THE ASSESSMENT CENTER HANDBOOK FOR POLICE AND FIRE PERSONNEL

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles D. Hale is the President of **Resource Management Associates**, a multifaceted firm he created in 1981 to provide technical assistance and consulting services to municipal governments. Mr. Hale began his career in the public sector as a police officer in El Segundo, California, in 1965, where he served for seven years as a patrol officer, investigator, and field supervisor. While working full-time as a police officer, he attended California State University at Long Beach where he attained his bachelor's degree in 1970 and his master's degree in 1972. From 1972 to 1974, Mr. Hale served as the Assistant Director of the Police Assaults Study conducted by the Oklahoma University Research Institute and funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. In 1973, Mr. Hale served on a team of consultants involved in a management and organization study of the Police Department in Amarillo, Texas. Since that time, Mr. Hale has conducted similar studies in over 200 police departments in several states. He is the author of numerous publications in the field of law enforcement, including *Police Patrol Operations and Management*, which is currently in the third edition and is published by Prentice-Hall.

As President of **Resource Management Associates**, Mr Hale directs a small staff of personnel engaged in conducting management studies of police departments and designing and administering written promotional examinations, oral examinations, and assessment centers for police and fire departments. Mr. Hale has personally designed and administered over 300 assessment centers for dozens of different positions in the police and fire services. His company has clients in more than twenty states including Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin.
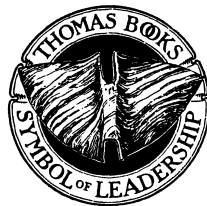
Second Edition

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By

CHARLES D. HALE

President
Resource Management Associates

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PREFACE

One of the things I have learned after more than twenty years of designing and administering assessment centers is that while the method remains constant, the process does (or should) not. If assessment centers are to live up to their full potential of being a viable and valuable method of selecting men and women for supervisory and command-level positions in the police and fire services, it is absolutely essential that the process evolve and adapt to meet new and changing conditions. It is my belief that if we are doing things the exact same way we did them five years ago, we have failed to keep up and have neglected our responsibilities.

The world of personnel management in general, and the fields of police and fire services, is rapidly evolving and bringing about new challenges each passing year. We need to evolve and adapt to those changes if we are to have a process that suitably reflects current conditions. It is essential that we continue to seek out new ideas and methods, including fresh scenarios and more reliable scoring techniques. Some of these newer ideas are discussed in this second edition. The use of computerized simulators rather than the old "smoke and mirrors" method of conducting the fire tactical problem is but one example. Using computerized in-baskets rather than the traditional paper and pencil format, is another. I can imagine that in the years ahead, new advances will be made in the art of designing scenarios, methods of administration, and candidate evaluation practices so that what we consider "state of the art" today will seem old fashioned then.

One thing that is not likely to change, I believe, is the value of the assessment center method to the field of personnel selection. It has proven itself time and time again, and its value will not be diminished with the passing of time. If anything, it will be viewed in the years ahead as an even more vital tool for selecting future supervisors and middle-managers than it is today.

In this edition, I have expanded and updated some of the technical aspects of conducting assessment centers and candidate evaluation procedures. For example, I have included a discussion of computerized sim-

ulations for the tactical fire problem as well as a means of ensuring that the benchmark criteria for this problem are consistent with local practices. I have also added a chapter discussing the complaints typically heard about assessment centers. This may be valuable reading if you are considering an assessment center and anticipate some resistance to it. I have also included a chapter devoted to a discussion of ways to ensuring candidate satisfaction with the process. While not all candidates will appreciate or have positive feelings about their participation in the assessment center, there are ways to try to ensure that the experience is meaningful and rewarding for them, regardless of the outcome.

I once considered writing an entirely new book to describe the best and worst performances I have ever seen in an assessment center. I later decided that the best performances speak for themselves, but the worst ones need to be memorialized so that others can benefit from them. I have described many of these in Chapter 10, and I hope they serve as dramatic examples of the worst approaches to several of the exercises contained in this book.

I originally prepared this book as a guide for those who might be preparing to participate in an assessment center as well as for those who might simply want to know more about the process, or who might be considering adopting the process for their own agency. I have been told by many people that this book was helpful to them in preparing to participate in an assessment center. It is gratifying to know that some useful purpose has been served by my efforts. I hope this second edition will prove as valuable to my intended audience as the first edition seems to have been.

C.D.H.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the result of a collective effort involving numerous people and organizations. I would like to thank, first of all, the many police and fire departments in which I have been privileged to work over the last twenty years in the design and administration of assessment centers. Many of the individuals who participated in these processes were kind enough to share with me their views about the process, and many of their suggestions have been incorporated into subsequent processes. Over the years, several thousand candidates and scores of assessors have helped me sharpen my skills in designing and administering assessment centers.

I have benefitted from the helpful support and critical contributions of many individuals who have worked with me as assessors and who have helped to formulate the ideas that have found their way into this book. Among the many individuals who have contributed in one way or another to the ideas in this book are retired Chief Robert Baird of the Elgin, Illinois Police Department; retired Deputy Chief Carl Bergman of the Evergreen Park, Illinois Police Department; retired Chief Robert Buhs, of the Orland Fire Protections District in Orland Park, Illinois; Chief Doug Chappell of the Drexel Height, Arizona Fire Protection District; retired District Chief Bennie Crane of the Chicago Fire Department; Chief David Dial of the Naperville, Illinois Police Department; Chief James Eaves of the Hoffman Estates, Illinois Fire Department; Chief Mark Field of the Wheaton, Illinois Police Department; Chief William Fitzpatrick of the Glenview, Illinois Police Department; Chief Gary Konzak (deceased), of the Grand Junction, Colorado Police Department; Commander Patricia McConnell of the Winnetka, Illinois Police Department; and Chief Tom Wagoner of the Loveland, Colorado Police department.

I would also like to acknowledge the valuable assistance provided by Assistant Chief Ralph Caldwell of the Springfield, Illinois Police Department, and Master Sergeant Rebecca Long of the Illinois State Police, whose keen eyes alerted me to the many typographical errors and

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FOR POLICE AND FIRE PERSONNEL

What's this I hear about assessment centers?

Chapter 1

WHAT IS AN ASSESSMENT CENTER?

An Assessment Center is not a place, but rather a process that is used in both private industry and in governmental agencies for the purpose of determining those persons who have the ability or potential to assume higher levels of supervisory, managerial and administrative ability.

Assessment centers are traditionally viewed as a part of a selection process, whereby candidates are evaluated on their ability to perform a particular job for which they are applying, but an assessment center can also serve other purposes as well. For example, assessment centers can be used to assist individuals in learning more about their strengths and weaknesses so that they can better prepare themselves to achieve whatever career goals they may have set for themselves. Carefully-designed assessment centers can also be used to evaluate deficiencies in organizational as well as individual training programs. For instance, the results of an assessment center may indicate the need for additional training in public speaking, cultural diversity awareness, or human relations.

> Assessment centers create a learning environment for participants. By taking part in an assessment center, participants can better understand the direction their organization is going and prepare for the "journey."[1]

An assessment center can also be used to pinpoint problems with organizational coordination and policy and procedure development. For example, the police or fire tactical problem exercise (described in Chapter 4) may yield tremendously valuable information about a police or fire depart-

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1. Patrick Oliver, "The Assessment Center Method: Not Just for Promotions Anymore." in *Subject to Debate: A Newsletter of the Police Executive Research Forum* (March/April, 1998), p. 2.

ment's tactical procedures and how well (or poorly) they are understood by members of the organization.

While these other uses are important, the assessment center is used primarily as a tool for evaluating candidates for promotion or appointment, and it is in this context that the material contained in this book is presented.

> An assessment center consists of a standardized evaluation of behavior based on multiple inputs. Multiple trained observers and techniques are used. Judgments about behavior are made, in major part, from specifically developed assessment simulations. These judgments are pooled in a meeting among the assessors or by a statistical integration process. In an integration discussion, comprehensive accounts of behavior, and often, ratings of it, are pooled. The discussion results in evaluations of the performance of the assessed on the dimensions or other variables which the assessment center is designed to measure.[2]

The assessment center process differs from more traditional examination methods in that it is a test of skill and ability rather than knowledge. Perhaps the greatest advantage of the assessment center is that it provides a higher degree of reliability and insight into supervisory or management potential than is possible with other examination methods. In addition, experience has shown that candidates feel that the assessment center is much more fair and job-related than other types of examinations. As a result, they are less inclined to challenge the results of an assessment center, even when they do poorly.

Assessment centers must adhere to certain basic principles which have been developed over time and must be administered under carefully controlled conditions if they are to be considered valid and reliable (see Appendix A). Among other things:

> 1. Assessors should be thoroughly familiar with the duties and responsibilities of the position for which the candidates are being evaluated and must be trained in assessment center methods and techniques.

> 2. Multiple assessors are used in evaluating the performance of candidates.

> 3. Multiple assessment techniques, including at least one simulation exercise, must be included in the process.

The assessment center is a process of evaluating candidates for promotion, appointment or reassignment that has proven itself in over fifty years

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2. Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations. Endorsed by the twenty-eighth International Congress on Assessment Center Methods, San Francisco, California, May 4, 2000, p. 2.

of application in both government and in private enterprise. While assessment centers are usually viewed as tools for determining a candidate's suitability for promotion in rank or assignment to a higher position in the police or fire service, this method is also used by some agencies for evaluating candidates for entry-level positions.[3]

Although there are other methods that can (and should) be used in evaluating the supervision, management, and administrative skills of candidates for various positions, there are none that provide the same level of insight into how a person will actually perform if eventually appointed to the position for which he or she is being evaluated. This is due, in part, to the fact that, in the assessment center method, there is an attempt to place the candidate into situations and scenarios that are very similar to the situations and scenarios that the candidate will actually confront if appointed to the position.

An assessment center attempts to capture the reality of the position for which the person is being considered. While the candidate understands that the exercise is merely a *simulation*, he or she also understands that every attempt has been made to make the simulation reflect the actual conditions of the position for which he or she is being considered. For example, in an In-Basket Exercise, the organization of the police or fire department used in the exercise will normally reflect or be similar to the actual organization of the police or fire department in which the candidate works or where the position is located for which the person is applying. Similarly, in a Community Meeting Exercise, the candidate will normally be asked questions by the role players based upon actual conditions in the community or neighborhood that is being represented in that exercise.

Because candidates understand that the exercises which they will experience are intended to reflect reality, they also understand that their reactions to these situations should also reflect reality. They must understand that they are expected to deal with each of the scenarios presented to them in the same manner they would if, in fact, the scenario were an actual situation. In truth, candidates rarely need to be told this at all. Experience has shown that candidates become so involved in the emotion of the situation that they often forget that they are role playing and do, in fact, react exactly the way they would in a real- life situation. This becomes quite important in the evaluation of candidates if it becomes clear to the assessors that a candidate may lose confidence under pressure or react belligerently when encountering opposition or hostility.

One of the most unique aspects I have discovered about assessment centers is how quickly and accurately assessors are able to "size up" a can-

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3. See, for example, Gary F. Coulton and Hubert S. Feild, "Using Assessment Centers in Selecting Entry-level Police Officers: Extravagance or Justified Expense?" Public Personnel Management (Summer, 1995), pp. 223-250.