

The Assessment Center not only identifies strong candidates for administrative positions, but helps participants improve weak skills.

The NASSP Assessment Center Develops Leadership Talent



PAUL W. HERSEY

For years principals and other school personnel asked the National Association of Secondary School Principals for assistance in identifying and developing potentially strong building administrators. As a result, and with technical help from a blue-ribbon committee of the American Psychological Association's Division of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, NASSP launched in 1975 its Assessment Center program.

Based on extensive interviews with teachers and administrators in pilot school districts, the Assessment Center was designed with three basic components:

1. Twelve skill dimensions with specific definitions were found to relate to the most important characteristics of successful assistant principals and principals. The skills to be assessed were problem analysis, judgment, organizational ability, decisiveness, leadership, sensitivity, stress tolerance, oral communication, written communication, range of interests, personal motivation, and educational values.

2. Simulation techniques and exer-

Paul W. Hersey is Director of Professional Assistance, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Virginia.

cises were written into the Center design to provide information for evaluating the 12 skills. Many of these techniques simulate activities that an assistant principal and principal experience each day, including leaderless group activities, fact-finding and stress tests, administrative in-baskets, a structured personal interview, and a participant feedback session.

3. A comprehensive and rigorous training program was developed to produce well-trained assessors who could administer the assessment process appropriately so that observed behaviors were properly interpreted.

Over the past five years we have found the assessor staff to be the most important component in a successful Assessment Center. As a result, much time has been spent in refining the training module so that potentially superior assessors can be (a) initially screened more effectively, (b) taught and evaluated comprehensively within fairly tight time constraints, (c) approved and certified by NASSP as official assessors to begin functioning in projects, and (d) monitored in an actual Center acting as a school district assessor.

A Ripple Turns Into a Tidal Wave

We initially saw this project as useful to

According to the Assessment Center, twelve skill dimensions that relate to the most important characteristics of successful principals are:

- Problem analysis
- Judgment
- Organizational ability
- Decisiveness
- Leadership
- Sensitivity
- Stress tolerance
- Oral communication
- Written communication
- Range of interests
- Personal motivation
- Educational values

principals in making better administrative personnel selections by evaluating the management skills of potential assistant principals and the process as an effective career counseling technique with all participants. However, after several districts successfully assessed a number of young administrative candidates, the potential of the approach became evident. Not only could the Assessment Center be used to identify good candidates for "threshold" administrative jobs, but developmental suggestions for each participant were becoming an integral part of the process.

Assessors and participants alike were asking: "If these factors represent my strengths and these other dimensions obviously indicate my improvement needs—what can I do about improvement?" "Will the project eventually provide this developmental help?"

Besides these questions, other practical suggestions coming from the pilot work broadened the scope of the project beyond anything envisioned in 1975.

What about the validity of the assessment process? What can we tell our boards of education?

A validation study, partially funded by the Rockefeller Family Fund (New York), began in September 1979 under the direction of Neal Schmitt at Michi-

gan State University. In July 1981 the Spencer Foundation (Chicago) added funds so participants could be analyzed for a third year. To date results have been positive and encouraging. Schmitt is collecting data on Center participants in five areas: content validity, criterion or predictive validity, internal validity, realistic job preview information, and school climate.

What about university involvement? Could techniques and materials from the Assessment Center be used in graduate programs or in counseling graduate students in educational administration?

In 1980 several projects were launched with universities. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of Utah both use the Assessment Center to (a) counsel personnel toward potentially satisfying career choices, (b) identify areas of strength and weakness in the universities' administrative preparatory program, and (c) act as a regional reservoir where trained personnel and facilities can be used to assist local school districts.

The potential of this thrust is exciting—a practical preparation program that emphasizes the fusion of "firing line" administrative problems with theory work in educational administration.

What about regional assessment centers? Wouldn't regional centers help smaller districts that could not afford to go it alone?

Currently, several of the 11 pilots provide regional services. The project of the San Diego County Department of Education was specifically designed as a regional model and currently provides the best example of how one Assessment Center serves many school districts.

Professional Development

As each year passes and more administrators are exposed to assessment activities, it is increasingly apparent that professional development must be addressed. The university pilots and two of the local school district projects are actively pursuing developmental techniques and materials for use by administrative candidates as a follow-up to their Assessment Center participation.

An exciting project designed to explore professional development was initiated with the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development in San Francisco during the summer of 1981. Initially the Lab committed considerable funds and personnel to the development of training activities and

materials in the skill dimensions of problem analysis and judgment. In conjunction with NASSP and San Diego County's Leadership Development Center the Lab is now field-testing problem analysis materials.

Our definition for problem analysis is "the ability to seek out relevant data and analyze complex information to determine the important elements of a problem situation; searching for information with a purpose." Far West Lab put together four separate training modules to assist participants in closing the problem analysis gap between "what is" and "what should be." Each module emphasizes important components related to the analysis of problems.

Generally, the developmental training covers:

- Analyzing a problem
- Testing assumptions that inhibit problem analysis
- Recognizing critical information gaps
- Conducting an effective information search
- Determining relevant information needed to fill a gap
- Identifying alternative sources of information
- Using investigative strategies for collecting information
- Identifying practical alternative solutions
- Predicting the probable consequences of alternatives.

Procedurally, the training is divided into three phases:

1. *Preparation:* Individual study and work prior to any group activities
2. *Training:* Four workshops with other participants that will facilitate individual involvement and group interaction
3. *Follow-Up:* Application of workshop concepts and approaches to participants' local work situations and problems.

The training is intended to give participants the opportunity to apply in actual work settings the new skills and concepts obtained. If participants elevate their problem analysis skills as they work through these activities and materials, training modules will be designed for many of the other 12 skill dimensions.

At that point, administrative professional development and the NASSP Assessment Center will make a good team to provide talented leadership for schools of the 80s. ■

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