

ASSESSMENT CENTRE PRINCIPLES

Background

Current Facilitator Certification Processes have greatly assisted the field of facilitation in understanding commitment to standards, continuous development, and client service. The following principles summarize the pillars on which an effective and standard Assessment Centre technology stands, and could have application to the continuing improvement of the certification of facilitators.

The Principle of Separation

An Assessment Centre measures all three components of learning: the participant's Knowledge, Skills and Motivation:

1. **Knowledge:** Assessing Knowledge requires a separate testing mechanism that concentrates on the key concepts of the field being assessed. In the case of facilitation, Knowledge Assessment would require measuring the participant's knowledge of the field's value system, practices, and component parts. This in turn would require a clearly articulated Body of Knowledge for facilitation, on which assessors could base their evaluation of the facilitator.
2. **Skills:** Assessing Skills requires measurability of the skills, and measuring the participant's performance against the skill standard. This implies that the assessor's judgment is framed and informed by the measurable standard and in fact, is informed overall by a series of measurable decisions made at the individual skills level. To further reduce subjectivity, it is essential to ensure multi-party assessment of the participant's skills.
3. **Motivation:** Assessing Motivation or Attitude involves the testing of values in a live situation. While simulations and role-plays have some merit, a participant can quite easily manipulate them, or fail them through lack of realism. It is best to test the participant in action in front of a live group of participants, who are not role-playing, but working through a real issue.

Since the Assessment of Knowledge, Skills and Motivation entail different mechanisms of evaluation, it is wise to separate them, and do one assessment at a time. The challenge of the complete and separate testing of KSM consists of developing a seamless process that performs all three elements well.

The Principle of Objectivity

As mentioned above, collective and measurable judgment is preferable to subjective assessment. Collective and measurable judgment also implies that:

- Exterior influences (e.g. the reputation of the participant, internal politics and policies of the assessing organization, the personal biases of the assessors) are made visible and factored into the assessment process.
- Assessors are cognizant of modern adult learning concerns, such as the coercive nature of testing or the assessment effect on human beings, and reduce the subjectivity related to individual responses to the evaluation process. What works for one participant may not work for another, and a “one size fits all” assessment process is neither objective, nor desirable. Thus an approach where the number of participants to be put through in a day is pre-determined could easily give way to a more flexible and individual approach.

The Principle of Logistics

Many Assessment Centres have suffered from the rigid use of bricks and mortar, which has a tendency to drive hard schedules and processes. The 21st century has put us in front of an admirable array of technology by which component and remote assessment can be done.

For example, knowledge can be tested remotely through a Knowledge Assessment Centre set up for this purpose using Web technology. Assessors can hold live, on line Knowledge Examinations, and indeed, can do so for participants across the world, thus reducing the cost of knowledge assessment, and increasing international consistency. Skills can be partly tested through other simple technological means, e.g. the submission of session videos. Motivation and attitude can also be partially judged through the means of teleconferencing. The final review of a participant can then consist of a rolling up of the various elements previously tested, and a face-to-face set of activities aimed at ensuring due diligence.

The Principle of Graduation

Assessment Centres are very clear on what level of knowledge, skills and motivation they are evaluating, i.e. is it entry level, intermediate, or advanced? Most often, the KSM involved in each of the levels is fundamentally different, and the assessment techniques may also vary according to the level. Omnibus assessment is not a desirable approach, because subsequent iterations to produce more advanced levels trespass on what has been done previously when the single assessment was in currency. It is relatively easy to set up the different levels of assessment at the front end: it is much more difficult to establish them credibly once an assessment process has been launched.

The Principle of Preparation

As mentioned above, in order for an assessment process to work effectively, the standards by which the participant will be evaluated need to be explicit. However, there is another linkage that is essential: participants need to be able to find learning opportunities that will ensure that they will be able to relate directly to the standard being assessed. It is not appropriate for the standards of a field to be spread across a large, diverse, and oftentimes difficult to access array of learning courses, seminars, workshops and conferences. Each one of these learning opportunities gets to compete with the other in terms of what is important in the field. The participant undergoing assessment can only interpret in his/her own terms the explicit and implicit standards of the Assessment Centre. This results in moving to the lowest common denominator of standard, or using a generic, and not very measurable standard, and reduces the effectiveness and the credibility of the assessment. The only other alternative is a standard Body of Knowledge, such as that provided by the Project Management Institute, where the assessment standards are only knowledge, and it is only the PMI's BOK that is the basis for the evaluation, for better or for worse.

The Principle of Accomplishment

Without exception, everyone who has been through an Assessment Centre should feel that they have accomplished something meaningful. And without exception, every Assessment Centre experience should be evaluated and continuous improvements made on an ongoing basis. This means that each participant is required to evaluate their experience with as much rigour as their KSM was tested, and the results of this evaluation feeds the research and development of the Assessment Centre. It is also desirable for the results of the participants' evaluations, along with those of the assessors be part of a post Assessment Centre report, to ensure the transparency and honesty of the process.

The Principle of Phasing

As mentioned previously, there is merit in separating the assessment of KSM, perhaps using modern adult learning practices. The seven main blocks for an effective Assessment Centre consist of:

1. Preparation: Providing the means for the participant to understand the standards on which the assessment will be conducted, including perhaps referring the participant to specialized training, preparation seminars, and information sources.
2. Knowledge Assessment: Measuring the participant's knowledge of the field, based on a well-articulated Body of Knowledge.
3. Skills Assessment: Measuring the participant's application of the skills of the field in a live situation.
4. Assessment of Motivation: Comparing the participant's value system to that of the field, and identifying points of congruence and gaps.

5. Validation: Bringing all of the assessment elements into one arena, and providing a final validation of the participant's suitability to the field.
6. Evaluation: Evaluating the assessment process and ensuring continuous improvement.
7. Communication: Ensuring that the participants in the assessment process are apprised of how well their particular assessment went, plans for future improvements, and the means for staying connected to the Assessment Centre for information purposes, and for contributing to ongoing growth.

Conclusion

Assessment is not for the faint of heart, but is essential for the forward momentum of a given field of endeavour. Where would doctors, lawyers and engineers be without their certification bodies? Facilitation is a field where certification is important to legitimize its activities on behalf of its practitioners, and more importantly, its clients.

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