

# Assessment & Leadership Development

Mitch McCrimmon, Ph.D. Self Renewal Group © 2006

No one would argue that leadership development should focus on real development needs for the best payback. But what diagnostic tool should you use to identify those needs? You might consider performance data, psychometrics, 360 or assessment centre simulations. The first three are currently more in vogue than conventionally run assessment centres which are time consuming for executives who serve as assessors. Although using executives in this way fosters their ownership, they may not be very skilled at assessment. Hence the risk of costly investment and low return.

But assessment centre techniques used by highly skilled assessors can be a very powerful diagnostic tool for identifying leadership development needs.

Assessment centre simulations serve a dual purpose: (1) identification of development needs and (2) opportunity to learn. Simulations actively engage participants in identifying their own development needs because they can see for themselves how they are doing. Further, when each simulation is followed by a discussion, coaching and feedback, both purposes are equally served. Asking participants questions about the rationale behind their approach generates a fuller assessment and, on the development side, such discussion prompts self-reflection and developmental insight in participants.

Consider, for example, the need to develop delegation skills. Psychometric or 360 feedback might suggest that an executive could delegate more but the question of exactly what the executive is doing or not doing is left unclear. By contrast, a role play, in which an executive is required to delegate, makes actual leadership style visible, including choice of words, tone of voice and body language, hence generating a much more microscopic assessment. This level of specificity, not afforded by any other diagnostic tool, facilitates follow up coaching much better than the vague suggestion that more delegation might be in order. For example, there is a world of difference between *telling* team members how to do a task and *asking* them how they would approach it. Executives using these different delegation styles might delegate fully but one style is much more engaging, empowering and motivational than the other. No other diagnostic tool can readily make such a fine differentiation.

## Benefits for participants of using assessment centre simulations

- Fuller engagement through having to tackle realistic business challenges.
- Combined identification of development needs and an opportunity to learn.
- A more active role in generating their own development plan.
- A precise focus on actual, modifiable behaviour.
- Fosters greater self-reflection and self-awareness, hence ownership.

## A typical program

**Case Study**— This exercise presents participants with a range of challenging leadership dilemmas. A whole organization or division is described covering a broad range of strategic, commercial, operational and human resource issues. Participants are asked to develop their top 5 priorities to improve the functioning of the business. Rather than

assess their written output, we engage them in a two-way discussion of their priorities and probe the rationale for their recommendations. This exercise reveals a wide range of leadership styles and strengths. Strategic participants talk about looking externally and re-focusing the overall business. Those with an operational orientation major on fixing immediate problems. Results driven participants display a hard-hitting sense of urgency and set challenging timeframes, while those who value engagement call for dialogue with key stakeholders before taking concrete action. Team oriented participants call for better team work and cross-functional cooperation. They also recognize the need to fix the morale problems that are weighing the business down. Those with a strong commercial bias want to cut costs and seize new business opportunities. Those who are uncomfortable committing themselves without further thought and analysis appear indecisive or they simply postpone action until they have dug into issues more deeply. Some call for greater accountability in key managers while others take too much personal ownership and do not empower anyone.

**Role play with team member** – The case study, which participants have just completed, makes reference to an underperforming or problem team member, setting the stage for this role play. This is an essential exercise for exploring how executives handle performance issues, how they show leadership to individuals and motivate high achievement in them. The exercise is structured so that participants are faced with difficult choices, such as how to win the team member over to a key agenda while also addressing performance issues. Many participants pursue one side of this challenge but ignore the other and it is easy to do both badly. This exercise is an excellent assessment tool as well as a learning experience. As with the case study, the participant's approach is probed and some initial feedback is offered. The role player fills in a one-page feedback form which participants find enlightening and helpful. A participant's leadership style reveals itself clearly in this exercise. Some participants see themselves as supportive simply because they are not heavy-handed, but they still do most of the talking, telling the team member what to do differently. More skilled leaders know how to ask good questions as a means of drawing solutions and commitment to change out of the team member. They have a talent for keeping the team member focused on solutions without dictating to them. Other participants are effective in using enthusiastic tones and language to inspire the team member.

**Role play with internal colleague/external client** – As with the first role play, the case study sets this one up with a message from a colleague or client who is complaining about the team member of the first role play. Linking the exercises in this way makes them more realistic. When participants engage in the role plays they have often taken some action in the case study, or at least, formed some opinions about how to deal with the issues. The challenge in the second role play is to pacify the colleague/client while still defending the team member, also to repair a damaged relationship and build bridges with an important stakeholder. Effective performers will show keen interest in the other party's needs and issues rather than focusing too exclusively on their own agendas. This exercise can provoke weaker participants to go on the attack and defend their team member too strongly, or equally, to be overly deferential and give in to every demand made by the stakeholder. It is an excellent tool to assess influencing style, conflict resolution and relationship building skills. Again, interview probing, feedback and coaching follow the exercise immediately along with feedback from the role player.

Taken together, the two role plays explore how participants deal with authority – down and up. Some challenge upwards while identifying too closely with their teams. Others

are too deferential upwards and overly directive downwards. Professional role players are skilled at playing the roles so as to elicit the full range of positive and negative behaviours in participants.

### **Benefits for the organization of using assessment centre simulations**

- A much more precise assessment of leadership talent than can be afforded by any other tools.
- More specific, behavioural feedback to help in grooming leadership skills.
- More ownership on the part of executives of their own development plans.
- A deeper understanding of the organization's underlying leadership model and how well it is likely to engage and empower employees, thereby retaining them and maximizing their potential.
- The use of professional, external assessors frees up executives for other things.
- The process is internally saleable thanks to the realism of business oriented exercises, the participative dimension and the dual benefit of assessment and development.

To achieve maximum focus on the organization's future leadership needs, simulations can be designed to mirror the actual challenges the business faces, now and in the future. A more cost effective approach uses off-the-shelf simulations that are just as powerful for revealing leadership style, strengths and development needs.

### **Example**

In 2002 a large construction company provided development for their most senior 130 executives using the set of simulations described above. Unusually, the Chief Executive and his top team also participated. Six external consultants worked with executives individually during the simulations and provided follow up coaching. Since 2002, this organization has used the same process and consultants on an ongoing basis to help them select external executives. This process is now also being used with internal junior executives as they rise to more senior roles. When used for selection, less emphasis is placed on coaching following each exercise. The focus is on assessment probing to explore a candidate's rationale for a particular action.

Two additional features of this program are noteworthy. There was no group exercise and executives were not assessed by different consultants in different exercises. With conventional assessment centres, it is advisable to have different executive assessors observe participants in different exercises to counter their lack of assessment experience. But when skilled professional assessors are used, it makes sense to have each participant work with only one assessor as this helps build rapport and fosters more open two-way dialogue. This approach generates a deeper assessment and leads more naturally to developmental coaching. Also, the use of different assessors in each exercise is not as cost effective because of the extra time required to integrate the observations of multiple assessors. Finally, because such integration occurs after participants depart, feedback is necessarily delayed that could be given immediately when one assessor works with one executive throughout the program.