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ABSTRACT

Project EXCEL (Excellence in Community Elected and Appointed Leadership) was created in 1990 to provide opportunities for assessing job training and personal development needs of public officials in small and midsized communities, as well as to develop a continuing education program to assist public leaders in professional growth and problem solving. One of the first strategies developed by the project was the creation of an assessment center where current and aspiring county commissioners could identify their current managerial capabilities and training needs. Project EXCEL used a five-step process for development of the assessment center: job analysis, selection of dimensions and activities, training of assessors, conducting pilot simulations, and conducting evaluation. The DACUM (Developing a Curriculum) process was used to determine the competencies or tasks needed for the position of county commissioner. The results of the DACUM were used in interviews to identify 15 dimensions or areas to be evaluated: oral communications, planning and organizing, leadership, decision making and judgment, initiative, objectivity, development of co-workers, perception, sensitivity, management control, collaborativeness, written communications, behavior flexibility, organizational sensitivity, and assertiveness. The following eight activities were then developed for the Project EXCEL Assessment Center for County Commissioners: background interview, group discussion assigned roles, leaderless group discussion, in-basket exercise, interview simulation, fact-finding, case study, and press conference. Trained assessors observe participants' performance of these activities and then provide feedback and discuss opportunities for professional development. Of the first 36 county commissioners who completed the assessment center experience, 42 percent said they learned a great deal about management abilities and 58 percent said they learned a moderate amount. In addition to the formal assessment centers conducted, Project EXCEL plans to develop a mock assessment center activity for demonstrations and as an educational program for community leadership groups. (Contains 10 references.) (KC)

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ASSESSMENT CENTER METHODOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Each year in Ohio, approximately 3,000 men and women aspire to positions of elected public responsibility, often with limited experience or training on issues and expectations for the job. In Ohio, 12,126 men and women hold elected positions in managing Ohio's township, county and municipal governments with 20% of these elected officials being replaced biennially (Collamore, 1988). Several thousand additional leaders serve on appointed or volunteer boards, commissions and councils. These individuals make decisions that influence the lives of all citizens in their communities. With little access to professional advice and training, the challenge of leadership is difficult (Hodson,1992). Adequate information for decision making is often unavailable, and the skills these officials bring to office often are insufficient for the task (Community Information and Education Service, 1986).

Both leadership and managerial skills are critical qualities for elected officials to possess. Several agencies provide training for individuals once they hold office, but little evidence exists that public leaders in small and mid-sized communities have access to personal assessment of these skills and/or training opportunities (Boothe, 1990).

In 1990, Project EXCEL, Excellence in Community Elected and Appointed Leadership, was created by faculty of the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service (OCES), The Ohio State University, with funding from the W.J. Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, Michigan. A primary objective of Project EXCEL is to provide opportunities for assessing job training and personal development needs of public officials in small and mid-sized communities. In addition, the project is developing a continuing education program to assist public leaders in professional growth and problem solving. One of the first strategies developed by the leaders of the project involved the development and implementation of an assessment center to assist current and aspiring county commissioners in identifying their current managerial capabilities and training needs.

Assessment Center Methodology

Assessment centers have been used since World War II as a valid and reliable method for appraisal of job performance in modern organizations. According to Thornton and Byham (1982):

> An assessment center is a comprehensive, standardized procedure in which multiple assessment techniques such as situational exercises and job simulations (i.e., business games, discussion groups, reports, and presentations) are used to evaluate individual employees for various purposes. A number of trained management evaluators, who are in direct supervisory capacity over participants, conduct the assessment and make recommendations regarding the management potential and developmental needs of the participants. The results of the

assessment are communicated to higher management and can be used for personnel decisions involving such things as promotion, transfer, and career planning. When the results are communicated to the participants, they form the basis for self insight development planning.

Multiple assessment procedures were first used in Germany prior to World War II to aid in the selection of military officers. Military leaders did not feel that pencil and paper tests adequately indicated one's potential success as an officer. The assessment center method was developed to enable observation of the behavior of candidates under different conditions. Both the British and U.S. military quickly adopted the procedure for the selection of spies. The assessment center used situational tests to determine if a candidate would break cover (Cascio, 1982).

AT&T instituted usage of assessment centers in the mid-1950s as a means to learn about the characteristics of young employees as they moved into middle and upper management positions (Cascio, 1982). Initially, 25 variables were studied and compared to candidate career performance. The reliability and validity of the method were so well documented that today more than 5000 businesses and industries use assessment centers (Moses,1987).

Since 1985, the OCES has had experience in the development and management of assessment centers since 1985. Under the direction of Dr. Keith Smith, an assessment center was developed to assist in the analysis of the managerial abilities and future training needs of Extension employees in supervisory positions. The assessment center became part of an ongoing effort to maintain high quality supervisory staff and to provide a professional development opportunity through simulation experiences as well as personal performance feedback. The assessment center enables observation of participants behavior concerning 16 job related dimensions (OCES, 1983).

Cummings and Schwab (1973) note that assessment centers have been used for two major purposes: organizational control and individual development. Participants in assessment centers have also noted that in addition to the personal feedback concerning performance on leadership and managerial behaviors, participation in the simulation exercises provides training and development.

Project EXCEL Assessment Center Development

Project EXCEL personnel used a five step process for development of the assessment center: job analysis, selection of dimensions and activities, training of assessors, conducting pilot simulations and conducting and evaluation (Beatty, 1977).

Also serving as a guide was the document Standards and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Centers Operations: Task Force on Assessment Center Standards which was endorsed by the VII International Congress of the Assessment Center Method, New Orleans, June, 1979.

Job Analysis

A process developed by the Center on Education and Training for Employment of The Ohio State University called DACUM (Developing a Curriculum) was used to determine the competencies or tasks needed for the position of county commissioner. This activity utilized a story-boarding activity with eight experienced Ohio county commissioners who were referred by the County Commissioners Association of Ohio. The Competency Profile outlined eight major duties, 101 tasks, 29 specific work behaviors, and 24 general areas of knowledge and skill needed by Ohio county commissioners. The results of the DACUM were published in the document "Competency Profile of the County Commissioner Position in Ohio."

Selection of Assessment Center Dimensions and Activities

The results of the DACUM were used in a second series of interviews with experts to identify 15 dimensions or areas to be evaluated. The fifteen dimensions included: oral communications, planning and organizing, leadership, decision-making/judgement, initiative, objectivity, development of co-workers, perception, sensitivity, management control, collaborativeness, written communications, behavior flexibility, organizational sensitivity, and assertiveness (Appendix A).

Burack (1972) identified the most common activities used in assessment centers as the following: in-basket, leaderless group discussion, management games, oral presentation, role play, and written report or analysis. Eight activities were then developed to provide participants the opportunity to demonstrate competency in the 15 dimensions. Activities were customized to the position of Ohio County Commissioner by soliciting specific case studies and real life situations from an advisory committee composed of individuals currently serving in the position.

The Project EXCEL Assessment Center includes 8 activities:

1) Background interview - An individual assessee interviews with an assessor to discuss previous training and experiences.

2) Group discussion assigned roles - An activity in which a group of assessees review credentials of a job candidate, present the information, and work together to rank the candidates for a particular position.

3) Leaderless group discussion - An experience in which a group of 6 assessees must solve a budgetary problem.

4) In-basket exercise - Individuals handle a series of items much like one would encounter in daily office experiences. The items are addressed through written communications. The assessee has the opportunity to discuss the process used to handle items and to address problems individually with an assessor.

5) Interview simulation - A group of 3 assessees prepare for and conduct a simulate meeting with a county department head who is experiencing problems on the job.

6) Fact-finding - Individual assessees are given a problem situation without all the facts. Through a questioning phase, the assessee has the opportunity to identify pertinent information then propose short and long term solutions to the problem.

7) Case study - Assessees outline (in writing) a proposed process to explore alternatives and to determine a solution concerning the need for a new county jail facility.

8) Press conference - Assessees are asked to prepare and present comments to the press concerning a current community issue.

Specific dimensions were identified for observation and rating in each activity (Appendix B). Trained assessors observe behaviors of individual assessees in each activity. Following the assessment center, the assessors prepare complete observation reports and meet to compare observations for each individual. A consensus report giving specific observations on each dimension is prepared for each assessee. An assessor then meets individually with the assessee to review the report and discuss opportunities for professional development.

Professional Development Opportunities for Assessees

Assessees are kept informed of other developmental opportunities available from Project EXCEL as well as other sources. The assessment center dimensions have been linked to a conceptual framework for leadership education. Training modules offered by Project EXCEL are also cross referenced with the conceptual framework and assessment center dimensions. During 1993, additional training modules and/or appropriate resources will be identified and developed to address voids in the existing curriculum.

Training of Assessors

The assessors are trained faculty and staff members of OCES. The original intent had been to select and train respected peers from the participant group. The advisory committee strongly recommended that the first few assessment centers be conducted using university-trained assessors. Several of the original assessors had prior training and experience as assessors for the OCES county chair assessment center. New assessors are trained through a combination of group meetings and individual shadowing of an experienced assessor. Each assessor trainee observes the activities, rates behaviors of identified assessees, prepares written reports, participates in a consensus meeting, and observes a feedback counseling session. The trainee compares ratings and reports with a trained assessor and discusses their observations to refine assessment skills. Following this training, a new assessor is placed with experienced assessors for the first assessing experience.

Pilot Testing and Implementation

The first assessment center was conducted in the summer of 1991. Following the initial implementation, minor revisions were made in the activities based upon evaluation feedback. Since that time, thirty-six county commissioners have participated in the Assessment Center experience with an additional six commissioners involved in observation and evaluation roles.

Evaluation and Results

The evaluation component of the Assessment Center has been multi-faceted. To date 36 county commissioners have completed the Assessment Center experience. Demographic and input data were gathered through the registration information.

When assessees were asked how much they learned about management abilities by participating in the Assessment Center, 42% said they learned a great deal compared to 58% who identified they learned a moderate amount.

The assessees were given a pre/posttest on the 15 Assessment Center dimensions, where they rated themselves from 1-5 (1=Poor, 2=Fair, 3=Average, 4=Very Good and 5=Excellent). To ascertain whether the Assessment Center made a difference, the pre/posttest scores were compared using a statistical procedure known as a t-test. The mean for each dimension in the posttest increased from the mean for each dimension of the pretest with the exception of Organizational Sensitivity. The results showed the difference in the means in the Assertiveness and Objectivity dimensions were significant at the alpha = .05 level. Table 1 displays the results.

Table 1- Pre/Post-Assessment on Assessment Center Dimensions

	Preassessment		Postassessment		T-Test	P-Value
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
1. Oral Communication	3.17	0.72	3.58	0.67	1.82	0.10
2. Written Communication	3.33	0.65	3.50	0.80	0.62	0.55
3. Leadership	3.58	0.51	3.67	0.49	0.56	0.59
4. Initiative	3.67	0.49	3.92	0.51	1.39	0.19
5. Planning/Organizing	3.58	0.67	3.83	0.58	1.15	0.28
6. Decision Making/Judgement	3.67	0.49	4.00	0.43	1.48	0.17
7. Development of Co-Workers	3.33	0.78	3.50	0.67	0.48	0.64
8. Behavioral Flexibility	3.50	0.80	3.75	0.62	1.15	0.28
9. Organizational Sensitivity	3.50	0.52	3.35	0.62	-1.15	0.28
10. Assertiveness	3.33	0.78	3.92	0.29	2.24	0.05*
11. Objectivity	3.58	0.51	4.17	0.39	3.02	0.01*
12. Perception	3.58	0.51	3.75	0.62	0.62	0.55
13. Sensitivity	3.58	0.90	3.91	0.67	1.48	0.17
14. Management Control	3.17	0.58	3.42	0.67	1.15	0.28
15. Collaborativeness	3.67	0.65	3.67	0.89	0.00	1.00
* Significant at <0.05						

After the Assessment Center experience, the participants completed a survey on their perception of how critical each of the dimensions were to their job as a County Commissioner. A scale of 1= Most Critical to 15= Least Critical. The rank order of most critical to least critical is shown in Table 2.

Table 2- County Commissioners' Rank Order of Assessment Center Dimensions as Most Critical to Least Critical to Their Jobs

DIMENSION
Decision Making/Judgement
Initiative
Development of Co-Workers
Planning/Organizing
Perception
Oral Communications
Written Communications
Organizational Sensitivity
Behavioral Flexibility
Sensitivity
Leadership
Assertiveness
Collaborativeness
Objectivity
Management Control

When participants were asked how they thought assessors would rate them on the 15 Assessment Center dimensions, 50% of the respondents felt assessors would rate them about the same as they (participants) rated themselves. Thirty-three percent said they would be rated higher in some dimensions and lower in others: only 1% felt they would be rated lower than they rated themselves.

Assessees rated the Personal Interview as the most enjoyable, the easiest and the best handled Assessment Center activity. The most applicable activities to the job of county commissioners were the Case Study, In-Basket Interview and the Interview Simulation. The most challenging activities were the Case Study and the Interview Simulation. The most disliked activity was the Case Study.

Focus group interviews were conducted following their participation in the Assessment Center. Observation of Assessment Center participants via video footage was used as benchmark information. The focus group interviews added depth to the qualitative dimension for the evaluation of the Assessment Center. Typical remarks from county commissioners were:

"opportunity to test realistic situations,"
"interesting and excellent program,"
"showed me my strengths and weaknesses,"
"worthwhile project,"
"I think to go through a hypothetical situation with three or five other people is a meaningful experience,"
"it should be a requirement that candidates go through something like this so they have an idea what they are getting into,"
"gave me confidence in some things that I didn't know if I had a good skill in or not," etc.

A sample of county commissioners who had gone through the Assessment Center, but did not participate in the focus group interviews were surveyed via telephone interviews.

Some had constructive feedback on improving the Assessment Center experience such as: "make experiences more realistic" and "assessors should be people who have been a Commissioner." Positive comments focused on such remarks as: "EXCEL is providing you an experience not available anywhere else" and "I think that it is good that the university and OCES are getting more involved in county government."

Final Note on Assessment Center Use

In addition to the formal Assessment Centers conducted, a mock Assessment Center activity has also been designed to use for demonstration purposes and as an educational program for community leadership groups. Several community colleges are currently developing proposals to include this Assessment Center into their ongoing curriculum for leadership and public service. Observers of the Assessment Center have indicated the need for application of this methodology to other public leadership positions such as school board positions and Chamber of Commerce directors.

The Project Excel staff plan to further develop a professional development network to supplement the Assessment Center experience. However, it is clear that participation in the Assessment Center experience is a method of leadership education even without additional developmental strategies.

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APPENDIX A.

Job Related Dimensions
Ohio County Commissioner Assessment Center
Developed July, 1991

1. Oral communication - the extent to which one can give an oral presentation and communicate on a one-to-one basis by listening and responding.

Specific behaviors include: public speaking skills (ie. express oneself clearly, quality of speaking voice, eye contact, hand gestures, small signs of nervousness); uses active listening skills, negotiation skills, ability to conceptualize ideas, comments clearly stated and understandable, provides reasonable arguments to support views.

2. Written communication - the extent to which one can express effectively his/her ideas in writing.

Specific behaviors include: organization skills (ie. answers are well-organized, clearly written, readable), ability to conceptualize and convey ideas effectively, reasonable in length, misspelled words or poor grammar do not detract from quality of information presented.

3. Leadership - the ability to influence others to move toward the attainment of a specific goal as efficiently as possible using such techniques as delegation and persuasiveness.

Specific behaviors include: uses a team-oriented, positive approach, sets goals, defines and solves problems proactively, motivates a group or individual, handles in-depth/complex issues, demonstrates vision, understands parliamentary procedure, expresses self forcefully, and influences other group members' or an individual's final decision.

4. Initiative - the ability to begin actions without stimulation and support from others, the capacity to see courses of action and to discover new means of goal achievement.

Specific behaviors include: ability to conceptualize and communicate ideas, "timing skills" (ie. realizing appropriate timing for specific actions), uses a proactive approach.

5. Planning/organizing - the process of establishing a course of action for self and/or others to accomplish a specific goal.

Specific behaviors include: ability to conceptualize ideas, approaches problems systematically using time and organizational management skills, sets priorities, ability to handle in-depth, complex issues and provides follow-up necessary to assure solutions.

6. Decision making/judgment - the process of identifying problems, securing relevant information, developing alternative courses of action, and the readiness of making a decision from the information gathered.

Specific behaviors include: ability to handle in-depth/complex issues, problem solving skills (ie. recognize need for additional information, considers several alternatives, focuses on overall situation rather than on individual items), has good arguments to support ideas, questions problems instead of accepting at face value, sets priorities, develops solutions that are practical and realistic, demonstrates ethical behavior and long range vision.

7. Development of co-workers - the extent to which one develops and/or assists in developing the skills and competencies of coworkers through training and development activities, counseling, and delegating the duties related to current and future jobs.

Specific behaviors include: uses active listening skills, delegates responsibility to individuals in order to provide experience in new areas, assists coworkers in the development of a plan to improve performance, helps coworkers analyze their strengths and weaknesses, recognizes and helps manage employee stress and values a team approach.

8. Behavioral flexibility - the extent to which one's behavior is flexible, adaptable and effective when confronted with different situations, circumstances or personalities.

Specific behaviors include: ability to adapt to change and responds effectively to crisis, willing to work toward consensus and compromise view when necessary, adjust approach to individual(s) he/she is working with, demonstrating patience, compatibility, diplomacy, and encouragement, yet willing to challenge when appropriate.

9. Organizational sensitivity - the degree of knowledge or awareness one has of formal and informal organizational policies and procedures.

Specific behaviors include: recognizes, understands and ethically considers existing or pending policy or legislation (ie. Ohio Revised Code, federal, state and local codes, etc.) when making decisions and correctly utilizes this information in order to solve problems; understands and responds appropriately to fiscal matters.

10. Assertiveness - the degree to which one can effectively state his/her position positively and forcefully without being hostile or destructive.

Specific behaviors include: proactively backs own view/position, expresses self forcefully, participates actively, demonstrates a willingness to challenge a position without being argumentative or aggressive, displays self-confidence, perseverance and stamina, utilizes negotiation skills when appropriate.

11. Objectivity - the extent to which one can analyze, judge and make a fair decision about a person or situation regardless of one's own attitudes or feelings.

Specific behaviors include: considers and fairly applies appropriate legislation and codes, approaches situations with an open mind.

12. Perception - the ability to identify or recognize a problem or potential problem.

Specific behaviors include: demonstrates "timing skills" (ie. realizing appropriate timing for specific situations), demonstrates ability to comprehend the scope of the problem or situation.

13. Sensitivity - the ability to respond/react to a problem considering the feelings, emotions, and needs of others.

Specific behaviors include: recognizes stress, uses active listening skills, demonstrates patience and diplomacy.

14. Management control - the extent to which one maximizes and monitors the use of all resources (personnel, office, committee, etc.) to obtain effective outcomes.

Specific behaviors include: understands and utilizes codes, legislation, fiscal and organizational resources that are consistent with sound business practices; demonstrates knowledge of parliamentary procedure and its uses, and handles in-depth/complex issues effectively.

15. Collaborativeness - the degree to which one is willing to work cooperatively with others in making decisions.

Specific behaviors include: works effectively with group members, uses a team-oriented approach, demonstrates compatibility and works toward consensus when appropriate, supportive of others, willing to share with others and to consult on important items.

Dimensions are based on a competency profile of county commissioners in Ohio developed in February, 1991. The job related dimensions of the Assessment Center for County Extension Chairs, Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, were also utilized.

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ASSESSEE: ASSESSORS: DATE: **DIMENSIONS:**	Background Interview	Group Discussion Assigned Roles	Group Discussion Non-Assigned Roles	In-Basket	Interview Simulation	Fact Finding	Case Study	Press Conference
Oral Communications	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Planning & Organizing				X		X	X	X
Leadership	X	X	X	X	X			
Decision Making/Judgment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Initiative	X	X	X	X	X			X
Objectivity		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Development of Coworkers				X	X			
Perception	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sensitivity	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Management Control	X		X	X	X	X		
Collaborativeness		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Written Communications				X			X	
Behavioral Flexibility	X	X	X	X	X			X
Organizational Sensitivity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Assertiveness	X	X	X	X	X			X

APPENDIX B.

08/91 - County Commissioners
ASSESSMENT CENTER DIMENSION SUMMARY SHEET

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