

Development Centres as a way of stimulating cultural change in teams and organisations

Since they were developed in the US in the 1930's and 1940's Assessment Centres of various kinds have been used world wide as a tool for assessment and selection. In general they have been regarded as a major organisational investment, providing high quality selection and appointment to key organisational roles, including the recruitment of people with the potential for the future.

Most Assessment Centres have been concerned to provide feedback to candidates (especially the successful ones). The best designed Centres went beyond that, to ensure that a key output from the process was a personal development plan, at least for successful candidates. In the 1970's a number of organisations made the decision to use Assessment Centre techniques and principles to construct 'Development Centres' with the intention of generating team and individual feedback, leading to focussed development planning.

There are many variations on the Assessment/Development Centre theme, some driven by technical considerations others more dogmatic. What I would like to do, through reference to a current CCDU project, is share some of the fundamentals that underlie the design and application of Assessment and Development Centre techniques in organisations.

CCDU are currently working in partnership with Decision Management Ltd, Dorset, to design and deliver Development Centres for the nationally and internationally renowned Transport Research Laboratory TRL Ltd, at their headquarters in Berkshire. TRL was privatised in 1996, and provides research-based technical advice and services to solve a range of complex problems within the transport arena. The Centres are designed to assess and provide personal feedback to the Laboratory's senior managers and scientists, to facilitate both individual and organisational development. The following are essential features of the Centre design:

Predicting performance on the job

All organisational roles, whether team based or not, require individuals to work and interact, professionally and socially with others. Conventional selection interview processes do not really recognise or take account of this. Panel interviews in particular tend to be highly structured, focussing upon knowledge and experience rather than those more deeply embedded aspects of competency that are so important for superior performance in the workplace.

The delivery of assessments with high predictive validity, in terms of on the job performance, requires a more sophisticated approach, designed to measure a range of observable competencies in a variety of interactive situations. This means firstly, that an effective Centre must include observed team and group activities and secondly, that the design should ensure that participants are required to work on team activities with different numbers and mixes of colleagues. For a heavily research/consultancy project based organisation such as TRL, these considerations were especially important. Particular attention was placed upon the construction of team activities and the design of the programme to generate as much interaction between participants as possible.

Opportunities for people to show what they can do

It is not at all unusual for assessment processes to concentrate upon a small number of threshold criteria and this has at times, resulted in identification of participants' weaknesses, with limited opportunity for them to demonstrate their strengths or range of competencies. In a changing professional and business world it is vitally important to understand an individual's full range of capability and potential. Early in the design process we agreed with our partners and TRL that philosophically, we should be aiming to provide opportunities through the Centre to enable participants to demonstrate their competencies.

Organisation specific criteria

The first stage in the project was to understand TRL's Mission, Goals, Strategy and Values (MGS&V) and the way in which these translate into policies and processes. Critical incident (also known as 'behavioural event') interviews were then conducted with individuals and small groups to identify the competencies required by the organisation to deliver its MGS&V. The competencies were then behaviourally defined in the language of TRL, these and formed the basis of the criteria used in both the Development Centre design and the assessment process. The rigour and quality of both the competency research and the behavioural definitions is key to the validity and reliability of assessments.

Organisation relevant activities and exercises

An effective Centre is designed to generate valid and reliable information about the performance of each participant against each of the behavioural competency criteria. Good practice indicates that each competency should be observed in at least two activities. Participants are however, unlikely to be effective in all contexts. This means that comprehensive (and fair) assessment will only be achieved through a mix of activities. Depending upon the time available for the Centre and the number of competencies to be measured, the Centre should be made up of as many different activities and contexts as possible (team-working, individual working, presentations to groups, one-to ones etc.).

In order to ensure that the information generated is as valid as possible in terms of predicting on the job performance, it is usual to design Centre exercises around authentic, organisational activities and materials. This can present difficulties where some individuals are perceived to have roles and experience directly related to a particular activity. Practically however, we are seeking to measure, whether, how, and the extent to which, participants demonstrate their competencies, rather than what they know. Despite some initial concerns, with TRL we constructed exercises around organisationally relevant activities and used the first Centre to 'pilot' these exercises. The conclusion was that because of the range of competencies being measured, the exercises provided opportunities for all participants to demonstrate their competencies regardless of their organisational role.

Psychometrics

Generally speaking psychometrics should be treated cautiously, as all too often they can be used to 'over-rule' behavioural evidence, they certainly should not be the major source of information within a Centre. Centre activities can however, be supported by psychometrics and depending upon the purpose of the Centre, these may be tests of specific abilities, measures of attitude or personality etc. In the case of TRL because of the need to understand participants' work preferences and potential it was decided to supplement the observations of assessors with the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ).

Valid and reliable behavioural assessment

As well as requiring robust behavioural criteria the validity and reliability of assessments are heavily dependent upon both the assessment design and the competencies and approach of the assessors. In a technical sense, an effective Centre design will require two assessors to rate each participant on each activity. For certain activities this can be difficult, for instance if one to one interviews are a parallel part of the design, or in team activities where assessors might have to observe and rate several participants in order to obtain overlapping ratings. Generally, it is essential that all the assessors see all the participants and that the design does not permit assessors to 'major' on particular individuals. The compromise design used at TRL achieves multiple ratings of each participant against each competency with overlapping observations on presentations and team activities.

The use of senior managers as assessors can be a valuable development opportunity for assessors, it can however place limitations upon the number of assessors available and the time they are able to commit. As a consequence, the number of assessors used and the number of

observations of each participant will usually be a compromise. TRL recognised the importance of using Directors and senior managers as assessors, both for the personal development of the 'Top-Team' and for the message it sent about the importance of the Centres.

Prior to assessing participants each assessor has undergone training focussed upon:

- Understanding Assessment Centre principles and the Centre design
- Understanding the principles of behavioural observation and use of rating scales
- Practice observation and rating with individual and team feedback and coaching

Integration and Challenge

In order to ensure and sustain the reliability, validity and credibility of Centre outputs and also build the competence of assessors, an essential part of the Centre is the process of challenge that continues beyond initial training. The TRL Development Centre includes therefore, a significant investment in the challenge, integration and moderation of assessments (about one hour per candidate). This is achieved through what we called the 'integration session'. Once the participants have departed, the four assessors and psychologist sit down together and facilitated by the centre manager, discuss the performance of each candidate in turn, as follows:

- One participant is selected who will provide the initial 'bench-mark' for each Centre. This will be an individual perceived by the assessors to have performed in a generally satisfactory (but not outstanding) way across the Centre activities. This individual is considered first.
- Each participant is taken in turn and each exercise is considered in turn. Each assessor, under challenge from their colleagues gives examples to support their ratings, in this way competency ratings are agreed for that participant against each competency
- Prior to the Centre participants have already completed competency self-assessment and OPQ assessment. The outputs from these assessments are fed into the integration discussions
- Finally, the centre manager ensures that each participant has an agreed competency profile and an agreed set of feedback comments with personal development recommendations, the 'Integration Report'

The integration session is attended, whenever possible, by a senior manager who has not been present at the Development Centre, who will take the role of 'outsider'. Their role will be to ensure that all agreed decisions are based solely upon evidence collected during the Centre

Use of Information

Where Assessment/Development Centres are to be used within an organisation and applied to existing employees rather than external applicants, the designers will inevitably be faced with suspicion from intended participants and challenges around how the assessment information will be used. At one extreme, the organisation may be seen to own the assessment information and therefore uses it for a range of purposes which might include; selection, succession planning, re-structuring, performance management, etc. At the other end of the continuum, the individual owns the assessment information and in such situations, whilst there is usually an expectation that participants use the information for personal development planning, there may be no obligation to share that information with others.

Of fundamental importance both for the perceived integrity of Assessment and Development Centres and for acceptance of their use, is agreement about how the information generated will be used, openness about those purposes and rigorous adherence to what has been agreed and shared.

At TRL the emphasis is upon feedback for all participants and personal development to improve the match between people and evolving roles in a changing organisation. The Centres are also intended to identify 'high potential' employees and facilitate succession planning for key roles. High potential employees are seen to be those individuals who are likely to be key to the business's future and who's personal development requires some element of management at a the business level.

At TRL, the emphasis is upon personal feedback to all participants, leading to individual Personal Development Plans. The Centre is intended to identify and develop the key competencies which will promote and facilitate the desired organisational culture and the achievement of the business goals.

Feedback and Personal Development

Another important area for Centre designers is the whole question of feedback (whether, when, how and by whom) and relating Centre outputs to current and future roles. These days it is usual to provide, or at least offer, feedback to all Assessment Centre participants (both internal and external) subsequent to the Centre. The purpose of Development Centres is to provide competency information upon which to base Personal development plans, therefore the feedback process is an integral part of the process.

At the development end of the continuum, participants are given feedback between activities so that they can effectively 'learn as they go'. Participants are in effect, given a range of opportunities to practice new behaviours and receive immediate feedback from assessors (and fellow participants) about the impact of those behaviours. This type of design can provide a safe (relatively) and exciting environment for participants to take risks, learn about themselves and to develop improved ways of interacting with colleagues. One major disadvantage of the approach is that the feedback process limits the number of participants and requires a significant amount of time within the Centre, this inevitably means that each Centre takes several days and costs are high. Additionally, whilst many participants find participation and immediate feedback positive and exciting, some, especially those who receive what they perceive to be critical feedback, may feel exposed and be bruised by the process. Such cases must be rapidly identified by the Centre Manager and any feedback within the Centre extremely sensitively and professionally handled. To circumvent some the issues identified above, we agreed with TRL a model that optimises the time requirement and costs. In this design twelve participants in two parallel groups, participate in an intensive day of assessed activities. Participants are given no feedback during the Centre, immediately after the event however, we provide feedback in a carefully managed one to one process facilitated by the Centre Manager and Centre Psychologist. The content of the feedback is determined by the assessors through the Integration Report referred to earlier in this paper together with the report on the personality questionnaire.

In most cases a week or two is allowed for personal reflection after the feedback and this is followed by a personal development planning meeting, generally involving the participant, an appropriate line manager and the Centre Manager.

Assessment and Development Centre benefits

We would see a series of potential benefits for organisations adopting a competency based approach to assessment and personal development reinforced by the use of rigorous and robust assessment and feedback processes. Well designed, well managed and appropriately applied, competency based Assessment and Development Centres:

- Create a language that helps people visualise the future requirements of the organisation and its customers, helping to drive individual, cultural and organisational development
- Provide a clear message about your organisation's values through transparent processes based upon rigour challenge, integration, agreement and objectivity
- Generate objective, reliable information about people, with high predictive validity in terms of on the job performance
- Provide cost effective, high impact learning opportunities and experience for both participants and assessors

Stimulate strong feedback and facilitate realistic, role focussed Personal Development Planning

