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ASSESSMENT CENTERS APPLICABILITY TO THE
DEVELOPMENT AND SELECTION OF LEADERS IN THE
ACQUISITION CAREER FIELD

A Research Paper

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by

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14. ABSTRACT The central issue of this paper addresses the lack of leadership in the acquisition career field and what can be done to correct it. The current environment within the Air Force poses a great leadership challenge to all officers, regardless of career field. However, the occupationalism that the service has fostered over the years has resulted in officers in the acquisition career field focusing on enhancing their managerial skills at the expense of their leadership qualities. As a result, many Program Directors are excellent managers, but lack even basic leadership skills. The lack of statutory or Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC) emphasis on leadership in the process of selecting Program Directors has perpetuated the managerial occupationalism that exists today. An objective measure of leadership ability must be factored into the existing selection process to ensure that personnel selected to fill critical Program Director positions have the demonstrated leadership potential needed to lead Program Offices into the 21st century. Assessment Centers represent the most sophisticated means of assessing leadership ability and potential. The workings of these centers is discussed followed by a recommendation to establish such a center at AFMC Headquarters to provide the objective measure of leadership needed as a selection criteria and to provide acquisition personnel with much needed feedback on their leadership strengths and weaknesses. A survey of current literature on leadership, management, and issues and studies on the acquisition career field provide the support for the contentions and recommendations put forth in this report.

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Preface

The seeds of motivation for choosing this particular topic were planted in my head years ago. I have been in the acquisition community for the vast majority of my Air Force career, and I have had the pleasure and the pain of serving for numerous Program Directors, both military and civilian. They have covered the waterfront in terms of leadership and management ability. Without exception, they have all been extremely intelligent, technically astute individuals. Some complemented this technical ability with equally outstanding leadership abilities. Unfortunately, the majority of them did not. As a result, morale suffered in those program offices and I saw officers and civilians with unlimited potential leave government service because they were disillusioned with the future they saw. I myself found it disconcerting (and somewhat embarrassing) that the senior officers who were supposed to be our role models of leadership appeared to be falling down on the job. I saw the Program Directors as managers, not leaders.

Here at Air Command and Staff College, reading Carl Builder's book, *The Icarus Syndrome*, struck a chord with me because his premise seemed to confirm my observations. Occupationalism was taking over the Air Force—specialists were more concerned with their specific career field than the Air Force as an institution. In the acquisition world, that manifested itself in managers with no leadership ability. It was at that point in the academic year when I decided that I wanted to explore ways to reverse the occupational trend in my career field.

I would like to acknowledge the patience and guidance shown to me by my research advisor, Lt Col Lawton Duncan. He demonstrated great flexibility early on in the research phase when I fell behind the schedule and equally great confidence in my ability to get back on track. His common sense inputs to my early outlines and drafts were instrumental in the formulation of the final product.

Abstract

The central issue of this paper addresses the lack of leadership in the acquisition career field and what can be done to correct it. The current environment within the Air Force poses a great leadership challenge to all officers, regardless of career field. However, the occupationalism that the service has fostered over the years has resulted in officers in the acquisition career field focusing on enhancing their managerial skills at the expense of their leadership qualities. As a result, many Program Directors are excellent managers, but lack even basic leadership skills.

The lack of statutory or Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC) emphasis on leadership in the process of selecting Program Directors has perpetuated the managerial occupationalism that exists today. An objective measure of leadership ability must be factored into the existing selection process to ensure that personnel selected to fill critical Program Director positions have the demonstrated leadership potential needed to lead Program Offices into the 21st century.

Assessment Centers represent the most sophisticated means of assessing leadership ability and potential. The workings of these centers is discussed followed by a recommendation to establish such a center at AFMC Headquarters to provide the objective measure of leadership needed as a selection criteria and to provide acquisition personnel with much needed feedback on their leadership strengths and weaknesses.

A survey of current literature on leadership, management, and issues and studies on the acquisition career field provide the support for the contentions and recommendations put forth in this report.

Chapter 1

Leadership Challenge in Acquisition

Where have all the leaders gone?

—Major Dennis Drayer, USAF
“Where have all the Leaders Gone?”

The post Cold War era in the United States has been characterized by a military drawdown to levels not seen since the days following the end of World War II. Manpower and funding levels have been cut drastically. As these budget cuts continue, the Air Force acquisition community faces significant challenges in its mission to provide the warfighters with effective weapon systems in a timely manner to support operational requirements. “Do more with less” is a phrase that everyone in the acquisition community has become familiar with. Acquisition programs with exceedingly complex development and procurement cycles are being executed with less personnel and resources to manage them. In this increasingly competitive environment, it is imperative that our Program Directors be good *leaders*, not just good managers. Unfortunately, the honing of military leadership skills has taken a back seat to careerism and the development of managerial skills in the acquisition career field.

Stovepiping

There is a common belief in the Air Force today that aircraft and technology have become an end in itself rather than a means to achieving an end. As a result of this, the accomplishment of missions has been lost as a primary focus in the Air Force, resulting in a weaker sense of community than the other services. More than any other service, the Air Force has moved away from an institutional value system toward an occupational one, due primarily to its dependency on technology and specialists. Surveys support the conclusion that the Air Force is tending toward occupationalism.¹ Air Force people are increasingly favoring their own careers and interests over that of the Air Force mission or institution.² In the acquisition career field, this trend manifests itself in senior personnel who have keenly developed managerial skills, but lack some of the most basic military leadership traits.

Manager vs. Leader

The Reagan Administration era was the best of times for the acquisition community. A massive military buildup resulted in manpower levels exceeding 100% of requirements, and a plethora of new weapon system program starts with an abundance of funds to spend on research, development, and procurement. Comparing that environment with the one we find ourselves in today, most acquisition career field observers would agree with an industry executive's comment that "...in the past we didn't need many leaders. But now, in a more competitive environment, we surely do. What we have currently is a couple of good managers who can lead, a lot of very good managers who can't lead, and hordes of great administrators."³ The frugal budgetary situation we find ourselves in now results in

procurement numbers being reduced *and* stretched out over a longer period of time. Coupled with manpower cuts in some program offices of up to 50%, we are expecting those programs to take on more complicated tasks with less resources. Accomplishing the mission is no longer just a matter of good managerial technique—it is a daunting task that requires strong leadership.

Most acquisition programs today are overmanaged and underled because few program directors understand what leadership is and what it can accomplish for them.⁴ Many program directors today spent the majority of their careers in the acquisition career field. They are specialists who have embraced their “occupation”, developing sound managerial skills at the expense of their higher calling to be Air Force leaders. Program Directors need to understand the difference between management and leadership. As Maj Dennis Drayer points out, this is a difficult problem to overcome:

The problem is that leadership is something cultivated during a considerable period of time, through a combination of inherent capacity, early childhood experiences, formal education, and career experiences. Formal education can supplement and build on the attributes required of effective leaders, but it cannot create the motivation, develop the personal values, intensify the abilities and skills, improve the reputation, build the relationships, or infuse the career of experiences required of an effective leader.⁵

This quote reinforces the arguments made by Builder that the Air Force has embraced occupationalism and does not have a clear unifying vision for all members of the force. In the acquisition field, that translates to a corps of effective managers, not military leaders. The motivation, personal values and career experiences of these officers encourage the development of management skills, not leadership.

Good, Fast, Cheap—Pick any Two

Most people have heard the old saying, “You can have it good, fast, or cheap. Pick any two.” In the acquisition world today, Program Directors are being tasked to get all three. In order to accomplish this objective, changes need to be made in the way System Program Offices get things done. Capt Joseph Veneziano believes we can do this by cultivating Program Directors who are visionary leaders to overcome what he calls “Acquisition’s Seven Cardinal Sins”⁶:

1. Not satisfying user requirements
2. Common goals but uncommon objectives (different motivating factors)
3. Adversarial relationships among government, contractor, and user, which destroy trust
4. Low morale among program office personnel
5. No clear lines of communication
6. Lack of understanding of the big picture
7. Inefficient processes, duplication of efforts, and lack of understanding of roles and relationships, resulting in overworked, underutilized employees

To overcome these problems, Capt Veneziano submits that a return to basics, emphasizing fundamental leadership principles such as motivation, delegation, communication, vision, and inspiring trust are required. On the other hand, one could posit that the lack of current leadership is a major contributing factor to these “Sins” existing (to varying degrees) in the first place.

Where do we go from here?

Clearly, the current environment within the Air Force poses a great leadership challenge to all officers, regardless of career field. However, the occupationalism that the service has fostered over the years has resulted in officers in the acquisition career field focusing on enhancing their managerial skills at the expense of their leadership qualities.

In the past, this focus on management did not have an adverse impact on the accomplishment of the mission. However, the austere conditions that program offices are forced to operate in today require a focus on leadership in order to be successful. The next chapter will discuss the difference between a manager and a leader, as well as a description of the current process used for selection of senior program directors in the Air Force.

Notes

¹Carl H. Builder. *The Icarus Syndrome*. New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994, pp. 6-8.

²*Ibid.*, pg. 20.

³Drayer, pg. 26.

⁴*Ibid.*, pg. 31.

⁵*Ibid.*, pg. 31.

⁶Capt Joseph Veneziano. "Getting Back to Basics in the Acquisition Workforce", Program Manager, Sep-Oct 1996, pg. 14.

Chapter 2

The Leadership Distinction

Overall, personal requirements for effective management are different from and, in many ways, simpler than leadership requirements. Relatively speaking, it requires considerably more to provide effective leadership.

—Major Dennis Drayer, USAF
“Where have all the Leaders Gone?”

Leaders manage and managers lead, but the two activities are not synonymous. The purpose of management is to keep systems running in line with established criteria. Thus, managers traditionally have been identified as performing the planning, investigating, coordinating, organizing, and controlling functions in an organization. Face to face interactions of managers with subordinates receive relatively little attention from management theorists. These superior/subordinate relationships are generally seen as leadership functions. Leaders focus more on resolving conflicts in groups, providing emotional support to group members, maintaining group cohesiveness and satisfaction, and working with group members to set group goals.¹ The strong interpersonal skills necessary for leadership are not inherent in management functions.

The interpersonal aspects of leadership can be found throughout the literature on the subject. The current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen John M. Shalikashvili, at a ROTC Award Seminar said, “Good leadership...is based essentially on three pillars: Character, love and care for soldiers, and professional competence.”² Gen. S.L.A.

Marshall also stressed the personal aspects of leadership, “Human relations will always play a vital part in the advancement of a leader. They become the mainspring of success.”³ Gen Howell M. Estes III, speaking on leadership at ACSC, stated that creating the right climate for leadership involves having good communications, mutual respect, trust, compassion, and integrity. Finally, Maj Gen Aubrey Newman said, “...nothing can replace the most effective principle of...leadership: the day-to-day personal interest of the commander.”⁴ Countless other examples exist, citing traits such as energy, vitality, charisma, inspiration, decisiveness, caring, patience, foresight, wisdom, fairness and confidence.

Clearly, management (process) and leadership (interpersonal) traits are both required for a Program Director to most effectively run a program office and accomplish the mission. The interpersonal leadership skills are necessary to maintain morale and unit cohesiveness; however, it is also imperative to have the necessary functional management expertise and experience to enable a leader to direct and guide a unit in its day to day activities. However, Air Force Materiel Command has emphasized management skills to the extent that they have completely excluded leadership qualities as selection criteria for Program Director billets.

Fill the Squares

The criteria used for certification of program management personnel is contained in DOD 5000.52-M, Career Development Program for Acquisition Personnel. The three successive levels of certification each require personnel to meet requirements in four areas: Assignments, Experience, Education, and Training.

The assignments criteria range from engineering or program management staff officer, laboratory staff, or test and evaluation staff at Level I up through Acquisition Command HQ, Service HQ, Program Office, and Broadening (Operational) assignments for Level III. The intent of this it to provide acquisition managers with exposure to different facets of the acquisition community to provide breadth of knowledge and experience.

Experience is based solely on time served in acquisition positions, with times ranging from 1 year for Level I up to 4 years (of which 2 must be in a program office or similar organization) for Level III. Once again, the intent is to ensure that personnel have served an appropriate amount of time in acquisition related positions before certifying them at the next higher level.

The educational requirements at all levels of certification are *desired*, not mandatory. Level I lists a Bachelor's degree in business or a technical discipline. Levels II and III certification criteria list a Master's degree in engineering, systems management or other appropriate field.⁵

These three areas do a good job of ensuring functional knowledge, time in service, and technical expertise are sufficient to handle the increased responsibilities encountered as a Program Director. The fourth category, Training, is the one where the cultivation of leadership skills could be encouraged. Unfortunately, little to no emphasis is placed on it. The only mandatory training occurs at Levels I and II. The Basic (Level I) and Intermediate (Level II) Systems Acquisition Courses are the only mandated courses that must be taken to be certified at the aforementioned levels. At Levels II and III, the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC) Program Management Course and other "Management and Leadership Training" is listed as *desired, but not mandatory*. This is

the only place that leadership is mentioned at all. This sends a message that reinforces the occupationalist attitude of many officers today. It is mandatory to be a good manager in the acquisition field; having good leadership skills is nice, but only “desired”.⁶

Concurrent with Level II certification, personnel are expected to meet the criteria for the Acquisition Corps. The intent of this corps is to ensure that a group of highly qualified and trained personnel is available to fill the critical acquisition positions within DOD. Membership in this corps is mandatory in order to fill a senior acquisition position such as Program Director or Deputy of a major or significant nonmajor defense acquisition program. Additional criteria over and above those previously listed include serving in the grade of GS-13 or O-4 and above, and completion of 24 semester credit hours from among the following disciplines: Accounting, Business Finance, Law, Contracts, Purchasing, Economics, Industrial Management, Marketing, Quantitative Methods, and Organizational Management. Once again, no mention is made of leadership.⁷

These criteria provide the statutory minimum requirements that must be met for acquisition certification and selection to certain high level positions. However, this does not preclude additional requirements being levied by the individual services. In the Air Force, the office responsible for filling Program Director positions is HQ AFMC/DP. The process they use to fill these positions is very subjective. They begin with a computer printout of all acquisition personnel who meet the criteria for assignments, experience, education, and training. A records review (to include OPR's, training reports, and any other appropriate documentation) is then accomplished to get a picture of each individual's duty history and performance. AFMC believes that this review provides a good measure of leadership qualities and uses it as a key determinant in selecting

candidates. However, the subjectivity and inflation of OPR's and training reports calls into question the validity of this process. Once the review has been completed, the list of candidates is given to the commanders of the various acquisition centers (Aeronautical Systems Center, Electronic Systems Center, Space Systems Center, and Human Systems Center) for final screening. The personnel that make it through these screens fill available Program and Deputy Program Director billets.⁸

The lack of statutory or AFMC emphasis on leadership in this process perpetuates the managerial occupationalism that exists today. What is sorely needed is an objective measure of leadership ability that can be factored into the existing selection process to ensure that the personnel selected to fill critical Program Director positions have demonstrated the leadership potential needed to lead Program Offices into the 21st century. Assessment centers represent the most sophisticated means of assessing leadership ability and potential.⁹ Implementing an assessment center at AFMC would provide decision makers with the objective measure of leadership that is clearly needed as an additional selection criteria. The chapters to follow will describe what assessment centers are, how they operate, and how they could be used in AFMC.

Notes

¹Richard L. Hughes and others. *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*. Boston MA: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1993, pg. 61.

²Gen John M. Shalikashvili. "Three Pillars of Leadership", *Defense Issues* v10 n42, 1995, pg. 1.

³Gen S.L.A. Marshall. *The Officer as a Leader*. Harrisburg PA: Stackpole Books, 1966, pg. 163.

⁴Maj Gen Aubrey Newman. *Follow Me II: More on the Human Element in Leadership*. Novato CA: Presidio Press, 1992.

⁵Dept of Defense 5000.52-M, *Career Development Program For Acquisition Personnel*. Washington DC, November 1991, pp. A.1-7 to A.1-9.

⁶Ibid.

Notes

⁷Ibid.

⁸Telecon with AFMC/DPO, 31 Dec 96.

⁹Hughes, pg. 73.

Chapter 3

The Assessment Center as an Evaluation Tool

Assessment is the state of the art technology in leader development. To ignore it would be to ignore developing quality leaders for the future.

—Major Joseph R. Palmer, USA
“Competency Based Leadership”

Historical Background

Although assessment centers are in widespread use in civilian industry today, their origin can be traced back to the German Army psychologists’ use of these methods to aid in the selection of officers in World War I. After WWI, the British adapted the German techniques for inclusion in their officer candidate selection process.¹ This approach was brought to the United States and used by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to evaluate the suitability of candidates to serve in overseas posts during World War II.² The OSS (the forerunner of the CIA) considered the program to be highly successful and at the end of the week long assessment candidates were either accepted or rejected based on their performance in the assessments.³

In the 1950’s, civilian industry began to pick up on the potential uses of this analysis technique. Dr. Douglas Bray was hired by AT&T to use assessment centers to evaluate the management potential of their young managers. His program was known as the

Management Progress Study. “No doubt this early study has played an important role in establishing the validity of the assessment center approach; the reported results of the management progress studies confirmed the high predictive power of the assessment techniques to subsequent performance.” By the mid 1980’s, over 2500 civilian organizations such as IBM, Sears, General Electric, and Caterpillar Tractor were using assessment centers to select potential managers.⁴

Although the military played the initial role in introducing assessment techniques, their use was essentially ignored until the mid 1970’s. The Army established an assessment program for use in selecting ROTC candidates and recruiters in 1974⁵ and the Air Force began to explore the feasibility of establishing an assessment center at Squadron Officers School in 1975.⁶ By 1983 the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) had adopted the assessment center concept for identifying officers for command positions and the development of leadership and management skills in all AFOSI officers. Their center was named the Commander Development Center and began operations at Bolling AFB in March 1986.⁷

The largest military undertaking to date has been the implementation of the Leadership Assessment and Development Program (LADP) in the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) school system in late 1991. LADP has been introduced in all resident leader training courses longer than five weeks. The goals of LADP are:

1. Give student leaders accurate assessments of their demonstrated leadership performance
2. Use assessment feedback to help student leaders prepare self development plans to improve their leadership performance
3. Help student leaders become more effective by better understanding themselves
4. Familiarize student leaders with the leadership assessment process so they can use it to develop their subordinate leaders in future assignments

5. Establish and maintain the proper school learning environment to develop leaders with the needed skills, knowledge and attitudes⁸

The trend clearly has been toward more widespread use of the assessment center technique throughout civilian industry; the military has been somewhat slower to catch on but is beginning to appreciate its value. TRADOC's LADP assessment center could be an invaluable role model for AFMC in developing its own center for assisting Air Force program managers to become better leaders.

What is an Assessment Center?

An assessment center is a method by which participants are evaluated for selection, placement, development or promotion.⁹ However, unlike most other evaluative programs, the assessment center approach is future oriented. The structured evaluation process utilizes a variety of exercises, written instruments and multiple independent observations to provide information about a leader's readiness or potential to lead effectively in a particular position or level within an organization.¹⁰ These multiple methods of assessment are designed to elicit behaviors and responses that are related to the specific competencies that have been identified by the sponsoring organization as being important to job success. "The overwhelming results indicate that assessment centers can accurately predict, with a high degree of validity, future job performance, promotions, and demotions, as well as progress or lack of progress in a career field."¹¹

What is assessed?

Assessment centers are individually tailored to observe and evaluate specific competencies that have been identified as being critical factors in successful future job

performance. Most often included in this list are skills such as oral and written communication, decision making, problem solving, time management, flexibility, energy, delegation, etc. A current military example would be LADP, which has identified nine “competencies” that are evaluated at their assessment center:

1. Communications
2. Supervision
3. Teaching and counseling
4. Soldier team development
5. Technical and tactical proficiency
6. Decision making
7. Planning
8. Use of available systems
9. Professional ethics¹²

How are competencies assessed?

A wide variety of tools can be used that are designed to highlight the behaviors and traits of interest. Candidates are commonly subjected to psychological and personality type tests, interviews, and written and oral exercises, as well as situational tests such as leaderless group discussions, in-basket exercises, and simulated counseling sessions with subordinates.

Psychological tests such as the Miner Sentence Completion Scale measures areas such as: attitude toward authority, the desire to be assertive, actively exercise power, stand out from a group, and the willingness to carry out routine work. The Thematic Apperception Test requires individuals to look at pictures of people in ambiguous situations and make up a story based on their perception of the picture. Their response reveals clues about their aspirations and provides a measure of a person’s underlying need for power, achievement, and affiliation.¹³

Leaderless group discussions involve placing candidates in a group with no designated leaders and are instructed to represent competing or opposing viewpoints. Each person's mission is to persuade the others to adopt his or her viewpoint. In-basket tests present the participant with an in-basket full of reports, letters, and memos and a limited amount of time to process the paperwork, making all necessary decisions as required. In both of these exercises, assessors can observe skills such as initiative, persuasiveness, assertiveness, dominance, and cooperation.¹⁴

In all of these and other similar scenarios, participants experience the typical problems, frustrations, and pressures they would be subjected to on the job. Their responses to the situations form the basis for the feedback they receive.

Who does the assessing?

Assessment opportunities can come from a number of different sources. At LADP, there are three sources, called "eyes" because they provide the leader a different look, and when combined, present a total view of the leader. All three "eyes" are based on the nine leadership competencies identified by TRADOC for feedback. Self assessment is completed by the participant and typically involves psychological measurement instruments, Myers Briggs Type Indicator tests, and other self assessment forms. It provides the leader with a look at himself based on his own perceptions. Associate (peer) assessment comes from other participants and provides feedback on how other candidates see them and usually is completed by using a competency based assessment form. Cadre/superior assessment lets the leader look at himself through the eyes of experienced assessors who are trained to evaluate performance in leadership situations, such as the leaderless group discussion or in-basket exercise. A fourth possible source of feedback

would be a subordinate assessment. The important point to highlight is that multiple sources of assessment are used to provide a more complete picture of the subject being evaluated.¹⁵

How are assessments used?

Assessment results typically serve two primary functions. They can be used for developmental feedback to the individual, or they can be used as selection criteria for a particular position.

At TRADOC, assessments are used to provide feedback on a student leader's strengths and weaknesses. A faculty counselor gives nonthreatening developmental feedback that can be used by the student to identify areas that need further development in order to be prepared for future levels of responsibility.¹⁶ On the other hand, in the civilian world, assessments are often used as selection criteria for particular positions. In order to be considered for certain positions, evaluation at an assessment center has become a prerequisite.

Where and how often are assessments conducted?

Most centers are conducted away from the participants workplace, sometimes in a place where all the candidates and assessors are housed in the same area and remain in close contact throughout the entire evaluation period.

Participation can be anything from a one-time event in a candidates lifetime, to a periodic assessment conducted at approximately four year intervals. Some organizations have full time assessment centers that operate continuously, while others run only periodically throughout the year. The time an individual participant spends at an

assessment center in a single visit varies from one to six days, with the average being about three.

If a center is being used strictly for selection purposes, the evaluation time will typically be shorter than one designed to provide feedback on an individual's strengths and weaknesses.¹⁷

Validity and Acceptance of Results

One of the most attractive features of the assessment center approach is the validity and acceptance of the evaluations they produce. The most authoritative research on the assessment center process was the Management Progress Study mentioned earlier. The study assessed male employees at AT&T beginning in 1956. The results of the study were reviewed eight years later to compare the predictive results of the assessments with the actual progress made by the participants. "Of the total number of men who reached middle management, 78 percent were correctly identified by the assessment staff. In contrast, among those in both groups who had not progressed further than first level management, the assessors predicted that 95 percent would not reach middle management within ten years."¹⁸ Clearly, this represents high validity for the process.

Acceptance of the results by the people being assessed is also important. Objectivity and the absence of bias are crucial if the process is to be accepted. The assessment center process is one of the most sophisticated formal, objective evaluation processes in existence today. There is a common misperception in the military that evaluation techniques are by nature subjective, due in part to familiarity with the officer and NCO evaluation systems (OPRs and EPRs). However, assessment center evaluations contrast quite sharply with the military evaluation systems:¹⁹

Assessments

Evaluates student behaviors
Predicts future abilities
Nonthreatening, uninflated

Requires trained assessors

Measurement tools are standardized,
validated and quantifiable
Assessor bias unlikely because
judgment calls are minimized

Evaluations (OPR/EPR)

Evaluates performance on the job
Usually measures past results
May be threatening, inflation
common
Requires senior/subordinate
relationship
Measurement tools may not apply to
anyone other than person evaluated
Requires judgments and may be
biased

Surveys have also shown that the assessment center results are unbiased in terms of sex and race. Overall levels of performance of men and women did not differ; similarly, the results of blacks tested were comparable to those of whites.²⁰ Assessor bias is minimized due to two factors: (1) assessors are not in the rating chain of the candidates, and (2) multiple assessors evaluate each participant to eliminate any individual biases in the overall feedback.²¹

“The assessment center approach seems to have substantial validity for long-range predictions of...success across many different organizations and specific job situations, and it appears to be highly useful in providing opportunity to the most capable in an unbiased manner; furthermore, it is a popular method with both management and employees.”²² The applicability to developing leadership skills in acquisition personnel and the potential to use this evaluation tool as a selection criteria for Program Directors is obvious. What remains is to recommend an implementation strategy for AFMC. This subject will be covered in Chapter 4.

Notes

¹Marvin D. Dunnette. “Multiple Assessment Procedures in Identifying and Developing Managerial Talent”, a technical report, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis MN, August 1970, pg. 4.

²Donald MacKinnan, “An Overview of Assessment Centers”, technical report No. 1, presented at the Industrial Psychologists Meeting, Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro NC, January 29-30 1975, pg. 1.

³Randall E. Wooten, “Faculty Guide to SOS Leadership Program”, Maxwell AFB AL: Air University, 1980, pg. 3.

⁴Joe Kelly and others, “The Use of Assessment Center Simulations to Evaluate Decision making Skills in Selection”, In Charles Cox and John Beck (Eds.), *Management Development Advances in Practice and Theory*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1984, pg. 58.

⁵William W. Witt, “Assessment - An Opportunity”, Cameron Station: Defense Technical Information Center, 1982, pg. 4.

⁶Wooten, pg. 5.

⁷Maj Stephen C. Minnigerode, “The Assessment Center for Leadership Development and Placement: AFOSI’s Commander Development Center”, Air Command and Staff College Research Report, Maxwell AFB AL, 1987, pg 2.

⁸Palmer, pg. 40-41.

⁹Col Barbara Francis. “The Assessment Center Process: Its Applicability to the USAF”, Air War College Research Report, Maxwell AFB AL, 1978, pg. 4.

¹⁰Maj Joseph R. Palmer. “Developing Army Leaders: The Leadership Assessment and Development Process”, *Military Review* v70 n4, Apr 1990, pg. 34.

¹¹Wooten, pg. 4.

¹²Palmer, “Competency Based Leadership”, pg. 46.

¹³Gary A. Yukl, “Leadership in Organizations”, Englewood Cliffs CA: Prentice Hall, 1989, pg. 184.

¹⁴Yukl, pp. 177-178.

¹⁵Palmer, “Developing Army Leaders”, pp. 40-41.

¹⁶Palmer, “Competency...”, pp. 44-45.

¹⁷Francis, pp. 9-10.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 12.

¹⁹Palmer, pp. 44.

²⁰Francis, pg. 15.

²¹Palmer, pg. 45.

²²Francis, pg. 16.

Chapter 4

A Potential AFMC Assessment Center Scenario

The following scenario represents the author's opinion of what would constitute an effective implementation of assessment center methodologies in AFMC to support the development and nurturing of critical skills (both leadership and management) in Air Force and Civil Service personnel in the acquisition management career field.

Location

The "acquisition world" is relatively small, with the vast majority of personnel in the career field stationed at a small number of locations within the continental United States: Wright-Patterson, Eglin, Hanscom, Los Angeles, and Brooks AFB are the homes of the five primary systems centers responsible for major Air Force acquisitions. Smaller numbers of personnel are stationed at other locations (most notably the Pentagon in Washington DC), but they represent only a fraction of the total workforce. AFMC Headquarters is collocated with the Aeronautical Systems Center (the largest concentration of acquisition personnel in the Air Force) at Wright Patterson AFB, OH.

Establishing the AFMC Assessment Center at the headquarters is obviously the most logical choice. Serving a command wide function suggests that the Center would best be located at HQ AFMC. Under the current AFMC organization, the Assessment Center

would be most appropriately placed in the Personnel Directorate (DP) as a three letter division.

Staffing

The Assessment Center should be selectively manned with a cadre of instructors ranging in rank from 1Lt through Colonel and GS-11 through 15, to ensure that participants (regardless of rank or grade) will always be in contact with a variety of assessors that would be considered peers, subordinates and superiors.

The amount of training given to assessors can vary anywhere from five hours to fifteen days.¹ Because these personnel will be doing this work on a full time basis, a three week training course would be appropriate.

It has been generally accepted that assessors can provide more accurate evaluations when they do not personally know the participants, as this allows the assessor to remain unbiased and uninvolved emotionally.² Specific behaviors to be evaluated have been identified and the assessor has been trained to observe them. Relative anonymity supports this process. Therefore, assessors who have been direct supervisors or subordinates of the participants in previous assignments will be replaced in exercises that involve those individuals.

While assessments are done for the participants, the assessors benefit as well. Through the experience of being an assessor, individuals appear to become more sophisticated in making judgments, enhancing their management and leadership abilities when they return to a regular duty assignment.³

Competencies

The goal of the AFMC Assessment Center should be to develop leaders for all levels in the Air Force, with some tailoring for the unique environment encountered in AFMC. Therefore, the competencies that define effective performance will be leadership based, with some management techniques added to customize the assessments for acquisition personnel.

In 1989 the Defense Systems Management College conducted a study of the major competencies possessed by effective program managers in the defense acquisition process. The study included in-depth interviews with over 50 DOD program managers and a follow-on survey of over 500 acquisition professionals. The results were used to update the DSMC curriculum, but are also valuable to acquisition organizations in their attempts to measure effective performance.⁴ The following list represents the six major competencies (with their definitions) that the study identified that distinguished outstanding program managers from merely effective ones:⁵

1. Sense of Ownership/Mission: Sees self as responsible for the program and articulates problems or issues from a broader organizational or mission perspective
2. Political Awareness: Knows who influential players are, what they want and how best to work with them
3. Relationship Development: Spends time and energy getting to know program sponsors, users, and contractors
4. Strategic Influence: Builds coalitions and orchestrates situations to overcome obstacles
5. Interpersonal Assessment: Identifies specific interests, motivations, strengths and weaknesses of others
6. Action Orientation: Reacts to problems energetically and with a sense of urgency

These six competencies represent key leadership traits that have an “acquisition twist” to them. To these six, five additional traits will be added, all of these taken from the LADP list enumerated earlier:

1. Communications (both written and verbal)
2. Supervision
3. Teaching and counseling
4. Decision making
5. Professional ethics

Together, this combined list constitutes the core of the AFMC Assessment Center organizational leadership competency list. While some “management type” functions are addressed, these competencies have a decidedly leadership/interpersonal slant. Other training that acquisition personnel receive over time will take care of the process skills, while this assessment center will hone the interpersonal side.

Evaluation Opportunities

Developing good leadership habits and traits is something that does not happen overnight. Periodic visits to the AFMC Assessment Center should be mandatory for all military and civilian personnel in the acquisition career field. An initial visit before reporting to a first duty assignment should be accomplished to give the participant a baseline look at the abilities one has going into a new career. Military can be sent TDY enroute to the first acquisition assignment, while civilians will have to be sent after starting the job at their organization.

Return visits for further feedback should be accomplished before each new assignment (TDY enroute) or every 4 years, whichever is less. For ranks of 2Lt through Captain, and GS-9 through GS-12, the purpose of the assessments will be strictly for feedback to help the junior personnel develop an effective leadership style by providing evaluations in a nonthreatening environment. However, Majors and GS-13's and above will not only get the feedback for their own personal use, but a file will be maintained at

the Assessment Center on them, reflecting their performance in the exercises and their overall marks in the eleven core competencies. These files will be provided to AFMC/DP for the records review that they conduct when screening personnel for Program and Deputy Program Director positions. The absence of a current evaluation (within four years) in this file will disqualify an applicant from further consideration for a senior acquisition billet. This will ensure not only that the candidate receives timely feedback on his leadership abilities, but it provides AFMC with an objective measure of the individual to use as a selection criteria (along with performance reports, duty history, center commander inputs, etc.) for filling critical program office positions.

Notes

¹Francis, pg. 10.

²Ibid., pg. 11.

³Ibid., pg. 11

⁴Dr. Owen C. Gaden, "DSMC Studies Program Manager Competencies" *Program Manager* v18 n1, Jan-Feb 1989, pg. 42.

⁵Dr. Owen C. Gaden, and others, "Program Managers with the Right Stuff", *Program Manager* v19 n3, May-Jun 1990, pg. 27.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The Air Force acquisition community has moved away from the development of leaders in favor of cultivating efficient managers. Some believe that it is a symptom of a greater Air Force problem of careerism and dependence on specialists. Whatever the reason, the current environment demands a return to the basics of leadership if the mission is to be accomplished effectively.

“The decade of the 1990’s brings with it challenges...unique in their complexities. Breathtaking technological advances, the startling pace of political change sweeping the world and increasing demands on shrinking resources all combine to make these challenges even more imposing on our senior civilian and military leadership. We must ensure that the leaders of our smaller force possess the right skills, knowledge and attitudes enabling them to be effective in any environment. They must be participants in a rigorous development and assessment program that prepares them to function not only at their present levels of responsibility but at one or two echelons higher.”¹

The establishment of an assessment center at AFMC Headquarters can bring some much needed refocusing on the skills and attributes that are truly critical to the accomplishment of AFMC’s mission of acquiring world class weapon systems for the warfighter in the 21st century. In addition to a reprioritization of the skills needed to be

effective, the assessment center can provide critical selection criteria to the decision makers who appoint future Program Directors. Objective measures of leadership are an essential tool for ensuring the right person is given the task of leading our major weapon system acquisition programs. These are the impacts that an AFMC Assessment Center can have on the future of the Air Force.

Notes

¹Palmer, “Developing...”, pg. 43.

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