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# THE TWO STEVES

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**WES BERRY**

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# THE TWO STEVES CORE COMPETENCIES

By: Wes Berry

When it comes to American success stories, the Steves at Apple probably rank pretty high on your list. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak started Apple, Inc. in a garage in 1976, selling computer kits to hobbyists for \$50 apiece. By 1980, Apple went public, and Jobs and Wozniak became millionaires. Today, 45 years after Apple began, Jobs and Wozniak are considered pioneers of personal computing.

If you find yourself asking how Jobs and Wozniak were able to turn Apple into such a huge success so quickly, you're not alone. People all over the world have been studying these two, trying to unlock the secret of their success. But in reality, it's not all that complicated. They just knew what their strengths were, and they played to them. They understood their core competencies. Leveraging core competencies is about playing to your strengths. The problem is sometimes we fail to recognize our own strengths.

Wozniak was the engineering genius who designed the systems and the programs that moved personal computing from a dream into a reality. Jobs was the visionary, who saw the potential in Wozniak's technical doodads, securing the funding and directing product development with the customer in mind. Wozniak was the man who made home computers possible;



Jobs was the man who created a product that we didn't even know we needed.

You can argue over who was smarter, who was more charismatic, or who contributed more to Apple's success. But when it comes down to it, what really matters is that both men understood where they excelled, and they maintained their focus on that particular core competency. Some people can code, some can sell.

### **What Is Core Competency?**

Core competencies refer to the unique set of capabilities and resources that enable a company to create sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace.

In 1990, strategists C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel wrote an article called "The Core Competence of the Corporation" for the *Harvard Business Review*. In this article, the pair wrote that

we should stop thinking of businesses as collections of different business units, but rather as a set of core competencies, “the collective learning in the organization, especially how to coordinate diverse productive skills and integrate multiple streams of technologies.”<sup>1</sup>

In a nutshell, these two strategists were saying that companies find sustained success by acknowledging the specialized skills their employees possess that add significant value to their product. These competencies include knowledge, technology, and infrastructure, and allow a company to deliver superior value to customers and achieve long-term success.

Core competencies are important because they allow a company to differentiate itself from competitors and create a sustainable competitive advantage. By leveraging their unique set of skills, knowledge, and resources, companies can offer

products or services that are superior to those of their competitors.

According to a study by McKinsey & Company, companies that focus on developing and leveraging their core competencies outperform their peers by a factor of three. These companies also achieve higher profit margins and are more likely to succeed in the long term.

Core competencies are also important because they enable companies to innovate and adapt to changing market conditions. By leveraging their unique capabilities, companies can develop new products or services that meet the changing needs of customers and stay ahead of competitors.

Basically, core competencies boil down to three things:

1. Does it apply over a broad range of industries?
2. Does it make the end product more desirable to the consumer?
3. Is it hard to imitate or replicate?

Since these three definitions are fundamental to understanding core competencies, it's worth taking a moment to think about them a little more. Let's dig into them more deeply.

### **Does It Apply Over a Broad Range of Industries?**

One of the hallmarks of a core competency is that it isn't tied to a highly specific area. Sure, it may be a specialized tool or skill, like high-level accounting or well-developed writing skills, but ideally, these core competencies can be applied to

a number of different situations, regardless of the specific industry.

Take accounting, for instance. While the numbers and processes may differ from industry to industry, by and large, the fundamental elements of accounting are the same across all industries, with the specifics of each business adding flavor, rather than changing the entire recipe. The same can be said for writing, research, teamwork, and so on.

In essence, core competencies are skills that are readily transferable from industry to industry, allowing you to apply your skills in a variety of fields after a relatively short period of adjustment.

The key word here is flexible.

## **Does It Make the End Product More Desirable to the Consumer?**

This definition can be a little harder to identify in some ways. Some core competencies are obvious, especially for manufactured goods. Engineering, mathematics, and design skills all provide clear benefits when it comes to manufacturing a TV or developing software.

But do accounting practices make a TV more desirable? What about problem solving? Or communication?

As you probably suspect, the answer is

*If you cannot  
measure a thing, it  
is not something  
easily managed.*

yes—just not in  
a  
straightforward,  
one-to-one way.

Yes, engineering a TV can make it sleeker and more powerful and can create a clearer picture. But accounting helps

to keep costs low, making the TV more affordable. Problem-solving can help efficiency from design through distribution. And communication lets consumers know why they need this particular TV.

When it comes to core competencies, it's actually pretty rare that you'll find a clear path from your skill to a product. Instead, when you consider a product from all angles, you'll start to see the invisible threads that connect it to all aspects of the business. That will reveal which skills will be most useful in making a product more desirable.

The key word here is useful.

### **Is It Hard to Imitate or Replicate?**

There are some skills that everyone is expected to have a solid grasp on. Everyone is expected to know how to read and write, the

basics of how to use a computer, and the ability to communicate with others. These are basic skills, not core competencies.

What makes a core competency special is that it goes beyond basic skills, giving you abilities that are more difficult to find. The more specialized the skill is, the more difficult it is to replicate or replace. In other words, core competencies are the things that separate you from others.

Take coding skills, for example. Someone who has just graduated from college with a computer science degree will probably have a solid grounding in coding. However, the more experience they gain and the more training they receive in specific languages and processes, the more highly developed their coding core competency becomes. They may even begin to



develop new processes or use coding languages in new ways.

At high levels, core competencies are virtually irreplaceable skills, either because there aren't enough highly trained individuals around to fill the missing space or because the employee has made the skill their own, adding an individual flair that can't be captured or recreated by someone else.

The key word here is unique.

If you ask yourself, then, if a skill is flexible, useful, and unique, then you've found yourself a core competency

Of course, that's all well and good when we're talking about a company. But what about personal core competencies? Well, they work pretty much the same way, except instead of giving companies a competitive advantage, they help give individuals a professional edge.

Core competencies are an increasingly important part of your professional life—and that’s a good thing. Chris Lennon, a senior HR executive, has said that a lot of bad hires come from not understanding the core competencies required for a position: “It can become impossible to find the right person for the job if you don’t first identify what the ideal candidate needs to succeed.”<sup>2</sup>

Core competencies aren’t just opinions. They stem from observable patterns of behavior and performance, and they must be defined from within. For companies, that means identifying areas where they provide services or attributes that separate them from the competition. For you, it’s about identifying the areas where you excel.

You can think of it as playing to your strengths: you know what you’re awesome at, and you know where you kinda stink. Maybe you’re

really good at coming up with concepts and knowing how to market ideas, but you don't have the first clue how to handle the technical elements. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as you're honest with yourself about your limitations.

In fact, knowing your limits is actually a strength. As William Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, "This above all: to thine own self be true, / And it must follow, as the night to the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man."<sup>3</sup> In other words, when you take the time to really understand who you are, and when you remain true to that person, you'll avoid positioning yourself for failure, and give yourself the opportunity to succeed instead.

"But wait!" I hear you say, "I don't know what my core competencies are! How am I supposed to know what I'm good at? And what if I'm not good at anything? What do I do then?"

Relax! Identifying your core competencies isn't something that happens overnight. You're not going to wake up tomorrow, turn off your alarm clock, look in the mirror, and say, "Hey! I know where my strengths and weaknesses really lie! Let's go!" Getting to know yourself is a longer process, and it involves taking the time and effort to really think about who you are, what you're good at doing, and most importantly, what you enjoy doing.

And don't worry about not being good at anything. I promise, you have a ton of things you excel at—you just haven't thought about yourself that way before, at least not in any organized way. With a little time and introspection, you'll find you've already got a bunch of core competencies, and you'll be able to prove it.

Plus, you should develop core competencies—both the skills you want to learn and those you already have. Just like with professional athletes, when you don't use a skill, it can start to fade away, and the longer you don't use it, the longer it takes to get it back. That's why it's important to make sure you continue to develop your existing core competencies as you explore new areas of personal development, so you can ensure you're not losing skills you already possess.

*If you wish to catch fish, first sharpen your hooks.*

When it comes to core competencies, the thing to remember is that it's all about personal growth. When Jobs and Wozniak first started working together, do you think they knew they

were going to end up millionaires in only a few years? Well, Steve Jobs probably did.

What made it possible was that both Steves were willing to grow, to develop their skills and look for new ways to put them into practice. You have the chance to identify your own core competencies, then develop and deploy them. It's all about being willing to grow and improve yourself. Trust me, you have it in you!

### **Identifying Your Core Competencies**

In 1958, Steven Spielberg made his first movie. Only twelve-years old, he used his father's video camera to film a train "wreck," using his toy train set. While the movie didn't make Spielberg any money, it did start him on a path to stardom as one of the most famous directors of all time.

But success didn't come overnight. Spielberg watched and made movies all through

his teens, wanting only to direct films for the big screen. But he was rejected from USC's film school for bad grades and ended up at California State University, Long Beach.

By 1968, though, Universal Studios gave Spielberg the chance to make his first theatrical film, and he wound up with a contract. For the next several years, Spielberg was stuck directing television shows, and while he was frustrated with his limited opportunities, he continued to develop his directorial vision with each episode.

Although his first theatrical film was *The Sugarland Express*, his breakthrough was 1975's *Jaws*, the first summer blockbuster. From that point on, Spielberg was a household name, and his reputation as one of America's greatest filmmakers only continues to grow.

What Spielberg was lucky enough to discover early in his life wasn't just his vision—

his ability to see what he wanted to create in his mind's eye was a huge factor, sure. But what really sets Spielberg apart is his ability to communicate that vision to actors, cinematographers, editors, musicians, and producers. From the very beginning, Spielberg identified his core competencies and honed them with persistence and practice.

Unfortunately, no matter how many movies we see, most of us aren't Steven Spielberg. Few of us have known since we were twelve what we wanted to do with our lives. But that doesn't mean we haven't been developing our own core competencies since we were kids.

Core competencies aren't just about accumulating technical skills, like coding or engineering. Many competencies are so-called "soft skills," such as communication, teamwork, and professionalism, which—unlike measurable



skills like math or language fluency—are more difficult to quantify.

While hard skills are valuable, it's the combination of hard and soft skills that can really make an employee a valuable contributor to the team. When you can combine technical capacity with leadership abilities and a commitment to producing high quality work, you end up with a sum that's greater than its parts.

But first things first. Let's think about identifying your core competencies. While you might be able to come up with a couple ideas while just sitting there and thinking about it for a few minutes, it's going to take more effort than that to really do the job right. So, clear your schedule, get a cup of coffee or tea, and get ready to think hard about who you really are.

### **Step 1: Brainstorming**

Yeah, I know. Is there a project that doesn't start out with brainstorming? But the reason brainstorming is such a common way to start projects is because it works. According to Anne Converse Willkomm at Drexel University, brainstorming is "intended to bring a wide range of ideas to the table, some of which fall to the wayside, while others get pulled and shaped into something concrete . . . What I find most exciting is when a new idea emerges, something no one entered the room with."<sup>4</sup>

When you're brainstorming, the key is to keep judgment off the table. Even when you're brainstorming by yourself, you may be tempted to not write something down because you think it's stupid or not related. But that's the value of brainstorming. We can flush out the bad ideas, get the junk out of the way, and let the gold shine. And

you never know—sometimes the junk ideas might lead to something you never would have suspected.

Start with a clear sheet of paper, preferably a new notebook or legal pad. Find a quiet place free from distraction—no phones!—and give yourself enough time to work. If you feel like you're pressed for time, then you might as well put off brainstorming until later, when you won't feel pressured. Grab a pen or pencil, take a deep breath, and start writing.

You're making a list of potential core competencies, and while you're probably coming into this process with some idea of what you're good at, you shouldn't be afraid to write down things you'd like to be good at. Or things you may never get a chance to practice. Or even things you don't like. Just get words down on paper. It's free association, baby—let the writing flow!

If you're struggling for some potential core competencies, here are some common competencies HR folks like to look for:

- Communication
- Coding
- Spreadsheets
- Teamwork
- Engineering
- Project management
- Personal development
- Responsibility
- Mathematics
- Ambition
- Problem-solving

These are just a very few potential possibilities. You can start with these, or you can just use them to prime your brain to come up with competencies on your own. You should expect to

spend at least five minutes on this process, but if you need more time, feel free to continue working. If five minutes feels like too long, then you probably need to keep digging.

### **Step 2: Evaluation**

Now that the brainstorming is over, you should take a few minutes to breathe. Shake out your hands, unclench your jaw, stand up and stretch . . . whatever you do to relax. Take five minutes and step away from the list you just made. It's pretty fresh right now, and you need a little time away from it to be able to fairly evaluate your list of competencies.

Feel relaxed now? Good!

The next step is going through your list and identifying which of the things you wrote down are the strongest core competencies. The total number isn't important. You may find you have a

broad range of interests and abilities, or you might be most focused in only a few areas. There's nothing wrong in either case.

The question, then, is how to evaluate your list. What are the factors that you should use to determine how important each competency is? Well, the answer is pretty straightforward. Do you remember that list I mentioned earlier about how companies determine their core competencies? It's basically the same here. This is what you should ask yourself when you're considering each core competency:

1. Does the competency apply across a broad range of industries or applications?
2. Does the competency make me a more relevant or attractive

employee? Does it make me stand out in a competitive position?

3. Is the competency something that's unique, uncommon, or requires training and experience?

When you're looking at your list of competencies, really try and think about each one of these factors. For some, you won't have to spend very long—in fact, some of the things you wrote down you can pretty much cross off right away, since they were the junk you were clearing out to make way for the good stuff.

But for the other competencies, really dig down and ask yourself each of these three questions. As you make your way through your list, you can start to cross more and more things off of your list, until you're left with a good set of skills. But there's still one more step.

### **Step 3: Reflection**

When it comes to identifying your core competencies, you have to remember that the focus is on you. You may have a list of several very good skills that an HR manager would kill to have on their staff. And while the goal of the brainstorming process was to come up with skills for you, the resulting list can sometimes stray pretty far from that goal.

That's where reflection comes into play. Once you have your carefully curated list of potential personal core competencies, you should go through each skill and ask yourself how much each skill resonates with you.

What skills do you feel you already possess? What skills would you like to develop further? Are there skills on the list where you have evidence of past success?



Using past evidence can really help this process, especially when it comes to soft skills. Without quantitative data to indicate success or mastery, you need to be able to summon performance reviews, recommendations, customer comments, and other anecdotal evidence to support your claims of competency.

Identifying your core competencies isn't an easy process. And honestly, you don't want it to be. When you're doing this kind of deeper self-examination, easy is the enemy of the good. You should embrace the challenge—the more energy you expend in an earnest effort, the higher the reward will be once you finish the process.

### **Developing Your Core Competencies**

In 1987, a man named Paul O'Neill took the reins of the Aluminum Company of America. Better known as Alcoa, the company had

manufactured aluminum products for more than 100 years, becoming the go-to producer of aluminum goods, including soda and beer cans, aluminum foil, and other commodities.

While the company had always produced decent returns for investors, those profits had started to tail off in the face of mismanagement, and Alcoa felt they needed fresh blood to reinvigorate their operations. They decided on Paul O'Neill, who had previously worked in the United States Office of Management and Budget and as vice-president and president of International Paper.

O'Neill came onboard as chairman and CEO of Alcoa and immediately met resistance from his board. The heart of the problem? O'Neill was singularly focused on improving worker safety. While the board of directors wasn't against improving Alcoa's safety record (which was

actually among the leaders in the industry), they were concerned about O'Neill's apparent disinterest in improving the one thing they cared about most: profit.

But while O'Neill was mocked by board members, investors, and the press for his emphasis on safety over profit, he stood firm on his principles, and insisted Alcoa plants become the safest workplaces in America. The end result? By the time O'Neill left Alcoa in 2000, the company's market value increased more than nine times the original value, rising from \$3 billion to more than \$27 billion.

Author Charles Duhigg suggests that O'Neill was able to create change at Alcoa by focusing on "keystone habits," which "say that success doesn't depend on getting every single thing right, but instead relies on identifying a few key priorities and then fashioning them into

powerful levers.” In this case, O’Neill used an emphasis on worker safety to disrupt the old order of business and instill a new workplace culture, which led to increases in safety—and profit.<sup>5</sup>

If you read this and thought to yourself, “Hm, that sounds familiar,” then you’re in good company. What Duhigg calls keystone habits sounds an awful lot like how we’ve been describing core competencies.

Like keystone habits, core competencies aren’t about becoming some kind of mega-powered superman. Instead, knowing your competencies allows you to focus on your strengths, and while you’ll still make mistakes, you’ll have a better chance of not only overcoming those mistakes, but incorporating the lessons you learn, and further developing your core competencies.

O'Neill understood that you can't simply decide to be someone or something different overnight. The only way to enact meaningful change is to break your problem down into smaller portions, then strategically focus your efforts to bring the most efficient returns.

The same is true when it comes to developing your core competencies. You can't just decide that you possess certain skills without taking the time to develop them. The good news is that you've already been developing a bunch of those competencies your entire life. But to really excel, you have to commit to continually honing your abilities.

If that sounds like a lot of work, and . . . well . . . it is. But believe me, it's totally worth the effort. And the best part is that because you're working on developing yourself, you have ultimate control. You decide what competencies

you want to develop and how you're going to strategically approach your development.

One key thing to remember is flexibility. No one gets everything right the first time, and no solution works for every person. If you work on a certain approach for a while and don't feel like you're making progress, take a moment to evaluate the effectiveness of your strategy. You might find a few tweaks could make all the difference—or you might decide on an entirely new approach altogether.

What is the best way to develop your core competencies? I've outlined a few strategies for you to try out, but the best advice I can give you is to be self-aware. The person who knows you best is you. Look over the approaches I suggest here, and tailor your approach to your specific skills and personality. Take ownership of your development.

## **Education**

Not everyone is a model student. Some people can't wait for the end of college, believing they'll never have to take a class again and they can just get on with the business of business. Of course, we all know that's not the case—most companies today insist on their employees taking on professional development, and as an employee, you should take full advantage of any development opportunities you encounter.

One of the most effective ways to develop your core competencies is to earn a degree. When I say this, most people think, “Oh, he means an MBA.” Yes, an MBA degree can be helpful to you if you're looking to move up the business ladder. But it's also not the only option.

There are a number of other degree programs you can pursue, including PhDs for

those in specialized fields. Or you can investigate earning another undergraduate degree in a major that's closely related to your field.

Of course, not all classes need to be degree-seeking. You should keep an eye out for courses that offer you training in a specific skill, many of which are available at local universities or, now more than ever, online.

### **Work Opportunities**

One of the most important aspects of finding business success is being willing to work hard to achieve your goals. That's especially true in the workplace, where your effort doesn't just help produce higher returns, but helps you stand out to managers and other important figures as someone who's committed to the company's goals.



But working hard doesn't mean you can't be working for yourself. Every project, even every task, offers an opportunity for you to develop your core competencies, especially in areas where you may not be as comfortable. When you take on work projects, for instance, think about how that project helps contribute to you gaining further mastery over your core competencies.

Taking on new work projects is a great way to build those skills. Not only will you help participate in building the business, but you'll also develop relationships with others who have their own sets of core competencies, and you can learn from each other in surprisingly rewarding ways.

You also shouldn't overlook the value of employee development opportunities. Training classes, online testing, and other forms of development aren't just a bonus, but they actually make up an important part of your employer's

commitment to you as an employee. Think of this training as part of your compensation package: development opportunities give you the chance to move forward in the company.

Another valuable tool for personal development is finding a mentor at your workplace. Find someone at your workplace who has more experience, and see if they'd be willing to share that experience with you. Sit them down, buy them a coffee, and pick their brain. Most of the time, people are happy to help out; someone probably did the same thing for them when they were younger, and they appreciate the opportunity to give back.

### **Networking**

For some people, networking comes naturally. For others, it's pure torture. But being able and willing to network with others in and

around your profession is a critical part of building your core competencies (I'd even say networking is a core competency).

Building your personal network is about more than finding a job. It's about establishing yourself within the ecosystem of your profession and building your reputation based on your set of skills. You can find a mentor outside the workplace through networking or even become a mentor to someone else.

Networking can take place just about anywhere. One ideal location is within professional organizations. While most organizations have annual conferences, which is basically a weekend-long networking fest, membership in a professional organization connects you year-round to a vast network of people across the country (and maybe even the globe).

### **Establish Yourself**

Many people think that establishing yourself within your profession only happens once you become a master. That couldn't be further from the truth. How do you think established professionals became masters?

You should take whatever opportunity presents itself to establish your reputation within your field. Write blogs and articles for professional publications, make presentations at conferences, and volunteer to teach others the skills you've acquired.

There's a longstanding tradition in education called Learn One, Do One, Teach One. You learn a skill, practice a skill, then teach that skill to someone else. When you can effectively teach that skill to another person to the point that they can acquire the skill themselves, then you've

come this much closer to mastering that core competency.

### **Core Competencies in Action**

While figuring out your core competencies and learning how to develop them into tools for success are essential, the real value of all of this work is learning how to deploy them. Here, I'm afraid there are no simple steps or straightforward answers.

Success is not as simple as telling you to apply this skill to that situation, and then voila, you've done it. A hundred people with the same skill set could look at the same problem and come up with 200 different solutions—and perhaps none of them work. Or maybe all of them do. So how do you figure out the right way to use your core competencies to your advantage?

The answer, my friends, is creativity. Having a well-rounded, highly developed set of core competencies is one thing, but it takes creativity and vision to turn those competencies into something really remarkable. And I don't just mean creativity from you; the most successful individuals manage to secure buy-in from others, especially those in a position to give you an opportunity that others might refuse you.

Take the case of Gerard van Grinsven, former CEO of Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital just outside of Detroit. When van Grinsven took the job in 2006, he wasn't the typical choice for a hospital CEO. Far from it, in fact, since van Grinsven had absolutely zero experience in the health care industry.

Before joining as the leader of the hospital, van Grinsven had spent more than 20 years in the hotel business, most recently as a vice-president

for Ritz-Carlton. During his time there, van Grinsven moved from VP of food and beverage to the Area General Manager in Dearborn, where he caught the attention of the Henry Ford Medical Group (HFMG).

At first glance, it seemed like an odd choice. What could van Grinsven, whose whole career theretofore was focused on the hotel business, possibly bring to the health care field? What experiences, what skills, what points of view could he offer West Bloomfield that made him a better choice than the multitude of others with a background in health care?

These questions were especially pressing since the West Bloomfield hospital would be the first new hospital the HFMG had built since 1915, the year the group was founded. The stakes were high, and their CEO hire was a critical part of making this new hospital a success.

What helped van Grinsven win the position was his confidence in how he could transform the way patients, doctors, and the community view health care. With his hotelier background, van Grinsven may not have known much about medicine and health care, but he knew an awful lot about customer service—especially high-end, luxury service.

The Ritz-Carlton has long been known for its stylistic opulence and the luxurious service available to its guests. As an executive with the chain, van Grinsven saw first-hand how luxury put guests at ease, and he focused his efforts on making those services as easy and stress-free as possible for those guests.

Now, in his role as hospital CEO, he transferred his core competencies centered on customer service to a new industry, believing that



he could transform the hospital experience by emphasizing wellness over sickness.

Before the hospital opened in 2009, van Grinsven worked with the HFMG at all stages of design. Instead of shared patient rooms, the hospital would have only private rooms, which not only reduced the risk of disease transmission but reduced patient stress and encouraged recovery and healing.

He also insisted on the building's striking atrium, which houses more than 2,000 live plants arranged along curved pathways, creating a tranquil, inviting environment. Throughout this atrium are several retail stores selling items intended to help patients, families, and anyone else who comes into the building to improve their healthy lifestyle.

More than services like acupuncture, a patient concierge, cooking classes, and a

therapeutic organic greenhouse, the biggest change van Grinsven made was food quality.

Historically, hospital food has been right up there with airline food and TV dinners on the list of foods no one would voluntarily eat. But under van Grinsven, the hospital began cooking made-to-order meals composed of fresh ingredients, with 24-hour room service, meaning that patients could get healthy, fresh, delicious food at any time of the day. In fact, the food is so good, they regularly cater for businesses in the West Bloomfield area.

For van Grinsven, these amenities are not luxury services but are instead wellness services, aimed at helping patients get healthy faster and hopefully remain healthy longer. While he acknowledges that his vastly improved food is partially a marketing device, it's also an earnest way to help improve the health of everyone who

eats in the hospital, including patients, families, doctors, nurses, staff members, and others.

Of course, it also took a lot of chutzpah for the HFMG to decide to hire van Grinsven. When he was originally brought on board, reactions were largely negative. In fact, one writer said his menu plans were actively harming the hospital—since hospital food should be terrible.

Luckily, the group gave van Grinsven a chance, and he rewarded them by leading the hospital to be profitable nearly a year ahead of schedule. Even more impressively, the hospital won the 2011 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, recognizing the improvements the hospital was offering the community and its willingness to innovate in the healthcare field.<sup>6,7</sup>

Looking at van Grinsven's core competencies during his time at Ritz-Carlton, it's easy to see why some would have doubted his

abilities to transition to a new field. But for him, it was less a transition than it was a way to deploy the same skills from a slightly different angle. His distance from health care became a strength, allowing him to deploy his core competencies in a new and exceptionally effective way.

In short, thanks to the creativity of van Grinsven and the members of the HFMG, they created a new way of thinking about healthcare, one that was radically different not just for its own sake, but because a radical change was what was needed.

### **Dealing with Doubt**

With all this talk about identifying, developing, and nurturing your core competencies, it can be easy to overlook the feeling of self-doubt that can start to creep in during moments of self-reflection. “Do I really

have these skills,” you might think, “or have I just gotten by because of luck?”

This is imposter syndrome, and it can be a pain in the neck.

Self-doubt is a relatively common feeling, especially when you’re setting new goals for yourself. It’s only natural to ask yourself whether you’re really up for the challenge, or if you have the time, the talent, and the dedication to be able to reach those goals. In fact, if you’re not a little uncomfortable, you’re probably setting your sights too low.

But imposter syndrome takes that self-doubt to a new level. Many people who experience success have trouble accepting that they’ve earned their achievements based on their abilities. These people often feel a sense of fear or dread, as though they’re just waiting for everyone else to find out that they’re a fraud and that they

don't have the skills or capacity to handle their job at a high level.

First described in 1978, imposter syndrome isn't considered to be a mental illness by the medical community. Instead, it's viewed more as a mindset, one that can create feelings of anxiety and depression in more serious cases.

It can manifest in many ways. Many people describe feeling like they have an invisible person watching over their shoulder, watching their every move. You may begin to feel like any mistake, no matter how small, could bring the whole house of cards tumbling down, leaving you exposed for the imitator that you are.

But no matter how ominous and dreadful this all sounds, there's one important thing to remember: You're okay!

People have been feeling the effects of imposter syndrome for years, and even some of

the most significant, impressive people have felt the same way. Take Albert Einstein, whose work in physics changed the entire world. Shortly before his death in 1955, he admitted that he felt the sting of imposter syndrome—although he didn't call it that: “the exaggerated esteem in which my lifework is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler.”<sup>8</sup>

Wow, right? If even the famed genius Albert Einstein feels like an imposter, shouldn't we feel a little more comfortable with our own sense of self-doubt? Political leaders, actors, musicians, entrepreneurs, tech titans, you name it. In just about every walk of life, you can find someone who has, at some point or another, felt like they weren't good enough, that they had somehow lucked into a position they didn't

deserve, and that it was only a matter of time before everyone figured it out.

Of course, it's easy to say that imposter syndrome is no big deal. It's another thing entirely to have to actually cope with it. How do you find a way past these feelings of self-doubt and accept that you have not only earned everything you've received, but that you have even more value to contribute and deserve even more?

This is another area in which focusing on your core competencies pays off. Overcoming imposter syndrome can actually happen organically as you identify and develop your core competencies. For the most part, imposter syndrome is a product of unfamiliarity. You've reached a level of success and achievement that is new to you, and now you're expected to rise to new heights—but how?



On your way up, it's possible—for many people, it's likely—that you've found success without necessarily identifying the specific skills that make you who you are. You simply make the best choices that you can based on your mindset and your available skills, and it usually works out in your favor.

But at some point, you have to be able to identify those personal strengths and weaknesses, not only so you can shore up any weak points, but so that you have a firm grasp on what has enabled you to succeed.

Imposter syndrome arises when you don't make that connection between your abilities and your current position. That's what can lead to feelings of insecurity and self-doubt, where you may feel that someone saw something in you that wasn't actually there.

As I said earlier, imposter syndrome is a mindset, and that means it can be changed. Talk to mentors, many of whom have probably felt the same way at some point. Don't focus so much on your mistakes, and remember instead that every failure is a chance to learn. Spend less time reflecting on the past, and spend more time thinking about how you can perform your best in the future.

Most of all, though, you should remember that it was your core competencies, your central set of hard and soft skills, that helped you get to this point in the first place. For the most part, when you get promoted or you experience a new level of personal or professional success, it's because you worked your butt off to get there. You displayed levels of expertise, good judgment, and superior commitment that allowed you to rise to your level of success.

Doubt is only natural. Yes, some people go through life never doubting themselves, but for the most part, being unsure of ourselves is just a part of life. The key to dealing with it is to remember who you are and focus on the core competencies that make up the fundamental parts of your character.

### **Developing Core Competencies in Companies**

Let's move from the individual and take a quick look at companies. For companies, developing core competencies requires a strategic and focused approach, just like with individuals. Companies need to identify the skills, knowledge, and resources that are unique to their organization and that can be leveraged to create a competitive advantage.

One way to develop core competencies is through investment in research and development (R&D). Companies that invest in R&D are able to develop new technologies and products that are superior to those of their competitors.

Another way to develop core competencies is through strategic partnerships and acquisitions. By partnering with other companies or acquiring companies with complementary capabilities, companies can expand their core competencies and create a more diversified and competitive organization. Then how do companies leverage these core competencies to their advantage?

### **Leveraging Core Competencies**

Leveraging core competencies requires a deep understanding of the market and customer needs. Companies need to identify the areas where their core competencies can be applied to create

value for customers and differentiate themselves from competitors.

Product differentiation is a great way to do this. By using their unique capabilities, companies can create products or services that are superior to those of their competitors and meet the specific needs of customers.

Another way to leverage core competencies is through operational excellence. By using their unique capabilities to streamline processes and reduce costs, companies can achieve higher levels of efficiency and profitability.

Let's take a look at three companies who have done this well;

### **Apple, Inc.**

Apple's core competency is its ability to design and develop innovative products that meet the changing needs of customers. The company's

focus on design and innovation has enabled it to create products such as the iPhone and iPad, which have become iconic in the tech industry. Apple's ability to leverage its core competencies has enabled it to achieve high levels of profitability and success in the marketplace.

## **Toyota**

Toyota's core competency is its ability to develop and implement lean manufacturing processes that enable it to produce high-quality cars at a lower cost than its competitors. The company's focus on operational excellence has enabled it to achieve high levels of efficiency and profitability, while also delivering high-quality products to customers.

**Amazon.com Inc.**

Amazon's core competency is its ability to leverage technology and logistics to provide a seamless and efficient customer experience. The company's focus on technology and logistics has enabled it to create a vast network of fulfillment centers and delivery systems, which allow it to deliver products to customers quickly and efficiently. Amazon's ability to leverage its core competencies has enabled it to become a dominant player in the e-commerce industry.

Core competencies are crucial for companies that want to create sustainable competitive advantage and achieve long-term success. These three companies have been able to differentiate themselves from competitors and create sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging their unique set of skills, knowledge, and resources.

Developing and leveraging core competencies requires a strategic and focused approach, and companies that are able to do so are more likely to succeed and outperform their peers in the long term.

## **Conclusion**

Despite what you might think, core competency isn't just a corporate buzzword. Learning to understand, identify, and develop your core competencies allows you to focus your efforts on your strengths without wasting time trying to be someone you're not. Core competencies aren't about transformation; they're about reinforcement.

You may have noticed that I keep talking about how developing core competencies takes time. It takes time to figure out your strengths and weaknesses. It takes time to come up with plans



for how to develop your core competencies. And it takes time to build your core competencies to new levels, enabling you to reach new heights.

Time is a funny thing. It's the one resource you can never get back—once it's gone, you can't recover it. But you also can't hurry time along. Making progress in developing your core competencies requires you to spend time and effort working on them—and no amount of wishing is going to make that time pass any faster.

That means that another key factor in developing your core competencies is patience. You have to have the patience to know that you won't see results immediately, and to have the fortitude to stick with your development plans to persevere even when the going gets tough and you feel like you might be stuck.

Your core competencies are never going to be entirely fixed—and that's a good thing. But it

also means you need to have the patience to take the long view and to see your core competencies as part of your life-long professional journey. There will be times when progress comes fast, and there will be times when time seems to drag like a thousand-pound weight. Patience means finding value in both cases.

Of course, having patience doesn't mean you have to like moving slowly. Like I said, you should be flexible too, looking for ways to reduce inefficiency and speed up the development process. If your approach isn't working, don't be afraid to change it. But by the same token, you shouldn't be too quick to abandon your approach, either.

Finally, you should remember that you're not alone in this. Everyone, from CEOs and presidents, to mail clerks and administrative assistants, has goals and aspirations, as well as

fears and doubts. And each person has their own set of core competencies, those that have been honed with years of practice and potential skills that are simply waiting to be developed.

There's a lot more that connects us than separates us, and the more we embrace that connection, the better we will be able to serve each other. Networking, mentorship, and other ways of developing your core competencies rely on building relationships, and those relationships can—and often do—extend far beyond the initial interaction. Many times, these people become life-long friends.

Just like with Spielberg, O'Neill, and the Steves, you have several areas where you're already an expert. The trick is to be able to identify those skills and center your attention on how you can best develop those competencies and deploy them to your benefit. Once you do, I think you'll

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be amazed at what you can accomplish, and what  
levels of success you can attain.

**ALMOST THE END! YOU STILL NEED TO  
COMPLETE THE 7-DAY CHALLENGE!**

# 7-Day Core Competencies Challenge

## **Why Accept this Challenge?**

If you're seeking personal growth and development, you need to commit to consistent effort. One way to jumpstart this journey is by taking the 7-Day Challenge. To succeed in this challenge, you must dedicate a little time each day to contemplation and reflection on the given topic.

The questions provided are only a starting

point. If they don't resonate with your personal experiences, modify them to better suit your situation. This flexibility allows for a more meaningful and authentic exploration of the subject matter.

When you commit to this challenge, you're making a decision to actively engage with your thoughts and emotions. Writing down your reflections is a powerful tool to solidify your insights and gain clarity on your internal landscape. This daily practice can have a profound impact on your overall well-being.

Approach this 7-Day Challenge with an open mind and willingness to explore. You may uncover aspects of yourself that you weren't previously aware of or gain a deeper understanding of your values and priorities. This challenge's benefits extend beyond the initial 7 days, and the

act of carving out time for introspection and self-reflection can become a habit.

Ultimately, this challenge is a powerful tool for anyone seeking to enhance their self-awareness and personal growth. By dedicating a small amount of time each day to contemplation and reflection, you are taking an important step towards a more fulfilling and meaningful life. Upon completion, commit to re-reading and updating this challenge when you find yourself challenged by this concept in the future.

A 7-Day Challenge provides a roadmap for achieving your goals by breaking them down into smaller, achievable tasks. By having a clear challenge, you can stay motivated and focused on your goals. Each day's challenge builds upon the previous day's, creating momentum towards the desired outcome. Additionally, having a plan can

help you stay organized and prioritize tasks based on their importance and urgency.

A challenge can help you overcome procrastination and stay accountable. By having a clear outline of what needs to be done, you can avoid feeling overwhelmed and take action towards your goals. Furthermore, having a plan can help you track your progress and make adjustments as needed.

Overall, a 7-Day Challenge is a powerful tool to focus on a particular issue and provide greater insight, bringing an area of concern into your comfort zone.



**Day 1: Identify your core competencies.**

Take time to identify your company's unique set of skills, knowledge, and resources. Analyze your company's strengths and weaknesses and identify the areas where you can excel and differentiate yourself from competitors.

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**Day 2: Invest in research and development.**

Invest in research and development to enhance your core competencies. Stay up to date with industry trends and new technologies that can help you improve your products and services.

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**Day 3: Develop strategic partnerships.**

Develop strategic partnerships with companies that complement your core competencies. This will allow you to leverage their strengths and enhance your own capabilities.

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**Day 4: Pursue acquisitions.**

Pursue acquisitions that align with your core competencies. This can help you acquire new skills and resources that can be used to create value for customers and differentiate yourself from competitors.

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**Day 5: Focus on operational excellence.**

Focus on operational excellence to enhance your core competencies. Streamline your processes and optimize your operations to improve efficiency and reduce costs.

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**Day 6: Leverage your core competencies.**

Identify the areas where you can leverage your core competencies to create value for customers and differentiate yourself from competitors.

Focus on these areas and develop strategies to capitalize on your strengths.

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### **Day 7: Contemplation**

Take time to reflect on your company's core competencies and the strategies you have developed to leverage them. Consider how you can continue to enhance your core competencies and maintain your competitive advantage in the long term.

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Core Competencies

Wes Berry



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## About The Author

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Wes Berry is a Keynote Speaker and Workshop Facilitator with the professional skills and real-life experience to deliver on any stage. He works with Fortune 500 companies like Johnson & Johnson to smaller businesses and associations of all sizes that are seeking a breakthrough experience. Wes changes lives and transforms organizations by delivering a Paradigm Shift. He has written sixteen business and success books and is a *Wall Street Journal* best-selling author and TEDx speaker. As an entrepreneur, he built a \$750 million international company that operated in 130 countries.

His business knowledge and communications skills have made him an expert media contributor on many topics, from

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commercial drone applications to the downsizing of Sears, resulting in appearances with various media outlets. His many media appearances include NPR, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The London Times*, *Entrepreneur* and *Time* magazines, Fox News, Neil Cavuto, Geraldo Rivera, and John Stossel, to name just a few.

