

Utilizing Assessment Centers for Supervisory Promotions

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### **Introduction**

The selection of suitable personnel for promotion has been a long standing problem within both the private as well as public realms. There is little doubt that when an organization makes the right promotional choices and promotes the most qualified personnel, there tends to be less overall problems within the organization. Each of us could likely relate a horror story from our own past about a nightmarish promotion of a supervisor which caused much pain to be had by the organization, especially its upper management. Increased complaints from the public unhappy with decisions made by or in conjunction with those supervisors, unhappy employees who worked under what could be considered a “bad supervisor”, or in some cases even lawsuits generated by poor decisions that these individuals made could have been the results of such promotions. We feel confident these decisions to promote were not taken lightly, and in most cases at the time these people did appear to us qualified for the job. After all, these people performed well for us as a lower level employee, and they may have even scored high in our testing process. So, what went wrong, and more importantly, what can we do as management to assist us in making better promotional choices in the future?

### **Why the Right Choices are Important**

There is little doubt that making the right promotional choice, for example, can result in higher employee work satisfaction and motivation levels as well as result in fewer external problems, such as complaints or civil lawsuits. Many texts and articles in the past have informed us that the manner in which our employees are treated by management is important to employee satisfaction and productivity. However, the scope of this article is not to delve deeply into such ideas and theories, but we do think that it is

an important reminder to upper management that promotional decisions should be prefaced with as much measurable information about the individual up for promotion as possible. Additionally, it does not take much browsing the web before one can come across instances of unacceptable behavior or poor decisions by supervisors in law enforcement that have caused lawsuits or other types of negligent torts to be filed, and in some instances, criminal charges to be filed against an organization, the police chief, and administrators themselves.

Finally, the wrong promotional choices can affect the organizations working relationship with the community. Nothing can upset the harmony of a community more quickly than actions taken, or not taken, by the department and its personnel in that community. Most community decisions are made daily by our supervisors and given to employees for implementation. However, bear in mind that it only takes one regretful decision to overshadow the many good decisions or acts made in the community. Not to mention the stressful position this places upper management in as they have to attempt damage control within the community. No one likes to be on the defensive when they are addressing a room full of hostile citizens at a local community meeting, or when surrounded by a pack of journalists during an interview with local news reporters.

Governments, in particular, are always looking for a testing process which can be successfully defended in the event of a grievance, arbitration, or litigation. Remember that in general, the testing process for a supervisory or managerial position has two goals in mind: 1) to make accurate prediction about an individual's performance in the target job and 2) to do it in a way that is legally defensible (Rockhill, T., 2000). So, what can

the campus administrator to do to help eliminate unsatisfactory promotional choices?  
The assessment center may be just the tool for this challenge.

### **Definition and Historical Development**

One of the early definitions of assessment centers can be found in the works of C.A. Fletcher (1982), who described the process as the “Assessment of a group of individuals by a team of judges using a comprehensive and integrated series of techniques” (p. 42). More recently the practice has been described as a process, not a place, which a team uses to identify and evaluate leadership skills for higher level positions, such as supervisors or managers (Cosner & Baumgart, 2000; Cosner, 2000). The assessment center technique is a comprehensive evaluation of an individual for job placement or promotion and typically uses a variety of activities (including case studies, simulations, interviews, and role plays) to evaluate critical behaviors related to success on the job.

Assessment centers have been in existence for quite some time, with indications that assessments were used in ancient China to identify capable warriors and leaders. The United States military has also utilized assessment centers in both World War I and II to identify competent soldiers and leaders for leadership positions within their ranks. Additionally, on the private side in 1952 AT&T is thought to have used the first known assessment in the private sector (Hilgenfeldt, 2000).

The use of assessment centers in law enforcement appears to have begun in the early 1980's, and over the years this selection method has become more popular as police managers realized the potential of the selection method. More recently Hurley (2001) found that 35% of law enforcement organizations in the United States were utilizing

some sort of assessment center in their hiring or promotional process. This is no surprise since the goal of most local government agencies is to produce a promotional list which identifies candidates with the most knowledge, skills, and abilities and which can be successfully defended in court, should the need arise. The assessment center generally meets these goals.

**Current Promotional Practices**

The traditional promotional examination or processes in policing consists of the following methods of selection of successful promotional candidates:

- Written examinations, which often test for knowledge gained from reading assigned materials (e.g., books or internal manuals like General Orders or a Rules Manual). This may also include psychological testing or job fit testing, which utilizes past successful promoted candidates to develop a pattern for selecting future successful promotional candidates.
- Promotions based on past performance of personnel within the department. Past performance is often based on employee past appraisals from supervisors or from recommendations of current supervisors who may have worked with the employee at one time or another.
- Assessment centers, which include a number of various exercises (e.g., the in-basket activity, the fact finding exercise, or group activities) which are used to determine how the candidates will react in certain situations.
- Any combination of the above methods, such as a written examination of the candidates followed by an assessment center, or a written examination followed

by an examination of the employees past performance by written documentation (employee appraisals) or interviews with previous supervisors of the candidate.

The problems that often face the administrator in regards to choosing a method of examination suitable to chose successful candidates for promotion are that in many cases the utilization of simply one of these methods may lead to a biased or only partial picture of the candidates knowledge, skills, and abilities. Written examinations, for example, only test for knowledge of materials that were selected for the promotional test. Knowledge, of course, is a valuable and is a desirable supervisory characteristic for any supervisory candidate to possess, but knowledge alone does not give a complete picture of the other two components that are important in selecting qualified personnel, which are skills and abilities. Using past records to try and garner more information about a candidate, such as employee appraisals, may also be of limited usage, as in to many instances in the past within some organizations personalities may have entered into the assessment process of the employee by the supervisor who made the employee evaluation. An interview with previous supervisors are also of limited use and is very situational, as often the supervisor only sees the results of recent past actions or inactions (e.g. reports and arrest numbers) and their judgment of that persons, knowledge, skills, and abilities may not be entirely accurate.

### **Steps of Developing the Assessment Center Process**

So, what are the steps needed to assist in development of an outstanding assessment center? There are some general recommendations that can be made, but realistically these steps are varied and may fluctuate according to your specific organizations wants and needs. For example, at some point during the process you will have to make the

decision to go with either inside or outside assessors to be judges for your assessment center. Outside assessors are actually preferred, specifically because the use of current and past employees, or those closely associated with the testing organization (i.e. union members, political activists, etc.), would invite claims of favoritism and improper conduct by those who did not score well during the assessment center exercises. As a matter of fact, just this same issue of using past employees as assessors occurred recently within the Houston Police Department's Lieutenant's assessment center. Although eventually the issue of using past personnel to assess candidates was successfully resolved in Houston the administrator should strive to make the process fair to avoid rumors of favoritism as well as to assist in keeping the process out of the court room and away from possible arbitration should your organization have that process in employee grievable matters.

On the other hand, there are some who see value in having current employee assessors with specific personal knowledge regarding the organizations rules, regulations, and practices. However, one must ensure that the use of current employees as assessors can be defended in court should the need arise and the process should be explained to the promotional candidates in advance. The primary reasoning for utilizing inside assessors instead of outside appears to revolve around the fact that even though assessment centers can place candidates into realistic exercises that may be found in the position in question, some candidates may be good at playing the role in front of outside assessors, but inside assessors may have the employees past history with the department available to them to assist in their assessment of the candidate. In either case, assessors should understand the target job and are typically of the rank one level above the target job. The belief is that if

they have held the target job and currently supervise those who hold the target job, they understand the job requirements better than any other could.

In addition, assessors must receive instruction and practice in observing behavior, taking notes, and rating performance. A recent job task analysis of the position being tested should also be completed, job descriptions should be updated with the analysis results, and then this information should be shared with the promotional candidates. Common dimensions such as leadership, communication skills, decision making, stress management, presentation skills, interpersonal skills, and command presence may be determined by the completion of a task analysis (Hilgenfeldt, 2000). Sharing of this analysis with employees interested in going through the assessment process is not only informative to the employee but also may prove useful should the results of any assessment center be called into question for not being an accurate representation of the job in question.

It is also recommended that in order to increase the chances of making good promotional choices that the administrator who uses the assessment center process for promotion of personnel to select at a minimum at least three (3) assessment center exercises to ensure a more comprehensive evaluation of the candidate's aptitude. Each of these exercises should have content and construct valid relationship with the results of the job analysis. Content validity refers to the activities that are determined from the potential types of activities that the employee performs or will perform while construct validity is related to the underlying skills, knowledge, abilities, behaviors, and traits that the employee needs to perform the critical or important aspects of the job (Cosner, 2000).



**Steps to Keep the Process Fair and Legal**

There are certain steps, however that need to be taken by the organization to ensure that the process is comprehensive, fair to all involved, and will pass a court review should there be a challenge to the process somewhere down the road. These steps are listed and discussed below:

- Review and update job descriptions- reviewing current job descriptions can help clarify the role of the individuals who currently hold that job. This step can often be overlooked in the assessment center process, but is important as the legal risks alone of not having a current job description may cause issues to erupt down the road in the event the process is challenged in civil or federal court.
- Complete an updated job analysis- the job analysis differs from the job description in that the job analysis lists the actual tasks that are important for the position and break down the nature, extent, frequency, and importance of specific types of behaviors that characterize the job. This will help develop an understanding of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors necessary to perform the job. Usually, a job analysis has job incumbents and their supervisors participate in preliminary interviews and then complete a questionnaire, assigning point values to task, knowledge, skill, and ability statements on several rating scales (e.g., frequency, importance, when mastery is needed). Data analysis of these ratings provides the blueprints for the testing process.
- Ensure a thorough legal review is conducted on all assessment center activities. Review all contracts (i.e. between law enforcement agency and police union),

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- policies and procedures to prevent unknowingly committing a violation or breach of contract.
- Meet with the promotional candidates- After the two above steps have been taken the next important step is for the assessors to meet with the promotional candidates to help them understand the assessment process. During this meeting the assessors should advise the candidates what to expect during the process as well as the methods that will be used to rate the candidates. The more candidates understand the assessment center exercises and activities, the less likely they are to develop negative perceptions about the process.
  - Develop the activities that will be use in the assessment- there are numerous activities that can be use to assess the candidates. These are some of the most common exercise and activities that are used:
    - a. The in-basket activity.
    - b. The fact finding exercise
    - c. The group activity.
    - d. The interview.
    - e. The oral presentation.
    - f. Role playing.
  - Evaluation of Performance- the manner in which this is done is also important to ensure accuracy as well as validity. During each exercise the assessors will rate the candidate on a pre-approved scaled of behavioral benchmarks. For example, you can use a simple five point scale to rate the candidate, with 5 meaning

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superior (for example) to 1 meaning not meeting criteria or ineffective in regards to the exercise.

- Final ranking of employees- the final ranking of employees needs to be completed as a group by the assessors after they have finished testing the candidates. The scores are usually converted to a percentage by the group. Occasionally the assessment center score will be weighted as a part of the total examination process and may be combined with a written examination score, seniority, or other rating or ranking procedure that may be used by the organization.

### Conclusion

Although no one can be inoculated completely against lawsuits (after all, this is America, home of the frivolous lawsuit), there is little doubt that the more a department can do to show that it is selecting qualified personnel for the supervisory positions within the department the more likely they are to come out of such a suit successfully, not to mention the fact that armed with more information about the candidates will assist the organization in making a good promotional choice. An example of legal issues that can arise with promotions and the promotions process can be seen in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals decision in the Isabel v. City of Memphis case, when six black officers of the Memphis Police Department sued the city for violating their civil rights by limiting their qualifications for the position to a written test. One of the prime reasons that this suit was successful, according to the courts review, was due to the fact the department only used a written test to determine if the candidates were qualified. The courts stated that the promotional process should be broad and contain more elements than simple comprehension of a written test. There is little doubt that should the issue arise in a court

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of law the likelihood of successful defense of a lawsuit is greatly enhanced by utilization of the assessment center. In fact in the past the assessment center methodology has been utilized successfully by defendants by demonstrating that this process measures relevant job behaviors such as knowledge, skills, abilities, and other essential characteristics that are required for competent supervisory or managerial performance, while minimizing the impact on protected classes.

The Campus Administrator should feel confident in their selection of the assessment center process to choose qualified personnel for their departments supervisors. As we are all aware, past promotional practices and processes have not always proven to be effective in selecting a qualified candidate, and we doubt that there are many administrators who have not at some point in their career either promoted an individual into a supervisory position who has not met managements expectations or at least has been the observer of past promotional processes in other organizations which failed to select a good, qualified individual. In closing, it is the author's opinion that making the right promotional choice can mean peace of mind for the administrator and their organization as well as a reduction of personnel and other legal problems down the road. Indeed, the assessment center is a tool that should be in every administrator's tool bag, and they should feel confident in using that tool to select qualified promotional candidates for their organization.

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