



Assessment/ Development Centres

-Key Implementation learnings



Overview

In India the number of organizations that are using Assessment /Development centres (AC/DC) is on the rise. These centres are being run to help both the organisation and the employees determine their proficiency levels on key organizational / managerial competencies .The outputs are being used for a variety of purposes including individual development initiatives. There have been mixed experiences for

organizations and the employees involved in these centres.

This note drawing on our individual experience of having been involved in over 100 centres details out the steps that organisations should take while designing and running Assessment centres.

We have kept the theoretical underpinnings out of the ambit of this note and have focused only on the practical issues.

Definition of the competency Model and acceptance of the same across the organization

The competency model is invariably the basis for the conduct of the centres.

Most organizations involve senior leadership and a set of high performers in the process of creation of the model. However a large section of the organization is unaware of the model and its parameters. There is typically cynicism on its relevance as well as contents. Some of these concerns are valid as it has a direct impact on an employee's professional life.

Address them through the following means:

- Communication workshops that are conducted through the organization. This had to be conducted by the line leaders and not the HR personnel or the external consultants. The latter can at best act as facilitators of the process, but true buy in happens

only when line leaders start championing the model.

- The competency model typically encounters cynicism as well as objection when positioned as an HR strategy/ tool. It is only when employees see the connection between the competencies/ behaviours and organization success /personal success do they begin to appreciate the relevance.
- One needs to be realistic. The first round of communication meeting is only the starter. There needs to be periodic reinforcement through incorporation in periodic performance reviews.
- Send the model to all the participants sufficiently well before the centre for familiarization. In addition always start the centre with a presentation



on the competency model, and have an interactive discussion addressing

any questions/concerns that the participants might have.

Design of the Assessment tools/Exercises and the tool competency Matrix

This normally throws up the following questions

- The number of tools to be used;
- The variety/ range of tools that are to be used;
- Weightage to each tool;
- Relevance of the tools to the educational background and orientation of the employees;
- The duration of the centre.

We have seen that a set of 6-7 activities over a 2 day centre is the optimal number while assessing 8-9 competencies. This typically includes tools like, Behavioural Event Interviews, case studies (Business analysis /situational analysis) depending on the participant profile, Group activities (with the group size ranging from 4-6), role plays (Both assessor led as well as participant led) and self analysis tools.

Each tool should measure 2-4 competencies. The exact number is to be determined based on the time allotted for the activity and the range of Competencies and behaviours that the tool allows the participant to demonstrate. Also ensure that each competency is measured at the minimum by two activities and a maximum of 4 activities.

We have found more success with unlinked exercises, i.e. those where each exercise in its context and content is not related to the other. This gives the participants sufficient

opportunity and flexibility to demonstrate behaviours consistently.

All tools should be given equal weightage to keep the process of understanding and linkages simple. Using differing weightages to balance out for the strength of individual tools is also sometimes practiced.

Assessor Selection and Training: There are two categories of assessors: **Internal** and **external**. Assessment centres which have as its primary purpose promotion recommendations should rely on external assessors whereas those that have other development and organizational change objectives can rely on internal assessors or have a mix of both.

Assessors need to have a basic understanding of the roles assessed and the industry but technical expertise on the industry is not a 'must have'. What is of importance here is the skill of the assessor to observe and spot behaviours when they are exhibited during the activities, record them in real time, correlate them to the competency model and rate them. They also need the ability to articulate the same clearly, when holding discussions with other assessors and providing feedback.

Assessor training can vary from 1- 5 days depending on the experience and skill level of the group. Irrespective of the experience of the assessors in having conducted past assessments one should insist on at least a two day workshop for assessors before start of any engagement.



In addition to familiarization on the competency model, tools to be used, rating scales, logistics schedule etc, this process should ensure commonality of understanding of the behaviours and the rating scales across all the assessors.

When assessors are required to be involved in the role plays ensure that they are trained on the dos and don'ts of their roles. In

addition do not assume that they can enact the role plays without rehearsals. Live rehearsals are a must.

Centre Planning and Conduct of centre

An assessment centre is a logistically complex activity that involves 4 sets of variables:

- The participants,
- The assessors,
- The set of competencies to be assessed, and
- The tools and the activities that are to be used to assess

The participant is the key customer of the centre and all activities are to be conducted giving him sufficient scope and space for demonstration of the competencies.

Use the following two methods to ensure it: A strong team of **centre administrators** (Typically 3 people: If you use an external consultant, one from the consultant organization and two from within the organization) who are given full authority and responsibility for smooth conduct of the centre. All the other people including the assessors are to follow their instructions and ensure discipline is maintained.

Centre scheduling: The schedule is to be made basis the 4 variables detailed above. A variation of even one of these elements (Lets say 1 participant not turning up at the last minute or one additional request to join

in) throws the schedule out of gear. Contingency planning is critical to accommodate one more or one less and one needs to have two alternate scenario plans ready. As a rule accommodate changes only in extreme cases and do not permit more than one variation. The strain that this puts on the process should not be underestimated.

A typical 2 day centre has 12-15 participants and 4-5 assessors. One also needs to ensure that each participant is seen by as many assessors as possible (typically 3 -4) during the centre.

The role of the administrators in ensuring that the participants and the assessors focus on their core roles of performing and observing is critical.

The administrators handle all the logistics, and are time keepers. One need to appreciate that spill over of any one activity has a cascade effect on the whole group. They also ensure that the support facilities, adequate rooms, stationery, food and refreshments, aids for activities, are all in place. Given the sensitivity of the process and their perceive impact on the careers of participants the need to conduct the same in a professional manner is important.



During the centre the assessors handle the entire participant briefing before, during and after each activity. As a practice insist that all assessment sheets for the particular activity are completed by the assessors immediately after the activity, and they are not allowed to accumulate that for a later point in the day. The schedules need to provide slots for the same. This is to ensure that there is no data capture loss.

In addition a detailed 'Wash-up' session involving all the assessors and lasting 1-3 hours at the end of the day is to be

conducted to discuss each participant, demonstration of competencies and collate ratings. Differences which invariably surface are to be discussed with supporting behaviours and a consensus reached. One of the assessors has to take responsibility for this process. Assessors are also to be allotted participants that they would be giving feedback to at the end of the process. The assessor then owns the participant and the process of allotment of the participant to the assessor is a key determinant on the perceived success of the process.

Feedback and Reporting

This is the proof of the pudding as far as the participant is concerned. Though feedback can be rendered either immediately at the end of the centre or after a few days, giving sufficient time for preparation of detailed reports, and deliberations and thought while finalizing development plans, is important. A few things that we insist on doing in either scenario are.

- No feedback is to be shared with the participants until the wash ups are conclusively completed by the assessors.
- The person, who has conducted the face to face Behavioural Event Interview, shall necessarily render the feedback. If there are major discrepancies in activity performance and interview scores he should be accompanied by a fellow assessor who has seen the participant in the maximum number of activities.
- Present the facts as they are without any sugar coating. Do not let the participant get a surprise later when he sees the report.
- Do not promise more than what you can deliver in terms of next steps.
- Do not be defensive of the process or the results.
- Relatively junior assessors should not render feedback until they are comfortable rendering them under different circumstances.
- Ensure a post feedback debriefing happens involving all the assessors to discuss any cases of concern.
- Last but not the least, remember that the process is seen as having a major impact on one's career, and therefore should be with the care and attention it deserves.



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