

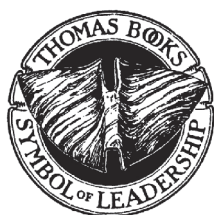
**THE ASSESSMENT CENTER HANDBOOK
FOR POLICE AND FIRE PERSONNEL**

Fourth Edition

**THE ASSESSMENT CENTER HANDBOOK
FOR POLICE AND FIRE PERSONNEL**

By

CHARLES D. HALE



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PREFACE

It should be obvious that the ability to evaluate, recruit, select, and train employees is an essential task of management. Well-trained people who know what is expected of them and who work hard at the tasks assigned to them are at the very heart of any productive organization. But finding the right people and assigning or promoting them to tasks for which they are well-suited is not a simple task and, if not done well, can have disastrous consequences for the organization and for the individual employee.

There are a variety of methods by which an organization can go about evaluating and selecting individuals to fill technical, supervisory, and management-level positions in their organizations. Some of these methods are simple and some are more complex. Some are inexpensive, and some are not. Some produce immediate and satisfactory results, while others do not. These methods include such things as simple job interviews to more formal structured oral interviews to background investigations, psychological evaluations, and personality testing.

All these methods have something to offer, and none of them guarantees absolute success. The assessment center method may be viewed as something of a hybrid combining features of other selection devices, including the traditional oral examination, psychological evaluation, and personality testing. Over the years, the assessment center method has proven to be one of the more reliable methods for selecting persons to fill important positions in an organization, and it has proven to be highly successful in doing this in municipal police and fire departments.

It is rare that any one of these selection devices is used alone. In more cases than not, two or more of these methods are used in combination with one another. For example, police and fire departments frequently combined assessment centers with a written, objective ex-

amination as part of the promotional process. In other cases, the assessment center is used in conjunction with peer evaluations and command interviews. The point is that any good selection methodology will almost always combine the best parts of two or more testing methods to yield the most satisfactory result.

While there is an abundance of empirical data on the advantages, disadvantages, strengths, and weaknesses of other testing methods, this book is devoted to a detailed and comprehensive discussion of the assessment center method—how it is used, why it is used, and what results may be expected from its use.

I am gratified that this book has helped people who are either interested in learning more about assessment centers or who hope to improve their performance as they face an assessment center. There are other sources of information about assessment centers and all of them have something important to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about this important selection method.

In preparing the fourth edition, I have attempted to expand upon the concepts and principles presented in the first three editions and have introduced a few new ideas. Several chapters have been extensively edited and reformatted. In addition, in Chapter IV, I have added sections of the Critical EMS Problem as well as the Public Education Exercise, both of which have special applicability to emergency medical and fire prevention personnel. I have also included a new Chapter IX entitled “Best Practices in Assessment Center Exercises” which provided several examples on how candidates may achieve superior performance in many kinds of assessment center exercises. I have included only a few of the best examples I have found, and I know that there are many others of which I am not aware.

I have addressed the use of modern technology in a new section in Chapter V and have attempted to reinforce the notion that assessment center developers and administrators need to be continually alert for opportunities to improve their practices and incorporate advancing technology into their work products. I am confident that we will see new developments in this arena in the years ahead and I hope to be able to update this book accordingly.

Regardless of how hard we work to design and administer successful assessment centers, our hard work can be easily unraveled by the thoughtless actions of a careless, lazy, or unprofessional assessor. I have been privileged to work with a great many thoughtful, dedicated, and hard-working men and women who have served as assessors in the several hundred assessment centers I have administered over the last thirty years. Selecting good assessors does not happen by accident nor do they work effectively without sound principles of supervisor and administration. I have provided some additional

insight into the selection, preparation, and supervision of assessors in Chapter VI.

The proper ways of evaluating the results of an assessment center, scoring candidates, and reporting the results of the process need not be a mystery, but it sometimes can be. The best practice, I believe, is to make the scoring process as transparent and uncomplicated as possible. Most candidates taking part in an assessment center are not mathematician masters of statistical manipulation and prefer to receive the results of their efforts in the most practical, simple, and easy-to-understand format. I have expanded my discussion of candidate scoring in Chapter VII as a means of addressing this issue.

We learn by our mistakes and I continually preach to participants that they will learn more about their own strengths and weaknesses by the mistakes they make in the assessment center. In the second edition of this book, I included a new chapter on “Some of the Greatest Blunders,” and I continue to think that it is one of the more useful chapters of the book for the first-time participant. I have added some new material for this section, once again drawing upon my own experience as an assessment center administrator. I have no doubt that the future will provide additional examples for this section as well.

I continue to believe that part of the success of an assessment center is the fact that candidates believe that they are a fair and realistic and practical way for them to demonstrate their ability to perform the tasks of a position for which they are being evacuated. When they stop believing this, the process is doomed to failure. This is one reason that I have tried, as an assessment center administrator, to do whatever can reasonably be done to ensure that candidates feel satisfied with the results of the process. This belief is discussed in Chapter XI where I have provided some additional thoughts to reinforce this view.

Assessment centers continue to be widely used as the preferred and accepted manner of evaluating the potential of members of police and fire departments as a part of their standardized promotional examination process. As I have suggested in the preface to the previous edition, the art and practice of designing job-related and reliable assessment centers is a work in progress. As we continue to ply our trade, we will continue to advance the theory and success of the process. I hope this fourth edition will play some part in that advancement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is said that some things get better with age. I hope this is true in the case of this, the fourth edition of a book that seems to have withstood the advance of time. In this edition, I wish to acknowledge and incorporate some of the advances that have been made in the assessment center process, which continues to be a viable and reliable tool for the evaluation of candidates for promotion and assignment. In so doing, I have benefitted from my colleagues who have worked with me on scores of assessment centers over the years, and from hundreds of candidates who have shared with me their observations, complaints, suggestions, and praise for what they have experienced.

I have been truly blessed to have been able to work with several talented, dedicated, and professional people in the police and fire services who have helped make our work a success. Space and time do not afford me the opportunity to list all of them, but I do hope that they know that they are in my thoughts and that their contributions are indeed appreciated.

Special thanks go to Mr. Sheldon Cohen, my long-time friend and colleague; Mr. Geoff Herald, retired fire chief in Danbury, Connecticut; Mr. Mark Field, retired police chief in Wheaton, Illinois; Mr. Robert LaDuer, former police chief in Warrenville, Illinois; Mr. George Graves, retired police chief in Downers Grove and Western Springs, Illinois, and Chief Chris Sewell of the Flossmoor Fire Department, Flossmoor, Illinois.

I would also like to acknowledge with the greatest respect and fond memory several of my colleagues who have passed on to their eternal reward but who remain among my most treasured friends: Gary Konzak, Bob Sauer, Pete Sanders, Ed Archer, Bill Sudbury, Bennie Crane, Barney Garmire, Ernie Russell, and Bob Baird. These gentlemen, professionals all, have served their respective profession well and nobly and I am honored to have known them as colleagues and friends.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the contributions of my son, Steve Hale, who has helped the business grow, and who will carry on what I started many years ago. I also want to thank my wife, Marlene, who has managed to put

up with me and my eternal absences for more than 20 years, and who has generously allowed me the time needed to make this book a reality.

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Chapter I

WHAT IS AN ASSESSMENT CENTER?

Many years ago, when you mentioned an assessment center, people would sometimes look at you with a quizzical look on their face, while others might pretend to know what you were talking about but didn't really understand what you meant and were reluctant to admit their ignorance. Even after explaining the basic concept to the uninformed, there remained a lot of puzzled expressions and expressions of doubt and even skepticism.



But that was a different time, and things have changed dramatically in the last 25 years or so. Today, when you mention an assessment center to most people familiar with municipal police and fire testing practices, they understand what you mean, and there is a better than even chance that they've had some experience in the process, either as a candidate or as an assessor. It's safe to say that the assessment center today is well-established and recognized as a valid and reliable process of evaluating candidates for promotion or original appointment. Nevertheless, some definition may be in order.

An assessment center is not a place, but rather a process or method that is used in both private industry and in governmental agencies for determin-

ing those persons who have the ability or potential to assume higher levels of supervisory, managerial, and administrative responsibility.

Assessment centers are traditionally viewed as a part of a selection process, whereby candidates are evaluated on their ability to perform a job for which they are applying, but an assessment center can also serve other purposes as well. For example, assessment centers can be used to assist individuals in learning more about their strengths and weaknesses so that they can better prepare themselves to achieve whatever career goals they may have set for themselves.

Carefully-designed assessment centers can also be used to evaluate deficiencies in department operations, management practices, and training programs. For example, the results of an assessment center may indicate the need for additional training in public speaking, cultural diversity awareness, or human relations. By being tested in a “real world” environment, candidates learn a great deal about their own strengths and weaknesses.

Participating in an assessment center helps to prepare a candidate for the challenges that he or she will face in the position for which he or she is being evaluated.

Like any testing process, an assessment center does provide an opportunity for a candidate to learn about his or her own strengths and weaknesses, to learn, and to know those areas in which he or she is deficient and that need to be improved if further advancement is to be achieved. Thus, there is a value to the candidate beyond that of gaining immediate promotion or advancement.

Assessment centers create a learning environment for participants. By taking part in an assessment center, participants can better understand the direction their organization is going and prepare for the “journey.”¹

An assessment center can also be used to pinpoint problems with organizational performance and policy and procedure development. For example, the police or fire tactical problem exercise (described in Chapter IV) may yield tremendously valuable information about a police or fire department’s tactical procedures and how well (or poorly) members of the organization understand them. Similarly, a well-designed role-playing exercise may reveal deficiencies in how members of the department deal with internal employee issues, external relationships, or customer service issues.

While these other uses are important, the assessment center is used primarily as a tool for evaluating candidates for promotion or appointment and it is in this context that the material contained in this book is presented.

1. Patrick Oliver, “The Assessment Center Method: Not Just for Promotions Anymore.” in *Subject to Debate: A Newsletter of the Police Executive Research Forum* (March/April 1998), p. 2.

An assessment center consists of an organized, standardized, and comprehensive evaluation of behavior based on multiple inputs. Multiple trained observers and techniques are used. Judgments about behavior are made, in major part, from specifically developed assessment simulations. These judgments are pooled in a meeting among the assessors or by a statistical integration process. In an integration discussion, comprehensive accounts of behavior, and often ratings of it, are pooled. The discussion results in evaluations of the performance of the assessed on the dimensions or other variables which the assessment center is designed to measure.

The assessment center process differs from more traditional examination methods in that it is a test of skill and ability rather than knowledge. In other words, it measures not how much someone knows about something but rather how well a person can function in an assigned role or task. Some people are known to be great at memorizing information from textbooks, procedural manuals, and statutes, but they fall short in such critical areas as leadership, human relations, and decision-making skills which are difficult to measure in a written examination.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of the assessment center is that it provides a higher degree of reliability and insight into supervisory or management potential than is possible with other examination methods.

In addition, experience has shown that candidates feel that the assessment center is much fairer and job-related than other types of examinations. As a result, they are less inclined to challenge the results of an assessment center, even when they do poorly. Assessment centers are sometimes confused with oral interviews, or “oral assessments” as they are sometimes called, but they are quite different, and the characteristics of an assessment center are quite distinct. A substantial body of literature in the psychological journals has developed over the years and is a useful source of information for anyone wishing to learn more about the nature, content, purpose, and value of assessment centers. For example, The International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines has issued comprehensive guidelines on the assessment center method, and these are periodically updated to provide current information on what is expected in the design and administration of an assessment center. These guidelines are illustrated in Appendix A.

Assessment centers must adhere to certain basic principles that have been developed over time and must be administered under carefully controlled conditions if they are to be considered valid and reliable (see Appendix A). These conditions are:²

2. International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines, “Guidelines and Ethical Considerations for Assessment Center Operations,” *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (September 2009), pp. 244–247.

- A job analysis of relevant behaviors must be conducted to determine the dimensions or competencies important to job success to identify what should be evaluated by the assessment center.
- Behaviors displayed by participants must be classified into meaningful and relevant categories such as behavioral dimensions, attributes, characteristics, aptitudes, qualities, skills, abilities, competencies, or knowledge.
- The techniques used in the assessment center must be designed to provide information for evaluating the dimensions previously determined by the job analysis.
- Multiple assessment techniques must be used.
- Assessment techniques must include a sufficient number of job-related simulations to allow opportunities to observe the candidate's behavior related to each dimension/competency being assessed.
- Multiple assessors must be used to observe and evaluate each assessee.
- Assessors must receive thorough training and demonstrate performance that meets the guideline in the "Assessor Training" section of this document before participating in an assessment center.
- Assessors must use a systematic procedure to record specific behavioral observations accurately at the time of observation.
- The integration of everyone's behaviors must be based on pooled information from assessors or through a statistical integration process.

While these guidelines are just that—not laws, rules, or regulations—they are important because they give us standards by which to practice our art and they lend authenticity and reliability to the final work product. Unfortunately, the term "assessment center" is often used in lieu of "oral interview" or "oral assessment," or some other process that lacks the structure and methodology of a true assessment center. Anyone who may be planning to conduct an assessment center should be familiar with these guidelines and follow them as closely as practicable.

All professions—doctors, lawyers, psychologists, teachers, and others—have standards by which they establish the governing rules of their profession. It is by these self-imposed standards that they are judged. In law enforcement, for example, the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA), has created a body of several hundred standards governing such diverse things as jail monitoring procedures, disciplinary procedures, and promotional procedures. While these standards are not laws, they are the guideline by which professional agencies measure themselves, and so it is important that those involved in the design and administration of assessment centers follow the standards that have been developed for this purpose.

The assessment center process has proven itself in more than fifty years of application in both government and in private enterprise. While assessment centers are usually viewed as tools for determining a candidate's suitability for promotion in rank or assignment to a higher position in the police or fire service, this method is also used by some agencies for evaluating candidates for entry-level positions.

No single method can or should be used to evaluate the skills and abilities of persons for new appointment, promotion, or career advancement and none of the many methods that are available is absolutely guaranteed to produce perfect results. Instead, any fire or police department personnel selection or promotion program should be multifaceted and designed to meet the unique needs of the employing agency. No one method will work well in all circumstances and no single method is infallible.

Although there are other methods that can (and should) be used in evaluating the supervision, management, and administrative skills of candidates for various positions, there are none that provide the same level of insight into how a person will perform if eventually appointed to the position for which he or she is being evaluated. "Research has consistently demonstrated that Assessment Centers successfully predict a variety of important outcomes: Job Performance, Management Potential, Training Performance, Career Development."³ This is due, in part, to the fact that, in the assessment center method, there is an attempt to place the candidate into situations and scenarios that are very similar to the situations and scenarios that the candidate will actually confront if appointed to the position.

An assessment center attempts to capture the essential characteristics of the position for which the person is being considered. While the candidate understands that the exercise is merely a simulation, he or she also understands that every attempt has been made to make the simulation reflect the actual conditions of the position for which he or she is being considered. For example, in an In-Basket Exercise, the organization of the police or fire department used in the exercise will normally reflect or be like the actual organization of the police or fire department in which the candidate works or where the position is located for which the person is applying. Similarly, in a Community Meeting Exercise, the candidate will normally be asked questions by the role players based upon actual conditions in the community or neighborhood that is being represented in that exercise.

Because candidates understand that the exercises which they will experience are intended to reflect reality, they are more likely to appreciate the fact

3. Michael D. Blair, "Best Practices in Assessment Centers: Reducing Group Differences to a Phrase for the Past," paper presented at the 27th annual IPMAAC Conference on Personnel Assessment, Baltimore, Maryland, June 2003.



that their reactions to these situations should also reflect reality. They must understand that they are expected to deal with each of the scenarios presented to them in the same manner they would if, in fact, the scenario was an actual situation. Candidates rarely need to be told this at all. Experience has shown that candidates become so involved in the emotion of the situation that they often forget that they are role playing and do, in fact, react exactly the way they would in a real-life situation.

This becomes quite important in the evaluation of candidates if it becomes clear to the assessors that a candidate may lose confidence under pressure or react belligerently when encountering opposition or hostility.

One of the most unique characteristics of assessment centers is how quickly and accurately assessors can “size up” a candidate. In a relatively brief period, assessors can learn as much about a candidate’s personality and behavior as someone who has worked with them for years. Even though they don’t come equipped with crystal balls and may not be super-sleuths, they usually make the right call when evaluating candidates.

I sometimes test this theory by asking assessors, after the candidates have been scored, to give the chief executive officer of the agency a brief thumbnail sketch of each of the candidates. They might respond, for example by saying that “candidate B has a lot of potential but lacks self-confidence.” They might describe another candidate as very intelligent but inflexible and officious. Still another candidate might be described as “being able to talk a good game but lacking in substance.” In nine cases out of ten, the chief executive officer of that agency will know exactly who the assessors are describing!

For me, this simply validates the process because it demonstrates that assessors can make accurate judgments of candidates in a relatively short