

Use of development centre methodology to focus workforce learning strategies – case study: NSW Department of Community Services

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This paper examines the use of development centre methodology to measure the gap in performance for fieldwork staff in a social welfare organisation. The process follows the construction of a capability framework, a set of work-based simulations for participants and the use of a 360-degree instrument. These processes are combined to measure and compare capabilities of both high level performers and a random selection of staff at various levels within the organisation. The results are analysed in the context of a range of organisation development options.

Introduction

The NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) is a mid-sized government agency with more than 4,000 staff, principally involved in promoting the safety and well-being of children and young people and to build stronger families and communities. DoCS field staff number over 2,000 and are structured in a basic four-level hierarchy. In embarking on a professional development strategy for these staff, it was decided that an assessment needed to be made of both current and desired future workforce capabilities.

Ultimately DoCS elected to utilise the development centre approach to inform the strategy. During 2007, development centres were constructed for each of the four levels with sample groups balanced by urban and regional work locations; male and female; length of service and other distinguishing criteria. In assessing workforce capabilities, DoCS chose the development centre approach as it has several advantages over other methods including:

- participant performance can be objectively assessed (by independent observers),
- use of realistic simulations of on-the-job scenarios and measuring performance against a capability framework, and
- it is behaviourally-based, which makes taking developmental action much easier and more practical since there is clear guidance on what the person should **do** (not on **who** they need to be).

It is superior to alternative methodologies (for example, surveys) in that it is an illuminative research approach that provides data based on observations from simulations designed to challenge and stretch participants. Using a cross-section of staff at a given level will demonstrate the differences between high, medium and low level performers, with reference to a capability framework. It is difficult to gain this type of meaningful data using other methods.

What constitutes sufficient, good or bad employee performance can be highly subjective. The development centre process endeavours to reduce subjectivity through the use of multiple simulations, rater/observer moderation and validation through 360-degree feedback.

Revealing the gap between current performance and desired performance as articulated by a capability framework allows for specifically targeted interventions (for example, training, coaching, research, action learning, immersion experiences). It also provides guidance as to which themes and messages should be utilised through existing professional development vehicles. This work could be undertaken within the organisation, however, in this case we partnered with an external consultancy, Bendelta, to gain advice to enhance our internal view.

Establishment of context

The starting points for this process were:

- a robust capability model with behavioural anchors based on multi-modal methods
- a 360-degree questionnaire based on the above model
- a series of behavioural simulations (including participant briefing, scenario descriptions and observer rating manuals)
- a complete description of the development centres, including key components, logistical considerations and a complete guide to running the sessions
- A series of successfully run development centres, producing:
 - benchmarked results for all targeted organisational roles against all capability areas
 - a detailed report for each development centre participant, summarising their results from both the 360 assessment, and the simulations
 - one-on-one feedback sessions looking at the link between each person's results and their individual development plans

- a clear appraisal of each cohort's strengths, weaknesses and developmental needs (with the view to building internal benchmarks in the future)
- recommendations on appropriate developmental steps.

Creation of capability model

A capability model built from valid and reliable data is the critical element in this process. This model was constructed utilising available organisational data and a series of behaviour event interviews. This process gets below the surface of observable behaviour to identify the personal capabilities of people who are outstanding or consistently high performers in their role. A project team was trained to assist with the interview process. After Bendelta and DoCS staff interviewed half of the sample group each, a panel analysed the data to identify an array of capabilities that distinguished excellent performance.

To identify the sample group for behaviour event interviews, DoCS management was asked to nominate people who were known high level performers in their previous role (on which they would be interviewed). Nominations were based on two main criteria: people recently promoted from their previous role, and general reputation as a superior performer within that role. Where we identified a greater number of people met these two criteria than were needed for the interviews, a random selection of people was made from the list of staff.

A total of 29 interviews were conducted across all four levels of field work staff. To a large extent, this group reflected the demographical breakdown of DoCS as a whole (for example, gender distribution, different geographical regions). The interviews conducted were one to one and a half hours' duration with individuals who described key events in their experiences in their previous role. Each interview involved gathering data using a modified form of grounded theory. 'Grounded theory' was coined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to

describe the concept that theory is generated by an iterative process involving the continual sampling and analysis of data gathered from concrete settings (Pidgeon 1996). It is a process of inductive theory-building, based firmly on the observation of data.

In this case, participants were asked to relate stories concerning when they perceived they were effective and/or ineffective in the workplace. Participants were also asked to relate how they felt and what behaviours they exhibited at the time of the incident(s). As Butler (1991: 648) notes, this critical incident method was consistent with Buss' and Craik's (1983) 'act frequency analysis' approach to construct validity in that it asked people to nominate specific intentional behaviours related to the workplace. Interviewers recorded key dialogue, which was later transcribed into a typed document.

The next step concerned the coding of transcripts into emergent 'capability' themes using content analysis. A panel was formed to read independently the copies of transcripts and list ideas for codes which related to outlining capability categories. Although one of the panel members was familiar with the literature on capabilities in the child welfare sphere, they had no presumptions about what these groupings would be.

The panel met to discuss the codes and to reach a consensus concerning which codes should be applied to the data. A third stage involved codes being independently applied to one transcript for each role, and revisions made after another meeting between two panel members. These steps were repeated for the remaining transcripts. After coding, chunks of data were arranged independently into common code files and themes were categorised. Two members of the panel then met again to compare the results of the categorisations and draw conclusions.

(i) Job descriptions

To feed into the above data, we also looked at specific tasks or duties that made up each job role using a functional job analysis approach. The basic task data were already available from DoCS Human Resources Branch. The job descriptions looked at four roles: Caseworker (CW), Manager Casework (MCW), Manager Client Services (MCS) and Director Child and Family (DCF).

(ii) Best practice research

Existing data and research from relevant international sources were then reviewed to identify overlaps, omissions and intersects between the job analysis data and behavioural event interview results.

(iii) Existing DoCS caseworker competency model

The caseworker capability model was cross-referenced with the caseworker selection competency areas used for staff recruitment. There was a strong alignment between many of the focus areas. The existing assessment centre competencies for the Manager Casework level also informed the capability model for that level. The APS Executive Leadership Capability model was also used in the development of the capability indicators for the Director Child and Family position.

(iv) Practice standards

The DoCS practice standards include desired behaviours required to function effectively in the NSW child welfare environment. To complete the representation of capabilities needed for performance at DoCS within the four positions, information from the standards was analysed in accordance with the capability themes.

(v) Review and verification

The review and validation proceeded in several steps. The panel first reviewed the model as a whole. It then revised the individual

capability indicators to ensure that the language appropriately reflected the target audience. The model was then presented to the Project Sponsors who made further suggestions for changes to language in line with DoCS' practice lexicon.

(b) Notes on the capability model

The following criteria were used to select the final capabilities for the development centre and training needs survey. Each capability had to be:

- DoCS content-specific
- substantive
- moderately homogenous
- developable
- defensible (credible for developmental purposes)
- valid (most likely to predict long-term success in the job)
- able to make the difference between average and outstanding performance.

For these reasons, a development-based capability model may differ from that used for selection purposes. In recruitment, it is best to target capabilities that are the most difficult to change through training and supervision in combination with those that can be impacted. For example, in the child welfare field, one can teach people how to fill in the right form or recognise the indicators of abuse and neglect, but it is much more difficult to change someone's values about children and families (Child Welfare Institute 2005).

The development centres

The development centre involved participants completing tasks which simulate the activities they could be expected to carry out in the workplace. Twelve behavioural simulations and in-tray exercises were utilised. A total of 62 staff across all four job roles were randomly selected to participate in seven individual development centre days.

Critical to this process was a team of well-trained observers who took on many roles including: playing a character in a simulation, observing participant behaviour, making notes on participant answers, and participating in ratifying the ratings across the observer group. Observers were carefully selected for their vocational experience, knowledge and seniority. Multiple methods, scenarios and assessors were applied to evaluate each participant against a given capability.

A 360-degree questionnaire was also created for each of the four job roles. This instrument was delivered to participants on-line and results sent anonymously to the external consultancy Bendelta to ensure individual confidentiality. The 360 aimed to explore the degree a person exhibited certain behaviours and capabilities at work. Participants completed the questionnaire themselves and their manager or supervisor and up to five others (including peers and subordinates) were also asked to complete them.

Key findings

The development centres produced generally positive results across the four position levels. Strong scores were commonly obtained across the capability model, particularly for the 360-degree survey. There were certainly more strengths than potential gaps. In many cases, the lowest rated capability area was not extensively larger than the top rated capability area. Broken down to the behavioural level, however, there were some stand-out opportunities for each position.

Table 1 provides a brief description of these opportunities for each role. With current scores generally high across the capability model, there is more opportunity to look at some areas than others, namely the following.

Table 1: Potential program focus areas

<p>Caseworkers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal effectiveness (managing emotional costs of role, building empathy, dealing with difficult conversations/clients, heightening client engagement) • Advanced analysis and professional judgement (linked to assessment and intervention practice) • Organisational management (e.g. organising information systematically) • Building networks – this would aid holistic case management (taking into account the client's whole picture), strengthen interagency ties and provide an avenue for peer support
<p>Manager Casework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal effectiveness (e.g. conflict resolution, self and other awareness) • Organisational management • Managing others (performance management and talent management) • Resource planning
<p>Manager Client Services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal effectiveness for leaders (e.g. persuasive communication) • Change leadership • Managing others (performance management and talent management) • Leading results • Resource planning
<p>Director Child and Family:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal effectiveness for leaders (e.g. persuasive communication) • Change leadership • Managing others (performance management and talent management) • Visionary leadership • Strategic thinking

Recommendations

Before recommendations were made, some central considerations were observed. It was important to ensure development options were consistent with:

- the strengths and lower scoring areas detailed in the report
- the organisation's environment and future needs
- the additive capability model (and key role requirements)
- other people systems and processes within the organisation
- existing learning and development programs, where practical, and
- developmental best practice.

Ultimately, the following initiatives were recommended.

- A review of current learning and development programs, as well as the development of new programs according to the areas identified and developmental best practice.
- Identification and integration of systematic immersive techniques (e.g. secondments, simulations etc.) across the four levels.
- Repeat the development centre and 360-degree process at significant strategic time-points (e.g. at a two-year interval followed by a five-year interval) in order to measure organisation progress against the capability framework.
- Creation of a succession management program integrative of talent management, leadership development, career management and career progression.
- Creation of a tiered, multi-faceted leadership program for the roles with management functions (which could be linked to a succession management program), that reflects the changing responsibilities of each management level, along with the developmental areas for each position.
- Executive coaching for the highest of the four levels.
- Construction of a five-year strategy and implementation plan around the above recommendations (including a feasibility study or cost-benefit analysis).

Different approaches and capability development

The notion of developmental best practice can be discussed with reference to the effect of different approaches on the depth of learning. Varying learning methodologies must be considered

when creating or re-designing programs to develop different types of capabilities.

Explicit technical knowledge is only the tip of a 'job capability' hierarchy that largely consists of deeper and more complex behaviours and capabilities. While formal development strategies, such as large-group training, lectures or reading may be sufficient to build surface-level, technical know-how, they may not be adequate to build deeper learning, whereby skills become part of a person's natural repertoire.

Relational-type learning (such as reflection through supervision, journals etc.) can be extremely effective for behaviour modification and learning, although it is generally 'learning by doing' that can have the greatest bearing on long-term capability development. These activities and strategies can be thought of as 'immersion' techniques, which involve on-the-job or experiential strategies and programs.

Many of the lower scoring capabilities for each level in the DoCS development centre model would best be developed by more immersive tactics. These can be further integrated into current programs, and/or new programs can be developed to target more specific areas.

Example immersion techniques at DoCS

DoCS immersion strategies for staff include planned work-based activities, such as the following:

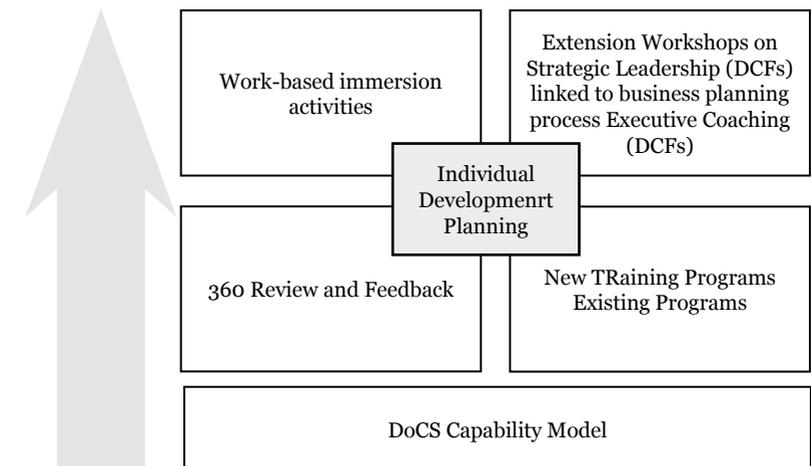
- on-the-job action learning
- work-based projects that connect to formal training programs (e.g. a post-training project relating to each topic)
- enhancement/change in existing role (e.g. new responsibilities)
- higher duties in a position at the next level
- secondment
- job rotations

- participation in project teams, working groups and/or governance groups
- sponsorship, co-sponsorship or participation in identified projects
- shadowing/learning from others
- learning in non-DoCS environments (e.g. in community bodies, pro bono activities etc.)
- running Strategic, Corporate or Divisional Planning meetings (senior leaders)
- secondment to another government agency
- active participation in professional organisations
- developing a change plan with a group of managers
- training with a strong emphasis on immersion techniques, such as simulations.

DoCS already had many of the above techniques operating within pockets of the organisation prior to this process, however, they were quite ad-hoc and unconnected to a deliberate learning strategy.

A recommended development framework

Immersion strategies are only one part of an effective developmental framework. The range of additional choices and the basis on which they have been made can be explained as in the figure below. The key issues are as follows:



Multiple-method learning

Within the model, workshop/program learning is reinforced by immersion techniques (such as post-course tasks), individual planning processes and awareness building (via something like a 360-degree assessment). People will get the most from learning activities that provide for varying learning styles and ongoing development activities. Accordingly, multiple methods are used systematically so that staff capability can grow over time, even after discrete learning events such as workshops. This is a powerful framework that leads to long-term gains.

Individualised development

Individual development planning should be the kernel of a staff member's development program, as each person has their different strengths, weaknesses and learning preferences (demonstrated by the range of findings). To an extent, this process was set in motion for participants in the current project by the 360 feedback process, and this could be continued within a self-directed learning framework. Such methods will assist DoCS staff to reach their full potential by identifying development needs and noting progress towards the achievement of agreed goals.

Importantly, planning can align individual objectives with DoCS' strategic direction and program needs. At the executive level, development planning will be integrated into the strategic and business planning process. This is an immersive technique that can enhance strategic thinking, which was found to be one of the lower rated areas at the highest of the four tested staff levels.

Immersion learning

Development activities should be based on learning methodologies with an experiential focus. Activities and examples for staff should be relevant to their experience and working environment to obtain maximum benefits for DoCS and each staff member.

Tailored to DoCS' context and capability model

The developed capability model (founded on data from high performers in each role, along with additional sources) can provide the frame of reference for each developmental element within DoCS. This guarantees that the strategies target the behavioural elements that serve to propel staff towards heightened performance.

Strategic leadership activities

Facilitated strategic and business planning sessions (or retreats) offer an excellent opportunity to incorporate some developmental activities as an extension to planning processes. Such a strategy serves to align senior leader development with the overall direction of an organisation.

Executive coaching that capitalises on individual strengths and helps to mitigate possible weaknesses can have an appreciable impact for Director-level staff.

Implications beyond this project

The implications for the current project extend beyond the learning and development area within DoCS. The work also identified the key competencies that are most predictive of success at the four field work levels of the organisation. DoCS will leverage this work further to see how the capability framework can be integrated into its systems, leadership and resources.

Career management and succession planning are key areas that can be aligned to the capability model and possible organisational objectives (e.g. staff retention, engagement, development).

Career management and succession management

DoCS Learning & Development team will liaise with the Human Resources Branch and other relevant stakeholders to examine the possible integration of results (and the capability model) into two people-related processes – career management and succession management.

Career management and career progression

Here, the capability model can be used for:

- **Development**

The behavioural anchors serve as a point of reference for people's strengths and gaps within their current role. The model could be aligned to planning systems and individual development initiatives.

- **Progression**

The tiered nature of the capability model acts as a guide for staff. Staff can clearly see the different behaviours and capabilities that are required at higher levels within the Department. For example, if staff members at level three wished to aim for a future level four position, they may wish to concentrate on building strategic thinking capability, which is an area that increases in importance at the higher level.

- **Job planning and fit**

Similarly, staff can use the capability model to determine whether their personal preferences and skills are likely to align with the capabilities required within their current role or possible future roles. In this way, the model can be used as a measure of job-fit. This dovetails also with leader succession management.

Leader succession management

Succession management is now the focus of many government organisations in Australia, which is in step with global trends across top private companies. Business logic dictates that organisations should look ahead into the future and review their requirements for leadership and professional talent and expertise. It is also a good discipline to anticipate and plan for the loss of key personnel and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of current leadership populations.

Government departments can be proactive in developing talented managers to prepare them for greater levels of responsibility.

In DoCS, as the capability model demonstrates, different skills are required at different position levels. What makes a good caseworker may not necessarily be what makes an exceptional manager of caseworkers, although many core skills do overlap across the two positions. A formalised succession management program could make the jump from 'professional' to 'manager' to 'leader' a less difficult transition for individuals. It can also lead to heightened organisational efficiencies, such as the cost and speed of appointments, the identification and risk management of potentially 'at risk' positions, and heightened success of appointees in management and leadership positions.

Career management and succession management are interlinked and could be part of the same program. They would also be significant change management programs. Input to performance management and recruitment systems could also be a next step.

The organisation benefits gained from this model

In recent years the NSW Department of Community Services has embarked on a systematic and wide-ranging process of reform. The professional development of field staff is integral to this reform process. A basis for benchmarking current skill levels, for measuring or defining best practice and for articulating how the gap between these concepts is narrowed is critical to the success of this initiative. The development centre as outlined provides such a process.

Insights from a development centre model into the generic development needs for all categories of field staff will enhance organisation confidence in the overall investment in learning and development, ensuring it is allocated in the areas which require attention.

Improved identification, then targeting of how professional development activities are linked to key developmental practice

areas and are subsequently delivered (rather than 'one size fits all') means there may be savings in terms of less time for staff out of the office attending training and utilising a range of alternative modes of learning.

The value of this project is in the valid and reliable identification of the strengths and weaknesses in key field staff roles, having greater certainty about appropriate interventions to take (in both selection and development) and how we benchmark in these areas.

The results of the development centre represent another perspective for the organisation to measure its perceived skills gap. In the past, the allocation of funds, and the response to organisation learning and development needs for field staff, have been largely reactive and based on delivering outcomes for major and minor projects, meeting workforce planning requirements and on discreet needs analyses.

The economic investment in this model should yield a significant economic benefit for DoCS (that is, several times its cost), and has the potential to impact greatly on the quality of service that DoCS provides to its clients and the community.

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