



YOUR GUIDE TO ASSESSMENT & DEVELOPMENT CENTRES

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment Centres (sometimes called Assessment Workshops or Selection Centres) represent probably the most powerful tool available to managements to predict performance and behaviour.

They enable managers to assess employees across the widest range of relevant characteristics and behaviours in which they are especially interested.. Where properly constructed and conducted, Assessment Centres provide this information at a level of predictive accuracy, which is difficult to achieve by any other means.

This overview is sufficiently detailed to provide you with the essential things you should know about running Assessment Centres - and getting it right for the first time!

Read through this booklet once to familiarise yourself with its contents. Thereafter it should act as a reference document.

I hope this answers some of the questions you may have about Assessment Centres

Tim Lambert

MODERN DAY ASSESSMENT CENTRES

Modern day Assessment Centre techniques trace their origins to the Second World War. The major protagonists were faced with the need to select from the ranks, soldiers with the potential to become officers. In the UK this led to the development of the War Office selection Boards. These were put together by psychologists, psychiatrists and military officers.

Essentially these were Assessment Centres, with participants asked to undertake a number of difficult exercises whilst being watched by trained observers who assessed potential. Similar pioneering work was undertaken at the same time by the Office of Strategic Services in the USA and by the German Army. These developers were motivated by the same reasons that management developers are interested in Assessment Centres today.

Whether it is for reasons of promotion, appointment or to introduce change, we need to be confident that the people we place into new positions can fulfil all the expectations of that appointment. For the most part however those who make appointments have evidence only of the candidate's past and present behaviour and performance, and this may not always be relevant or useful information for the new position. Good soldiers don't necessarily make good officers, good operators or good clerks don't necessarily make good supervisors, good supervisors or good technicians don't always make managers. Yet the need to discover and develop talent is one of the most important activities any successful business must undertake.

Assessment Workshops work on the principle that it is possible to identify and isolate many of the key requirements for a particular job. Subsequently techniques such as tests, interviews, exercises and simulations are devised which have as their focus one or more of these criteria. By asking someone to undertake these tests it is then possible to obtain some measure of the qualities of the person i.e. do they demonstrate relevant behaviours or do they have the potential to acquire them quickly?

In a sense then it is possible to simulate elements of a new role or job (or even an existing job) and to judge a would-be jobholder according to the criteria, which are thought to be appropriate to that job.

There is now a wealth of evidence to show that Assessment & Development Centres are an extremely effective development tool. They are seen as a cost-effective way of acquiring valid information that is difficult to come by through other means. Their capacity to predict future behaviour is higher than almost any other technique. And their use is now being extended as a device for identifying clearly and accurately the training needs of employees in their current roles.

However as with most powerful tools in the wrong hands or improperly handled they can create more problems than they solve. The keys to a good Assessment Centre are good planning, thoughtful execution and good follow-up.

OBJECTIVES AND USES OF ASSESSMENT CENTRES

The objective of Assessment Centres is to obtain a clear and accurate picture of an individual's qualities such that they may be matched against the requirements of a job or jobs.

Managers will recognise this as a common approach to a wide range of human resources activities and initiatives. However there are three main areas of application.

- **Selection**
- **Management development**
- **Human resources planning**

1. SELECTION

This was the original application for the Assessment Centres. It is a particularly valuable tool when considering internal candidates for posts where their past or current experience is of little value in indicating their likelihood of success in the new post.

For larger organisations where there may be several good candidates for a post it may have two advantages. Firstly it is a good device for discriminating between apparently close candidates. Secondly when handled properly, it can be useful as a means of explaining to the unsuccessful candidates how and why, on this occasion, they did not succeed. At worst it will avoid de-motivation of those candidates: at best it can actually have a motivating effect.

Many organisations use Assessment Centres for external requirement. Again because the candidate is even more of an unknown quantity than an internal candidate there is a considerable advantage to be gained from the insights offered through the Assessment Centres.

Where there are external and internal candidates Assessment Centres, (because of their structure and their discipline), can offer an opportunity to improve the objectivity of the selection process.

2. MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

As will be seen the criteria or competencies or qualities examined in an Assessment Centre are very often exactly the same ones, which are addressed in management and supervisory

training programmes. A glance at the list of the most commonly used criteria will quickly confirm this.

It is not difficult to ensure that assessment and training are linked processes: the organisation could (perhaps must) have a common database for both. It enables the business to provide tailored training programmes in response to individuals' development needs. The assessment process will identify those needs, and will give some guidance as to the priority areas for attention. This will enable training to be directed to the greatest need, which is important for both the business and the individual. The business will see the fastest and best return for its training and development input. The individual will feel the benefits of the attention more quickly and will be better motivated to continue developing their contribution to the business. Nothing breeds like success.

By linking training to assessed needs, the credibility of the combined assessment and training process is enhanced. A powerful signal is given to all employees that the organisation has made a real commitment to meet their development needs.

3. HUMAN RESOURCES PLANNING

In a sense this is linked to the Management Development use. All organisations (from time to time) need to take stock of all the resources used in their business. The human resource is no different. This is particularly true at senior levels and the level immediately below.

The Assessment Centre process can be useful as a means of scanning key sections of the workforce to examine the extent to which skills, knowledge, experience, behaviours etc are developed and present.

EVERY organisation should have a business strategy, and a key component should be the HR plan.

WHICH APPLICATION?

Clarity about the application you have chosen for the Assessment Centre is important for the following reasons -

- You must explain the purpose accurately to the participants as well as the assessors. Integrity is a vital component in making the process work well. Typically, participants are nervous or cautious about exposing themselves to Assessment Centres. To get the greatest volume of accurate information from participants, they must be open and honest in their participation. They are much more likely to adopt this behaviour, if you behave in the same way.

- Different uses may result in different criteria being measured i.e. the objective of the Assessment Centre will determine its make-up.
- For a similar reason care must be taken in interpreting measurements of performance. Information gleaned from one Assessment Centre application may not always be valid for another application.

Now that the use and application have been established, the process of identifying valid and relevant criteria for measurement can begin. This is considered next.

SELECTION OF CRITERIA

This is probably the most crucial issue in developing effective Assessment Centres.

Any criteria selected must be:

- **Relevant**

This is so often ignored. It's easy to select a criterion on the basis that it is good in its own right e.g. participation. But it may not be *relevant* to a particular position nor may it fit in with the prevailing culture of the business. How often do senior managers wish their subordinates would display different patterns and standards of behaviour when their own styles prevent any such thing arising?

- **Capable of being defined rigorously**

For example 'LEADERSHIP' is often chosen as a criterion. But what exactly does 'leadership' mean. Leadership is capable of different styles and interpretations. Do we mean participative or authoritative leadership; or do we seek to identify those who operate through consensus? Too often a broadly descriptive title is chosen as a criterion and too little definition of its precise meaning takes place.

- **Sensitive to difficulty factors affecting it**

These factors reflect things like complexity, criticality, ambiguity, risk etc. For example presentation skills maybe absolutely essential for a sales role and may be less critical for a research chemist. This quality or criterion may figure in the portfolio of criteria for both kinds of job but may need to be considered differently.

AGREED DEFINITIONS & THE USE OF JUDGEMENT

When defining Competencies and the demonstrated behaviours that convince us of those competencies, it is important to have a common understanding of what we mean by some of the terms we use.

For instance, it is not uncommon for **‘Sense of Humour’** to be used as a criterion, yet this is meaningless without further clarification.

A ‘sense of humour’ could mean any of the following:

Always cracking jokes	Quick-witted	Sarcastic
Sensitive to nuances	Can see the funny side	Able to put things in perspective
Showmanship	Creates a sense of excitement	Able to laugh at themselves
Laughs at other people	Offensive	Dry
Entertainer	Takes centre stage	Capable to smoothing out difficulties by injecting some fun
Able to present difficult issues or concepts in ways that are immediately understandable to others through the use of humour	Timing	

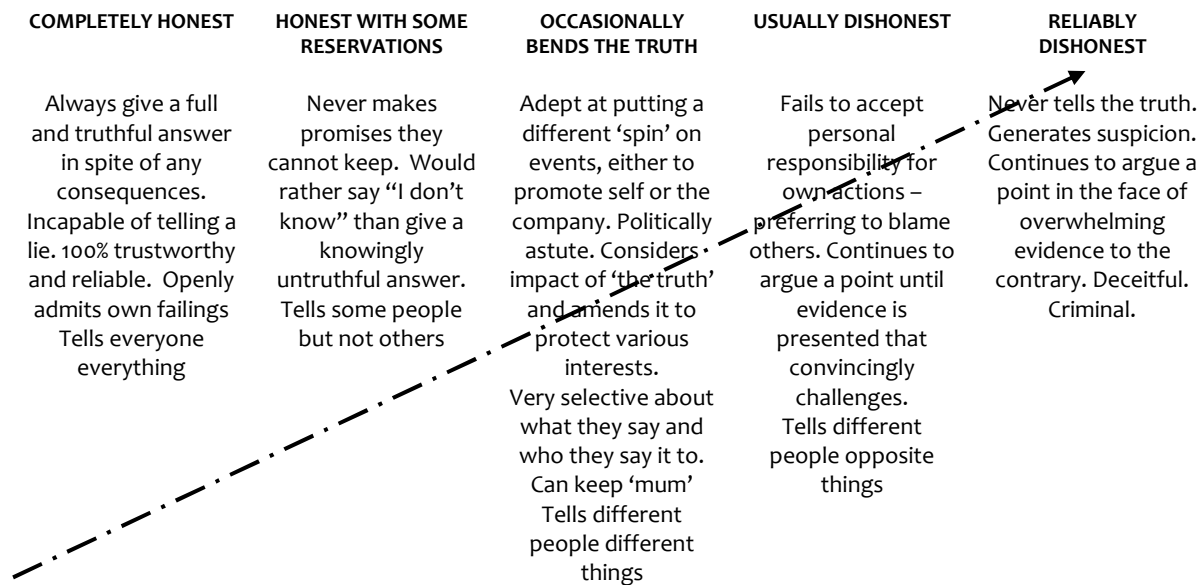
Given the various ways of interpreting ‘sense of humour’, there is the potential for one observer to rate a participant in a development or assessment centre highly, whilst another observer in the same centre rates the participant low.

Judgement will always be required to assess where ‘humour’ is employed appropriately. This means taking into account:

- the circumstances leading up to the use of humour
- the type and delivery of humour employed
- the impact of the humour on the group, the individuals within it, and the objective of the group at that moment.
- how the individual responds to the impact created by their use of humour

CASE STUDY

Here is another interesting example for you to consider. An organisation felt that ‘HONESTY’ was a key requirement for any future or current employee. But when it came to agreeing what level of honesty would be acceptable, they had real difficulty deciding where on the honesty continuum should employees be.



HONESTY CONTINUUM

What the company began to realise was that 'LOYALTY' was at the heart of their requirements, and that the higher up the management line a person went, the more 'loyalty' would be demanded of them. This was particularly true with regard to handling sensitive and confidential information that, if made public, might have an effect on employee morale, shareholder value, or competitive advantage.

The lesson here is: **be clear about what you want & need.** Without this clarity you stand little or no chance of creating the assessment and/or development process that will enable you to get what you want and need.

ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRES: What are the key differences?

Both types of Centre rely upon a carefully constructed series of Tests, Exercises, Interviews and Presentations during which trained Observers watch participants.

There is a great deal of evidence that a properly constructed Assessment and Development Centre is the most reliable and valid means of obtaining relevant information about an individual's suitability or potential for a job (current or proposed).

From the participant's point of view, participating in the core exercises and events may feel quite similar whether they are in an Assessment Centre or in a Development Centre. The crucial difference lies in their differing objectives.

- An **Assessment Centre** is most often used in a selection or recruitment situation where the organisation seeks to discover as much relevant information about a person in order to select one or more for a specified role. This often means that there is one (or more) "winners" and that there are often "losers".

If the participants are external to the organisation then they may get little more than the experience of participation. The logistics of the process means that they will rarely get feedback.

If the participants are internal then there is more scope for constructive feedback to be given – but again this often does not take place as often as it should.

- A **Development Centre** provides both you and your employees with the opportunity to find out more about their current skills and future potential - particularly those which are crucial for current or future job performance and therefore business success.

The objective here is to identify training and development needs and to secure commitment to a development plan – from both the employee and the boss. In this sense there are no "losers". Everyone emerges with valuable feedback and a structure through which they can improve – everyone "wins".

Furthermore it helps to focus development of staff to ensure those key skills and competencies are acquired as quickly and as effectively as possible.

OUTLINE OF A TYPICAL PROCESS

A Development or Assessment Centre usually comprises a range of tests, structured interviews, presentations, individual and group exercises designed to measure the individual's abilities against an agreed set of criteria – often called competencies. Some of the exercises may be work simulations.

The first step is usually to identify the core skills and competencies (and supporting behaviours) which must be displayed if the organisation is to perform as planned. The criteria (or competencies) reflect those skills that are felt by the company to be most important qualities for employees to possess at their level and/or given the company's aims.

Observers survey and measure each individual's performance during the Centre and then prepare an objective and accurate picture of the individual's skills and abilities.

In Assessment Centres this high quality information is used to contribute to recruitment and promotion decisions, and the gathered evidence is shared with candidates as feedback if they wish to receive it.

In Development Centres this information is always fed back to the individual (usually with the Line Manager in attendance) and used as a basis for preparing focussed and highly relevant development plans. Observers are often drawn from senior managers in the organisation and/or can be experienced consultants.

Clearly this is an extremely valuable approach to adopt when organisations are going through change and employees are being asked to perform differently to the way they have performed in the past.

WHY USE THIS APPROACH?

There is overwhelming evidence to show that a Development or Assessment Centre is the most reliable and valid technique for measuring people's qualities.

UK organisations who use this approach have reported other significant advantages:

- Senior managers are able to observe at first hand the performance of current and potential employees. They are often able to observe people demonstrating behaviours which though relevant for the future they have not had the opportunity to demonstrate to the manager before or in any other way.

- Managers report that it develops their people skills too! They acknowledge that they understand better the relevance of competency and behaviour to job performance.
- Participants report that the range of activities and exercises draw out accurate and useful information - they learn from the experience.
- Participants report that the process is fair and rewarding.
- It raises the profile of those competencies felt to be important across the whole company - helping to sell key elements of the programme for change.
- Focused and cost effective decisions may be achieved following the Centre – whether this is for recruitment, promotion or training and development.
- Importantly, employees who have undergone the process understand better what the organisation seeks to achieve and can then help the business manage change, outperform the competition, address resourcing gaps, etc.
- Ultimately better recruitment and development of people does lead to improved business performance.

THE DEVELOPMENT/ASSESSMENT CENTRE VERSUS OTHER MEASURES

There is no such thing as a perfect assessment procedure where people are concerned! However this is unquestionably the most accurate approach available for use with most organisations.

A Development or Assessment Centre is clearly an artificial environment. Participants are taken from their work place for typically one to three days and are measured using a series of tests and exercises.

It is easy to dispute the value of information drawn from this setting. What if the participant has an off day? How can exercises truly reflect the demands of the work place?

Validity studies of various assessment methods have consistently demonstrated that a well planned and professionally administered Development or Assessment Centre will produce robust, reliable and valid information.

In particular an extensive open communication process prior to the Centre combined with the careful selection of business exercises which simulate work experiences will guarantee a quality of information that outstrips that derived from any other assessment methods.

DESIGNING & IMPLEMENTING DEVELOPMENT/ASSESSMENT CENTRES

Good Centres are a product of careful planning and preparation. Typically the process follows the following sequence:

Identify the Competencies & Behaviours

It is important to begin by establishing the business need.

- Is the company undergoing change and therefore the type of person who will be effective in the new regime will need different qualities to those they have now?
- Through manpower planning, have you observed growing skill gaps in your company (i.e. 70% of your Senior Managers will be retiring within 5 years)?
- Is a merger/acquisition/change in business strategy demanding a different skill set for your employees.

Having identified the business need, it is possible to establish:

- Who in the company will be affected?
- What skills or competencies must they possess in order that the business requirements are achieved?
- What are the typical behaviours, which provide evidence of competence. I.e. can you describe that competence in behaviours you would expect to see demonstrated in the workplace by a competent person – or in behaviours you would wish to see avoided in a competent person. It is usual to identify several (8 – 10) positive and negative behaviours.
- Will the competencies be the same throughout the company but with different behaviours expected at each level/for different roles?
- Are these mirrored by any existing competencies or will these old competencies need to be updated, modified or prioritised?

Development Centre Content

Once the criteria have been established and validated it is possible to put together a structure for the Development Centre. This will entail:

- Identifying which competencies or behaviours can be assessed through a Development or Assessment Centre
- The design of relevant exercises, simulations, structured interviews and case studies.
- The selection of psychometric measures (i.e. aptitude tests, interest or motivation inventories and personality measures). Prevue Assessment is particularly suitable for Assessment and Development Centre applications.
- Creation of an Evidence Matrix. This records which exercises have the potential for gathering information about competencies and behaviours. From this a plan can emerge.
- The preparation of Participant Matrices. These record which participants will work together on particular exercises and who will observe them. It is essential for the objectivity of the Centre that participant groupings are mixed and that people have the opportunity to work with different co-participants. It is equally important that each participant is seen by several observers.
- Designing observation aids for the observers to use.
- Establishing how decisions are to be reached and how and when feedback will take place.

Observer Training

We all bring our personal views, opinions and biases to the role of observer. Training is essential if we are to minimise the impact of these influences on the objectivity and validity of the Centre.

Within a day, potential observers are encouraged to explore their values and attitudes and to practice techniques that will allow them to observe others effectively. This learning has much wider applications than just the Centre. These are often valuable skills which may be applied back in the workplace too, reinforcing the Manager's role as coach and developer.

Participant Selection & Briefing

If participants are anxious about the Centre they may not perform naturally and so the information derived from the process may be inaccurate.

A briefing prior to the Centre is recommended; dispelling myths about the process and allowing participants to practice similar exercises. This is much easier to organise for internal participants.

It is important that the business need is emphasised and that a senior company representative reassures participants about the constructive way information from the Centre will be used.

Run the Development or Assessment Centre

The typical duration for the assessment part of a Centre (if it is to provide some useful information) is one day. In some rare cases, centres are designed to run over four hours if the group is well-contained and there are a smaller number of skills and competencies being assessed. On the other hand any more than three days in length will often only reconfirm conclusions already made.

At the end of the centre, observers collectively make their decision on whether a candidate was successful or not.

In addition time must be set aside for feedback where this is relevant. The observers or someone independent of the company may conduct this, for instance. The approach will depend on the culture and structure of your company.

The overriding recommendation is that the feedback takes place immediately or very soon following the Centre. Memory of the event quickly fades and so too can the impact of the feedback, if delayed.

Action Planning – Development Centres

The return on the investment made by participants and observers depends largely on the quality of the action plan. Again the process of preparing a plan should immediately follow the Development Centre.

Experience also suggests that successful implementation of the action plan involves the participant's own manager in the planning process. If a manager has been party to identifying the development needs of the individual they can make realistic suggestions for development, can authorise training and accelerate attendance on training courses.

Similarly, through involving someone responsible for company wide training in the development process, the training priorities for the company can be set, and different forms of development (both on the job and outside work may be introduced).

Action planning should be structured around a portfolio of possible interventions (sometimes written up in a Development Manual), which specifies a range of activities to develop the particular competencies. This should include: 'on-the-job' activities, formal courses, videos, reading material, etc.

ASSESSMENT & DEVELOPMENT CENTRES - DESIGN FEATURES

The purpose of this note is to provide guidance as to the issues to be taken into account in creating events and exercises for Assessment & Development Centres.

One essential feature is to be clear about the competencies against which participants are to be assessed. There should normally be at least two sources of evidence for each competency (or unit of competence).

In practice this means that a one day centre is only able to gather useful and reliable data on a limited number of competencies. In turn this might mean that it is necessary to prioritise which competencies should be built into the Centre.

Psychometric Tests and Measures

Used predominantly to gather information about participants, which might otherwise be difficult to get through other means. Psychometric tests also tend to be quick, efficient and (if carefully selected) reliable sources of relevant data.

They can have a useful role in validating or explaining, independently, observations made on other parts of a development or assessment centre.

There are many products which have sufficient rigour to be suitable for the purpose of recruitment. Many other products also have good validity for Development processes. Ability Tests, Aptitude Tests, Personality Profiling Tools, Emotional Intelligence Questionnaires, Leaderships Styles Inventories, etc, all have a useful role to play as part of the process.

It is important to keep psychometrics in perspective. Some clients are mesmerised by them. They should contribute to data gathering, analysis and drawing of conclusions. We have seen clients virtually ignore all other data and seek to rely mainly on this input.

Presentations

These are a consistent feature of many centres. If used carefully presentations will generate a lot of information about the candidate, particularly

- their communication skills
- their listening skills
- selling skills
- their personal confidence
- their ability to question constructively
- if the presentation topic is carefully selected, their ability to plan and to organise, manage their time and the values they hold dear.

It is important to use this exercise properly. It can be time consuming and can be tedious (especially if there is poor selection of topics).

A very useful twist is to use candidates as the audience for each other. They should be encouraged to question each presenter in turn. Finally each can be told to write a short (30 minute) critique for one of the presentations. They are only told which presentation they are to critique when all have been completed.

This ensures that they listen attentively throughout (and further encourages them to question and to probe) and enables some assessment of their critical skills.

Group exercises

These are regular features in Centres and, again, if carefully designed, yield a lot of good and valuable information.

They can be designed to incorporate these features:

- Based on real work situations. This can enhance their validity but should be used only with people (e.g. for same organisation or same industry) who will be readily familiar with the scenarios.
- Based on generalised scenarios e.g. survival type exercises. These are useful when people from a wide variety of backgrounds are to be observed. It ensures that one individual is not favoured over another.
- Participants are given a particular position to defend or promote.
- Participants are allowed to choose their own position.
- Participants are briefed to oppose a position.

- Problems have a unique solution or have a range of solutions.

Exercises are particularly useful to examine;

- Team working
- Leadership
- Planning, Organisation and Control
- Communication Skills
- Assertiveness & Submissiveness
- Competitiveness & Co-operation
- Problem Solving

(Structured) Interviews

These are very useful in enabling line managers/observers to assess a participant's knowledge and understanding about a specific issue or topic.

They are much more effective when they are structured and when they are focussed on specific issues. They represent a good way to probe an individual's technical expertise and/or their real experience in a particular area.

Good features include:

- Interviews should be structured – questions should be planned in advance.
- Potential follow up questions should be available
- The same questions should be addressed to all participants
- There should be model answers available
- There should be more than one interviewer. One to ask questions and one to observe – in rotation.

In Tray Exercises

Completed individually, these are based on scenarios around which a number of decisions need to be made – often to prioritise action. Individual responses can then be measured. They can form an introduction to a group exercise.

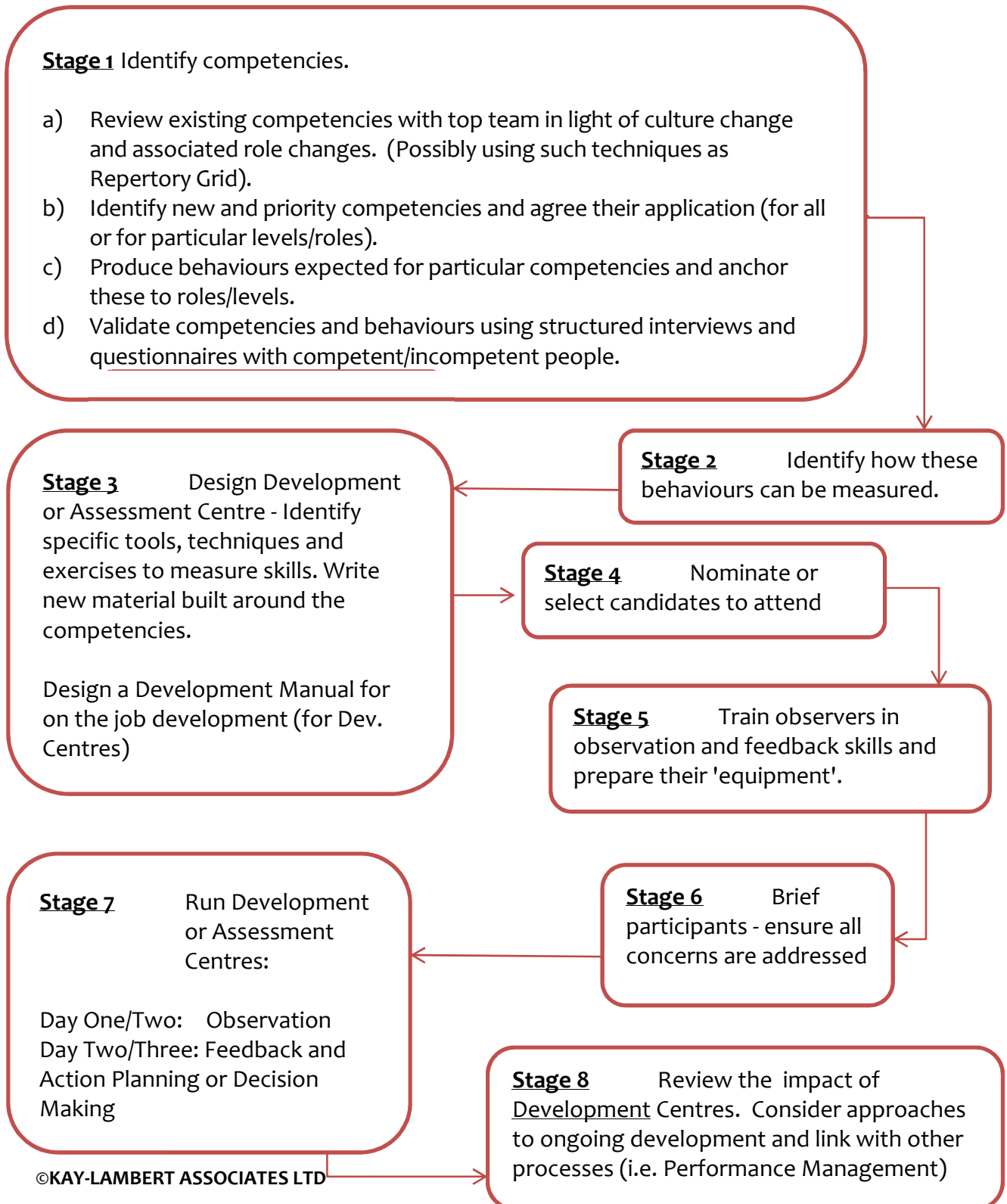
The scenario can be based on real situations or on generalised hypothetical situations. Candidates are asked to analyse the scenario, identify priorities for action, and then to identify potential actions to be taken and reasons for the action.

In Trays are particularly useful to examine:

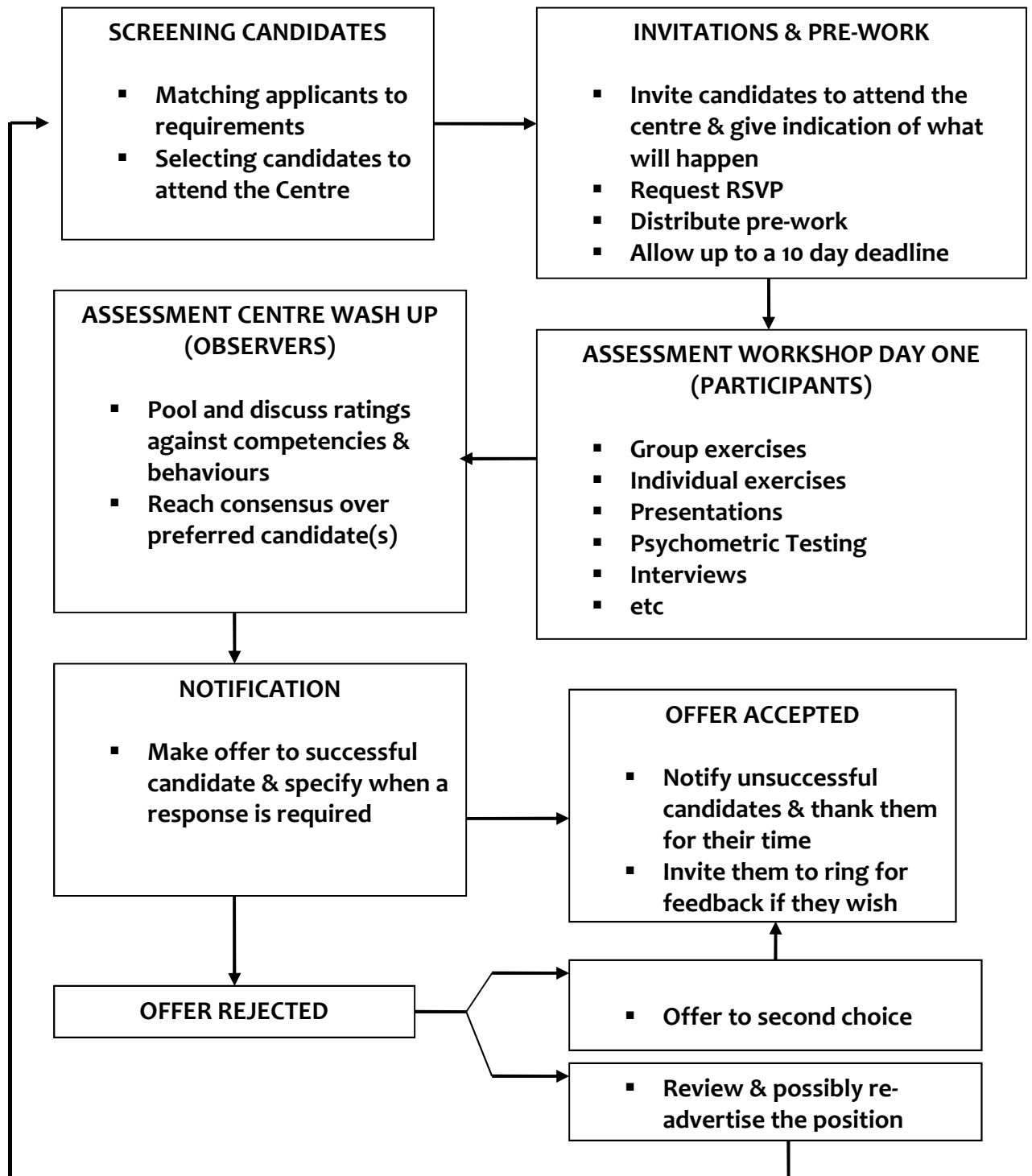
- Decision Making
- Analytical Skills
- Working Under Pressure
- Problem Solving

ASSESSMENT/DEVELOPMENT CENTRE PROCESS OUTLINE

Typical requirements for constructing the process are described below.



ASSESSMENT CENTRE PROCESS DIAGRAM



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