

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 17, 1990

THE ASSESSMENT CENTER AS AN EXPERIENTIAL CLASSROOM EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

Assessment centers are being implemented as internal or external staff selection mechanisms in over 3000 business organizations. The popularity of assessment centers has increased steadily every year. This paper reviews the rationale behind the assessment center and describes the development of a simulated assessment center, which was implemented in a college classroom. Examples of the assessment activities are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Simulation exercises used in college classrooms not only expose the students to situations which might arise in the "real" world, but they can also affect the students' performance or behavior in the classroom setting. For example, when presenting the idea and process of assessment centers to a retailing human resource management class at Michigan State University, simulations proved to be very effective in transmitting ideas, concepts, and skills to students.

Assessment centers are used by business/industry primarily as a screening device to identify individuals with managerial potential. By implementing an assessment center simulation, students have a chance to experience the intensive evaluation which is characteristic of assessment centers. The assessment center simulation can help students to maximize their performance in an actual work-related assessment center.

ASSESSMENT CENTER AS A CLASSROOM SIMULATION

The basic variation of the assessment center that we simulated consisted of 6 assessment-like activities. The students, or assesses, were randomly placed into six groups, 12 assesses per group. The groups simultaneously rotated every 20 minutes to a new exercise. In preparation, the students were informed of the nature and characteristics unique to the assessment center and the general types of simulations to expect. However, it is important to not let the assesses know what types of behaviors and results the assessors are looking for during the exercises, as it would sensitize the students to act in the desired manner.

Selected assessors consisted of professors and graduate students. Prior to the administration of the assessment center simulation, each was presented with an outline of the specific simulation they were to evaluate, the behaviors to look for, and a standardized evaluation measure.

Each simulated exercise was limited to 12 minutes. During the final two minutes, the participants were encouraged to rationalize their decisions and discuss how the exercise could be used as a performance measure in an actual work environment. Students then rotated to the next exercise, while the assessors evaluated each assessee.

Assessment Activities

The six activities we chose to simulate are by no means the only satisfactory applications of appraisal exercises. A main advantage of the assessment center over many other assessment techniques is the ability to adapt the assessment center to situation-specific circumstances. Six simulations were administered:

In-Basket. This technique simulates a stress situation, which demands quick decision-making. Subjects read a scenario in which they are faced with urgent decisions, which must be made within a 30-minute time frame. It is the subjects responsibility to prioritize the situations which they would/could handle in the 30-minute period. Following prioritization, each student, in writing, rationalizes each decision made.

Tragedy-Group. The simulation in this exercise allows the participants to experience the difficulty in getting people to change. Individuals read a short tragedy story and answer several accompanying questions. As a group, assesses then discuss why they answered as they did and then ultimately come to a group consensus for the answers to each question. Evaluation is based on leadership and persuasion abilities.

Numbers. The objective of this exercise is to gauge the participant's speed and accuracy in problem solving. The participants carefully read the instructions in which analytical irregularities are given. For example, a "-" sign means to multiply, a "+" sign means to divide... and so on. The students solve the test as quickly as possible. Evaluation is based upon both quickness and accuracy.

Symbols. This exercise tests participant's ability to follow oral instructions and perceptual/spatial abilities. Group members, paired off, are seated back to back. One member orally describes a line drawing while the other member draws a representation front the description. Evaluation is based on the accuracy of the drawing displayed teamwork, and thorough communication skills.

Role Play. Participants read and act out an actual manager/employee situation that may occur on the job, emphasizing attention on interpersonal skills and creative problem solving. Evaluation is based on each student's understanding of the situation, communication skills, and problem solving techniques.

Leaderless-Group Discussion (LCD). This exercise demonstrates the student's ability to reason/judge/persuade others. In this situation, students read a scenario dealing with the retail industry. The discussion should focus on pros/cons/causes/effects of the issues within the situation. Evaluation is based on the student's leadership (not dominance), communication, interpersonal skills, and group facilitation.

Evaluation

The top three assesses in each group are identified as star performers" and are acknowledged at the following class period. Inevitably, some students are identified as "stars" who in other situations had never demonstrated excellence. This recognition often creates for them, a greater motivation to achieve.