

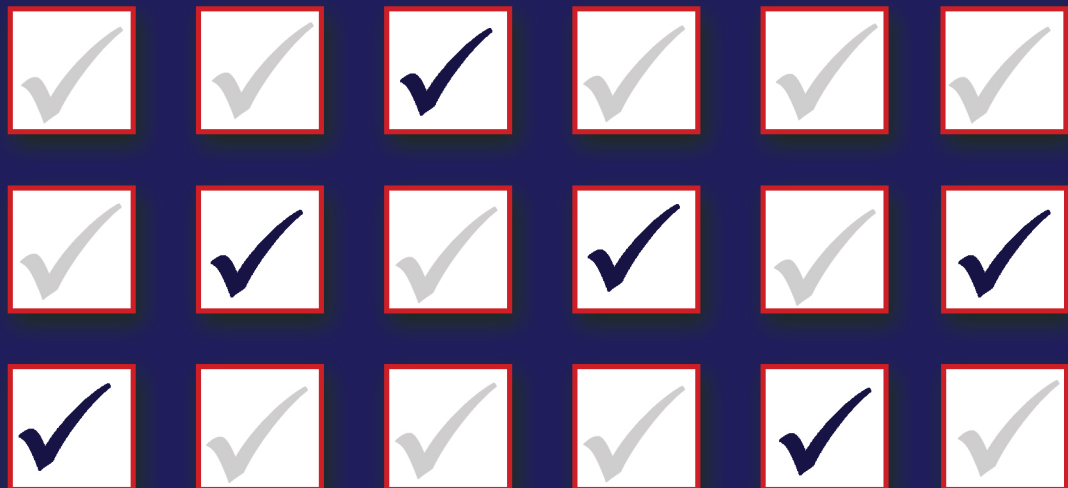


# **MASTERING**

**2ND  
EDITION**

# **THE ASSESSMENT CENTER PROCESS**

**The Fast Track to Promotion**



**LINSEY C. WILLIS**

**MASTERING THE ASSESSMENT  
CENTER PROCESS**

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Linsey Willis, with more than thirty-nine years of Human Resources and management experience, is currently president of L.J. CRAIG & Associates Inc., a management and organizational consulting firm. Her firm's clients represent a diverse mix of organizations from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors in the U.S., the Caribbean, Canada, Thailand and Dubai, U.A.E. Linsey serves as an expert witness for attorneys in the employment law and personal industry disciplines. Dr. Willis is also a full-time instructor for Florida Atlantic University's College of Business. She is on the faculty of its Management Department and teaches management and human resources undergraduate and graduate courses. She also teaches for the university's Executive Education department, for the HR and Advanced HR programs awarding students certificates of completion. Dr. Willis holds a doctorate in Public Administration from Nova Southeastern University, a master's degree in forensic studies from Indiana University, a master's degree in public administration from Florida Atlantic University, and a B.A. in political science from the University of Kentucky. She has also earned certification in human resources from the Human Resources Certification Institute which has certified her as a Senior Human Resources Professional (SPHR).

**Second Edition**

# **MASTERING THE ASSESSMENT CENTER PROCESS**

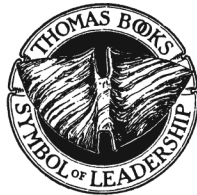
**The Fast Track to Promotion**

*By*

**LINSEY C. WILLIS, DPA, SPHR**

*President, L. J. Craig & Associates, Inc.  
Boca Raton, Florida*

*Instructor  
Florida Atlantic University  
College of Business – Management Department  
Boca Raton, Florida*



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*This book is dedicated to all the members of the  
Thin Blue Line that protect all of us each day, and  
do it without fame, without fortune, and without fail.*

*A special dedication is made to the members of the  
line that have fallen in service, and to their families.  
Their memories of their loved ones, and the mission  
of the Thin Blue Line, live on in all of us.*



## PREFACE

**T**hank you for purchasing this book. It was written because I know that you need and want what this book offers. After reading the sample exercises and commentary contained herein, you will be convinced that your time and money have been well spent. Why? Because you will have practiced the exercises herein, and beyond just reading about the assessment center (AC) process, you will have learned about many of the most important components of the process. For example, you will know what assessor notes look like and how they should be taken. You will know what a comprehensive Assessor Guide looks like and why an assessor's notes are so important.

I have read most of the books about the AC process, its skill dimensions, descriptions of the AC process, tips for preparing for an AC evaluation, and much more. Of course, a number of those books provide some sample in-basket items, but most are missing many of the essential sample exercises and components included in this book. Law enforcement officers preparing for promotion evaluations understand and can prepare for a paper-and-pencil 100-item multiple-choice test, but they have shared with me that often they are confused, afraid, nervous or just plain curious about what they will experience when they go through the AC process.

And, the AC process is the “Cadillac” of systems used to identify management potential I know of and the best method for testing whether a candidate can demonstrate a talent for planning and organizing and possesses the necessary judgment, communication skills, and decision-making ability to move up the ranks. Many candidates do possess these abilities but have not learned how to apply them. This book will teach you how to use all your potential. Just possessing certain innate abilities or really wanting a job is not enough. You must be prepared to show that you can do that job, and you must learn how to do that. In addition, it is almost impossible for an individual to fake his/her way through an AC process, although many candidates who have failed, perceive that their “buddies” did in fact do just that. But, as you probably already know, the assessors are sitting in the back of the room taking notes or will take notes later while listening to an audio or video recording of the process. If candidates are trying to fake their way through it, the assessors will note that they peppered their answers with a lot



of “uhs” or “ums,” repeated phrases, or made statements that had nothing to do with what the exercise is really about, or wrote things unrelated to the exercise. If the situation occurs where one or more candidates are able to obtain high scores even though they were not prepared, then the process as conducted was not valid.

Here are some examples of invalid processes:

- No job analysis was conducted.
- The exercises are based on vague job descriptions.
- Some of the exercise components may never occur in the agency.
- The exercise response standards are severely lacking in content.
- There is no evidence of a linkage between the job tasks and the abilities required to successfully complete the tasks.
- If no job analysis exists the weight given each skill dimension will not be available.
- There is no record of critical incident job analysis notes obtained during assessment process conducted by the consultant.
- Because the assessors indicate they were trained by another vendor, they may not be trained for the specific agency’s AC process.
- Candidates who participate in a process for their city or agency helped a vendor develop the exercises and then the vendor was hired by their city to administer the process they will be competing in.
- The chief or assistant chief develops material that gives the impression of internal bias or suggests that the process will not be strictly confidential.
- Some assessors take few or no notes and the test administrators do nothing about this because no one will be auditing the final score sheets.
- There are problems during the administration of the process which provide an unfair disadvantage to the candidates who experienced these problems. Sometimes there are mechanical problems such as printer breaking down. Perhaps some candidates have long wait times between exercises and others do not; or candidates are not sequestered and morning candidates share information with their friends whose process starts later.

All of the sample exercises included in this book have been used in past AC processes or in customized coaching exercises. The names of the individuals and agencies have been excluded for confidentiality purposes. Read on, and learn at a pace comfortable for you and treasure your new insights.

What also makes our knowledge and experience so relevant for you is that all of the other consultants in the United States whose work and repu-

tations I am familiar with, do not have the 360-degree experience with the AC process. The 360-degree feedback process involves obtaining feedback from a circle of personnel who extend beyond direct reports. I am not minimizing or denigrating the knowledge they add to the topic at hand, because I have read their books and many of the books are very well written and comprehensive. The consultants who provide group training on the AC process do not have the knowledge and training on how to design, develop, implement, administer and score AC exercises. They have only taken their knowledge and experience with AC processes they have participated in and turned this experience into a consulting enterprise.

Consulting firms make considerable money when 25–30 people pay anywhere from \$500–\$1,500 for one or two days of group training. This is an excellent way to learn what you will be experiencing after you pass the written examination. My firm (L.J. Craig & Associates) has a totally different business model. We provide our clients with a return on their investment; approximately 98 percent of the law enforcement officers we have coached over the past several years have been promoted. Their ranks range from sergeant up through and including chief of police, from all across the United States, from small agencies to large city departments, and including state highway patrol officers and sheriff's deputies and some federal agencies.

The design, development, administration and scoring of any AC process takes anywhere from 300 to 600 work hours—for smaller agencies with fewer than a dozen candidates. At a minimal cost of \$20 per hour, that would represent a minimum cost of \$6,000 to \$12,000 for such an assessment center. A good AC process is extremely labor intensive.

I have always breathed a sigh of relief once a process is completed. This is because of the rigorous nature of the design and administration of the process which includes writing candidate feedback reports (this process is too time consuming and difficult for assessors). Other consultants I know from other firms have been relieved at completion, too—because no lawsuit had been filed. That has happened many times all over the United States since the 1970s, especially with large urban departments. We have never had a lawsuit filed against our firm nor has anyone threatened to file one. Nonetheless, it is always a concern.

With coaching, I have never had a sigh-of-relief moment after that process is over. In fact, after every coaching assignment, I have felt elated, proud and delighted because I knew I helped someone to best utilize their innate abilities. As a professional and a human being, I love the face-to-face contact most (of the time via Zoom) after the promotion process is complete.

L.C.W.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In June 2015 during the annual meeting I have with my two affiliates, Bill Reilly, Assistant Police Chief (ret,) and Lt. Paul Patti (ret), we discussed our goals for the coming year. We meet at the same place each year and dine on seafood in Melbourne, FL. During our lunch, great ideas are generated and my affiliates had a great idea which was presented to me more like a police command: “Linsey, you have to write a book on AC’s and use an experiential approach.” This book fulfills their command in less time than I anticipated. Therefore, I first want to acknowledge Bill and Paul for their collaboration, inspiration, support, and friendship.

I also want to acknowledge my husband, J. Frank Willis, without whose support, love, nurturing, interest, and admiration, I would not be doing what I am doing at this stage of my career.

My appreciation and admiration are also owed to Dr. Pat Maher, a retired police lieutenant, with whom I have been friends since 1982. We met at a conference on the assessment center process and thereafter have worked together on various projects including conference presentations. Additionally, the help of Rick Michelson, also a retired police lieutenant, is also acknowledged. I also want to thank Andy Scott, a former police chief, whom I have also known for more than 20 years. He has been a supportive colleague, former client and friend. Finally, I want to acknowledge Alan Chertok, a lawyer and retired police chief, whose national and international law enforcement experience makes him exceptionally well qualified to have reviewed my book.

Others who read and gave invaluable input on this book include: Dr. Melinda Holmes; Craig Roegner, RAC, federal ATF; and Michael Annese, a fire department battalion chief, author of *The Victory Cycle* (2015), and a successful candidate in past assessment center processes.

Last but not least, I want to thank Dr. David Herst a colleague at Florida Atlantic University’s College of Business.

One additional and very important person I want to acknowledge is Dr. Robert S. Sloat, one of my associates helped edit my book.

Thank you all so much.



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**MASTERING THE ASSESSMENT  
CENTER PROCESS**





## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

**T**his book has been written for all police officers who want to be promoted, whether to sergeant, lieutenant, captain, deputy or assistant chief or chief or any person from a state or federal law enforcement agency. And anyone interested in learning more about the assessment center process of candidate evaluation, to include practitioners working in human resource departments or Industrial Organizational psychologists and the like may also find this book useful. This book is not designed to teach HR professionals how to design an assessment center process, nor is it to be considered a comprehensive textbook on the subject.

The majority of the chapters in this book contain sample exercises which you can complete, and then later review with the Assessor Guides, role player scripts and other material contained in the Exhibits Appendix. Sample candidate reports may be found in Chapter 16.

It is not necessary to read the chapters consecutively because each chapter is written to stand alone. If you choose to start reading in the middle or near the end of the book, you will not feel that what you just learned is disconnected from another chapter. I do, however, recommend that if you have little or no understanding of the assessment center (AC) process, that you read the book from cover to cover.

## Chapter 2

### YOUR CANDIDATE TRAINING SCRIPT

#### OVERVIEW

Throughout my career designing AC processes one of the important components is the candidate orientation. Orienting candidates somewhere between one and two weeks before the process is relatively standard. Candidate orientation should never be excluded from any process because of budgetary or time constraints, nor should it be done just a day or so before the process. However, some agencies do not give candidates much advance notice. Nevertheless, candidates should know quite fully what they are going to be experiencing, which includes not only an overview of what an AC process is about, but how they will be scored, etc.

Most of this chapter is designed so that you will learn much of what assessors are taught in their training. The material was prepared initially for one of my clients. I decided that because the agency had never before used AC methodology, I wanted them to use the best process my firm could provide, so I created an abbreviated assessor-training manual.

You might envision yourself sitting in the training room of your department. Then:

- Clear your desk or work space of instructional materials and distracting objects;
- Pretend that I am in the room making a formal presentation to you using the following material;
- Prepare to read very carefully.

## **THE ASSESSMENT CENTER PROCESS**

Pretend you are one rank above the position you currently hold. Assume that you are participating in an assessor training program for your department. Pretend also that this section of the book is part of the trainer's script. What you will read starts out very broadly, then goes into great detail, and then repeats some concepts to reinforce your learning.

The term "AC" refers to a standardized system used for identifying an individual's strengths and weaknesses for a predetermined purpose, such as a promotion or employee development. An AC is a process not a place. The AC is a testing methodology. The term "assessment" usually refers to a comprehensive, multi-faceted view of an individual in which information gleaned from a variety of measurements is brought together. The information that is derived is related to the critical job dimensions for the target position and is designed to predict who will be successful in that position.

The usual assessment center program lasts from one to two days and may last longer depending on the number of exercises used. That duration depends on the complexity of the target position. The participants go through four to six exercises specifically designed to elicit behaviors which have been identified as important to effective performance in the position. These key behaviors are identified through a comprehensive job analysis of the position. This job analysis is one key factor which supports the legal defensibility of the assessment process. As the candidates go through each exercise, the trained assessors observe and record the behaviors demonstrated in each candidate's performance. After all the behavioral simulations are completed by the candidates, the assessors prepare an assessor integration discussion with other assessors who have observed the same participants.

Each assessor evaluates each skill dimension based on the evidence presented from all the exercises, and a numerical rating for each dimension is determined independently by each assessor. The numerical ratings assigned by the assessors are compared, and an integration discussion ensues until a group consensus on a single numerical rating for each dimension is reached. This discussion is vital to the success of the assessment process in that the assessors must discuss all the behavioral data collected and agree upon standards in reaching the consensus rating assigned. After a consensus is reached on each of

the dimensions, the final profile of the candidate is achieved. This final profile provides each candidate with their scores from all assessors across all exercises and skill dimensions.

### **A Brief History**

The first major documented use of AC procedures in American industry was a monumental study called the Management Progress Study which was conducted at AT&T beginning in 1956 (Bray, 1964; Bray & Grant, 1966; Bray, Campbell & Grant, 1974). The study involved four-hundred and twenty-two recently hired males whose progress had been followed to determine their range of professional growth and the characteristics which led to their success in management. The results of the initial eight-year “predictive validity study” were quite positive. Eighty-five percent of the individuals who successfully reached the middle management level had been correctly identified by the assessment process (Bray & Grant, 1966; Thornton & Byham, 1982).

Over the approximately sixty years since the AC method was used in the private sector including such companies as AT&T and JC Penny, the method which was used to study adult development has expanded to a great many countries (Lievens & Thornton, 2005). After its use became common in the U.S. it gained acceptance in the United Kingdom and then was adopted by Germany, Japan, South Africa and then other country participants, who attended one of the International Congress conferences on the AC method, including Sweden, South Korea, India, Indonesia, Kuwait, Brazil, Venezuela, Russia, China, Singapore, and Malaysia (Thornton & Krause, 2009). Based on research by Thornton and Rupp (2006), the method has gained acceptance in other fields during the last fifty years, including developmental planning and advanced training. And soon after the AT&T Management Progress Study (Howard & Bray, 1988) was completed, other large corporations found that the AC method was able to identify those who had managerial talent (Thornton & Byham, 1982; Thornton & Krause, 2009).

With that background, let’s go back to the years before AC was widely adopted by private industry. The use of AC assessment and selection methods had been evolving and accelerating since its first use in this country by the Office of Strategic Services, which later became the Central Intelligence Agency. That agency assessed 5,391