POLICE ASSESSMENT TESTING

Third Edition

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An Assessment Center Handbook
for Law Enforcement Personnel

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To Gaynell Coleman, my wife, for encouragement, support and guidance in the continual research and knowledge gains in the area of Assessment Center Preparation.

PREFACE

During the past three decades, a number of information texts have concentrated on participants in an Assessment Center process. Previously, virtually every article and/or book written concerning assessment centers in both the public and private sector has concentrated on the *development of* or the *administration of* the actual testing process. Experts conclude that of all the possible methods of candidate testing for promotion or hiring, the assessment center process is far more reliable in determining performance potential, because, unlike most single mode systems, an assessment process assimilates a number of "work-simulated" tasks that evaluate candidates in actual job-related situational exercises.

However, in most testing specialists' schemes to develop a better and more effective measure of police candidates' performance potential, one essential factor has been overlooked. This unexpressed factor is that a true assessment center is primarily an *administrative process* and generally measures an officer for a position in which he or she is not totally knowledgeable. This implies that the process *in and of itself* is unfair, because the potential candidates who are exposed to the administrative processes of the organization have a distinct advantage over the functional- or operational-level officer without such exposure. This then means that the score achieved between the two different employee categories will be reflective of on-the-job experience rather than an actual potential for positional performance.

This text was developed because of a need and an outcry from talented law enforcement personnel, who by their assignment are insulated from the exposure to the quintessential processes of the organization. The book's content is the result of several years of experience and research to develop a specific text that would provide essential knowledge to all potential police assessment center candidates for

improved performance.

It is perceived that the material presented in this book will benefit any and all of this country's estimated million or so potential candidates for police assessment testing. The basic material content of this text was tested during an assessment center training class taught by the author to police and fire department personnel at Pioneer Community College in Kansas City, Missouri, with noteworthy results of knowledge gains and performances by the students.

J.L.C.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

When writing a book of this nature where essential information is gathered from countless sources, it is virtually impossible to formally acknowledge every contributor. However, special recognition should be accorded the entire staff of the Pioneer Community College of Kansas City, Missouri. The college's logistical allowances and research provisions aided greatly in the development of the text. Acknowledgment must be accorded the Kansas City, Missouri Police Department, who provided my initial exposure and insight into formal law enforcement assessment center processes.

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment centers continue to be the wave of the future and are the best method of determining who is better suited for a position or advancement. Many experts in the field of police testing for hiring and promotions conclude that **it is the ultimate process for measuring performance ability in a realistic setting**. Their opinion is apparently accurate, as the use of assessment center testing for hiring and advancement processes has increased in popularity in the last few years. It is a human resource tool that incorporates "work simulation" into a methodology that best illustrates a candidate's performance once the position has been achieved. However, before we attempt to systematically analyze an assessment center process in terms of **how a candidate should perform**, it is important to review the **history of assessment centers** in this country, its evolution and the **rationale** of why law enforcement personnel needs to prepare for participation in one. Principle to our clinical appraisal of assessment center performance is a clear understanding of what an assessment center process is.

Assessment Center: Defined

"Assessment Centers are often defined as a variety of testing techniques designed to allow candidates to demonstrate, under standardized conditions, the skills and abilities that are most essential for success in a given job."[1] This clinically concise definition of an assessment center presented by Dennis A. Joiner clearly establishes the premise upon which most work-simulated processes are developed.

Work simulation is a term that most aptly applies to the essence of what an assessment center is, because the process is generally a number

of performance-related exercises which resemble actual work activity, where a candidate should react. This simulated response of the candidate is then evaluated against the performance of other participants to determine which, potentially, will perform best in a real-life situation. Simply stated, **a police assessment center process is a measurement of job behavior in a simulated or controlled setting**.

The basic assessment center process is not a **question-and-answer** knowledge testing of technical skills or intelligence. It is a process whereby a candidate is evaluated on a personal ability to perform and an ability to **project** or **sell oneself** through job-related activity. Although an individual's personality and charismatic ability will somewhat affect assessment center scoring, it is the actual responses of the candidates that will ultimately decide who is best in an impartial and standardized process.

In our brief definitive discussion, it is appropriate to conclude that Gilbert H. Skinner summed it up best of **what an assessment center is** when he said, "An Assessment Center is a procedure for simultaneous measuring of several persons, performing a variety of simulated work exercises, with their behavior being observed and recorded by trained evaluators. Or more simply, the Assessment Center lets a person try out for a job without the expense of being in the job for six months to a year."[2]

U.S. HISTORY OF ASSESSMENT CENTERS

The basic use of the assessment center process as we know it today is reported to have had its initial beginning in the United States in the military during the World War II era. It has been documented that personnel from the Office of Strategic Service structured the concept for its use as a method of testing the performance ability of potential candidates. The basic perceptual purpose was to test the management abilities of incumbent's personnel to determine each person's potential for growth and development as a result of their personal traits and characteristics. This quantum leap in the determination of the potential of human resource value in actual work situations has proven to be t**he summit of management's attempts to develop the best work-related process possible of testing for promotions and hiring of new personnel**.

tion with several other persons, thereby, allowing an opportunity to compare the practitioner's problem recognition and responses to others. A group learning process tends to expand a preparing candidate's insight into the assessment center exercises and it helps the candidate formulate strategies that will help performance during the testing process.

A candidate should make every effort to familiarize him/herself with the terminology and some typical problem issues used in the position or confronting the leadership position being sought. For example, if a candidate is in an assessment testing process for the position of Captain, then the focus of his or her practices, problem recognition, terminology and decision making should be handled as if he/she is a Captain.

KEY AREAS OF FOCUS

There are a number of areas that a candidate should utilize as key concerns when handling work simulated problems. J. L. Coleman in his *Police Assessment Center Testing Workbook* identified a number of these focal areas, where operational awareness would be important. A candidate should endeavor to keep these key areas of focus in mind while participating in an assessment center process. Some key areas of focus are:

1. Respond to each problem or concern objectively and within the operational parameters and policy limits of the position and the organization. It would not be appropriate or viewed as positive for a candidate to say that he/she would allocate funds to pay for an item when the position competing for has no budgetary authority to use any organizational resources.
2. A candidate should direct his/her responsive efforts toward problem resolution through a constructive leadership approach. In other words, a candidate should ensure that recommendations and decisions are focused toward resolving the problem or issue and not just coping with it. Remember, in an assessment center as in real life, a problem not resolved now will resurface at a later time and need to be addressed. Also, like a snowball rolling downhill, an unresolved problem picks up or effects ancillary

concerns that eventually become unmanageable.

3. A candidate must be acutely aware of what effect his/her actions will have upon other areas of responsibility and the organization's goal achievement. It is important to relate that an assessor's evaluation of a candidate will include judgment and foresight in relationship to the actions recommended or taken during a simulated work testing process.

4. The candidate's actions during the process should be perceived as a positive use of available resources within the role expectations of the position. For example, if the candidate is in charge of a squad of six persons, it would not be effective to indicate that you will assign officers to fixed posts to cover 15 doors at the same time.

5. Essential to effectiveness as a position leader during an assessment center process is the key concern for teamwork, performance behaviors of subordinates, and collaborative interaction with other organizational elements.

6. The practitioner must ensure that his or her actions are directed toward affirmatively dealing with situations, problems, and concerns that affect his or her simulated job performance in an assessment center process.

7. There must be an acute awareness that an assessment center candidate's actions are result oriented. The action should be easily understandable as to purpose and intent. Remember that success in a work simulated testing process depends on the candidate's ability to demonstrate appropriate leadership skill in the handling of problems set forth in the assessment center's exercises.

8. It is essential to a candidate's success in a testing process that he/she displays an awareness and responsiveness to the need for information sharing with his/her identified chain-of-command. As in actual work situations keeping those with a need to know or those having responsibility for informed behavior based on a practitioner's action is critical. Overlooking the essentials of information sharing is a clear step to failure in an assessment center process.

9. A primary key to handling items during an assessment center process is to be cognitive and responsive to completion or due dates. A candidate should ensure that his or her actions are in

response and timely with established *respond by dates.* A participant should also ensure that when assigning work to others as a part of the exercise that he/she set *due dates* that is consistent with other operational functions effected by the planned or desired actions.

10. Assessment centers are typically developed and arranged so that there is an interaction between other elements in the exercise and/or other exercise during the process. A candidate should be aware of the interrelatedness of all concerns or problems during the work simulated process. Ensure that note is made of the interrelated problems addressed, as a candidate's analytical and problem recognition skills may be assessed by evaluators.

11. Self-confidence and a practice effort should provide an assessment center candidate with a positive assurance that he or she has the ability to make the right decisions and is willing to commit his/herself to a decisive course of action. Primary to an evaluator's assessment of a work simulated candidate is his/her willingness to show the fortitude to make a creditable decision and commit to that action.

12. An assessment center practitioner should not be apprehensive about using new and creative ideas or methods to address problems and concerns. A candidate's creative and innovative action toward resolution of problem reflects a thinker, a person who has assessed a problem and developed a nontraditional method for handling. The creative and innovative ideas must be in line with the parameters of the exercise and resources available to the candidate. For example, a candidate recommends his/her squad's rapid deployment to an area high school to address a violently active situation by using a jet helicopter with enough seating to accommodate the SWAT squad. The planned deployment concept is creative and innovative, but the practical application may not be feasible because the organization has no jet helicopter capable of transporting the squad and several other logistical incompatibilities would hinder such action. Thus, instead of the recommendation for action being viewed as creative and innovative, it may be perceived as illogical and nonresponsive to the problem's resolution.

13. A comprehensive analysis of each exercise and the interrelated-

ness to other factors in the process is essential. Oftentimes the action a candidate takes during one exercise will directly affect how he or she responds during another. For example, if you suspend an officer from duty for five days during the In-Basket Exercise, then it would not be feasible to recommend using that officer as point man on the SWAT team during an action occurring within the same time frame as the suspension dates. Overlapping items such as the one cited above are usual occurrences during assessment center processes to test the candidate's cognitive and analytical ability in addressing problems and concerns.

14. An assessment center candidate should always expect the unexpected when doing an exercise, but handle as expected within the scope of the authority limits of the sought-after position. Candidates are advised to practice efforts to be displayed during the assessment enter and to whatever degree possible preplan his or her projected actions. However, it is essential that a candidate be cognizant of the fact that the ability to assess a practitioner's capability to function under pressure and to make decisions in the absence of a lot of planning time is a foundational aspect of most assessment center processes.

If an assessment center candidate keeps the key areas of focus in mind while completing each exercise, then he or she should be effective in handling all items and problems presented during the process.

KEYS TO STRATEGY PREPARATION

Strategic planning in the development of a course of action for success in an assessment center process in formulated at three distinct levels, *conceptual*, *practical*, and *functional*. *Conceptual Strategic Planning* in preparation for participating in an assessment center process refers to a mentally conceived plan of action designed to achieve desired results. Whereas, *Practical Strategic Planning* is the preparation for actions that are capable of being used without elaboration, it is adaptable and virtual. And, *Functional Strategic Planning* is the developing of a plan of action that is workable, to wit: the normal or characteristic actions of a candidate's performance in the simulated work environ-

ment.

A candidate must utilize a number of criteria in the formulating or design of his or her strategy for action to enhance personal chances of survival and success in an assessment center testing process. The approach must be viewed as *objective* by evaluators or assessors. Self-delusion has no place in a process where an honest dispassionate assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a candidate's potential to effectively perform is evaluated. It is essential that the leadership skills are set forth in a manner that will be perceived as a positive aspect of the behavior qualities of a candidate.

The **KISS** (**K**eep **I**t **S**imple **S**tupid) principal of presentation is and continues to be the most effective and most desired method of planning or projecting ideas and behavioral factors to others. *Keeping it simple and focused* is effective. It is easier for you as a candidate to remember and put into practice and it is more recognizable and understandable to assessors, who are evaluating your actions. The candidate's efforts and behavior attitudes should be concentrated where the impact and results are the greatest. The planned and delivered actions must be directed toward the goal of creating the best possible image of the candidate as well as resolving the problems and issues set forth during the assessment center exercise to test a candidate's ability to perform in a work simulated situation.

The practitioner must focus on *result-bearing efforts.* The key to survival and success in an assessment center process depends on the candidate's ability to demonstrate proper dimensional skills of leadership. The dimensional skills of leadership must be projected in a manner that reflects an ability and willingness to commit oneself to an ideal or practice that will effectively deal with a problem or concern. Too often candidates conclude that if they project an idea or strategy that will allow coping with a problem, that this will, or should be, sufficient. However, it has been demonstrated in numerous past assessment centers, if the candidate can set forth a concept or practice to resolve an issue or problem and not just cope with it, is most likely to be concluded to be the better performing candidate in an assessment center process.

Develop a fundamentally sound strategic plan. One that includes basic approaches to time management, predetermined standards of behavior, historical experience (that encompasses preparational knowledge concerning the performance expectations of the position), good judgment and observations.

SUMMARY

The aspects and need for preplanning and preparation for participation in an assessment center process cannot be overemphasized. It readies the candidate for the challenges that he or she will face during the process, it also engenders confidence in one's own ability for the effective performance in a simulated work situation. It also serves as another opportunity for the candidate to prepare his/herself for the expectations of an assessment center process.

The planning or preparedness function has and will continue to receive increased attention as the process of simulated work testing accelerates its use in police and private industry. The subject of management potential and the subject matter for teaching and preparing potential leaders have evolved from a simple testing process to a structured planning tool for skill enhancement.

It is recognized that the need for preplanning or prior preparation of candidates became more obvious as people and police organizations develop an awareness of the precise nature of their objective. The constant changes in police work in its attempt to deal with the problems of society mandate such adjustments. For example, the concept of community policing has added a new dimension that a potential leadership candidate must be familiar with and prepared to make recommendations and render decisions that correspond to the concept, and seek to resolve the traditional concerns faced by law enforcement's leaders.

Preparation planning for an assessment center candidate focuses on estimating the future and establishes the foundation and parameters in which decisions will be made. The policies set forth in the Introduction or Information Sheet for the exercises provides the cement that holds the many individual decisions together by serving as guides for decisions and relating individual actions to goals and objectives. This chapter was included to provide the basic idea of planning, a process for preplanning preparation that impart consistency and direction toward a candidate's success in an assessment center process.

Traditionally, planning is discussed as a dimensional skill during the actual assessment center process, however, as indicated afore in this

chapter, preplanning and preparedness is essential to a candidate's readiness to effectively perform during a simulated work testing process. The candidate should have some basic idea of the general plan and scope of the actions he/she are to perform during the assessment testing.

The candidate must first identify the goals of the organization and the level of participation that the tested-for position holds within the infrastructure of the agency. The candidates in a work simulated process for primary or middle level leader must not only show an awareness of the stated goals as set forth in the Introduction to the exercise, but must refocus these goals in a form that is useful to their own effectiveness in the testing process. In other words, broader goals must be restated or more aptly focused in definite terms that will be useful and demonstratable during his/her participation in the assessment center process, for example, the insertion of scheduled completion dates, defined specification of acceptable quality of work, and standards for the quantity of work output.

A candidate must be prepared to seek the opportunities to demonstrate his/her skills for the position. This requires the collection of data or information that will guide the candidate toward discovering which skill expectations are to be demonstrated during each exercise during the assessment center process. The candidate must venture away from the traditional fixed way of thinking to having an open mind to new ideas and approaches to dealing with the concerns and problems presented during the exercises. The afore mentioned information should include forecasting problems and events, as well as identifying changes in the demands of the situations or personnel involved.

The candidate's preplanning process must include some consideration for the translation of the opportunities into selected courses of action. It is at this point that the plan developed by the candidate becomes clear and more recognizable as to its use during the assessment center process. And, finally, the candidate's preplan for participating in the assessment center process should be continually reviewed and revised, as needed. The continual review of the preplan refreshes the candidate's awareness of the elements of the plan, as well as affords him/her the opportunity to make adjustments as needed when additional information or personal strengths or weaknesses are manifested.