

CLI PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE
WHITE PAPER SERIES

THE COMPETENCE GAP

Why Compliance Does Not Guarantee
Professional Performance



A COATES LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE WHITE PAPER

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Introduction: When Competence Becomes Visible

Recently, a group of law enforcement supervisors participated in a pilot assessment conducted by the Coates Leadership Institute. The purpose of the assessment was not to rank supervisors, identify poor performers, or produce another administrative score. It was designed to examine patterns associated with supervisory professional competence: how supervisors think, how they respond, how they influence others, how they balance competing responsibilities, and how they approach the work of supervision.

When the results were discussed with one participating agency, the Robeson County Sheriff's Office, something important became apparent.

Professional competence was not merely an aspiration within the organization. There was evidence that it was already present.

The supervisors had demonstrated patterns consistent with thoughtful supervision, professional responsibility, sound judgment, and an understanding of their influence on the people they led. Much of that competence was evident not simply in what they reported doing, but in how they approached the responsibilities of their positions.

When they were told that the assessment suggested professional competence was alive and well within their agency, their reaction was unmistakable.

There was pride on their faces.

That moment deserves attention because it illustrates something easily overlooked in conversations about accountability, training, evaluation, and organizational performance.

Organizations spend considerable time trying to identify what is wrong.

They conduct investigations. They review complaints. They track policy violations. They document training deficiencies. They evaluate critical incidents. They impose corrective action when standards are not met.

All of those functions are necessary.

But what mechanisms allow an organization to discover when its people are actually doing the profession well?

What tells a sheriff, chief, commander, or supervisor that employees are not merely meeting administrative requirements, but demonstrating the Knowledge, Skill, Judgment, and Values necessary for professional performance?

Traditional systems often provide an incomplete answer because many of those systems were designed primarily to establish compliance.

And compliance is not the same thing as competence.

That distinction creates what the Coates Leadership Institute refers to as the competence gap: the distance between what an organization can document that its personnel have completed and what the organization can reasonably demonstrate that its personnel are capable of doing.

Compliance can be documented. Competence must be demonstrated.

1. The Compliance-Competence Distinction

Compliance matters in law enforcement.

Policies must be followed. Required training must be completed. Certifications must remain current. Reports must satisfy legal and organizational requirements. Supervisors must complete evaluations. Agencies must comply with statutory, regulatory, accreditation, and professional standards.

The argument for professional competence is therefore not an argument against compliance.

It is an argument against mistaking compliance for competence.

Consider several conclusions that organizations can easily make:

An officer completed the required training; therefore, the officer is competent.

A supervisor signed the policy acknowledgment; therefore, the supervisor understands the policy.

An employee possesses the required certification; therefore, the employee can perform proficiently.

An officer has twenty years of experience; therefore, the officer possesses professional expertise.

An employee has received no formal discipline; therefore, the employee is performing satisfactorily.

A supervisor completed every required annual evaluation; therefore, employee performance has been effectively evaluated.

Each conclusion sounds reasonable.

None necessarily follows from the evidence.

Training completion establishes that training was completed. Certification establishes that a qualification requirement was satisfied. Policy acknowledgment establishes that information was provided or received. Years of service establish duration of employment. The absence of discipline establishes that formal disciplinary action has not occurred. A completed evaluation establishes that an evaluation document exists.

Those things may contribute evidence to a broader determination of competence. They do not, by themselves, establish it.

Compliance asks: Was the requirement satisfied?

Competence asks: Can the professional perform appropriately when the requirement must be translated into action?

2. Compliance, Qualification, Proficiency, and Competence

COMPLIANCE

Did the person satisfy the defined requirement?

Establishes whether a required action, process, or standard was completed.

QUALIFICATION

Has the person met the established prerequisite or credential?

Establishes eligibility or a threshold requirement for a role or function.

PROFICIENCY

Can the person perform the particular task to the required standard?

Moves from completion toward demonstrated task performance.

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

Can the person reliably integrate Knowledge, Skill, Judgment, and Values under real conditions?

Addresses integrated professional performance—not merely completion, credentials, or isolated task ability.

Professional competence requires integration. Within the Professional Competence Doctrine, competence involves four interdependent domains: Knowledge, Skill, Judgment, and Values.

Professional competence asks a more demanding question:

Can the individual reliably integrate Knowledge, Skill, Judgment, and Values to produce appropriate professional performance under changing real-world conditions?

3. Why Organizations Gravitate Toward Compliance

There is a practical reason organizations depend heavily on compliance measures.

Compliance is relatively easy to document.

A training roster provides a date. A learning management system records completion. A certification has an expiration date. A policy acknowledgment contains a signature. An evaluation produces a form. A disciplinary process creates documentation.

These are visible, countable, retrievable forms of evidence.

Competence is more difficult.

Professional competence appears in decisions, conversations, responses, observations, interactions, priorities, habits, and performance over time.

It becomes visible when circumstances change. It appears when policy does not provide an obvious answer. It becomes important when competing priorities must be balanced. It is tested when the professional is tired, frustrated, uncertain, challenged, or operating under pressure. And it is frequently most consequential when nobody is standing nearby with a checklist.

That creates an organizational temptation: Measure what is easiest to document and assume that it represents what is most important to know.

Eventually, the proxy can replace the objective.

Training completion becomes evidence of capability. Years of service become evidence of expertise. Policy compliance becomes evidence of judgment. The absence of disciplinary problems becomes evidence of satisfactory performance.

But the organization may still be unable to answer the most important question:

What evidence do we actually possess that our personnel can perform competently?

That is the competence gap.

4. The Four Domains Expose the Gap

The Four Domains of Professional Competence provide a useful framework for understanding why compliance measures alone are insufficient.

Knowledge

An employee may have received information without understanding it. An officer may have attended legal update training but be unable to correctly apply the legal principle to a complicated field situation. A supervisor may have read a policy without understanding its operational implications. Knowledge requires more than exposure. It requires understanding sufficient to support performance.

Skill

A skill may have been introduced without becoming proficient. An employee may have successfully demonstrated a skill during training but rarely practiced it afterward. A certification may remain current while actual capability deteriorates. Skill must therefore be developed, reinforced, observed, and sometimes reassessed.

Judgment

Judgment presents an even greater challenge because it cannot be reduced easily to procedural compliance. Policy can establish boundaries. Training can provide principles. Supervisors can establish expectations. But professionals routinely encounter circumstances requiring interpretation, discretion, prioritization, and choice.

Values

Values may be the least visible domain until circumstances test them. An organization can publish values. Employees can recite them. Mission statements can display them. Policies can reinforce them. But organizational values ultimately become visible through behavior.

KNOWLEDGE | SKILL | JUDGMENT | VALUES

The Four Domains expose the fundamental limitation of a compliance-only system. It is possible to document requirements in each domain without establishing that the domains are being successfully integrated in professional performance.

5. The Danger of Assumed Competence

The competence gap becomes particularly consequential when an organization stops looking because it assumes competence is already present.

The assumption may be based on tenure. It may be based on rank. It may be based on certification. It may be based on previous performance. It may simply be based on the absence of visible problems.

But competence should never become organizationally invisible simply because nothing has gone wrong recently.

A favorable outcome does not necessarily prove that the underlying decision was competent. Likewise, an unfavorable outcome does not automatically establish incompetence. Professional performance must be examined in context.

This is why supervisors matter so much.

Supervision provides one of the organization's most important opportunities to observe professional competence while it is occurring—not months later during an annual evaluation and not only after something has gone wrong.

Supervisors see decisions being made. They review reports. They hear explanations. They observe interactions. They recognize patterns. They see hesitation, confidence, shortcuts, growth, complacency, sound reasoning, questionable assumptions, and developing expertise.

The question is whether organizations teach supervisors to recognize those things as evidence of competence.

If they do not, enormous amounts of valuable performance information pass through the organization unnoticed.

6. Recognizing Competence, Not Merely Finding Failure

This returns us to the supervisors who participated in the assessment pilot.

Assessment is frequently associated with deficiency.

What is wrong? Who is struggling? Where is the weakness? What requires correction?

Those are legitimate purposes of assessment. They are not its only purposes.

A credible professional-competence assessment process should also help an organization identify strengths, constructive patterns, sound professional reasoning, and behaviors worthy of reinforcement.

That distinction matters.

If professional competence becomes merely another language for identifying employee failure, professionals will eventually experience it as another mechanism of organizational control.

But if competence is treated as a genuine professional standard, then evidence must be allowed to lead in both directions.

Where development is needed, say so. Where evidence is incomplete, continue the inquiry. Where performance is inconsistent, address it. But where competence is demonstrated, recognize it.

That recognition should not be confused with lowering standards or offering praise indiscriminately. Recognition has meaning precisely because the standard has meaning.

The pride visible among those supervisors was not created by telling them that everything they did was perfect.

It came from learning that the way they approached their professional responsibilities reflected something worth valuing.

What organizations choose to measure determines not only what they discover is wrong. It determines whether they ever recognize what is right.

7. What Evidence of Competence Looks Like

If completion records alone are insufficient, organizations need a broader conception of evidence.

No single observation, assessment, evaluation, or outcome should ordinarily define the professional.

Instead, credible conclusions about competence should emerge from multiple forms of evidence considered over time.

That evidence may include training performance, demonstrated skills, supervisory observation, decision-making, work products, scenario performance, coaching conversations,

assessment results, patterns of behavior, citizen interactions, peer relationships, critical-incident performance, evaluations, and demonstrated responses to feedback.

The objective is not to create a massive new administrative system.

It is to use existing organizational activity more intelligently.

A supervisor reviewing a report can examine reasoning. A coaching conversation can reveal knowledge. A scenario can test judgment. Observation can reveal skill. A difficult interaction can provide evidence of values. An evaluation can synthesize patterns rather than merely assign ratings. Training can require application rather than attendance alone.

The shift is subtle but profound.

What have we documented?

becomes

What does the evidence tell us about professional performance?

8. From Documentation to Development

Identifying the competence gap is not enough.

The organizational objective must be to close it.

That requires moving beyond a model in which training, supervision, evaluation, policy, and accountability operate as separate administrative functions.

They should form a developmental system.

**EXPECT → DEVELOP → OBSERVE → EVALUATE → CORRECT →
REINFORCE**

First, the organization establishes clear expectations. Then it develops the Knowledge, Skill, Judgment, and Values necessary to meet them. Supervisors and leaders observe performance. Evidence is evaluated. Deficiencies are corrected. Competent performance is reinforced. Then the cycle continues.

This changes the meaning of accountability. Accountability is no longer limited to determining who should be blamed when performance fails. It includes the organization's responsibility to establish expectations, prepare people to meet them, recognize emerging

problems, intervene when necessary, and reinforce performance that reflects the professional standard.

That is how competence becomes intentional rather than accidental.

9. The Leadership Responsibility

The competence gap is ultimately a leadership issue.

Leaders determine what the organization measures. Leaders decide what supervisors are expected to observe. Leaders establish what training is intended to accomplish. Leaders determine whether evaluations describe real performance or merely complete an administrative requirement. Leaders influence whether difficult conversations occur. Leaders decide what is reinforced, tolerated, corrected, and rewarded.

And leaders establish whether professional competence is treated as an abstract ideal or an operational expectation.

This does not mean leadership is responsible for every individual failure.

Employees remain responsible for their own conduct, decisions, preparation, and professional obligations.

Individual accountability and organizational accountability must coexist.

But leadership cannot credibly claim that competence matters while relying exclusively on systems that measure whether administrative requirements have been completed.

If professional competence is the standard, leaders must develop ways to see it.

Conclusion: Making Competence Visible

Law enforcement organizations need compliance.

They need documentation.

They need policies, certifications, training records, evaluations, and accountability systems.

But none of those should be asked to prove more than they actually prove.

A completed training course is evidence of training. A certification is evidence of qualification. A policy acknowledgment is evidence that a policy was communicated. An evaluation form is evidence that an evaluation process occurred.

Professional competence requires something more.

It requires evidence that people can integrate Knowledge, Skill, Judgment, and Values into appropriate professional performance under the conditions in which the profession must actually be practiced.

Sometimes that evidence will reveal a gap. When it does, leadership has a responsibility to respond.

But sometimes the evidence will reveal something else.

It will reveal officers making thoughtful decisions. Supervisors developing their people. Professionals exercising authority responsibly. Leaders reinforcing standards. People doing difficult work well—not because someone is watching, but because that is how they understand their professional responsibility.

Organizations need to see that, too.

The supervisors in that assessment pilot provided a reminder that professional competence should never be understood exclusively through failure.

Competence can be developed. It can be observed. It can be assessed. It can be reinforced.

And when people have genuinely demonstrated it, it can—and should—be recognized.

That recognition does more than make people feel good.

It tells professionals what the organization values. It tells others what the standard looks like. It reinforces behaviors worth preserving. And it transforms professional competence from an organizational expectation into a source of professional identity.

Compliance can be documented. Competence must be demonstrated.

And when competence is demonstrated, leadership should make sure it does not remain invisible.

About the Coates Leadership Institute

The Coates Leadership Institute develops law enforcement leadership and professional-development programs centered on Professional Competence: the intentional integration of Knowledge, Skill, Judgment, and Values in professional performance. CLI works to help law enforcement professionals and organizations move beyond completion-based measures toward systems that develop, observe, evaluate, and reinforce competent performance.

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Professionalism is our standard. Competence is not a destination. It is a standard.