Traits vs Competencies

Traits and competencies are two different sides of human capability. **Traits** describe who people naturally are: stable personality characteristics that shape how they think, feel and behave. **Competencies** describe what people can do: the knowledge, skills and behaviors they gain through education, training and experience. Many organizations use the two words as if they meant the same thing, yet understanding the difference helps leaders hire the right people, develop talent fairly and build stronger teams.

Why the Difference Matters

When leaders confuse traits with competencies, they make costly mistakes. They may reject a candidate with excellent skills because of a first impression of personality, or hire a charming person who cannot actually do the job. They may try to "train" personality, which rarely works, while neglecting skills that could easily be developed. Separating the two makes hiring, performance reviews and development plans clearer, fairer and more effective.

1. Traits

Traits are **natural characteristics** that form part of a person's personality. They develop over time and usually stay fairly stable throughout adult life. They strongly influence how people react to pressure, handle change and work with others.

Common workplace traits:

- **Curiosity:** asking questions and exploring new ideas.
- **Resilience:** recovering quickly from setbacks.
- **Optimism:** expecting good outcomes and seeing opportunities.
- **Empathy:** understanding others and building strong relationships.
- **Patience** and **attention to detail**.

Example: a naturally empathetic nurse notices when a patient is anxious, even before the patient says anything.

2. Competencies

Competencies are the **knowledge, skills and behaviors** needed to perform a job well. Unlike traits, they are not fixed: they can be learned, practiced, measured and improved at any stage of a career, and they relate directly to job performance.

Common workplace competencies:

- **Communication** and **negotiation**.
- **Project management** and **problem solving**.
- **Leadership** and **decision making**.
- **Data analysis** and technical expertise.

Example: being friendly and sociable is a trait, but structuring ideas clearly, listening actively and adapting a message to the audience are communication competencies that must be learned.

3. How Traits and Competencies Work Together

Traits often make certain competencies easier to learn. A sociable person may develop communication skills faster; an analytical person may learn problem solving more quickly. Think of traits as the **foundation** and competencies as the **tools built on top of it**. Traits alone are not enough, and competencies without the right traits can be harder to apply under pressure. The most effective people, and especially leaders, combine both.

Example: one candidate for team leader is excellent at planning and managing resources but lacks patience and empathy, so the team may struggle. Another is optimistic, curious and empathetic but cannot plan work or resolve conflicts. The best choice combines strong competencies with supportive traits, or develops the missing competencies quickly.

4. Developing People

Traits are hard to change, but competencies can grow at any stage. An employee who naturally enjoys helping others has the trait of empathy; with the right training, that person can develop coaching, mentoring and leadership competencies. In the same way, a naturally organized person still needs to learn proper project management methods.

Applying the Difference at Work

- **Hiring:** assess both. Use structured interviews and practical tests for competencies, and behavioral questions or validated assessments for traits.
- **Development:** focus training budgets on competencies, because they are much easier to change.

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- **Role design:** build on natural strengths; an empathetic employee can become a great coach, and a curious one a strong analyst.
- **Performance reviews:** use competency frameworks to evaluate people fairly and consistently, based on observable behavior.
- **Team building:** combine people with different traits so the team is balanced.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Hiring only on personality and first impressions.
- Trying to change someone's personality through training.
- Judging performance on traits ("not a people person") instead of observable competencies.
- Ignoring traits completely when a role needs, for example, high resilience.
- Using vague competency lists without clear behavioral examples.

Measuring Progress

- **Competency assessments** before and after training.
- **Performance ratings** linked to clear competency frameworks.
- **Quality of hire:** performance and retention of new employees after one year.
- **Internal promotions** that come from developed competencies.
- **Team feedback** on how well strengths are used.

Example: Building a Customer Success Team

A company creating a new customer success team first defined the traits that matter most in the role: empathy, patience and resilience. It then listed the competencies needed: product knowledge, communication, problem solving and account planning. In interviews, it looked for the traits, and it tested competencies with a short role-play and a case study. After hiring, the company invested its training budget in product knowledge and account planning, the competencies the new team members lacked. Within a year, customer satisfaction rose sharply and two team members were promoted to lead new regions.

Quick Checklist

- Have we separated traits from competencies in this job description?
- How will we assess each one fairly during hiring?
- Which competencies can we develop through training?
- Are we building on people's natural strengths?
- Are performance reviews based on observable behavior?

Key Takeaways

- Traits describe who we naturally are; competencies describe what we have learned to do.
- Traits are fairly stable, while competencies can be developed at any time.
- Traits make some competencies easier to learn; together they create real capability.
- Hire for both, but invest development mainly in competencies.
- Organizations that value both help people grow faster and teams perform better.

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