

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

**Why Assessment Centers Should be an Integral
Part of a Balanced Police Promotion Process**

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
Lester L. Nace**

**Copperas Cove Police Department
Copperas Cove, Texas
July 2013**

ABSTRACT

The goal of any law enforcement agency's promotion process should be to identify the most capable candidate for advancement. Historically, law enforcement agencies have used various means of accomplishing this, ranging from written tests, tenure, and oral boards. The one common problem with these different processes is that they do not test essential skills and abilities that are critical to success in a specific role. Past performance or success in a previous assignment is not necessarily a clear indicator of future success in a different role.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the importance of integrating the use of the assessment center as part of a balanced police promotion process. This paper will review the history and origins of the assessment process. It will establish clear justification to support the use of the procedure as an effective tool to aid in the promotion process. It will also address common counter points used by critics of the process. The information used to support this conclusion was obtained through review of journals, articles, books, and research papers relating to the use of assessment centers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	3
Counter Position	7
Conclusion	9
References	12

INTRODUCTION

The goal of any law enforcement agency's promotion process should be to identify the most capable candidate for advancement. Historically, law enforcement agencies have used various means of accomplishing this, ranging from written tests, tenure, and oral boards. The one common problem with these different processes is that they do not test essential skills and abilities that are critical to success in a specific role. Past performance or success in a previous assignment is not necessarily a clear indicator of future success in a different role. A proven method for testing skills and abilities relevant to a specific role or position is the assessment center.

An assessment center is a process that is used in both private industry and governmental agencies to determine those candidates who have the potential for assuming higher levels of supervisory, managerial and administrative ability (Hale, 2004). The assessment center provides an opportunity for a candidate to demonstrate how well they can perform real duties and responsibilities using a simulated environment. As stated in Hale (2005), "The materials used in the assessment center can be directly linked to the job for which candidates are being evaluated" (p.18) Because assessment centers simulate actual police jobs, they afford candidates the opportunity to demonstrate how well they can perform tasks required for the actual position being tested for.

It is no secret that effective leadership is the key to the success of any police organization or business. This idea is clearly expressed in the words attributed to Socrates, "A group of donkeys lead by a lion can defeat a group of lions lead by a donkey." Any agency wishing to establish a balanced police promotion process should

include, or at least consider the use of an assessment center as an integral step in the overall process.

The use of the assessment center is not a new concept and its basic use is reported to have originated with the United States Military during the World War II era. During the early 1950s, the work-simulated concept was infused into basic assessment center activities associated with private industry. As noted in Coleman (2010), the most notable endeavor credited with ingraining the assessment center process into private industry was the AT&T Study of 1956. The study validated the results of the assessment center process and established work-simulated testing as the ultimate gauge for accurately predicting a person's performance in an actual work situation (Coleman, 2010). It was not long after this that the concept of the assessment center began to catch on with law enforcement. The Cincinnati Police Department began using situational testing, a component of assessment centers, as part of their selection criteria in 1961. More recent survey data indicated that situational tests are used by 60% of city and state police departments, while approximately 25% of these agencies used assessment centers (Hughes, 2006). A survey of law enforcement agencies conducted by Best (2004) indicated that 90% of the departments currently using the assessment center in their current promotion process felt that the process was a very good tool to use in the promotion process.

The promotion process for law enforcement is one of the most important administrative activities that an agency can perform. Because of the potential impact that a future supervisor might have on his subordinates, as well as the agency itself, it is imperative that an agency endeavor to mitigate the risk of promoting anyone less than

the most qualified person. For these reasons, as well as more that will be later discussed, assessment centers should be an integral part of a balanced promotion process.

POSITION

One of the key advantages of the assessment center process over traditional testing methods is that the assessment center tests skills and ability that relate to the position being tested for. According to Hughes (2006), "Assessment centers are considered the most valid and reliable methodology to rank order candidates using an objective technique that recognizes future potential" (p. 107). A written test may be able to test a candidate's knowledge of a specific top, but it does not indicate how that person may perform in a future setting.

As noted in McMillin (1999), traditional methods of hiring do not have the proven validity of the assessment center and lack case law support in the event they are contested. In this age of ever increasing civil litigation, agencies simply cannot afford to continue using outdated and often subjective promotion procedures. According to Coleman (2010), the greatest value of an assessment process to a police organization is the testing will validate the selecting of the top performers in simulated work environments. As stated in Coleman (2010), "Many experts in the field of police testing for hiring and promotions conclude that it is the ultimate process for measuring performance ability in a realistic setting" (p. 3). It is only common sense that if an agency has the ability to test skills and characteristics that are essential for success in a given position, that they do so before putting someone in that role. This is especially

true when promoting an officer into a supervisory position, as any law enforcement supervisor can attest that the roles are vastly different.

Assessment centers must follow certain basic principles and be administered under careful conditions in order to be considered valid and reliable. The basic assessment process should start with a basic analysis of the job position being tested for. As noted by Cosner and Baumgart (2000), the job analysis functions as the “lynchpin” of the assessment center program because it identifies essential traits and skills required of the position (p. 2). It allows those administering the program the opportunity to understand the required knowledge, abilities, and behaviors necessary to perform the job in order for them to measure these elements through the assessment process. Because of this, it is essential that assessors be thoroughly briefed with duties and responsibilities of the position.

Each procedure used in the assessment process must contain content that has a valid relationship with the job analysis. According to Cosner and Baumgart (2000), “Each procedure must have content and construct valid relationship with the results of the job analysis” (p. 3). Content validity means the activities being performed by the assessment candidates directly relate to the type of activities they will perform in the position for which they are being assessed. In contrast, construct validity refers to the basic skills and abilities that are needed to perform important aspects of the position.

A balanced promotion process must include procedures that foster an atmosphere of professionalism and fairness. According to Hale (2004), candidates who experience the process feel that the assessment center is much more fair and job-related than other types of examinations. As a result of this, candidates are less inclined to

challenge the results, even when they do poorly (Hale, 2004). A common complaint amongst officers is the manner in which their promotion process is conducted. This is often due to the lack of transparency and inherent potential for subjectivity for certain promotion methods such as Oral Interviews.

In agencies where a test is only used, officers have a tendency to refer to the person being promoted as “book smart,” meaning they are good at taking tests, but do not necessarily have other vital leadership skills and abilities. This can especially be true in situations where candidates are required to study certain materials and are subsequently tested on them. Although the written test is undeniably an important step in the promotion process, it should only serve as one element of a balanced process.

Some agencies may place too much emphasis on the use an interview or oral board process for determining who will get promoted. The main problem with this is that it often focuses on past successes and behaviors. Raters often receive little direction and training; because of this, the opportunity for personal bias remains high. This process is typically viewed by candidates as being the most subjective of all testing processes and often the most controversial. Agencies using this as the primary tool for promoting are often referred to as having the “Good ole boy system”, meaning that a candidate was selected because of who they know, as opposed to what they know. According to Orrick (2008), one of the primary reasons cited by officers for leaving an agency is their immediate supervisors. The relationship between an officer and their immediate supervisor can be one of the most influential factors in an officer’s decision to leave a department. Because of this, it is essential that only the best candidates be placed in this critical role.

Another key benefit for using the assessment center process is that it provides a training opportunity for the candidate. According to Hale (2004), "Assessment centers can create a learning environment for participants" (p. 3). Feedback is an important part of the process, as it provides the candidate with information on how they can improve their job skills. According to Cosner and Baumgart (2000), there should be an opportunity for candidates to discuss the results of the assessment process with the assessors in order to gain constructive feedback regarding their performance. This not only allows the candidates to better understand the reasoning for their scores, but it also allows them to gain a better understanding on what areas they can improve on. Even candidates who are not promoted receive the tangible benefit for participating in the process (Hughes, 2006). According to a law enforcement survey conducted by Rutherford (2010), "many of the responding agencies felt as though the assessment centers are the fairest manner in which to conduct the promotional process, with seventy-five percent indicating that assessment centers were the most objective" (p. 5).

Assessment centers are easily defended if properly administered as the process, if administered correctly, has proven to show validity. The assessment process must include a specific job analysis for position being tested for. As noted in Kurz (2006), "assessment centers have proven highly defensible as a selection strategy, because of their accurate simulation of the job and its duties" (p. 110).

As noted by Cosner and Baumgart (2000), each procedure in the development of an effective assessment center should have content and construct valid relationship with the results of the job analysis. Validation is defined as the demonstration of job relatedness of a selection process. Content validity relates to actual activities that the

candidate will perform. In contrast, construct validity relates to the underlying skills, knowledge, abilities, behavior, and traits needed to perform critical aspects of the job. The assessment center process is unique, unlike traditional testing methods, and it can meet all of these criteria. As stated in Hughes (2006), “pressure from the federal government and the increased threat of judicial intervention has prompted law enforcement agencies to seek out more effective selection methods” (para. 8).

COUNTER POSITION

Effectively identifying candidates who are the most capable of performing in administrative or supervisory roles is crucial to the success of any police organization. These leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out the vision and mission that the police chief has established. If the person(s) selected to fulfill this duty are not capable, the department will not flourish (Hughes, 2006).

The assessment center process is not a single answer for establishing or conducting a balanced promotion process. In fact, there are valid arguments for including multiple steps and factors when attempting to determine the most suitable candidate for promotion, such as: written examinations, tenure, and past performance appraisals. Detractors of the assessment center process often point to the time and cost associated with administering the process. In addition to this, there are various other arguments that are sometimes made against the use of assessment centers such as: assessment centers are subjective since they use people, the scenarios are not realistic, or the assessors do not have a chance to really get to know the candidate. A properly designed and administered assessment center, along with thorough education of those involved easily proves the assumptions to be false (Hale, 2004).

While it is true that the use of an assessment center in a promotion process is more costly and time consuming than traditional methods, the benefits far outweigh the cost. Promoting the best candidate reduces the potential liability associated with litigation resulting from putting the wrong person in a position of leadership. The cost associated with reduced productivity, moral, and employee turnover due to poor leadership is far more costly in the grand scheme of things than that associated with the use of the assessment center process. When taken in this context, the actual costs associated with the use of the assessment center pales in comparison to not using them. Hughes (2006) expressed it best when he stated, "The hidden costs of selecting the wrong people are potentially many times greater than the additional costs involved in implementing an assessment center program" (para. 30).

Assessment centers have been accused of being subjective. While it is true that any process that utilizes people in determining the overall outcome likely contains some degree of subjectivity, a properly trained assessment team can be highly objective. Assessment centers will never be as objective as some tests, such as written examinations, but those tests are used to test knowledge as opposed to future job performance. Trained assessors using carefully designed evaluation procedures will help to serve as a safeguard against subjectivity being an issue. Hale (2004) addressed this concern when he stated, "Trained assessors, using consensus rating techniques and working with carefully-designed evaluation procedures can be nearly as accurate in evaluating performance and measuring attributes as any paper and pencil test" (p.13). Hughes (2006) also noted that subjectivity in the assessment process

typically favors the candidate, as assessors are inclined to give candidates the benefit of the doubt in the majority of cases.

In regards to assessors not being able to really get to know the candidates, the assessors actually get to know the candidate better than they might choose to admit. As outlined in Hughes (2006), assessors are quickly able to identify who can make a decision under pressure, who can relate to people, who can manage their time well, who can inspire others to get things done, who can communicate effectively both orally and in writing, and who has the skills to plan and organize complex events. The assessors are able to make accurate and sometimes uncanny predictions of who can do the job and who cannot. Cosner and Baumgart (2000) also noted that when developing an effective assessment program, it is important to ensure that the assessors become acquainted with the department and position that is to be assessed. This step should include meeting with parties that will be involved in the process.

In summary, none of the arguments against the use of assessment centers outweigh the obvious benefit they provide to a law enforcement agency's promotion process. The cost and time involved, while being an important factor, do not outweigh the potential costs of litigation, decreased moral, and productivity. In essence, it may cost an agency much more time and money by not using the assessment center process in their current promotion process.

CONCLUSION

The assessment center is a time tested and validated method of evaluating a candidate for advancement in almost any occupational field. Law enforcement agencies that do not currently include the use of assessment centers in their promotion

process should consider the benefits of adding the procedure to their existing testing and selection process. As stated by Hughes (2006), "The assessment center provides another tool that agency administrators can use to differentiate between candidates by simulating actual duties and responsibilities of a particular job and evaluating the candidate's performance in those scenarios" (para. 32). Although the time and cost associated with the use of assessment centers is an important factor to consider, the potential repercussions of placing the wrong people into key positions far outweigh these factors.

Of all testing and selection processes used by police agencies, the assessment center is the only one that tests a candidate's actual ability to perform the functions of the position being tested for. Because of this, appropriately designed and managed assessment centers are more reliable than traditional testing methods in determining supervisory, managerial, and administrative potential (Hughes, 2006). A written examination can demonstrate whether or not a candidate knows the policies of the organization and perhaps the principles that relate to the position, but alone, it does not provide reliable means of evaluating potential success in an administrative or leadership position. The assessment center process as a whole is considered more fair by candidates in the process because it affords them the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to perform activities related to the actual position being sought. Because of this, officers are more inclined to feel that the right person is promoted. The training benefits offered by the assessment center process cannot be overlooked. There is perhaps no greater way of showing a candidate their strengths and weaknesses and providing them with ideas on how they can improve themselves as a potential leader. The last, but

perhaps most important factor to consider is the potential cost to an agency for not selecting the right person to promote. Civil liability is one the most important factors that agency administrators must consider and none of the counterpoints to using the assessment center process outweigh the benefits of using it. It is up to each individual agency to exam their own values and priorities and weigh the benefits with the costs before implementing the use of assessment centers in their promotion process. It is especially important to note that law enforcement as whole has a responsibility to those they serve to ensure that they are putting the right people into these indisputably important positions within agencies. History has shown too well the costs to reputations and the faith of those led when people do not have the best leadership possible.

REFERENCES

- Best, J. (2004, October). *The role of assessment centers in the promotional process*.
Huntsville, TX: The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of
Texas.
- Coleman, J. (2010). *Police assessment testing*. Springfield, IL: Thomas Publisher.
- Cosner, T., & Baumgart, W. (2000, June). An effective assessment center program
essential components. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 69(6), 1-5.
- Hale, C. (2004). *The assessment center handbook for police and fire personnel*.
Springfield, IL: Thomas Publisher.
- Hale, C. (2005, April). Pros and cons of assessment centers. *Law and Order*, 53(4),
18-21.
- Hughes, F. (2006, August). Does the benefit outweigh the cost? Using assessment
centers in selecting middle managers. *The Police Chief*, 73(8), 106-109.
- Kurz, D. (2006, October). A promotional process for the smaller police agency. *The
Police Chief*, 73(10), 106-111.
- McMillin, J. (1999, February). *The assessment center for promotion of police officers:
Can it be improved?* Huntsville, TX: The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement
Management Institute of Texas.
- Orrick, W. (2008). *Recruitment, retention and turnover of police personnel*. Springfield,
IL: Thomas Publisher.
- Rutherford, M. (2010, January). *The use of assessment centers in the law
enforcement promotional process*. Huntsville, TX: The Bill Blackwood Law
Enforcement Management Institute of Texas.