

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

**Assessment Centers for Command Staff Selection:
The Practical Choice For Choosing Dynamic Police Leaders for the
21st Century**

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

**By
Bill H. Hedgpeth, Jr.**

**Mesquite Police Department
Mesquite, Texas
September 2011**

ABSTRACT

Police commanders in the 21st century face the daunting task of leading law enforcement agencies in a world that is changing more dramatically than at any time in history. They must hire only the best applicants, fight crime, prepare for the possibility of domestic terrorism, and manage ever-increasing demands for service with dwindling resources, all the while maintaining transparency with the public and the news media. Selecting these leaders is no longer a matter of who has the most seniority or who can attain the highest score on a multiple-choice written examination. These selection methods are outdated and inappropriate in a global society. Police officers and the public are more educated than ever before, and consequently, they expect their police commanders to be sufficiently capable to succeed in this dynamic and changing environment.

In today's law enforcement community, there are three common ways used to promote command-level officers: interview, written examination, and assessment center. This discussion will focus on the assessment center and why it is the most logical and practical methodology for selecting police commanders in today's world. There are divergent opinions about the cost and perceived subjective nature of the assessment center. Research gleaned from a variety of sources, including books, magazine articles, and experts' published research, indicated that there is no perfect selection process; however, utilizing an assessment center for selecting command level police officers is the best overall methodology simply because it tests what candidates can do, not just what they can remember.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	4
Counter Position	6
Recommendation	8
References	11

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership is critical for the success of any organization, large or small. A global industry has developed focusing on leadership and its related topics. Many companies now hire “head-hunter” firms to find and recruit leaders from outside their organizations. However, law enforcement is much different and faces unique challenges when selecting its leaders. Because state licensing and civil service regulations are very specific about hiring and promotions, all ranks must be peace officers licensed by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officers Standards and Education (TCLEOSE) (Texas Administrative Code, 2001). Texas Civil Service guidelines require an officer serve at least two years in the previously held rank to be eligible for promotion. To promote to captain, a peace officer must have a minimum of four years of service with that agency (Texas Local Government Code Section 143.028(b)). These factors essentially guarantee that most promotions will occur from within the department.

Therefore, the best promotional method must be chosen to ensure that the most-qualified candidates are selected for command staff positions within their agencies. Three common methods include the multiple-choice written examination, the interview, and the assessment center (Trojanowicz, 1980). This discussion will focus on the advantages of the assessment center as the preferred testing method for promoting first-line supervisors to command staff positions. Command staff in this discussion refers to the ranks of lieutenant and captain.

The assessment center is a flexible concept open to interpretation in how it is designed, structured, conducted, and evaluated. In fact, there are many different

definitions for the term “assessment center.” The International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines (2000) defined the assessment center as “...a process employing multiple techniques and multiple assessors to produce judgments regarding the extent to which a participant displays selected competencies” (p. 10).

An assessment center is only as good as its preparation. When a department elects to use an assessment center for promotion, a job analysis is conducted for the position. The primary objective of a job analysis is to identify, define, and weigh those behavioral dimensions that are essential to the successful performance of the job (More & Unsinger, 1987). After a job analysis is completed, the specific exercises can be selected for use during the assessment. These exercises may include in-basket, oral résumé, or role-playing activities. The candidates then participate in the selected exercises under the scrutiny of trained assessors. The assessors rate the participant using an extensive list of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA's), which must be demonstrated by the candidate. The single biggest advantage to the assessment center over other forms of testing is that the participants have the chance to demonstrate not only what they know, but also how they will put that knowledge into practice via the simulations and other exercises.

Assessment centers were first used in modern times by the German Army in World War I and by both the Allies and Germany during World War II for selecting officers and special operatives (Swanson, Territo & Taylor, 2007). The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), used their screening process to evaluate and assess “the man as a whole” (More & Unsinger, 1987, p. 5-7). The purpose of these assessments was to evaluate the participants'

reactions and responses in a variety of situations. Corporate use of assessment centers began with AT&T in the 1950s. Their success led many other prominent corporations to follow with assessment center development programs of their own (More & Unsinger, 1987).

Even though assessment centers have been used as a selection tool for police promotions for over 30 years, many police agencies still rely on the multiple-choice written examination as the primary (or only) method for selecting and promoting first-line supervisors to command-level positions. Written examinations measure the ability to retain specific information and are considered an efficient and relatively inexpensive manner of testing a large number of candidates (Hughes, 2006). However, the written examination does not allow the department to evaluate how the candidate would apply these theories, solve problems, prioritize situations, or justify decisions. Assessment centers “are considered the most valid and reliable methodology to rank order candidates using an objective technique that recognizes future potential” (Hughes, 2006, p. 2).

Texas Civil Service regulations currently mandate that all promotional examinations be written only, with no oral component (Texas Local Government Code Section 143.032). However, civil service regulations also make provisions for using assessment centers possible. This is referred to as an “Alternate Promotional System” and requires a majority vote of the sworn officers in the department before any alternate promotional system can be implemented. Once the alternate system is approved by majority vote, it goes into effect for the next promotional examination. This alternate test is rank-specific; the officers must vote on each individual rank’s testing method

unless an all-inclusive request is made that addresses all ranks in one vote. Once approved, the system will remain in place for at least 180 days.

There are two ways to rescind the change after the 180 day period. One way is for the agency head to submit a written request to the local civil service commission requesting the abolishment of the alternate promotional system. The second manner is by a vote of at least 35% of the sworn officers in the department requesting that the alternate promotional system be reconsidered. Once that petition is submitted to the local civil service commission, the commission must terminate that promotional system within 60 days (Texas Local Government Code Section 143).

Police agencies have an obligation to select the most qualified people for command-level positions in their departments. They have a responsibility to the community to provide the highest-quality police service possible and to the agency and its employees by providing dynamic and ethical leadership. Assessment centers should be utilized for the command-staff selection process because they offer the most appropriate methodology to select the police leaders of the future.

POSITION

Law enforcement is facing unprecedented changes. Case law, societal values and expectations, demographics, technology, globalization, and the economy are all having a significant impact on how police services are provided. Police leaders of the future must be increasingly adept at addressing all these issues while still providing dynamic, ethical leadership in their agencies. Police commanders, typically titled lieutenant and captain, are the department administrators. They manage the budget, schedules, and discipline and are responsible for the daily operation of the department

at the bureau level. Their jobs place a high premium on the ability to think creatively and critically more than technically. Swanson, et al (2007) explained, “conceptual skills involve the ability to understand and also to interrelate various parcels of information that often seem unrelated or the meaning or importance of which is uncertain” (p. 276). They continued by asserting that conceptual thinking is required at all levels in the organization, but that the level of abstraction required to handle the information increases with each successive rank. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to select the most qualified candidates for promotion into leadership positions in the police agency.

Considerable preparation and research is required when a police department decides to utilize an assessment center process. There are essential requirements for a promotional process to be called an assessment process. They include a job/position analysis and appropriate behavioral classification. The assessment process must also use multiple and relevant assessment techniques and simulations (International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines, 2000). These procedures are designed to accurately research and plan for the position being evaluated and to ensure that all job competencies are measured properly.

Assessment centers should be considered an investment in a department's future as well as a promotional process because they provide opportunity for professional development. All participants receive extensive feedback about their performance, and properly administered feedback allows candidates who are not promoted to be aware of shortcomings, so they make themselves more competitive in the next assessment (Swanson et al., 2007, p. 429). In the meantime, these candidates

can take the lessons learned during the assessment and apply them in their current assignments.

COUNTER POSITION

Despite their apparent advantages, many officers oppose assessment centers for a variety of reasons. Opponents claim that assessment centers are costly and inherently subjective. They assert that candidates who present themselves well have an advantage over some of their competitors, and the rating process itself is subjective and, therefore, unfair. However, when these claims are examined dispassionately and with the goal of selecting the best candidate for promotion, these arguments are deficient.

The cost on a per-candidate or per-promotion scale is substantially higher than a multiple-choice written examination. Wyman and Associates charged the Mesquite, Texas police department \$10,360 for a three-day captain's assessment center in May, 2008 (Wyman & Associates, 2008). There were five participants in the process and two captains promoted from this assessment. The cost to promote each captain was \$5,180. That same year, the Mesquite Police Department utilized a multiple-choice written examination for promotion to lieutenant. Justex Systems, Inc. charged the city \$3,500 for the examination (Justex Systems, Inc., 2008). Eleven people tested and four were promoted to lieutenant. The cost of each promotion in this instance was \$875.

While the cost of an assessment center is higher than a written examination, the many benefits of the assessment center process far outweigh the time and cost involved. The candidates selected for promotion have demonstrated their ability to perform successfully in the specified areas of competency tested in the assessment.

So, while the cost may be higher, the value for money spent is evident. If these same candidates were promoted from the standard 100-question, multiple-choice examination, the only thing that was measured was the candidates' ability to retain and recall specific information when required.

Every participant in an assessment center also receives valuable feedback about strengths and weaknesses in his/her performance. This is a critical training tool; if the person wishes to be successful at a later date, this feedback provides a catalyst and roadmap for improvement. It is also very valuable information for the successful candidate in improving the weaknesses demonstrated in the assessment process. This information can be used to develop programs to assist participants and make them more promotable in the future (Swanson et al, 2007).

Unfortunately, some officers simply do not trust the entire concept of the assessment center process. They claim that assessment centers are too subjective. They complain that the process is flawed because answers are not selected from a list of possible solutions as in a multiple-choice examination. One reason written examinations are accepted by officers and administrators alike is that they are objective, and they can be efficiently administered to a large number of candidates (Cederblom, 1990). Written examinations do provide a mechanism to evaluate whether a candidate has a working knowledge of the organizations' rules and regulations as well as an understanding of the conceptual principles of policing (Hughes, 2006).

Additionally, opponents also claim that candidates with better inter-personal and communication skills score higher on assessment centers, and this creates an inherent bias in favor of the more "polished" candidate (Booth, n.d.). Examination of these

concerns revealed that they are largely perceptual. Opponents of assessment centers perceive that they are unfair, biased, and not a valid form of testing and evaluation. The research and results prove them wrong.

Assessment centers objectively evaluate the subjective responses of the participants involved in the various components of the process. Unlike the written examination, assessment centers "...test what a person can do, not what they know. It is not enough to memorize abstract principles or philosophies. What is important is the ability to apply formal education in a real-world simulation" (Hale, 2005, p. 18). Additionally, the concern about a more poised, polished candidate having an advantage reveals a lack of understanding by the opponents. Many of them are used to the 100-question, multiple-choice examination. It is a single-dimension test, whereas the assessment center is "a job-related, multi-dimensional, multi-exercise process in which each candidate is evaluated separately" (McLaurin, 2005, p. 2).

RECOMMENDATION

The research and results are conclusive: assessment centers provide the best overall method of testing for promotion, particularly for command staff positions. The KSA's required for success in these positions are most accurately measured using a testing method other than the traditional multiple-choice exam. The assessment process allows candidates to demonstrate their reasoning and problem-solving skills and their ability to explain and justify the decisions they make during the exercises. This is a very accurate representation of what command level officers actually do on a daily basis: evaluate situations, choose a course of action, and then explain or justify those decisions.

The assessment center process is an effective career-development tool as well. Candidates who are not promoted have had the opportunity to participate in an exciting test of their skills. It is an experience that allows officers to receive valuable feedback from raters who do not know them, so the information is untainted by personal relationships. Candidates can use the feedback to request training to address areas identified as needing improvement.

The associated costs of an assessment center seems relatively high when viewed on a per-promotion basis. However, when other factors are considered, the assessment center is actually a very cost-effective process. The Mesquite Police Department, for example, has been utilizing assessment centers for captain's promotions for over a decade. There have been no challenges, grievances, or lawsuits stemming from any of these assessment centers. Challenges of questions on multiple-choice exams, however, have been a regular occurrence. These challenges require that the Civil Service panel hold a hearing and then rule on the challenges. This increases the cost of the process as well as delaying the promotions of deserving officers.

It is interesting that the issue of subjectivity is raised so often by people complaining about assessment centers. A critical component of leadership is the ability to make subjective decisions and influence the actions of others. This is not only an appropriate skill to measure, it is essential that anyone aspiring to the rank of lieutenant or captain possess these skills in abundance. The City of Mesquite lists these five competencies in the job descriptions for both lieutenant and captain: leadership and results orientation; coaching, mentoring, and developing employees; communication

and maintaining an open mind; vision and innovation; and empathy (City of Mesquite Human Relations).

Good commanders make good decisions. This is especially critical when dealing with budgeting and discipline issues. It only takes one major purchase that is handled improperly by a marginal commander or one bad disciplinary decision that results in a lawsuit to demonstrate the value of selecting leaders that make proper decisions. This leads the discussion back to the beginning: how to select the best leaders for police agencies. Promoting the best-qualified candidate after an intensive, thorough, and validated assessment center makes a clear statement to the participants, the department, and the community: the agency is committed to excellence. The assessment center process provides a means for meeting the continuing challenge of change (More & Unsinger, 1987). Police departments should seriously consider adopting the assessment center process to select the best people for promotion to the command level positions in their agencies.

REFERENCES

- Booth, W. (n.d.). *Top ten complaints about assessment centers and how to overcome them*. Retrieved May 18, 2011, from <http://boothresearchgroup.com/pages/articles.htm>
- Cederblom, D. (1990, February). Written promotional exams: How good are they? *Police Chief*, 57(2), 27-28, 30-31.
- City of Mesquite Human Resources. (2007, April). Job description-Captain. *PC002122*. Mesquite, Texas.
- 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), 2. Retrieved from http://policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article_id=973&issue_id=82006
- International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines. (2000, May 4). *Guidelines and ethical considerations for assessment center operation*. Retrieved from <http://www.assessmentcenters.org/pdf/00guidelines.pdf>
- Justex Systems, Inc. (2008, January 14). Agreement for rental of examination materials and ancilliary services. 5. City of Mesquite, Texas.
- McLaurin, M. (2005, March 1). *How to run an assessment center*. Retrieved November 7, 2009, from <http://www.policemag.com/Channel/Patrol/Articles/2005/03/How-to-Run-an-Assessment-Center.aspx>

More, H. W., & Unsinger, P. C. (1987). *The police assessment center*. Springfield, IL:

Charles C. Thomas.

Swanson, C. R., Territo, L., & Taylor, R. W. (2007). *Police administration; Structures, processes and behavior* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall

Texas Administrative Code. Title 37, Part 7, Chapter 217 (2001).

Texas Local Government Code, Sections 143.001-143.089 (2006).

Trojanowicz, R. C. (1980). *The environment of the first-line supervisor*. Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Wyman and Associates, Inc. (2008, April 4). Invoices for professional services. City of Mesquite, Texas.