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# Restructuring Personnel Selection: The Assessment Center Method

Frederick C. Wendel, Ronald G. Joekel

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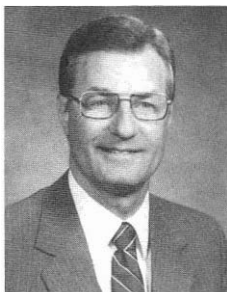


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# **Restructuring Personnel Selection: The Assessment Center Method**

by  
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and  
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## Introduction

Imagine that you switched careers and have become head coach of a new National Basketball Association franchise – the High Fliers. How are you going to go about selecting your players? For a start, how about administering the Miller Analogies Test or the Graduate Record Examination? Would the franchise benefit much from mental ability testing of players? How about administering a personality inventory? You can pick from the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory, the California Psychological Inventory, or the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. Maybe you could learn more by using a projective technique, such as the Rorschach or the Thematic Apperception Test? Or maybe you would prefer to have the players draw a set of offensive and defensive schemes, or take a true-false test on “Great Coaches of the Game,” or fill out a biographical questionnaire, or submit letters of reference from their previous coaches? Would you observe them lift weights, broad jump from a standing position, or perform hand-eye coordination exercises? Perhaps. Most of all, wouldn't you want to see the players dribble, crash the boards, shoot, play D, pass, hustle, look for the open teammate – all under game conditions?

Coming back to reality, let's think now about how the basketball franchise example applies to how we go about selecting educational personnel to work in our schools. Commonly used methods used in selecting personnel include scanning of transcripts, resumé's, and let-

ters of reference and conducting interviews. How valid are these methods for selecting those who will be responsible for developing the mind and character of this nation's youth? How closely do they approximate the "game conditions" of teaching students and administering schools?

We believe that there are better ways of selecting personnel for schools, ways that should be considered in efforts to restructure schools. One of the better ways is the assessment center method, which is designed to assess specific job-related skills and behaviors under simulated "game conditions." In this fastback we begin with the origins of the assessment center method, then describe how the method works in education, and conclude with the contributions the method can make to the selection of educational personnel.

## Origins of the Assessment Center Method

**E**arly in World War II, General "Wild Bill" Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), predecessor of the CIA, faced a serious personnel problem. He had to recruit staff to serve as saboteurs, spies, provocateurs, agents behind enemy lines, as well as support personnel for these intrepid ones. There weren't any personnel tests for spies and secret agents. No candidates for the OSS had resumé's filled with clandestine activities or could produce letters of reference about their prowess in filtering behind enemy lines, blowing up bridges, sneaking photos of secret weapons, fouling up troop movements, and the like. There were no job descriptions, selection criteria, or a cadre of experienced personnel in a candidate pool. Moreover, recruiting for the OSS was a high-stakes venture involving the security of the nation and the lives of individuals. The "game" in the OSS was for keeps.

One of the persons asked to help select OSS personnel was Henry Murray, a physician by training and director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic in the 1930s. Murray and the OSS staff devised a battery of tests that included such traditional personnel instruments as standardized tests of mental ability, personality inventories, a health questionnaire, a work conditions survey, and a biographical information questionnaire.

The tests also included leaderless group discussions and situational exercises with such names as "Behind the Barn," "The Wall," and "The



Brook." These exercises were designed to measure candidates' skills in leadership and stress tolerance. Some of the exercises were quite ingenious. For example, a candidate was taken "behind the barn" and asked to use pieces of lumber to build a structure similar to the model provided. Two assessors playing the role of "farmhands" assisted the candidate. In their farmhand roles, the two assessors vacillated between passivity or aggression; they disregarded instructions and pleas for assistance; they criticized the candidate in every way possible in an effort to prevent him from completing the structure. But they also were keeping careful notes about the candidate's leadership behavior under stress.

By using a battery of instruments and situational exercises and pooling observations and information about candidates, the OSS assessment staff improved the methods of selecting persons for extremely dangerous jobs, persons who would more likely succeed in their missions and return alive. The OSS staff also learned more about personnel assessment from the experience of Germany and Great Britain.

### **The German Military Experience in Assessment**

After Germany's defeat in World War I, its military machine was dismantled. However, beginning in the 1930s, Germany began to rebuild its armed forces and sought ways to improve the selection of officers. The Germans were the first to use situational tests of leadership behaviors. Psychologists played an important role in the assessment process; in particular, they stressed holistic measurement of leadership and the need for carefully observing behaviors. The German assessment program had weaknesses: the situational exercises were crude, observations were not recorded systematically, and criteria for successful officers were not carefully documented. Nevertheless, the Germans demonstrated that officer selection could be improved by having candidates take part in exercises, by having several trained persons observe their behaviors, and by trying to measure complex personality characteristics.

## **The British Military Experience in Assessment**

Early in World War II, British military leaders felt compelled to restructure their method of officer selection. Previously officers had been selected from graduates of elite schools with officer training programs on the basis of a 20-minute interview. Factors such as the favoritism shown to men from the privileged class, the need for many more well-qualified officers because of the war, and, ultimately, the poor results of the existing selection process called for a new look at officer selection methods. British military leaders learned about Germany's assessment methods from a military attaché who had been stationed in Berlin and subsequently incorporated them into their own selection methods. Intelligence tests, psychiatric inventories, and situational exercises, similar to those developed by the Germans, were used. The British were aware that some of the situational exercises developed by the Germans had weaknesses, so they designed better ones to measure leadership qualities, using such techniques as leaderless group discussions, leaderless group problem-solving activities, and other group tasks.

## **Civilian Experience in Assessment**

After World War II, the British established a Civil Service Selection Board whose responsibility was selecting personnel for middle- and high-level positions in the civil service. The board developed a multi-stage testing program to assess candidates that consisted of objective testing and interviewing, situational tests, and a final interview. A major contribution of the board was demonstrating that the assessment center method could work well in civilian life, too.

After World War II, several programs also were developed in the U.S. that contributed to the assessment center method. The Veterans Administration launched a program for training clinical psychologists that provided useful data on the benefits of different assessment techniques. At the University of California at Berkeley, Donald Mackin-

non, who had worked with Henry Murray on the OSS program, established the Institute for Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR) to conduct research on personality structure and functioning of normal adults. IPAR staff developed a variety of questionnaires, self-report inventories, situational tests, and other exercises to measure effective performance. IPAR's work is noted for its thorough analyses of job success criteria and for correlating assessment techniques with those job-related criteria.

One of the most significant research studies in personnel assessment was undertaken by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company in the mid-1950s. Called the Management Progress Study (MPS), it was designed to improve recruiting and training of managers. Also, the study was unique in that it was longitudinal and traced the development of managers over 20 years.

From 1956 to 1960, 418 men were assessed in groups of 12. Two-thirds were college graduates, one-third were not. The researchers first identified 25 characteristics of successful middle-level managers related to attitudes and values, socioeconomic background, education, general abilities, interpersonal skills, managerial functions, and personality variables. The characteristics, however, were not derived empirically based on job task analyses.

Using data from multiple assessment techniques such as interviews, situational tests, pencil-and-paper tests, and pooled assessor judgments, the assessors independently rated the subjects on the 25 characteristics of successful managers and on their likelihood of receiving a promotion to middle management at AT&T within 10 years. None of the results were fed back to the subjects or their supervisors; thus the subjects' progress in the company would not be affected by the assessments.

Subjects were re-assessed after eight years and again after 20 years. By 1965, 42% of the 103 subjects predicted to be promoted to middle management had attained that level, while only 7% of the 166 not rated as "promotable" had been promoted. Thus the study demon-

strated that the multiple techniques of the assessment center method were successful in selecting future managers.

With this brief overview of the origins of the assessment center method, let us now look at the basic processes of the method, how it operates in practice, and how it can be used in the selection of educational personnel.

## What Is the Assessment Center Method?

An assessment center is not just a site or location. It is a process involving: 1) analysis of job-related behaviors; 2) development of exercises and tests appropriate to measure those job-related behaviors; 3) administering of situational exercises; and 4) training of assessors to administer the exercises, observe behaviors, record and categorize them, prepare reports, and pool information. Let us examine each of the steps in the process.

*Job-related behaviors.* The first step in the process is identifying job-related behaviors. Compare the duties of a receptionist in a business office with an auto mechanic. What duties distinguish one job from the other? A receptionist, for example, should have excellent oral communication, listening, and interpersonal skills. Greeting people face-to-face and on the telephone, taking and relaying messages, and giving directions to visitors are all tasks a receptionist must perform. The duties of an auto mechanic would have little overlap with that of a receptionist. An analysis of job-related behaviors should clearly delineate the major skills and personal qualities needed to carry out the job effectively.

*Job-related measures.* Teachers' jobs differ from those of administrators. Teachers need planning skills in preparing lessons and serving students' instructional needs. Measures of teachers' job-related behaviors might include diagnosing learners' needs, prescribing instruction, and evaluating achievement. Principals have different

responsibilities. Measures of their job-related behaviors might include developing a building budget, mediating disputes between teachers and parents, or planning a staff inservice program. This step in the process first involves analyzing the tasks that go with the job and then identifying specific behaviors to look for with each task.

*Administering of situational tests.* Experience has shown that the use of situational tests can contribute significantly to the assessment of potential. Some of the situational tests are in the form of simulation exercises. Commonly used exercises include the case study, fact-finding, in-basket, leaderless group discussion, scheduling, and management game. In addition, such traditional measures as mental ability tests, essays, personality inventories, projective techniques, and other methods may be used.

*Training assessors.* Assembling a team of qualified assessors requires an intensive training program. Assessors must be trained to understand the behaviors under consideration; to observe, record, and categorize behaviors accurately; and to prepare reports on situational tests that faithfully describe the observed behaviors. The assessors must be able to integrate data from a variety of sources for particular skill dimensions, score the behaviors objectively, and then provide an overall rating of performance.

In summary, the assessment center method produces a standardized evaluation of behavior based on data from multiple sources. Trained assessors observe behavior, record what they see, and rate the candidates' behaviors. Ratings are based, in part, on simulations that are specifically developed for the job in question.

## **Simulation Exercises**

Assessment centers use a variety of simulation exercises to evaluate personnel. Some of the more common ones are described below.

*Case study.* In this type of exercise, the subjects are given background information about a problem or situation related to the job

in question. They are asked to analyze the case study and to make recommendations based on their analysis. Variations on this type of exercise include requiring a comprehensive written report; presenting an oral report to a supervisor, a single assessor, or a team of assessors; or engaging in a discussion with other subjects who have read and analyzed the same case study and reaching consensus on one set of recommendations.

*Fact-finding.* A fact-finding exercise is usually structured around a complex problem. Typically, a subject is given background material on the problem and is assigned the role of fact finder. The problem might be that staff morale in a school has fallen dramatically over the past 12 months. The subject is to find out why morale has dipped and then prepare a report on the problem. The exercise is often structured so that the subject has time to: a) read the background material and to develop questions about the situation, b) ask a resource person (a trained assessor) about the problem, c) summarize information obtained from the resource person, and d) deliver an oral report, complete with findings and recommendations, to the resource person.

*In-basket.* The in-basket technique was developed specifically for identifying managerial potential. Subjects are assigned a role, such as a newly appointed administrator of XYZ school, and receive general instructions about what they are to do to items in the in-basket. For example, the instruction might be, "Write down everything you would do or say exactly as you would in real life." The subjects receive a packet consisting of a calendar, a memo pad, and a stack of stationery. They might be asked to respond to notes from the secretary, requests for appointments, reports to review, requests for advice, and other items to review and act upon individually. The subjects then respond by writing notes or letters, scheduling appointments on the calendar, compiling agenda items, or preparing "To Do" lists, within a specified time. After handling the in-basket items, the subjects are usually given a form to summarize what action they took and their reasons for each item in the in-basket.

*Interview simulation.* An interview simulation might require a subject to confront a disgruntled or incompetent employee played by an assessor. Other interview simulations might be situations involving a distraught parent or hiring a new staff member. Or somewhat like the "Behind the Barn" exercise in the OSS assessment center, a participant might have to interview two persons who play opposite personality types. A variation of the interview simulation is the negotiation exercise. In this exercise, a subject might be asked to negotiate with superiors, peers, subordinates, or people outside the school on matters related to pay, allocating scarce resources, or providing services. The other party in a negotiation would, of course, have to be played by a trained assessor.

*Leaderless group discussion.* In a leaderless group discussion, six to eight subjects are given a common set of background materials and a simple task, such as agreeing on a set of recommendations for dealing with the problem described in the background material. A variation is to make the discussion more competitive by assigning roles to the subjects. Each subject is given similar but not identical background material on a set of applicants for a promotion or award. Each subject would be asked to make a case for one applicant to receive the promotion or award. A part of the evaluation of the subjects would be how successfully they promoted their assigned applicant.

*Management game.* A typical management game is structured around a problem that requires cooperation with team members in competition with another team. For example, in an assessment center for business executives, subjects might be given money to buy, trade, or sell shares of stock. Two or more teams might try to capture the market, form a conglomerate, or win big in the market. Educational personnel might be asked to compete for grants, form consulting agencies, or the like.

*Presentation.* In some cases, presentations may be required after a leaderless group discussion, a fact-finding exercise, or a case study. Presentations also may be stand-alone exercises, for example, ask-



ing a subject to hold a press conference defending a decision for a reduction-in-force, a cross-town busing program, instituting a new reading program, or changing to an all-day kindergarten. Presentation simulations lend themselves to many issues confronting administrators and teachers.

*Scheduling.* Scheduling simulations are used in selecting personnel for jobs that require scheduling of employees to machines or tasks. A subject is given background information on a job, the number of workers, the capacity of machines, and other pertinent data. During the course of the simulation exercise, new information might be introduced: one or more workers has taken ill, a machine has broken down, a rush order has just come in. Introducing new information is a way to gauge a subject's ability to react to changing conditions and to keep the work flowing smoothly.

*Staff meeting.* In this exercise a subject could be given time, perhaps an hour, to interview several school staff, played by trained assessors, about problems within the district. After this staff meeting, the participant would be asked to make an oral report to the "president of the school board" about the problems.

## **Skill Dimensions in the Assessment Center Method**

For assessment center staff to be successful in selecting effective administrators or teachers, it must identify skill dimensions that are job-related or specific to the target job. A job analysis based on observations of what behaviors are performed on the job should reveal what skill dimensions are related to success. Situational tests that elicit the skills are subsequently designed. Typical skill dimensions identified for success in administrative/managerial positions are:

1. Oral communication. Effective expression in individual or group situations, including nonverbal communications.
2. Written communication. Clear expression of ideas in writing, using proper grammatical form.

3. Delegation. Using subordinates effectively; allocating decision making and other responsibilities to the appropriate subordinate.
4. Organizational sensitivity. Awareness of the impact and implications of decisions on organizational policy and operations, for example, a school, a school district, a school board, or state department of education.
5. Sensitivity. Actions indicating consideration for the feelings and needs of others.
6. Judgment. Developing alternative courses of action and making logical decisions based on factual information.
7. Leadership. Use of appropriate interpersonal styles and methods in guiding individuals or groups toward task accomplishment.
8. Decisiveness. Readiness to make decisions, render judgments, take action, and commit oneself.
9. Work standards. Setting high goals or performance standards for self, subordinates, others, and organizations (Thornton and Byham 1982, pp. 138-140).

Assessing each of these skill dimensions will differ depending on the job. While all the skill dimensions might apply to both a principal and a teacher, they will differ qualitatively for each position. So the task of the assessment center staff is to devise appropriate instruments to assess these skills for different positions.

Methods used by assessment centers provide indicators or *signs* of skills and behaviors, or they require subjects to provide *samples* of their skills and behavior in a situational test. A score on a mental ability test is considered a sign of where a person falls on a scale of intelligence. While high mental ability test scores may correlate positively with successful job-related behaviors, high mental ability is no guarantee of success on the job. For example, a teacher may be highly intelligent and knowledgeable in his or her subject matter but just can not get the material across. Such a teacher probably lacks instructional skills and, perhaps, interpersonal skills as well, both of which

are essential to teaching success. A better measure would be a sampling of the teacher's behavior in a teaching simulation exercise.

One of the most widely used instruments for personnel selection is the interview. Useful information can be gathered through an interview; however, answers to an interviewer's questions or to items on a questionnaire will not necessarily reveal how a person would actually behave in a situation. What I say I would do and what I actually do may be quite different. Insight into a person's behavior might be more revealing by giving the person an in-basket task to complete or by assigning the person to a leaderless group discussion and getting samples of the person's behavior and skills. The key is to put persons into situations where they can demonstrate skills in job-related activities.

Successful assessment centers have used mental ability tests, personality inventories, projective techniques, simulation exercises, interviews, paper-and-pencil tests, and other means to collect both signs and samples of a subject's skill dimensions and other behaviors. All can contribute to the assessment process; however, whatever assessment instrument is used must reflect job-related requirements. Validation studies have consistently pointed out the need for using multiple sources of data, using multiple techniques for observing behavior, and pooling information from multiple assessors. All techniques used should contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the subjects and to validity of the assessment center.

### **Advantages of Assessment Centers**

Assessment centers are now widely used in business and industry, government, and the military. Most of the Fortune 500 companies operate assessment centers for the selection and development of personnel. The advantages of the assessment center method are several.

First, they are more effective in fitting a person to a specific job. Jobs vary in the nature of their tasks and in levels of responsibility. Even jobs with the same title can vary greatly. For example, the title

of assistant principal in a high school can mean different things in different schools. In one high school, the assistant principal might have primary responsibility for student discipline, in another the primary responsibility might be student activity programs. Each position has the title of assistant principal, but the job descriptions for each would have little in common. Similarly, at the college level three positions might be on the same organizational level and receive comparable compensation, yet the three positions would require different combinations of skills. For example, the jobs of dean of students, dean of academic affairs, and dean of business and operations would be quite different and require different skills.

By conducting a job analysis of major duties and responsibilities, criteria for job-holders can be readily identified. Are written communication skills required? If so, what kinds of communications would a job-holder have to write: memos, letters, minutes of meetings, grant proposals, technical reports? Once a job analysis is completed, then simulation exercises can be developed to elicit job-related behaviors.

A second advantage is that ratings obtained by using assessment center methods can provide more valid measures than on-the-job observations by supervisors or paper-and-pencil tests. On-the-job observations by supervisors often suffer from failure to gather objective data for predicting how subordinates might perform in higher-level positions. A subordinate's demonstrated job skills may have little to do with the skills needed for an entry-level managerial position. Or a teacher of chemistry may have limited opportunity to demonstrate skills in the classroom that relate to the duties of the assistant principal for discipline. Consequently, prediction of success is often as much a guess as anything.

A major criticism of paper-and-pencil tests is that they often fall short of meeting the standards for fairness and non-discrimination of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and other governmental agencies. Although such tests may report good reliability and validity scores, they may lack predictive validity for job

success. Assessment centers will meet the standards of fairness and non-discrimination if subjects are asked to engage in job-related tasks and to exhibit behaviors that are linked to successful job performance. Several court cases have upheld assessment center methods that adhered to the principles of job analysis, assessment procedures related to the job analysis, and appropriate assessor training.

## How an Assessment Center Operates

In review, assessment centers consist of a standardized set of procedures and multiple exercises conducted by specially trained assessors. One or more exercises is a situational test or simulation. Information from the exercises is pooled by the assessors in jurying sessions where they reach consensus on final ratings. Typically, a final written report and oral feedback are provided to each subject by the center's director. The assessment is conducted for selection, placement, promotion, or development of individuals, usually for managerial or administrative positions.

In a typical assessment center several assessors work with a limited number of subjects, generally from one to 12, with ratio of assessors to participants of 1:2 or lower. Subjects engage in a variety of activities over one or more days. They may be asked to take paper-and-pencil and mental ability tests, complete knowledge or personality inventories, as well as take part in simulations. The simulations might include activities drawn from fact-finding exercises, management games, in-baskets, interviews, leaderless group discussions, and leaderless group tasks. The simulations or situational tests must be designed to elicit job-related behaviors.

As an example, in the National Association of Secondary School Principals Assessment Center Project, 12 subjects engage in six activities over two days. Their behaviors are observed by six assessors and the center director. The morning of the first day, they are engaged

in a leaderless group activity and complete an in-basket. After lunch, they are engaged in another leaderless group activity and complete a second in-basket. On the second day, the participants are asked to complete a fact-finding exercise and participate in an intensive interview lasting two or more hours.

In many cases, subjects will have undergone other screening processes prior to assessment. In the selection of building administrators, school district officials may have reviewed participants' performance appraisals, application materials, references, and resumé. In addition, other information may have been collected from autobiographical essays, personality inventories, mental ability tests, review of academic transcripts, placement papers, and evaluations from superiors.

The assessment center's staff consists of a team of six trained assessors plus the director of the center. An assessor is assigned to observe one or two subjects in each exercise and prepares a standardized exercise report on each. On the first day, an assessor observes two leaderless discussion groups and prepares reports on them and also prepares reports on two in-basket activities. On the second day, an assessor plays the role of resource person for two subjects in fact-finding exercises as well as observes two other subjects in the same exercise and subsequently prepares two reports. Afterward, each assessor interviews two subjects and completes report forms on the interviews.

Because the stakes are high, possibly affecting the future careers of the subjects, assessment center work standards are exacting. To maintain the pace of the daily activities and to prepare the necessary reports requires considerable energy. The two days and evenings are filled with observations and note-taking, followed by preparation of the report forms. When six assessors observe 12 participants, an assessor might begin each day at 7:45 a.m. and work until midnight or later. When the ratio is reduced to 6 on 6, the workload is cut in half, and the demands on assessors' energy and stamina are reduced considerably.

After the conclusion of the exercises, the assessors meet to review the subjects' behaviors in what is called a consensus discussion. Photocopies are made of each standardized exercise report form so each member of the assessor team has a copy to examine. In addition, the assessor who observed subject "A" in a leaderless group discussion might bring materials the subject used and raw notes from the observation in case other assessors raise questions about the report.

Each subject's behavior is reviewed separately. The object is not to compare one subject with another but to look for particular behaviors in each exercise in which the subject participated. For example, the assessor who observed subject "A" might have noted behaviors related to such skill dimensions as leadership, oral communication, sensitivity, and problem analysis, among others. Leadership might be observed in the two leaderless group discussions; sensitivity in discussions, in-baskets, and the interview; and oral communication in the leaderless group, fact-finding, and interview activities.

After reviewing targeted dimensions in each report, the assessors will independently rate subject "A" on each skill dimension. If there is a discrepancy between assessors' ratings, an established procedure is followed so that the team reaches consensus on final ratings. Assessors must reach agreement within one number on a five-point scale. For example, if one assessor gives a rating of 5 in judgment, four give a rating of 4, and one gives a rating of 3, the two assessors at the extremes, those giving ratings of 5 and 3, must review the data and re-evaluate the participant's behaviors. Both may decide to give a final rating of 4, or only one may change to a 4. In either case, the requirement of final ratings not having more than one point difference is met. Above all, the ratings must be based on the data provided in the reports or other sources.

A consensus discussion frequently takes two or more hours for each subject in order to document the subject's strengths, areas in need of improvement, and suggestions for improvement. One assessor is assigned the task of writing a final report. Finally, in an exit inter-



view, the director of the center gives written and oral feedback to a participant.

While a subject might spend as much as 12 hours completing the various activities at the assessment center, the team of assessors might spend as much as 22 hours on one subject. However, no single assessor would spend this much time on each subject. Therefore, an assessment center is a highly labor-intensive effort; but the benefits from having multiple assessors are many. Probably most important is that subjects perceive the ratings as fair since more than one assessor reviews the subjects' behaviors.

### **Assessor Training**

Candidates for assessor training must have a commitment to improving personnel selection processes, a high energy level, and good analytical skills and must work well with others in demanding situations. In most cases, assessor training candidates are drawn from a pool of individuals who are one or more levels above the targeted job they will be assessing. Thus principals, department chairs, or supervisors might be appropriate candidates for assessing teachers; superintendents, other district administrators, and professors of school administration might be good candidates for assessing principals.

An assessor training program is an intensive activity usually requiring several days. For example, the training program for the NASSP Assessment Center Project requires four days. The training is provided by a cadre of individuals with extensive backgrounds in the assessment center method and who themselves have received preparation as a trainer of trainers.

The NASSP assessor training program consists of an overview of the program, definition of the skill dimensions, and explicit training in observing, coding, reporting, and rating behaviors. For each activity, specific training is provided in what to look for in each skill dimension. Assessor-trainees are taught how to administer each activity, how to observe subjects engaged in each kind of activity, how

to record raw notes and transcribe them onto standardized report forms, and how to prepare a final written report. Scoring an in-basket differs considerably from serving as a resource person in a fact-finding exercise. Therefore, explicit training is necessary to ensure reliability in each exercise.

Since an assessment will have significant consequences affecting a subject's chances for promotion or additional training, every step in the process must have quality controls — from the identification of job-related skills dimensions through the design of simulation activities to the delivery of the exit interview. Assessors must avoid “mind reading” their subjects and not let their personal idiosyncrasies influence their ratings. Subjects' ratings should be based only on the record of their actual behaviors. Only in this way can reliability be established. And because subjects may reveal information of a very personal nature, what assessors see, hear, and learn about them must remain confidential. Breaches of confidentiality are a violation of professional ethics.

## **Using the Assessment Center Method with Educational Personnel**

**T**he assessment center method can be used to great advantage in the selection and preparation of educational personnel. While its use has not been as widespread in education as in business and the military, certain components of the method have been used for many years. For example, professors have long used case studies to provide realistic situations for discussion and analysis. At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, simulation materials, particularly in-baskets, have been the core of an introductory course in educational administration for 30 years. Since the 1970s, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) has developed a comprehensive listing of in-baskets and other simulation materials for use in administrator preparation programs. In this chapter we shall look at some of the ways the assessment center method is used in administrator and teacher preparation.

### **Administrator Preparation**

Many universities have adopted the assessment center method for their administrator preparation programs (Wendel, Gappa, and Yusten 1990). At Texas A&M University, the method is used at its Center for Principal Preparation. The University of Maine has developed an extensive series of case studies for its administrator training program. Since 1980, the NASSP Assessment Center Project has been incor-

porated into the University of Nebraska's educational administration program. Graduate students are offered the opportunity to be participants in order to obtain diagnostic feedback about their performance in the 12 skill dimensions. As of 1991, 254 individuals have been assessed and 187 have completed assessor training.

Other universities affiliated with the NASSP Assessment Center Project include: Alaska, Auburn, California State-Fullerton, Western Ontario, Georgia State, Indiana, Northern Iowa, Kansas, Wichita State, Western Kentucky, Louisville, North Western State in Louisiana, Western Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Houston, Utah, George Mason, Virginia Commonwealth, Virginia Polytechnic, and Old Dominion.

The assessment center method, with its reliance on job-related behaviors, multiple exercises, and multiple assessors, can readily be incorporated into administrator preparation programs in many ways. Students could be assessed prior to or after admission into a graduate program. The results of assessment would be useful in both developing the graduate program and for individualizing the program to fit the needs of particular students. During their graduate programs, students could maintain a portfolio or performance file that documents their assessment, their plan for development, their developmental efforts, and formative evaluations or appraisals of growth. Such a performance file could contain information related to knowledge, attitudes, and skills but need not be limited to behavioral dimensions.

Professors of school administration can benefit from training in assessment center methodology. After training, they might conceptualize a curriculum map of how principles of assessment can be included in a scope and sequence of course offerings. Assessment need not be concentrated in a two- or three-day period; it could be spread over one or two semesters to fit the time available to faculty.

Skill dimensions could be matched with each course with planned repetition in subsequent courses to strengthen the skills. For example, the dimension of leadership might be assessed in an introductory

course, with feedback coming from faculty, peers, and self. In subsequent courses, students would participate in more demanding exercises in which they would be expected to demonstrate leadership as a member of a group or task force. In a practicum, students would be expected to show leadership in a work setting. More extensive opportunities also could be drawn from internships, field studies, or on-the-job situations.

This continuing emphasis on skill development should lead to better-prepared graduates, ones who are confident of their ability to deal with real problems, not merely talk about them. Data-based diagnosis of performance, self-appraisal with accompanying feedback from peers and trained assessors, directed practice on job-related tasks, and long-range monitoring of analyses of performance should lead to growth in job-related skills of school administrators.

## **Teacher Preparation**

The assessment center method can be, and is being, used in teacher education programs. Many teacher preparation institutions have used paper-and-pencil tests, interviews, and situational tests; but few have packaged them into a comprehensive assessment program. To use the assessment center method in teacher preparation, teacher educators must incorporate the four components of the method. Simply put, they must: 1) identify key teacher behaviors, 2) develop exercises that will demonstrate these behaviors, 3) administer situational tests to elicit the key behaviors, and 4) prepare a cadre of trained assessors to do the rating. A few teacher education institutions that have had success with the assessment center method are described below.

### **Alverno College's Assessment Program**

More than 10 years ago, the faculty of Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, identified a set of competencies needed by stu-

dents in the teacher education program (Thornton and Byham 1982). These competencies included aesthetic responsiveness, analytical capability, effective communications ability, problem-solving ability, and responsible involvement in the contemporary world. The faculty then developed a variety of situational exercises to assess these competencies. An in-basket exercise is used to evaluate students' analytical and problem-solving competencies. Group discussions are used to measure communications ability and social interaction. The faculty have developed more than 20 simulation exercises for their undergraduate teacher education students. The college also continues to use traditional paper-and-pencil tests, particularly to evaluate students' knowledge in the content fields.

### **Pennsylvania's PreTeacher Assessment Project**

Beginning in 1985, faculty at three Pennsylvania teacher education institutions (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Millersville University, and Slippery Rock University) incorporated principles of the assessment center method in their PreTeacher Assessment Project (Millward 1987). In this project, the faculty decided to use the assessment method not as a selection tool but as a diagnostic tool for sophomores just beginning their teacher education courses. After reviewing the assessment data, the faculty then developed instructional modules for a variety of teaching skills.

The faculty involved in the PreTeacher Assessment Project identified and defined 13 skill dimensions to be assessed: planning and organizing, monitoring, leadership, sensitivity, problem analysis, strategic decision making, tactical decision making, oral communication, oral presentation, written communication, innovativeness, tolerance for stress, and initiative. Following are definitions the faculty used for some of the skills:

**Monitoring.** Establishing procedures for monitoring classroom activities and student progress.

**Leadership.** Setting high standards, communicating a clear philosophy about learning, challenging students, reflecting on teaching.

**Strategic decision making.** Developing alternative courses of action, making decisions, and setting goals when time for deliberation is available.

**Tactical decision making.** Making appropriate decisions in ongoing situations where time for deliberation is limited and extensive information gathering may be inappropriate.

**Oral communication.** Expressing ideas with clarity, style, appropriate volume and rate of speech, and appropriate grammar.

**Oral presentation.** Presenting ideas in an organized manner with an opening and a closing, being persuasive and enthusiastic, and establishing eye contact.

Four simulation activities were developed to elicit behaviors in selected skill dimensions. In "Classroom Vignettes," students view a series of five-minute videotapes depicting classroom events. Students are asked at selected intervals to write how they would react to the event. In "Teaching Simulation" students must teach a lesson after two hours of preparation with a lesson packet. In a two-hour exercise, "The Educational Fair," students must organize a district-wide fair based on a packet of information they are given. Another two-hour exercise, "The School Museum," requires students to read and analyze data and then develop a plan for reorganizing the school museum. Each of these situational exercises provides many opportunities for students to demonstrate several of the 13 skill dimensions.

After completing the exercises, students are given feedback on their performance from a trained assessor. Learning modules and other activities are used to help students develop their skills in the targeted dimensions during the remainder of their undergraduate teacher education program.

The development and implementation of the PreTeacher Assessment Project was a five-year process and was supported with funds

from two external sources. Carrying out a project such as this does not come easily or cheaply. But the project demonstrates how the assessment center method can be adapted to preservice teacher education to develop job-related skills in prospective teachers.



## Summary

**R**estructuring the assessment of educational personnel by using the assessment center method can improve selection processes for both administrators and teachers. Although student teaching, supervised practicums, and internships are time-tested means of assessing professional skills in controlled settings, the assessment center method provides a more valid and equitable way of selecting candidates who are likely to be successful on a targeted job. By identifying job-related behaviors, using situational exercises to observe those behaviors, and having skilled assessors rate those behaviors, much can be learned about a candidate's skills in key dimensions of a job.

Most of the Fortune 500 companies use the assessment center method for selection, promotion, and training of personnel; and the principles of the method are now being adapted for use in a few teacher and administrator preparation programs. With the current push to restructure education, serious consideration should be given to the expanded use of the assessment center method in administrator and teacher preparation programs. Using the method should lead to better identification of job-related behaviors for educational personnel, more reliable measures of candidates' skills in those job-related behaviors, and better programs to improve those job-related behaviors.

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