

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

=====

The Role of Assessment Centers in the Promotional Process

=====

**An Administrative Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

=====

**By
John S. Best**

**Marshall Police Department
Marshall, Texas
October 2004**

ABSTRACT

Every law enforcement agency must decide how they are going to promote their employees. There are numbers of methods that can be used, from the “good ol’ boy” system, to written tests, to assessment centers, or a mixture of all the above. Surveys were sent to many agencies across Texas. Information from books and periodicals was obtained to be used for research. Feedback from different agencies across the state of Texas finds that there are no “perfect” ways to promote employees, but morale in the departments can be high as long as each employee feels they are given a fair chance to be promoted. This paper should give information to any law enforcement employee, officer or administrator having any participation in a promotional system.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.	1
Review of Literature	2
Methodology	6
Findings	8
Discussions/Conclusions	10
References	13

INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies use many methods to determine who gets promoted to supervisory positions. These include interviews, tests, assessment centers, and the “good ‘ol boy” system. While each of these is used, they will not always promote the most qualified person for the job.

It was the pursuit to promote the most qualified person that prompted the initiation of the assessment center process. While this process was initially used in the business sector, law enforcement agencies began to research what role that assessment centers could have in the promotion of their supervisors. This is the question that this research will address. Is there a place for assessment centers in the promotional process? What is this place and how can agencies use this tool?

The research of this paper will consist of periodicals, articles, books, electronic sources, and officer interviews. There are many sites on the World Wide Web that offer information on assessment centers, not only in the law enforcement application, but in the business world also. The majority of the research will come from books and the World Wide Web.

The intended outcome of this paper will be to show that there are benefits to utilizing the assessment center for the promotion of employees to supervisory positions. While there are people that have the ability to be great test takers, they are not always the best person to be promoted. The test can be an important tool in the process, but not the only tool. This also rings true for an interview process. Some people can interview very well, but not be the best candidate. Depending on who is doing the interview, the process can be skewed by personal feelings or preferences. Many officers worry about the human aspect determining the outcome of this process. There

is not much good that can be said about the “good ‘ol boy” promotions. These promotions usually don’t answer the question, who is best for the job, but what can the person do for the administrator. Within this report, it will be shown that the use of an assessment center can and will be a large benefit for any law enforcement agency that will implement it into their promotional process.

The intended audience for this research paper will be law enforcement administrators, supervisors, and any officer within a department that may be looking for a new way to promote their supervisors. Any person within the department that has any control over, or may be involved in an alternative promotional process will benefit from this research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For years people have been raising up through the ranks of law enforcement. Officers begin their careers as patrol officers, and then if they are lucky they start promoting into positions of higher and higher responsibility. Officers have been searching for a way to perfect the promotional process.

O’Leary (1994) states, “In general, written tests are good measures of specific job knowledge, but not very good measures of management skills. On the other hand, assessment centers are good measures of management skills, but not very good measures of specific job knowledge” (p. 36).

The perfect system has never been invented. Law enforcement administrations have searched to develop a valid selection system.

In order for a selection system to be valid, it has to measure what is being measured.

According to O’Leary (1994), “if a written job-knowledge test is valid, then if it claims to measure basic job-related knowledge, the creator of the test must have some evidence to demonstrate that assertion. The four types

of evidence that can demonstrate that validity are predictive validity, concurrent validity, content validity, and construct validity” (p. 31).

Of these four types of validity, the one that is often used to test assessment centers is content validity. The content of the assessment center exercises should be areas that will be used in the actual job. The assessment center is to test job-knowledge and job skills. Each exercise that will be assessed will have to test the candidate’s job-knowledge and job skills. According to Cosner and Baumgart (2000), if an assessment team cannot convey their procedures to the job analysis, they run the risk of conducting a valueless assessment center. Patti (2003) believes that a review of validity studies relating to assessment center methods shows that the assessments are more efficient than traditional methods of evaluation (e.g. written tests).

O’Leary (1994) points out, that another term that has been used often is the quality of objectivity. This term seems to be misspoken more times than not. In order for a test to be objective, it should be scored the same by two or more evaluators and the scores should be very similar. Not only should an assessment center be valid, it should be objective.

Assessment centers were first used in the early 1900’s in Germany to select officers in the Military. In World War II, the United States Office of Strategic Services utilized assessment centers for the purpose of selecting secret agents. After World War II, the British Royal Army used a variation of the assessment center for the selection of applicants for the Royal Military Army. The United States Army Infantry School using the basis of an assessment center designed a leadership confidence course. This course is still being used today as an integral part of infantry basic training. Law enforcement agencies began using the assessment center process in the 1970’s.

Assessment centers have been proven to evaluate leadership behavior through problem-solving courses (Patti, 2003, pp.5-6). O'Leary (1994) also states, "that prior to the assessment center, the only measure of management skills was an oral board or, perhaps, some performance appraisal process" (p. 38).

According to Lawrence (1994), "An Assessment Center has a specific meaning and is well defined. An Assessment Center is a process which involves:

A series of exercises designed to generate job-related behavior

- (1) Multiple Assessors
- (2) A combining of scores from the different exercises at a date later than the observation of the performance resulting in one score each for a set of job-related management skills" (p. 9).

Also according to Lawrence (1994) the assessment center measures difficult-to-measure skills such as those of management with a high degree of accuracy. Each assessor is given a score sheet for each exercise, with the value of one (1), being the lowest, and ten (10), being the highest. The assessors are also given thorough instructions about how to score each exercise. Cosner and Baumgart (2000) argue that each assessor will need to compile a score for each of the candidates, based solely on their performance on the assessment exercises". Each candidate must be evaluated and scored on his/her own merits, not how they performed compared to another candidate.

According to Coulton and Field (1995), there are many shared qualities which appear to work well in the law enforcement assessment center including, an officer's ability to relate to the public, his ability to stay calm and collected during times of stress, ability to work within the structure of a team, communications skills and their ability to

maintain the proper use of force. Each exercise measures several different skills. A few of the skills that are measured are; leadership, decisiveness, judgment, dealing with people, scheduling, planning, etc. Patti states (2003) that there are definite dimensions that are used by many police agencies: energy, forcefulness, flexibility, stress tolerance, risk taking, originality, and problem solving. Patti (2003) also contends that each dimension will have both a title, which would be oral communications, and a definition, which is a way to clearly express your thoughts through oral means, properly using technical factors such as grammar, vocabulary, eye contact, and voice inflection.

There are many different exercises that can be given in the law enforcement assessment center. The exercises that have been used for the Marshall Police Department are employee counseling, citizen complaints, an in-basket, reporter interview, department proposal, and a visual biography. These are only a few examples that agencies may implement into their centers. Agencies are only restricted in the exercises they use by the types of activities that will actually be used in the job.

The in-basket exercise consists of a series of memos that have been sent to you and you only have two hours to address all tasks. In many cases, the scenario that you are presented is you have just been promoted to a certain position. You may be sent immediately to a school, or have to go out of town for some reason. The Chief has asked you to take care of the memos before you leave town. You must then decide how to handle each memo and be prepared to answer why you made the decisions. Patti (2003) believes that police applicants, should be able to demonstrate general intelligence and planning ability, and that police promotional candidates should demonstrate a strong leadership ability, exhibiting methods of planning and knowledge of the department mission.

The role-playing exercise consists of the candidate having to take care of some type of problem. The problem may deal with an employee, a citizen or member of the community. The candidate should be able to take care of the problem to satisfaction. This exercise, according to Patti (2003), should evaluate such skills as communication, problem solving, and interpersonal skills.

Patti (2003) believes that a written test only requires the entry-level or promotional candidate to study material and then regurgitate the information at a later date. The subject of this report can be any of a number of different situations concerning a law enforcement agency. Two that have been used at the Marshall Police Department were the feasibility of opening a substation and reorganization of the hierarchy of the police department. Each applicant also had to give a verbal presentation on his or her findings before the assessment center panel.

METHODOLOGY

Is there a “perfect” system Law Enforcement agencies can us implement to promote their employees? Obviously the answer to this question is no. If the answer to this question is no, then Law Enforcement is forced to ask other questions. What can we do to assure that we give all our officers a fair chance at being promoted? How can we assure that the best candidate is promoted? What testing or evaluating systems are available to our agency?

There are many such questions that can be asked. Each agency has its own personality. What works for one department will not necessarily work for other departments. Agencies need to evaluate their situations and provide employees with the best method possible. Most importantly, the method chosen will need to be a fair

process. Agencies need to get away from the “good ol’ boy” system and for the most part the majority of the Law Enforcement agencies have changed this policy.

For the purposes of this study, questionnaires were used to collect data from current sources in Law Enforcement. The questionnaires were sent only to agencies in Texas and the response rate was eighty-four (84) percent. One hundred (100) questionnaires were sent out and eighty-four (84) returned. Questionnaires were returned from all areas of the state, from El Paso to Marshall, and from Katy to Canyon. The agencies responding were as small as a three (3) man Independent School District department to the Harris County Sheriffs Department.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to see what promotional tools agencies were currently using. If they were not currently using an assessment center, would that be an alternative the department would be interested in implementing. The questionnaire also requested the individual responding to give his/her own thoughts and feelings about assessment centers.

FINDINGS

Many individuals in the law enforcement field have been frustrated by the way that their individual departments have handled promotions. Many of these departments use only a written test to decide which employees are promoted. When a position opens, a test is given and the high score will be the one that is raised to the next position. The problem with the test is that it does not always find the most qualified or best person for the job. Many people are test takers, but may not have any interpersonal skills needed for the supervisor level.

Some departments use interview processes for the purpose to determine who gets promoted. One problem with the interview process is that they are not always

objective. An interview has the possibility of becoming a personality contest instead of a process for promoting the most qualified person. Also, during an interview, there is the possibility of no two people scoring the task the same way.

Of the agencies that responded to the questionnaire, none currently used the “good ol’ boy” system of promotion. All agencies currently use some sort of evaluation method for promotions. These methods range from test only to a combination of test, interview, and essay question.

In response to the question, what would need to take place before your department can change the current way of the promotional process, the majority stated that their agency’s head would be the one to implement the change. If the agency head decided that a new process was needed, it would be his decision would be final. Two (2) of the responding agencies stated that it would be a command decision made between all administrators in the department. The only major difference came from departments that are civil service.

Of the responding agencies, 4.75% are civil service departments. These departments will need to hold a vote in order for these departments to implement an assessment center, or any other type of tests, into their testing process. Their agency heads will need to go before the civil service commission to request the vote takes place. They will then need at least 51% affirmative vote for a new testing process.

When asked if their department currently used an assessment center as an alternative testing procedure on ten (10) agencies stated they did. Of these departments, 90% stated they thought an assessment center was a very good tool to use in the promotional process. These departments also use at least a written test to go along with the assessment.

The majority of responding agencies do not use an assessment center. The departments that do not use an assessment center were asked if an assessment center would be an option that could be implemented in the future. No department ruled an assessment center out. Many of the agencies stated that cost was a factor in their department not using an assessment center.

One (1) department stated they have used an assessment center many times in the past. They have now opted to have their candidates write an essay on a subject of the departments' choice. The candidate takes a written examination and then the candidate then interviews with members of the administration.

Only one (1) department has used assessment centers in the past and will not use them again. The assessment center used by this department was administered by an outside agency, in the private sector, and the department decided its needs were not met by the department. Because the question was not asked, it is not known whether the department thought the entire process was bad or if the problem was the outside agency. The department did, however, state that price was a consideration.

One responding agency stated they have used assessment centers for the past five (5) years. This department is committed to using this alternative system. The department does not expect to change from an assessment center/written test procedure any time in the near future. The respondent stated that an assessment center was a fair and objective process.

DISCUSSION

All businesses, whether in the public or private sector, want to put the right employees in positions that will benefit both the employees and the business. The problem they find is how to make this happen. There are many ways to promote

employees, but no one process is going to always find the perfect employee for the job. While this is true, an assessment center that is administered properly can be an asset in the promotional process.

Agencies can put a series of exercises together and call this an assessment center. However if the assessors have not been trained properly and the measures are not objective, the process can not be called a true assessment center. The assessment center should also evaluate skills that are to be used on the job that is being tested.

Many of the applicants that will be testing will have the ability to take tests well. These individuals can read material, study the material, and remember the information long enough to take a test. This only tests one skill that will be needed in a person's job.

Other applicants have the ability to interview well. They can perform well and make themselves look good by answering questions. Many times the answers that are given will be what the interviewee thinks the interviewer will want to hear.

An assessment center evaluates many different skills an employee might use in the everyday task of the job. These skills include, but are not limited to, leadership, decisiveness, dealing with people, an employee's ability to schedule and their ability to plan activities. An assessor can evaluate the individuals on each of these skills and give them a rating. Then the scores given to each skill can be added together to become one total. Each assessor's score is then tabulated with the other assessor's scores and the employees can be ranked in the order of their scores.

While there is no one "perfect" way to decide who gets promoted, different evaluations can be used together to help find the proper employee for the job to be filled. Each of the different skills tests that have been mentioned have pro's and cons. A written test can be advantageous to certain individuals and the same can be said

about an interview. An assessment center, while it will eliminate the individuals that do not need to be placed on the eligibility list, it alone, may not show the best person for the job. Used in conjunction with each other, these evaluations can be an asset to a department.

Departments stand to promote better supervisors using a combination of tests and evaluations than using any one alone. Morale at the departments also stands a chance of improvement using a combination of these systems. When each employee feels he has a fair chance at making the promotion, the morale of the department will be high on this subject. If the evaluation system is valid and objective the best leaders and supervisors will come to the top of the lists.

Of the promotional systems that have been investigated; tests, interviews, and assessment centers, the only system that is both valid and objective is the assessment center. Again, while the assessment center alone might not give the best choice for the job, it does weed out the weak candidate, and can be an asset to any law enforcement agencies promotional system.

REFERENCES

- Cosner, Thurston, & Baumgart, Wayne, (2000, June). An Effective Assessment Center Program Essential Components. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, The.
- Coulton, G. F., & Feild, H. S. (1995). Using Assessment Centers in Selecting Entry-Level Police Officers: Extravagance or Justified Expense?. *Public Personnel Management*, 24(2), 223+. Retrieved August 7, 2004, from Questia database, <http://www.questia.com>.
- How to Prepare for a Law Enforcement Assessment Center. (1996). United States of America. Public Safety Publications.
- Narramore, Randy, (1996). The Law Enforcement Assessment Center: Basic Guide for Law Enforcement Officers. United States of America. Public Safety Publications.
- O'Leary, Lawrence R, (1994). The Police Assessment Center Preparation (For the Candidate). St. Louis. O'Leary, Brokaw & Assocs. Inc.
- Patti, Paul, (1997-2003). The Naked Truth About Assessment Centers in Police Promotional and Pre-Employment Testing. United States of America. Author.