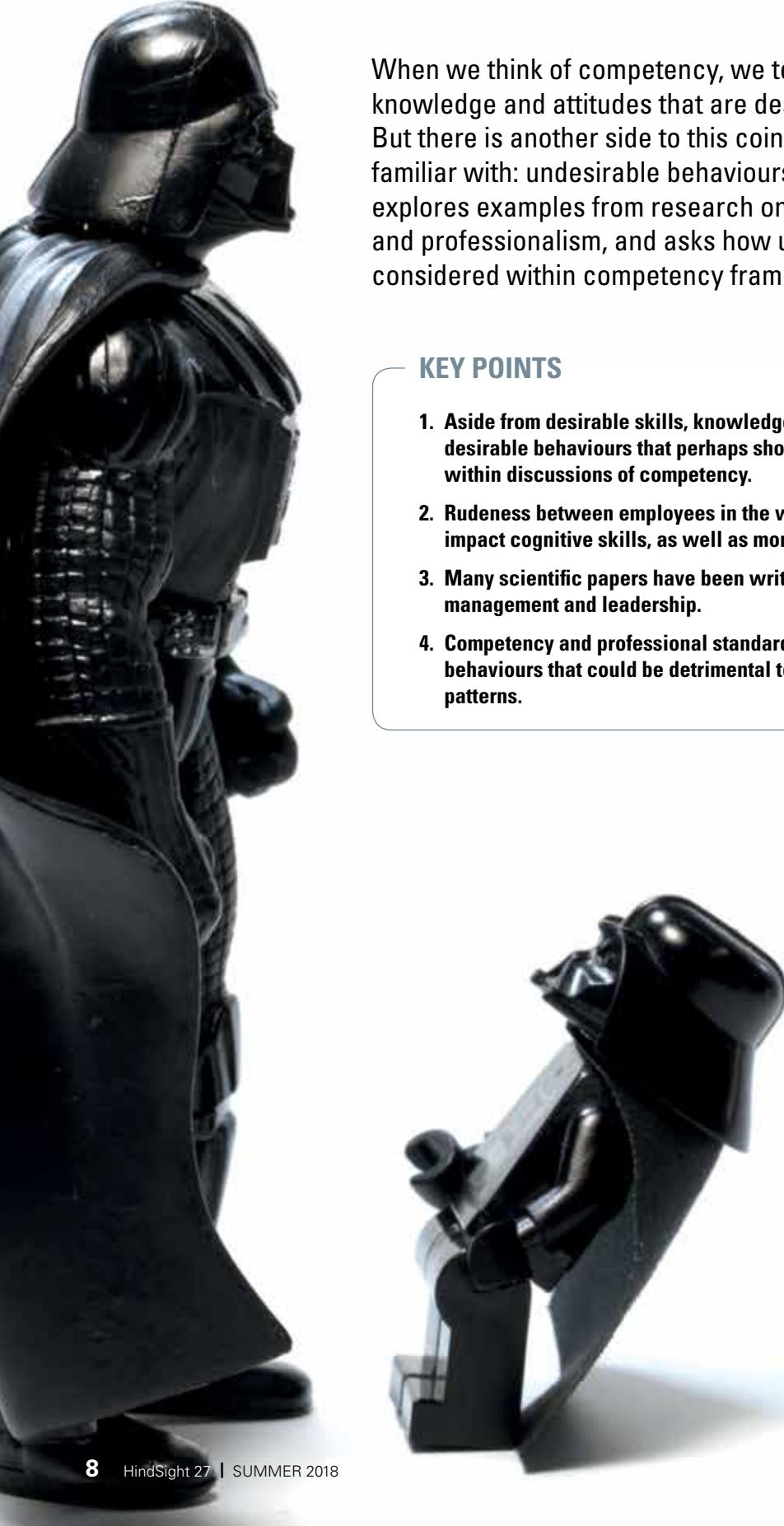# THE DARK SIDE

When we think of competency, we tend to think about the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are desirable for a given job. But there is another side to this coin that most people will be familiar with: undesirable behaviours. In this Op Ed, **Rhona Flin** explores examples from research on the dark side of competency and professionalism, and asks how unwanted behaviours can be considered within competency frameworks.

KEY POINTS

1. Aside from desirable skills, knowledge and attitudes, there are also less desirable behaviours that perhaps should be considered more explicitly within discussions of competency.

2. Rudeness between employees in the workplace is also an issue, and can impact cognitive skills, as well as morale.

3. Many scientific papers have been written on 'dark side' characteristics in management and leadership.

4. Competency and professional standards documents should mention behaviours that could be detrimental to safety, as well as desired behaviour patterns.

What makes a controller, a pilot, or a manager competent? For almost all occupations, standards of competence exist that specify the knowledge, skills, attitudes and attributes that a given job requires. These are valuable, but do they present the whole picture? Perhaps it is also necessary to add a little something on what current research tells us about behaviours that could be detrimental to safety. It may be important to acknowledge which behaviours have to be suppressed or inhibited, as well as those that should be enacted.

In the UK, standards of competence for managers have been around for decades. My experience of writing these is limited but in the early 1990s, after Lord Cullen's report on the Piper Alpha North Sea Oil disaster was released. I was part of an oil industry group devising standards of competence for Offshore Installation Managers (OIMs),

especially relating to their emergency command responsibilities (a skill set that appeared to have deficiencies in the three OIMs on duty that night – on Piper and the two connected platforms). This type of management competence framework is written by committees of experts and typically based on job analysis studies. The standards represent best practice and so are important for selection, training, and assessing competence. The contents cover not only the technical skills needed for task accomplishment but also sets of desirable behaviours, such as listening, consulting and mentoring. They do not make for lively reading but that is not their purpose.

More entertaining are the studies of all the other behaviours that humans tend to exhibit in the workplace. Setting aside the sexual activities of notorious film directors, hapless politicians and others named in #MeToo campaigns, and ignoring deliberately malevolent or criminal actions, there are a whole range of interesting behaviours that perhaps should be considered more explicitly within discussions of competency. I've chosen two examples where the safety implications have been examined: rudeness between staff and leadership styles.

Rude behaviours

Social psychologists, Porath and Erez looked at the incidence of rudeness between employees in the workplace and found that it was so frequent that it might be regarded as an epidemic. They began to examine the impact of rudeness on cognitive skills such as memory, by running psychological experiments with students who had been recruited to take cognitive tests.

The students in the experimental group were given directions to the test session, which took them to an office. When they knocked on the door, the person in the office (e.g., a professor) displayed annoyance at being interrupted and spoke to the student very rudely before giving directions to the correct room. The results showed that the students who had been the victims of rudeness performed worse on the tests than those in the control group who had not had this experience. In a second manipulation,

students who simply witnessed a rude exchange between a staff member and a student also showed lower cognitive performance than a control group who had not witnessed the exchange.

I was studying behaviours in hospital operating theatres when I read their paper, and was hearing reports of conversations between staff that were less than polite, to put it mildly. There were also survey data showing that aggressive language between operating theatre staff was not uncommon in UK hospitals. Several research teams have now investigated the effects of rudeness – experienced or witnessed – on staff in medical simulations. These teams have reported the same kinds of negative impacts on cognition as found in the student studies. So there is evidence that behaviours such as rudeness, which can be committed thoughtlessly as well as deliberately, can have an impact on critical cognitive tasks and thus on safety. Of course, the organisational culture can foster particular behaviour patterns. To address this, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh recently launched an anti-bullying and undermining campaign (#LetsRemoveIt). In their membership survey, nearly 40% of respondents reported they had been victims of such behaviour, with the same amount reporting that they had witnessed it.

"There is evidence that behaviours such as rudeness, which can be committed thoughtlessly as well as deliberately, can have an impact on critical cognitive tasks and thus on safety."

In domains beyond healthcare, rude or unpleasant exchanges between staff could have an effect on safety. Readers will probably be familiar with YouTube videos of rude exchanges between air traffic controllers and pilots at some airports. Presenting research findings showing the links between certain social behaviours and impaired cognition in safety-critical tasks can be enlightening for those working in riskier environments. Including this type of evidence in CRM training can result in important insights for busy

practitioners who work in stressful, time-pressured conditions, where thoughtful politeness may not always be the norm.

Destructive leadership styles

Some years ago, I heard the American psychologist Robert Hogan – an expert on personality – amusingly describe the dark side of charisma. He had been studying leadership styles and had concluded that managerial incompetence was far from uncommon. In fact, he estimated the base rate to be around 60-75%. He suggested that American managers had learnt their leadership style from watching John Wayne movies, characterised by phrases, such as "Do what I say or I'll kill you".

His findings led him to identify several types of incompetent leaders that could be found in the workplace. The first was 'the empty suit' leader who 'fell upwards' in the organisation, being rapidly promoted, despite a lack of managerial skill, due to competence in navigating selection procedures, such as assessment centres or other 'beauty contests'. The second type left 'scorched earth' in his wake having burnt out his subordinates as he progressed his career. The third was some kind of charming psychopath. (At that time, the majority of managers he studied were male.) ▶ ▶

Rhona Flin is Professor of Industrial Psychology, Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University and Emeritus Professor of Applied Psychology, University of Aberdeen. She carries out research and consultancy projects on human performance in high risk industries, looking at leadership, culture, team skills and decision making in healthcare, aviation and the energy industries.
r.flin@rgu.ac.uk

"The key intervention is to make managers more aware of their typical styles and to understand the effects that some of their behaviours can have on others."

Almost thirty years later, investigations of undesirable leadership styles are now mainstream for management researchers. Many scientific papers have been written on 'dark side' characteristics, managers who derail, the effects of devious behaviours, and unethical leadership. Studies of destructive leadership styles have tended to examine the effects on employee wellbeing or trust, rather than safety, but there have been reported effects on safety-related behaviours, such as speaking up. Not surprisingly, laissez faire leadership (not paying attention to the task or the team) is related to lower safety performance. A new study by Barling and colleagues of the leadership styles that surgeons use while operating found that unsupportive and over-controlling behaviours were linked to lower measures of team members' ratings of psychological safety.

The key intervention is to make managers more aware of their typical styles and to understand the effects that some of their behaviours can have on others. This requires feedback mechanisms and these detrimental styles of leadership should be openly discussed during training.

What not to do

To recap, while the analysis of competency and the resulting skill sets and professional standards documents are an essential part of occupational development systems, they tend to focus almost exclusively on the desired behaviour patterns. Perhaps there should be some mention of behaviours (which may be typical in a given work environment) that could be detrimental for safety and therefore should be suppressed.

A key component of expertise can be the inhibition of certain actions, such as rushing or becoming distracted. In some of the non-technical skills frameworks, such as NOTECHS for pilots, this kind of information on undesirable behaviours is already included, having been provided

by subject matter experts during development. The behavioural markers for each component skill element provide examples of good and poor behaviour patterns. Thus for situation awareness, a negative behavioural marker is, 'Does not set priorities regarding time limits'. For co-operation an example is, 'Ignores suggestions of other crew members'. Similarly in NOTSS for surgeons, markers of poor behaviours include 'Fails to inform team of surgical plan' and 'Needs help from assistant but does not make it clear what assistant is expected to do'. The inclusion of negative markers makes it easier to discuss behaviours that may have a negative impact on task performance.

"For managers, explicit discussion of destructive leadership styles and behaviours that have been shown to increase risk or affect worker wellbeing, could be a useful addition to their training syllabus."

Conclusion

So in discussions of competency, perhaps we should have more up-front consideration of which behaviours may increase risk and should be inhibited. This could also include more advice on what not to do in given situations – i.e. the kind of information that experienced practitioners share informally when they say, 'Don't do that because I did it once and this (negative outcome) happened'. For managers, explicit discussion of destructive leadership styles and behaviours that have been shown to increase risk or affect worker wellbeing, could be a useful addition to their training syllabus and might be included in the appendix to a competency framework.

My experience is not in air traffic management and none of the research mentioned above came from control centres, though some does come from pilots. But are there are behaviour patterns in controllers and their managers that are detrimental for safety, and if so, should they be considered within ATM competency frameworks? ⓢ

Scott will not get away from me this time! This session is **mine**...