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 more than 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 25 states, including Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

Third Edition

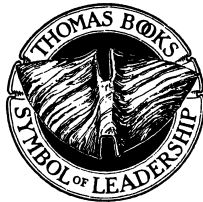# THE ASSESSMENT CENTER HANDBOOK FOR POLICE AND FIRE PERSONNEL

By

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With THOMAS BOOKS *careful attention is given to all details of manufacturing
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and good will.*

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

I am gratified this book has helped people who are either interested in learning more about assessment centers or who hope to improve their performance as they face an assessment center. There are other sources of information about assessment centers and all of them have something important to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about this important selection method.

In preparing the third edition I have attempted to expand upon the concepts and principles presented in the first two editions and have introduced a few new ideas. Several chapters have been extensively edited and reformatted. In addition, in Chapter 4, I have added sections of the Tactical EMS Problem as well as the Public Education Exercise, both of which have special applicability to emergency medical and fire prevention personnel. I have also included a new Chapter 9, entitled "Best Practices in Assessment Center Exercises," which provides a number of examples on how candidates may achieve superior performance in many different kinds of assessment center exercises. I have included only a few of the best examples I have found and I know there are many others of which I am not aware.

I have addressed the use of modern technology in a new section in Chapter 5 and have attempted to reinforce the notion that assessment center developers and administrators need to be continually alert for opportunities to improve their policies and incorporate advancing technology into their work products. I am confident that we will see new developments in this arena in the years ahead and I hope to be able to update this book accordingly.

Regardless of how hard we work to design and administer successful assessment centers, our hard work can be easily unraveled by the thoughtless actions of a careless, lazy, or unprofessional assessor. I have been privileged to work with a great many thoughtful, dedicated and hard-working men and women who have served as assessors in the several hundred assessment centers I have administered over the last thirty years. Selecting good assessors does not happen by accident nor do they work effectively without sound principles of supervision and administration. I have provided some additional insight into the selection, preparation, and supervision of assessors in Chapter 6.

The proper ways of evaluating the results of an assessment center, scoring candidates, and reporting the results of the process need not be a mystery, but it sometimes can be. The best practice, I believe, is to make the scoring process as transparent and uncomplicated as possible. Most candidates taking part in an assessment center are not mathematicians nor are they master statisticians and therefore prefer to receive the results of their efforts in the most practical, simple, and easy-to-understand format. I have expanded my discussion of candidate scoring in Chapter 7 as a means of addressing this issue.

We learn by our mistakes and I continually preach to participants that they will learn more about their own strengths and weaknesses by the mistakes they make in the assessment center. In the second edition of this book, I included a new chapter on "Some of the Greatest Blunders," and I continue to think that it is one of the more useful chapters of the book for the first-time participant. I have added some new material for this section, once again drawing upon my own experience as an assessment center administrator. I have no doubt that the future will provide additional examples for this section as well.

I continue to believe that part of the success of an assessment center is the fact that candidates believe that they are a fair, realistic, and practical way for them to demonstrate their ability to perform the tasks of a position for which they are being evaluated. When they stop believing this, the process is doomed to failure. This is one reason that I have tried, as an assessment center administrator, to do whatever can reasonably be done to ensure that candidates feel satisfied with the results of the process. This belief is discussed in Chapter 11 where I have provided some additional thoughts to reinforce this view.

Assessment centers continue to be widely used as the preferred and accepted manner of evaluating the potential of members of police and fire departments as a part of their standardized promotional examination process. As I suggested in the Preface to the previous edition, the art and practice of designing job-related and reliable assessment centers is a work in progress. As we continue to ply our trade, we will continue to advance the theory and success of the process. I hope this third edition will play some part in that advancement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In previous editions I have acknowledged that this book is the result of a collective effort involving numerous people and organizations. This statement is no less true today. However, it is virtually impossible for me to list the many men and women with whom I have worked over the last 30 years who have contributed in one way or another to making this book a reality. Nevertheless, I owe them all a great debt of gratitude for their understanding, support and guidance.

I am also indebted to the many police and fire chiefs, city managers, personnel directors, fire and police commissioners, civil service examiners, and others who have been gracious enough to allow me to assist them in designing and administering assessment centers for their agencies. I appreciate the trust they have placed in me and I hope that I have not disappointed them.

I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of the hundreds of men and women who have participated in assessment centers under my direction. They have offered many comments and suggestions which, over the years, have helped us to improve the quality of our work. They deserve a great deal of credit for having the fortitude to go through the process which is indeed exhausting and challenging and I sincerely hope that they consider the experience a satisfying and rewarding one.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge with the greatest respect and fond memory of several of my colleagues who have passed on to their eternal reward but who remain among my most treasured friends: Mr. Gary Konzak, former Chief of Police in Carol Stream, Illinois and Grand Junction, Colorado; Mr. Robert Sauer, retired Chief of Police of Hanover Park, Illinois; Mr. Pete Sanders, retired Chief of Police of the Riverdale, Illinois, Police Department; Mr. Ed Archer, retired District Chief of the Rockford, Illinois, Fire Department; Mr. William Sudbury, former Chief of Police of the Munster, Indiana, Police Department; Mr. Bennie Crane, retired District Chief of the Chicago Fire Department; and Mr. Robert Baird, retired Chief of Police of the Elgin, Illinois, PoliceDepartment. These gentlemen, professionals all, have served their respective profession well and nobly and I am honored to have served with them.

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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.

What's this I hear about assessment centers?

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

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can also be used to evaluate deficiencies in department operations, management practices, and training programs. For example, the results of an assessment center may indicate the need for additional training in public speaking, cultural diversity awareness, or human relations. By being tested in a "real world" environment, candidates learn a great deal about their own strengths and weaknesses. Participating in an assessment center helps to prepare a candidate for the challenges that he or she will face in the position for which he or she is being evaluated.

> 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 performance 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 department's tactical procedures and how well (or poorly) they are understood by members of the organization. Similarly, a well-designed role playing exercise may reveal deficiencies in how members of the department deal with internal employee issues, external relationships or customer service issues. 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 an organized, standardized, and comprehensive 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 judgements 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.

The assessment center process differs from more traditional examination methods in that it is a test of skill and ability rather than knowledge. In other words, it measures not how much someone knows about something but rather how well a person can function in an assigned role or task. Some people are known to be great at memorizing information from textbooks, procedural manuals, and statutes, but they fall short in such critical areas as

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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.

leadership, human relations, and decision-making skills which are difficult to measure in a written examination.

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 are sometimes confused with oral interviews, or "oral assessments" as they are sometimes called, but they are quite different and the characteristics of an assessment center are quite distinct. Assessment centers must adhere to certain basic principles that 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). These conditions are:[2]

1. A job analysis of relevant behaviors must be conducted to determine the dimensions or competencies important to job success in order to identify what should be evaluated by the assessment center.

2. Behaviors displayed by participants must be classified into meaningful and relevant categories such as behavioral dimensions, attributes, characteristics, aptitudes, qualities, skills, abilities, competencies or knowledge.

3. The techniques used in the assessment center must be designed to provide information for evaluating the dimensions previously determined by the job analysis.

4. Multiple assessment techniques must be used.

5. Assessment techniques must include a sufficient number of job-related simulations to allow opportunities to observe the candidate's behavior related to each dimension/competency being assessed.

6. Multiple assessors must be used to observe and evaluate each assessee.

7. Assessors must receive thorough training and demonstrate performance that meets the guideline in the "Assessor Training" section of this document before participating in an assessment center.

8. A systematic procedure must be used by assessors to record specific behavioral observations accurately at the time of observation.

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[2] International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines, "Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations," *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (September, 2009), pp. 244–247.