United Nations
Competencies
for the
Future

"It is my hope that competencies will provide us with shared language for talking, in concrete terms, about high performance and managerial excellence. I believe that a shared view of the standards we are striving to achieve will assist us in our continuing efforts to prepare the Organization to meet the challenges of the 21st century."

Kofi Annan
Secretary-General

Introduction to Competencies

In "Building the Future", the Secretary-General has indicated that the Organization's greatest strength—and the key to our success—is the quality of our staff and managers. He has stressed that, to capitalize on this strength, we need to create an organizational culture and environment that enables staff to contribute to their maximum potential. Experience in other organizations has shown that when seeking to create a new culture and build human resources capacity for the future, it is important to define organizational core competencies—the combination of skills, attributes and behaviours which are essential for all staff—as well as the additional managerial competencies required by all those who manage others. Once organizational competencies have been defined, they can be used as a base on which to build and strengthen other human resources systems such as recruitment, placement, development and performance appraisal.

Accordingly, a participatory process, involving staff and managers throughout the Secretariat, was undertaken to define core and managerial competencies for the United Nations Secretariat. This booklet has been prepared to inform staff of the United Nations competencies for the future, to describe how these competencies were arrived at, to provide examples of how the competencies look in action and to indicate how they will be applied in the Secretariat.

What are competencies?

The term "competency" refers to a combination of skills, attributes and behaviours that are directly related to successful performance on the job.

Core competencies are the skills, attributes and behaviours which are considered important for all staff of the Organization, regardless of their function or level.

Managerial competencies are the skills, attributes and behaviours which are considered essential for staff with managerial or supervisory responsibilities.

Core and managerial competencies are not specific to any occupation. One could demonstrate the competency of "teamwork" or "client orientation", for example, in performing any job. Specific technical competencies are not included in the model of United Nations competencies for the future. To complement the core competencies, individual departments may choose to define functional competencies related to their respective areas of work.

Why are competencies important ?

Defining competencies is important both for the Organization and for staff. Competencies are forward-looking. They describe the skills and attributes staff and managers will need in order to build a new organizational culture and meet future challenges. They help organizations clarify expectations, define future development needs, and do more focused recruitment and development planning. Competencies provide a sound basis for consistent and objective performance standards by creating shared language about what is needed and expected in an Organization.

How were the United Nations competencies decided?

Core and managerial competencies for the United Nations Secretariat have been developed through a participatory process taking into account the diversity of levels, functions, cultures and geographic locations of the Organization.

Interviews

As part of the process, interviews were conducted with the Deputy Secretary-General and twenty-four Under-Secretaries-General and Assistant Secretaries-General who head Departments and Offices throughout the Secretariat. They were asked about the Organization's environment, stakeholders, work outputs and future challenges. Information drawn from the interviews provided an overall context for the work of focus groups.

Focus Groups

Seventeen focus groups, comprising a cross section of staff from different departments at all levels, were held in six duty stations. The focus groups participated in a day-long process of examining the Organization's environment, the work we do and expect to do in the future, and the needs of our clients and stakeholders. Each group came to a consensus on the most important competencies and values for all international civil servants, as well as the additional competencies required by staff who manage others.

Building the Competency Model

The competencies defined by all groups were sorted and analysed. Similar competencies were grouped together and a common term chosen for each grouping. Using the most frequently occurring items, a model was developed with eight core competencies and six managerial competencies.

Organizational Core Values

Organizational values are the shared principles and beliefs that underpin the work of an organization and guide the actions and behaviours of its staff. During the participatory process, "integrity", "respect for diversity" and "professionalism" emerged as the Organization's core values, and they have been included in the model. They are consonant with the United Nations Charter and with the core values set out in Article I of the Staff Regulations.

How will the competencies be used?

Staff Development

Staff development programmes will be aligned with the competencies and new programmes introduced to support their development. A guide will be prepared explaining the various means available to acquire and strengthen competencies.

Career Planning

Competencies will increasingly be used as a basis for identifying individual and organizational needs and planning for development. Support will be provided to staff through publications and career support workshops.

Performance Management

Competencies will be useful to staff and managers in assessing development needs and setting performance standards. Competencies will be incorporated in subsequent revision of the PAS.

Recruitment

Gradually, competencies will be incorporated into generic job descriptions and vacancy announcements. Interview frameworks and other tools will be developed to incorporate competencies into recruitment and placement decisions, and staff will be trained in the use of these tools.

How do I
acquire the competencies?

Competencies include a combination of skills, attributes and behaviours that need to be developed and strengthened throughout one's career. Acquiring a competency is not a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process. Formal training can help, but experience, coaching, feedback and individual learning activities are needed as well. To assist staff in using competencies in their daily work and planning for their continuous learning and development, ongoing information and guidance will be provided by OHRM.

What are the UN core values and competencies?

Core Values

- Integrity
- Professionalism
- Respect for Diversity

Core Competencies

- Communication ■ Teamwork
- Planning & Organizing
- Accountability ■ Creativity ■ Client Orientation
- Commitment to Continuous Learning
- Technological Awareness

Managerial Competencies

- Leadership ■ Vision ■ Empowering Others
- Building Trust ■ Managing Performance
- Judgement/Decision-making

What do competencies look like in practice?

As competencies relate more to what a person does, than what a person knows, they are observable. For each competency it is possible to describe "behavioural indicators" – actions or behaviours that exemplify the competency in practice. These may be helpful in promoting shared values and common standards of performance and behaviour throughout the Organization.

The following pages set out the organizational core values, core competencies and managerial competencies, followed by "behavioural indicators". These indicators are indicative only. They are not intended to describe all the behaviours related to a competency.

Integrity

- Demonstrates the values of the United Nations in daily activities and behaviours
- Acts without consideration of personal gain
- Resists undue political pressure in decision-making
- Does not abuse power or authority
- Stands by decisions that are in the Organization's interest, even if they are unpopular
- Takes prompt action in cases of unprofessional or unethical behaviour

Professionalism

- Shows pride in work and in achievements
- Demonstrates professional competence and mastery of subject matter
- Is conscientious and efficient in meeting commitments, observing deadlines and achieving results
- Is motivated by professional rather than personal concerns
- Shows persistence when faced with difficult problems or challenges
- Remains calm in stressful situations

Respect for Diversity

- Works effectively with people from all backgrounds
- Treats all people with dignity and respect
- Treats men and women equally
- Shows respect for and understanding of diverse points of view and demonstrates this understanding in daily work and decision-making
- Examines own biases and behaviours to avoid stereotypical responses
- Does not discriminate against any individual or group

Communication

- Speaks and writes clearly and effectively
- Listens to others, correctly interprets messages from others and responds appropriately
- Asks questions to clarify, and exhibits interest in having two-way communication
- Tailors language, tone, style and format to match the audience
- Demonstrates openness in sharing information and keeping people informed

Teamwork

- Works collaboratively with colleagues to achieve organizational goals
- Solicits input by genuinely valuing others' ideas and expertise; is willing to learn from others
- Places team agenda before personal agenda
- Supports and acts in accordance with final group decision, even when such decisions may not entirely reflect own position
- Shares credit for team accomplishments and accepts joint responsibility for team shortcomings

Planning & Organizing

- Develops clear goals that are consistent with agreed strategies
- Identifies priority activities and assignments; adjusts priorities as required
- Allocates appropriate amount of time and resources for completing work
- Foresees risks and allows for contingencies when planning
- Monitors and adjusts plans and actions as necessary
- Uses time efficiently

Accountability

- Takes ownership of all responsibilities and honours commitments

- Delivers outputs for which one has responsibility within prescribed time, cost and quality standards

- Operates in compliance with organizational regulations and rules

- Supports subordinates, provides oversight and takes responsibility for delegated assignments

- Takes personal responsibility for his/her own shortcomings and those of the work unit, where applicable.

Client Orientation

- Considers all those to whom services are provided to be "clients" and seeks to see things from clients' point of view
- Establishes and maintains productive partnerships with clients by gaining their trust and respect
- Identifies clients' needs and matches them to appropriate solutions
- Monitors ongoing developments inside and outside the clients' environment to keep informed and anticipate problems
- Keeps clients informed of progress or setbacks in projects
- Meets timeline for delivery of products or services to client

Creativity

- Actively seeks to improve programmes or services
- Offers new and different options to solve problems or meet client needs
- Promotes and persuades others to consider new ideas
- Takes calculated risks on new and unusual ideas; thinks "outside the box"
- Takes an interest in new ideas and new ways of doing things
- Is not bound by current thinking or traditional approaches

Technological Awareness

- Keeps abreast of available technology
- Understands applicability and limitations of technology to the work of the office
- Actively seeks to apply technology to appropriate tasks
- Shows willingness to learn new technology

Commitment to Continuous Learning

- Keeps abreast of new developments in own occupation/profession
- Actively seeks to develop oneself professionally and personally
- Contributes to the learning of colleagues and subordinates
- Shows willingness to learn from others
- Seeks feedback to learn and improve

Vision

- Identifies strategic issues, opportunities and risks.
- Clearly communicates links between the Organization's strategy and the work unit's goals.
- Generates and communicates broad and compelling organizational direction, inspiring others to pursue that same direction
- Conveys enthusiasm about future possibilities

Leadership

- Serves as a role model that other people want to follow
- Empowers others to translate vision into results
- Is proactive in developing strategies to accomplish objectives
- Establishes and maintains relationships with a broad range of people to understand needs and gain support
- Anticipates and resolves conflicts by pursuing mutually agreeable solutions
- Drives for change and improvement; does not accept the status quo
- Shows the courage to take unpopular stands

Empowering Others

- Delegates responsibility, clarifies expectations, and gives staff autonomy in important areas of their work
- Encourages others to set challenging goals
- Holds others accountable for achieving results related to their area of responsibility
- Genuinely values all staff members' input and expertise
- Shows appreciation and rewards achievement and effort
- Involves others when making decisions that affect them

Managing Performance

- Delegates the appropriate responsibility, accountability and decision-making authority

- Makes sure that roles, responsibilities and reporting lines are clear to each staff member

- Accurately judges the amount of time and resources needed to accomplish a task and matches task to skills

- Monitors progress against milestones and deadlines

- Regularly discusses performance and provides feedback and coaching to staff

- Encourages risk-taking and supports creativity and initiative

- Actively supports the development and career aspirations of staff

- Appraises performance fairly

Building Trust
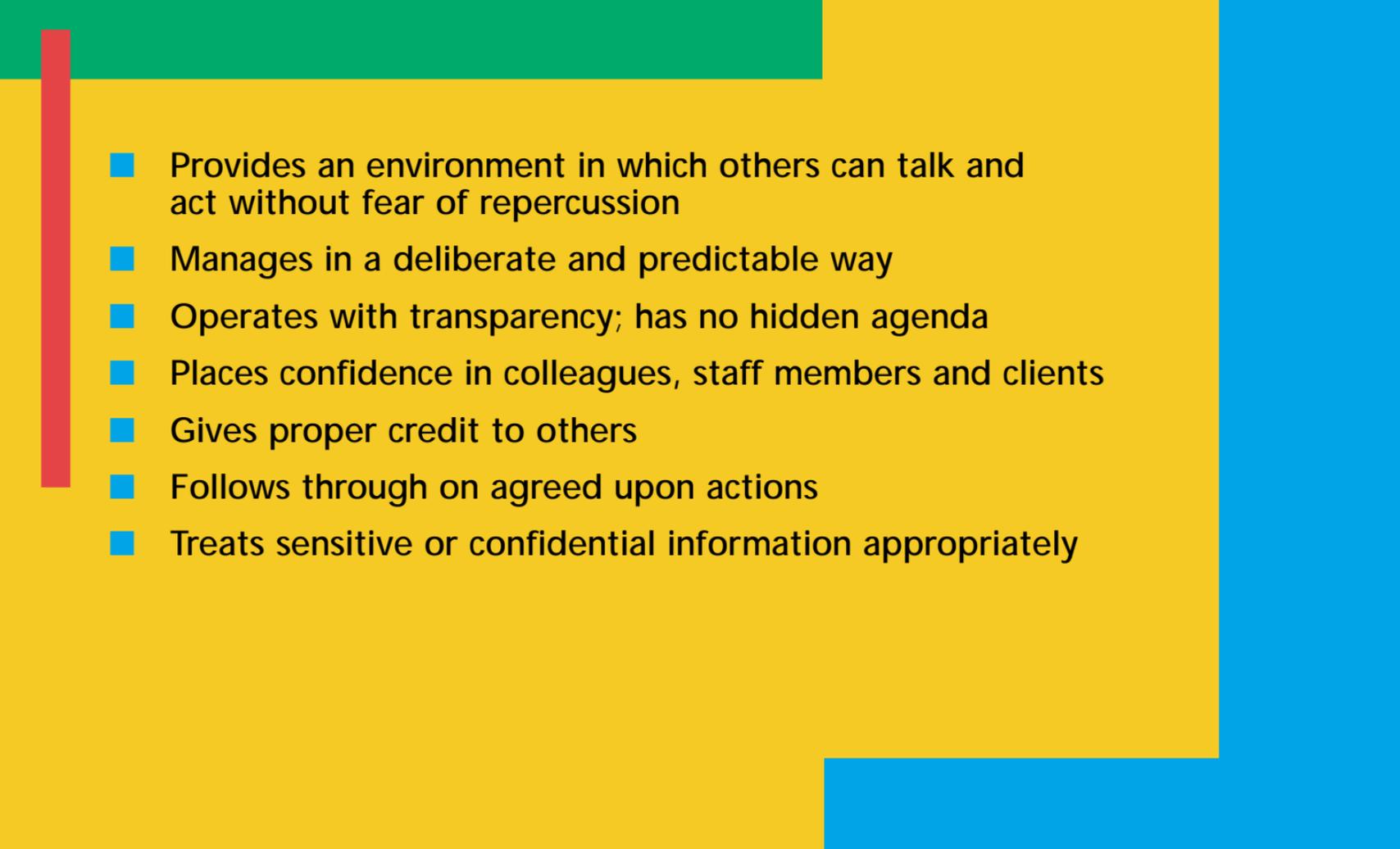
- Provides an environment in which others can talk and act without fear of repercussion
- Manages in a deliberate and predictable way
- Operates with transparency; has no hidden agenda
- Places confidence in colleagues, staff members and clients
- Gives proper credit to others
- Follows through on agreed upon actions
- Treats sensitive or confidential information appropriately

Judgement /
Decision-making

- Identifies the key issues in a complex situation, and comes to the heart of the problem quickly

- Gathers relevant information before making a decision

- Considers positive and negative impacts of decisions prior to making them

- Takes decisions with an eye to the impact on others and on the Organization

- Proposes a course of action or makes a recommendation based on all available information

- Checks assumptions against facts

- Determines that the actions proposed will satisfy the expressed and underlying needs for the decision

- Makes tough decisions when necessary

What's Next?

Integrating competencies into the Organization is an ongoing process. As a first step, please use this booklet to familiarise yourself with the organizational values and competencies. Use and observe the competencies in your daily work and in discussing staff development and performance management issues. The booklet will be supplemented by additional publications to assist staff and managers in using and strengthening competencies to enhance performance, increase accountability at all levels, and promote continuous development.