
Assessment Centers Work, but for Different Reasons

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By focusing on the impact ratings and exercises have on assessment centers, Lance (2008) has applied the wrong hammer to examine why assessment centers work.

Assessment Centers Have Very Different Expectations Today

Lance points out what assessment centers do well, but he does not distinguish between the early 1960's models of assessment centers and how they are used today. Early assessment centers were designed to primarily do one thing—serve as “lemon” eliminators. The initial Office of Strategic Services (OSS) center, the early AT&T operational centers, and the centers at IBM, Sohio, and Sears all focused on prediction, but their underlying operational rationale was not just to identify those who would succeed but, as important, eliminate those likely to fail. It was this latter characteristic that supported the cost justification of conducting centers. This was clearly the intent of the seminal article in the 1950's *Harvard Business Review*, “A good man is hard to find,” written by the OSS staff and used to initiate the initial support for AT&T's Management Progress Study. Campbell and Bray's (1967) article comparing participants chosen prior to, during, and after assessment center procedures

were instituted made a strong case for using assessment centers as even the group with the lowest potential assessment center ratings was superior in terms of leadership performance to groups chosen before or even during the application of this method. Along with this, the supply of assessment candidates was plentiful and there was little real concern about the possible morale implications of those who “failed.” Poorly conducted assessment centers quickly became known as “assassination centers.” To assuage this, an attempt was made to provide some form of developmental feedback. Dimensions were the easiest place to begin. The early operational AT&T centers that served as a model for many future centers provided feedback information on ratings as an afterthought in order to help candidates improve their performance on these ratings. Therefore, it was not surprising to see the early emphasis placed on ratings in the early assessment centers. In contrast, the climate for conducting centers today has shifted significantly. Retention and development are often the primary use for this technique. The competition for talent means that there are far fewer candidates in most organizational pipelines, and assessment centers are frequently used as a reward rather than as a hurdle to overcome. Although there continues to be a widespread use of assessment centers to select candidates for entry-level positions having similar job demands, there are great differences in centers designed for more senior roles where there is

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considerable variability in the task demands for leadership success.

Data From Different Assessment Centers Vary in Quality

Lance appears to assume that the basic characteristic of one assessment center can universally apply to all. This is not the case because assessment centers are not equivalent representations of one another. Many studies cited in the literature represent “mechanical” centers with poorly trained or less qualified assessors rather than assessors who are able to spot the critical differences in leadership effectiveness that is germane to their organization. Academically based researchers often are thrilled to have access to assessment center data but often are not in the position of experientially evaluating the quality of the center itself or its perception by its users. Consequently, many researchers fail to critically evaluate the competence of the program itself and its real impact in broad organizational terms because there are huge differences in the quality of assessors, the training they receive, the reports they write, and the organizational support for this process that often differentiate the truly outstanding assessment center interventions from the more prosaic, poorly designed and managed centers. Let me cite three brief examples. (A) Consider the method of collecting insights regarding performance. At one extreme, assessors are given time for reflection and synthesis prior to writing a report. These reports tend to be narrative rather than competency driven. At the other end of the spectrum, assessors complete behavioral checklists. Without going into the merits of these approaches, these practices lead to different expectations regarding the quality of the judgments that are presented as data. (B) The topic of assessor performance is rarely reported. High-quality assessors are often hard to find, particularly if they are well-regarded managers and executives who have many other critical demands on their time. Consequently, assessors from within the organization often come from a conve-

nience sample. This ranges from people the organization can spare to retired individuals to human resource incumbents who may be good at coaching or organizational change but have limited leadership experience. Often organizations go outside for professional assessors, but these too vary based on their leadership experience. For example, it can be very difficult for an assessor who has never managed others to evaluate strategic thinking or in-basket performance without having considerable structure added to the program, a practice leading to checklists that too often restrict the range of “acceptable” responses to predetermined formulaic analysis rather than looking at the consequences of one’s behavior. Thus, the judgment process used by assessors often determines the quality and realism of the information that is generated. (c) There has been a shift from using the kinds of isolated assessment center exercises initially used at AT&T to a more integrated simulation where the participant has to respond to a wide array of different stimuli but does so in exercises all occurring in a single organization. This requires extensive assessor training in order to understand how to examine behavior in a more global context rather than the one driven by a specific simulation. Recent use of Web-based simulations creates an additional degree of difficulty for assessors. It is for these reasons, and many others (space prevents further discussion), that we cannot treat assessment centers as essentially duplicate replicates of each other, particularly when subject to complex meta-analyses and statistical summarization of data.

Consequences, Rather Than Description, Are What Matters

This is the most critical distinguishing feature among assessment centers and seemed to be overlooked in Lance’s distinction between dimensions rated after each exercise versus those completed as an aggregate of performance. What was missing for me was ignoring the importance of outcomes. In order for feedback to make a difference, the participant needs to understand the consequences

of one's behavior. This is where assessment data can be rich with meaning, even when stated in simple declaratory statements such as "You talk too much," or "You don't talk enough," or "You make decisions very quickly," or "You can make it very difficult for others to feel that they can influence you." Data from simulations that create a framework for understanding how this behavior applies in real life require a different level of training and analysis than the one focusing only on describing what has occurred. For example, a theme appearing in one exercise, such as noting that the person was the first to speak up or interrupted others or was particularly insistent on his or her conclusions, may have a very different interpretation when aggregated across multiple exercises and can have different implications concerning others' expectations about performance. Rather than focus on the content of one sim-

ulation, it is these insights, when aggregated as reflections regarding one's style, that often have considerable potency for impacting changes in behavior.

In conclusion, we need to examine Lance's article in a different light. Assessment centers work when the judgments made reflect useful insights that both the individual and the organization find valuable. It is not the exercise or the dimension that matters; it is the insights that can lead to changes in performance that make the real difference.

References

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