

Unique Competencies for a Unique Company

By Kathy Miller and Leslie Hunt

Organizations need strong leadership now more than ever before. Over the years, many of us have assumed that the characteristics, competencies and behaviors that lead to successful leadership are universal and timeless.

However, the world has changed quickly and dramatically over the past two decades. More of us look for ways that we can get our unique needs met when we shop for products and services. Companies have capitalized on this shift by using mass customization to tailor their offerings to consumers' specific requirements.

So perhaps our organizations should reexamine whether the one-size-fits all model of leadership still holds. Companies have their own unique cultures. It makes sense to develop leaders to meet the *unique* circumstances of their own organizations.

We at Miller Consultants have been working with an organization that requires some unique qualifications for its leadership teams—Canyon Ranch. This group asked us to partner with them in designing an imaginative approach for preparing future leaders for this rapidly growing, unique organization.

About Canyon Ranch

Canyon Ranch is one of the best known wellness lifestyle companies in America. The company has two goals: profit and mission. While standard leadership competencies still apply, the mission-driven focus and the solid emphasis on *customer satisfaction* provide additional demands for company leadership.

Canyon Ranch is distinguished by its groundbreaking mission, philosophy, values and business model. It has won awards for its health resorts

throughout the country, particularly because of the manner in which it provides customized services to meet each guest's individual needs.

Each "destination spa" provides a complete, healthy lifestyle experience with state-of-the-art fitness and wellness programs, as well as luxurious spa treatments. The company is planning a large expansion over the next decade that will create new, healthy-living communities that allow persons to purchase homes and live the "CR lifestyle" every day of their lives. Clearly, the diversity and distinctiveness of Canyon Ranch's businesses and services drive the need for leadership that is uniquely prepared to excel in this culture.

A team from Canyon Ranch recently kicked off the design of the Leadership Internship (LIT) program by selecting two people from a large pool of candidates to participate in the pilot program during 2006 and first half of 2007. At the same time, they conducted an assessment of the skills and knowledge that leaders need in order to carry the company into the future. This assessment reveals that new leaders must possess three separate and distinct sets of competencies: Canyon Ranch Specific Competencies, General Leadership Competencies and Business Acumen Competencies.

The Competencies

Canyon Ranch-Specific Competencies encompass a set of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that emphasize company culture and history; a strong customer service mindset (referred to as "Critical Eye" and "Guest Profile"), and a strong appreciation for all



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the employees who have contributed significantly to the success of the organization. Miller Consultants and the Canyon Ranch team made these company-specific competencies the centerpiece of the internship program. We believe that standard leadership models fail to recognize the importance of these company-specific competencies. Leaders do function within a cultural context that our models and our development programs must acknowledge.

Leadership Competencies include personal attributes such as emotional intelligence, accountability, and analytical and interpersonal skills dealing with communication, conflict management, and visionary leadership.

Business Acumen Competencies include basic supervisory skills, budgeting, project management, and several other skills that are considered critical to success in this organization. While these competencies are found in almost all leadership models, we believe that the interns would not benefit from learning about their generic applications. Instead, we wedded them completely to the Canyon Ranch context in which they would be applied.

When the LIT management team reviewed the competency model, they decided that the assessment required an additional step. The company has three distinct subcultures with separate business models exemplified in their most successful and well established locations:

- the flagship destination spa property in Tucson, Arizona,
- the ultimate day-spa property, SpaClub, within the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada
- the medical-destination spa in Lenox, Massachusetts.

The management team believes that new leaders must *first of all* learn about these existing properties and the essence of what makes each property prosperous and appealing to clients.

Each property provides certain services that Can-

yon Ranch management regards as “best in class.” Tucson’s destination spa is recognized for its superior capabilities in advising guests in their selection of programs and services. SpaClub Las Vegas is noted for its renowned spa services (beauty salon, skin care and massage). The medical destination spa in Lenox distinguishes itself by its Healthy Living and Healing programs. Therefore, they have decided to expose the in-

terns to all three of these locations where they can learn from each staff, first-hand, what qualities embody *excellence* for this company.

We will transfer the requisite competency knowledge and the “centers of excellence” practices to the interns during their experiences at each of

the three locations. The internship rotations will include:

1. A week of orientation at the Tucson corporate offices and spa facility where interns will be introduced to the founders, the history of the company, and the cultural aspects of the company that set it apart from other entities in the destination spa marketplace;
2. Three months at SpaClub Las Vegas where the interns will be immersed in the workings of a high-volume, high-profile day spa, including spa administration and the signature services provided in skin care, massage therapy, the beauty salon as well as the locker rooms and the retail operations;
3. Three months in Tucson to learn about the Life Enhancement Center featuring the areas of program advising, exercise physiology, nutrition and fitness; and
4. Three months in Lenox to concentrate on health and healing program administration, directing a medical and nursing staff, providing movement therapy and outdoor sports programs.

To avoid teaching generic competencies, the Miller Consultants and Canyon Ranch LIT teams have decided that exposure to the requisite competencies

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(Canyon Ranch-specific, Leadership and Business Acumen) will be intertwined into the “centers of excellence” training at appropriate points.

For example, when covering spa administration in Las Vegas, the interns will be introduced to the concepts of analytical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and flexibility — four competencies that are critical to success for a Spa Director in a high-traffic, high-profile day spa such as SpaClub Las Vegas, which provides 1,000 - 2,000 treatments during an average weekend.

With this volume of business, even the most organized operation will run into challenges! Blake Feeney, Spa Director for Spaclub Las Vegas, emphasizes that it is important for new managers to have a “let's fix it” attitude rather than a “whose fault was that” attitude. He encourages and nurtures an environment where everyone pitches in to deal with the challenges, and expects these competencies and qualities to be interwoven into the SpaClub Las Vegas curriculum.

Given the overall goal of the program to prepare interns for leadership roles at new properties, we have incorporated a capstone project into the program. In collaboration with the Canyon Ranch management team, we are designing these projects to challenge the interns to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of Canyon Ranch and the Canyon Ranch experience.

To this end, the interns will absorb the culture at the three properties while they are training and working at each site. They will visit other spa resorts in each area to be able to understand more thoroughly how Canyon Ranch differs from the competition. The interns will compare and contrast Canyon Ranch with the competition, and also within its three Canyon Ranch locations, in the form of a final report and presentation.

As part of this final report and presentation, the interns will be asked to envision the type of culture and

organizational structure they believe would be best suited for one of the new properties currently being conceived and developed — a proposal for an “ideal” (but evolved) new Canyon Ranch culture for the newly emerging environments. They will address the unique aspects of the Canyon Ranch leadership model for the new ventures.

The Las Vegas rotation has been successfully completed and the interns have now moved to the next location. As with all new programs that begin in a formative stage, we are continuing to make some “tweaks” along the way not only

to the development program but to the Canyon Ranch leadership model upon which it is based.

We believe that other organizations with the need for exceptional leaders can replicate the Canyon Ranch Internship model. A key element includes the commitment to tailor the leadership model completely to the culture within which the participants will work.

You can start with the basic leadership competencies but should not teach them in their generic form. Instead, wrap them into the specific organizational context; follow-up with and emphasize as most important the organizational-specific competencies; make action learning the primary vehicle for facilitating learning. ☞

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