

**#M303— Developmental assessment centers:  
A one-year check-up - How did the executives change  
(if at all)?**

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*Byham, T.M. (2005). Factors affecting the acceptance and application of developmental feedback from an executive assessment program. Doctoral dissertation. University of Akron.*



# Research Design

## Longitudinal Research

### Developmental Assessment Center

Components:

- 1-day simulation to assess 12 competencies
- 360 questionnaire
- 16PF, personality measure
- Raven's Critical Thinking Test

### 2-Hour Feedback Session

## Methodology

115 participants from AC contacted 9-15 months after their Developmental Center experience

79 1-hour structured interviews conducted

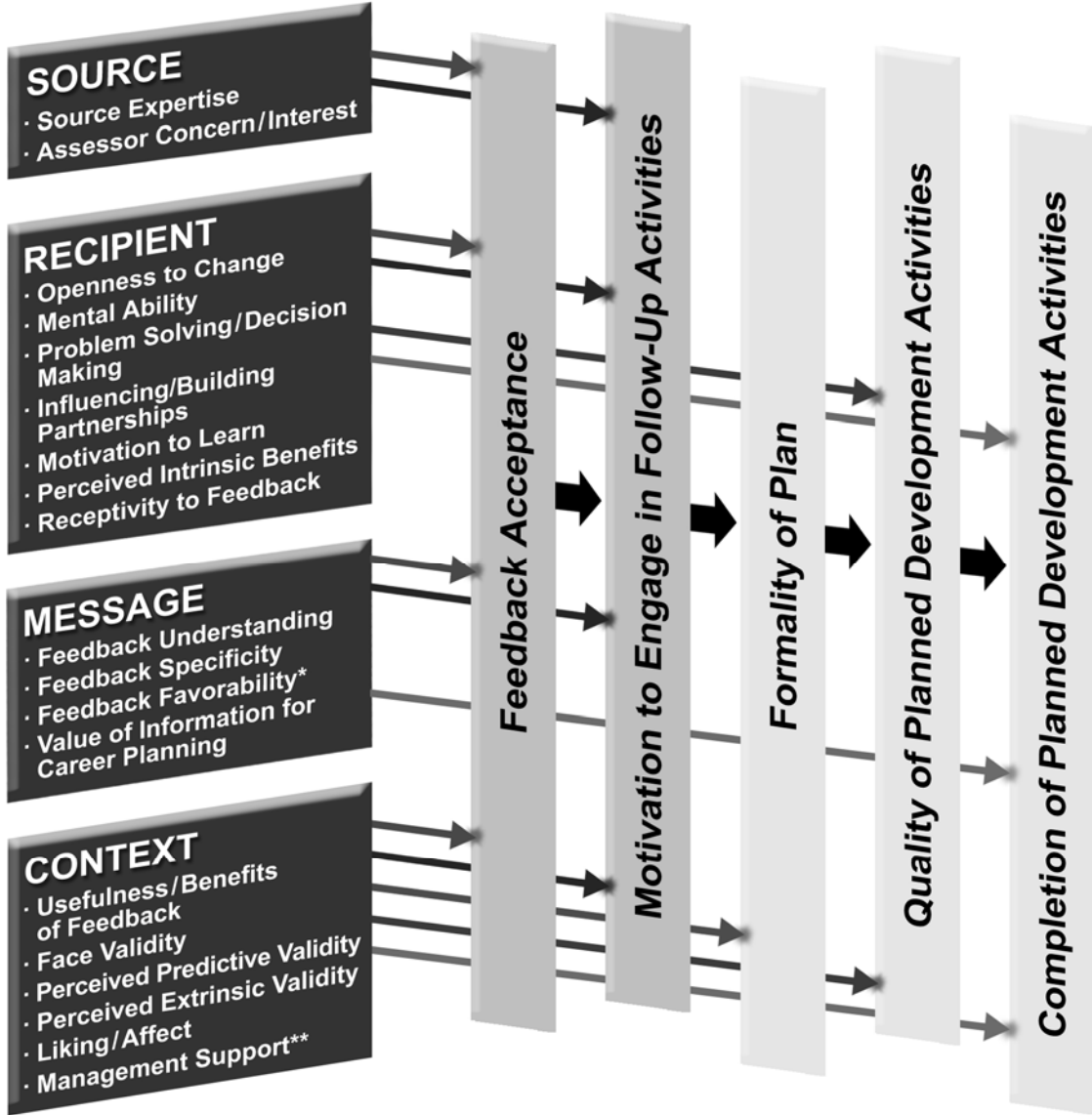
Demographics of interview population:

- 82% White, 9% Black, 1% Hispanic, 8% not reported
- 77% Male, 15% Female, 8% not reported
- Mean age = 42.9, (Min= 29, Max = 56)
- 8% working outside of the U.S., another 2% on ExPat assignments within the U.S.

## Realization

A sustainable, positive change in people's performance that dramatically increases the ability of an enterprise to achieve its business goals.

# Feedback Process Model



# Expectations Post-Assessment

- Received a Developmental Planning Form/**Individual Development Plan (IDP)**
- **Manager also received** a copy of the report — expected to discuss results with participant and create a plan

**Expectation that accurate diagnosis will lead to behavior change**

## Quick Quiz

Fast Forward One Year...

Did They Meet With Their Managers?

WHICH CATEGORY BEST REPRESENTS THE NATURE OF THE MEETING WITH THEIR MANAGER?	%
No support, no meeting	
Cursory meeting where manager simply signed off of feedback	
Full review, item-by-item, how employee can turn their feedback into actions, what support the boss can provide	

## NOTES:

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# Quality of Planned Development Activities

## What Makes a High-Quality Plan?

- a) Development goals were clear, achievable, behavioral, measurable, and prioritized
- b) Focus of the plan was on challenging assignments, not simply training
- c) Plan used a variety of learning/development methods

*Bracken, Timmreck & Church (2000), Byham, Smith and Paese (2002), Grote (1996), Lepsinger & Lucia (1997), McCall, Lombardo and Morrison (1988), University of California, San Diego (2000)*

## Quick Quiz

What About the Quality of the Development Plans in Study One?

WHICH CATEGORY REPRESENTS THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANT'S PLANS?	%
Much more than acceptable – Significantly above criteria outlined for a quality development plan	
Much more than acceptable – Greatly exceeds criteria	
Acceptable – Meets criteria	
Less than acceptable – Generally does not meet criteria	
Much less than acceptable – Significantly below criteria	
No plan in place, 1 year later	

## NOTES:

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# Completion of Planned Development Activities

Collected behavioral examples of development during the interview  
 Situation/Task – Action – Results



Scored on a 5-point scale

Based on:

- Whether complete **STARs**,
- The number of **STARs**,
- The significance of the **STARs**



## Quick Quiz

Did They Complete Developmental Activities?

WHICH CATEGORY REPRESENTS THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANT'S DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES?	%
Much more than acceptable – Significantly above criteria outlined for completion of planned development activities	
Much more than acceptable – Greatly exceeds criteria	
Acceptable – Meets criteria	
Less than acceptable – Generally does not meet criteria	
Much less than acceptable – Significantly below criteria	

## NOTES:

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# Implications for Practice

## **Feedback recipients should be encouraged to focus their development efforts on two or three competencies.**

Participants in the study targeted development in only one to three competencies although they were given more development needs (weaknesses) and strengths in their assessment center feedback reports. Two or three competencies may constitute the maximum areas on which a busy executive can concentrate. Also, if executives aim at only a few competencies, they are more apt to meet their goals and feel a sense of achievement, which will set them up for developing additional competencies. A focus on development actions may be a facilitating factor for those who did well in the developmental assessment center exercises. The already “rich” have only a few potential areas of development focus; conversely, their “poor” counterparts have a number of development areas. This may be demotivating (as they vacillate on which area to focus on) and overwhelming.

## **Development plans should include a variety of learning methods.**

Development should begin with the opportunities for application of newly acquired skills already thought through. Too often, skill acquisition occurs without opportunity for immediate application, which limits development return-on-investment (ROI). Additionally, not all learning needs are met through training. Managers and participants should be encouraged to be creative and consider methods of skill acquisition such as targeted assignments, shadowing, and job rotation. As such, corporate education ends not with the learning event, but upon accomplishment of improved workplace results (Wick, 2003).

Recently, Zenger, Folkman and Sherwin (2005) argued that the learning process is broken. Clearly, the most valuable component of learning comes from the follow-up after the learning experience. This would include activities designed to reinforce and strengthen the individual’s application of learning. However, when an estimate of how organizations typically allocate funds to development activities was completed, the actual learning experience takes the lion’s share of the funds (85%), with follow-up funding estimated to be only 5%. (The remaining 10% is estimated to be spent on prework prior to the learning session.)

Viewing development as a process rather than a formal program highlights the opportunity not only to focus on the learning experience (i.e., the developmental assessment center), but also to consider the importance of post-assessment sessions on development planning or the manager’s role in supporting growth to best create bottom-line results (behavior change) for the organization. For example, individual coaching or counseling may be a way to sustain momentum toward goals after feedback (Bono & Colbert, 2005).

To the same point, the Corporate Leadership Council surveyed approximately 8,000 senior managers on the most important development events of their careers. The resulting conjoint analysis suggested the following ratings of various developmental experiences:

- *Most Critical*—Continually increasing amounts of decision-making authority; having a leadership development plan; and opportunities to work with peers.
- *Least Critical*—Business skills courses, technical skills courses, off-site courses in business skills, and people skills courses. The bottom line is that too often organizations send employees to courses when instead they should put them in a stretch assignment, with a plan in place to support development.

## **Choose development actions for participants that align with their personal goals, their team’s goals, and the organization’s goals.**

The highest development opportunities with the highest payoffs solve an organizational problem or accomplish a team goal as well as build the skill, knowledge, and competencies of the team member. In these cases, development is occurring within the boundaries of day-to-day work, not in addition to those responsibilities. We believe that alignment is the key to the serendipitous nature of executive development. Thus, it is important not only to create formal development opportunities, but also to assign participants who have a development need to the right projects when they arise.

### **Encouraging receivers of developmental feedback to put their development plans in writing increases the quality and the likelihood of completion of their plan.**

It appears that more-detailed plans are associated with higher quality and higher levels of completion. In recent years, practitioners have begun to suggest that development planning be a required part of the developmental assessment center experience (Bernthal, Cook & Smith, 2001; Corporate Leadership Council, 2002). Best practices for the organizations in which they work suggest a systematic and objective developmental feedback session coupled with a required formal development action plan. Both the participant and the manager sign off on this plan, and it is in effect for the next two years. Furthermore, 100% compliance is the norm. This rigor has resulted in significant results. The CLC reported that participants in the Senior Manager Development Center were twice as likely to be promoted compared with a randomly matched sample of employees, matched on the basis of years with the organization, job salary, grade, and functional areas. When they surveyed the participants one year into their development efforts, 86% reported that they were “working the plan.” So, in this case, forced development planning promotes development action and, in turn, is more likely to lead to successful organizational outcomes, such as promotion (Corporate Leadership Council, 2002).

It is notable that the research organization used in our study has significantly modified its process, based on a preliminary review of our results, to add process tension around plan formality, quality, and completion. It has added a session with an executive coach two months after the feedback session to aid the high potentials in development planning. The organization has not formally measured the improvement to date, but anecdotal evidence suggests that development activities have improved.

### **The feedback recipient’s manager plays a major role in the formality and the quality of the development plan.**

When the manager takes an interest in the development plan, the plan is more likely to be in writing and to have creative ideas. However, a current trend with developmental assessment center feedback is for the feedback to be shared only with the participant, who in turn, conveys the results to his or her manager. When this model is followed, the development goals that a manager hears are potentially not accurate depictions of the developmental assessment results. Participants may choose to present to their managers only the parts of the report that are the most socially acceptable or the easiest to accomplish. This trend reduces the opportunity for meaningful managerial involvement. The current research suggests that without managerial involvement, participants are less likely to be successful. Organizations should strongly consider an Executive Development Team (EDT), comprised of the participant, an HR representative, and the manager, as described in Bernthal et al. (2001). This team would work together to set appropriate development plans, ensuring critical managerial involvement.

### **If feedback recipients are low in receptivity to feedback (and possibly in openness to change), their ability to execute their development actions can be seriously derailed.**

Practitioners may consider screening candidates for development on these factors and weighting predictions of successful development based on this factor against the costs of assessment and development activities.

### **Create progress and outcome measures of success to ensure development goals are on target and create process tension.**

Simply documenting a formal development plan is a first step. Well-thought-out measures related to learning and application goals will further ensure successful development after participation in a developmental assessment center. A recent study by Hewitt and Associates (2005) revealed that 90% of the *top* companies for leaders have a rigorous process in place to monitor actions resulting from 360°s/multisource feedback. Obviously, organizations that focus on measurement are more likely to be successful. In fact, the same research revealed that these top companies are able to source more CEOs internally (85% vs. 68%), source more VP-level talent internally (74% vs. 59%), and are consistently able to attract the external talent they want (95% vs. 59%).

Tacy Byham, Ph.D. is a senior consultant in DDI's Executive Solutions Group. She provides consulting support to clients in the planning, design, and implementation of assessment and development solutions across the leadership pipeline. Dr. Byham has also extensively researched and applied methods to ensure that the corporate investments in behavioral diagnosis (multi-rater/360°s or Executive Assessment Centers) result in behavior change for the participants. Her research received the national ASTD Dissertation Award at the International Conference and Expo in Atlanta, Georgia on June 4, 2007.

In her prior role, she focused on building and marketing the leadership development system, *Interaction Management® Exceptional Leaders . . . Extraordinary Results® (IM: EX®)*, winner of HR Executive's top training program award. Currently, Dr. Byham is playing a key role in the launch of DDI's new executive development capabilities. Dr. Byham has had a variety of roles in the organization, including executive assessment, where she worked with Nortel, GM, and Microsoft. In the leadership arena she has been the architect of corporate leadership universities for sanofi-aventis, Bank of America, and BAE Systems, and a master trainer of leadership solutions for clients in Europe and the U.S.

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