

editor's page

Angel Wings

Somerset Maugham once observed that there are three rules for writing a novel. "Unfortunately," he added, "nobody knows what they are!" The same thing could be said about the problem of defining competency.

Competency is a familiar, almost hallowed word among certain professional groups in need of defining and demonstrating what their members do. Its meaning is presumed to be self-evident, yet in actuality, there is no such thing as a competence. It's an abstraction, like the concept of human resource development. If we try to form an image of competency, usually we can produce only specific examples.

It does not help that there are many definitions of the word competence—among them "the quality of being competent," which includes able, qualified, average, suitable, capable and sufficient. None of these tells us what competency is beyond a state of being. Moreover, the definition of competence as a condition of being adequate, but not exceptional, does not allow the notion of excellence that a professional group might wish to have as part of its self-definition.

However, lack of a precise definition of competencies has not prevented discussion about them. W.D. Maxwell, writing about competencies in education, commented that "it is far easier to talk at great length about angel wings than it is to produce them for our inspection." Thus, it is noteworthy that the ASTD Competency Study has produced a number of angel wings for the training and development field.

The study defines competencies as "the knowledge and skills which are key to producing the critical outputs of the training and development field and its roles." Having embraced the notion of competencies in the abstract, the study sets about to describe them in the concrete. It identifies competency requirements for 15 roles in the training and development field. Compositely, these roles define the field.

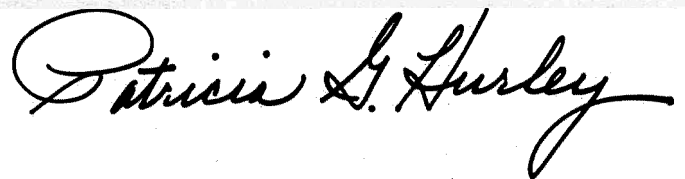
There is no question that training and development has long needed better definition nor that the competency study produced a definition that distinguishes usefully among competencies, tasks and job titles. As the first national research effort of its kind, it is a clear step toward professional status for training and development. Furthermore, it provides intelligently for the inclusion of future competencies as the profes-

sion grows more professional. There are, however, some questions to ask.

Are competencies, in fact, a complete measure of professional excellence? Some people see competencies as sets of objectives describing what practitioners must do to demonstrate competence. But they do not see them as adequate to describe notions such as a concern for human improvement, which is not measurable in tasks or outputs but which has value in the practice of the training and development profession.

My concern about competency goes back to its limiting definition—adequate but not exceptional. No one would argue against the concept of competence as a goal for members of a profession. But a profession in search of excellence needs more than competence to achieve it, and the present study, in spite of its grounding in competency, offers the possibility of much more than simple adequacy. Hence its title, "Models for Excellence." As Neal Chalofsky points out in his guest editor's commentary on page 8, excellence lies in being effective.

Although the participants in the competency study might not agree, the easy part, relatively speaking, of striving for professional excellence is establishing competencies and definitions. The harder part will be using the solid base of the study to foster a community of spirit, attract new adherents and provide strength and reassurance to veterans in the training and development profession.



—Editor