CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM
(CASE STUDY) NSW DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIVE SERVICES

By Sean O’Toole

One of the greatest challenges facing human resource development practitioners is establishing meaningful links between learning and development initiatives and advances in the core business of the organisation. The emergence of an enhanced form of the traditional assessment centre which focuses on improving organisation capability, has the potential to demonstrate this link as it serves as a trigger for the long term development of both the individual and the organisation.

Recent research has indicated that about half of all organisations have used some form of assessment or development centre for staff, with use more prevalent in large scale organisations, particularly in the private sector. The logic behind the rise in the use of development centres is that companies increasingly see the value of investing in the potential of their existing workforce. A development centre which forms part of an integrated training strategy ensures staff development is carried out in a context of organisational relevance.

Assessment and development centres have their origins in the selection of officers for the British military during the second World War. At that time the traditional ‘interview’ against a nominated selection criteria resulted in large numbers of officers being returned to their units as unsuitable. Subsequently, a method of assessing a candidate’s potential was devised where the types of behaviours which an officer needed were identified and then candidates were developed against those behaviours. The terms assessment or development centre are now merely labels and seldom relate to a designated place of learning or venue.

The UK civil service went on to adopt the assessment centre as part of its recruitment process at management level in the post-war years. Large American companies such as General Electric, IBM and AT&T followed suit in the 1950’s. The military have retained the system to this day with the essential differences between the UK and US models being the nature, type and frequency of the exercises and activities participants undertake. Today an estimated 20,000 companies in the United States use assessment centres. In contrast, Australian organisations have not been as willing to adopt them.

The NSW Department of Corrective Services

The NSW Department of Corrective Services is a mid-sized organisation in the NSW public sector. The Department has more than 5,000 employees, with approximately 3,500 staff involved directly in the containment and care of offenders sentenced to custodial or community corrections by the courts. The organisation has a reputation for being very proactive in the area of learning and development. In 1989 it was the first, and remains the only, corrections jurisdiction to establish a staff training academy. In the 1990’s it formed a partnership with Southern Cross University which lead to the development of and access to specially designed and run tertiary level courses in corrections.

During 2000, the Department’s research indicated that twenty percent of its senior officers were over the age of 54 and would be likely to retire in the next five years. This posed a very real dilemma in terms of succession planning and would obviously result in a significant gap in corporate knowledge, experience and leadership.

The problem was addressed by targeting middle managers and building their leadership potential using a development centre. This differed from the classic assessment centre model as candidates would not be assessed or ranked and it would not be linked directly to promotion. Instead candidates involved in the program would merely enhance their competitiveness when promotional opportunities arose.
The first step in the process was to formulate a leadership template upon which the skills assessment and individual development plans for the initiative could be based. The template highlighted the key competencies/capabilities which would be required in leaders for the organisation at three levels: executive, middle manager and supervisor. It is used to guide the construction of the plans for participants, to highlight areas of weakness and to identify suitable activities, programs and experiences to be used to build the necessary skills.

The Department wanted the program to be seen as independent from other training and development activities so it was decided that an external consultant would be tasked with its operation. Following a tender process, the Department selected a Sydney based consultancy Marlow-Hampshire who had constructed similar programs for the ANZ Bank and the CSIRO.

The program represents a three year commitment for participants and starts with an application package which contains a form requesting the applicant’s educational achievements, learning and development and work history. The form also requests information on the applicant’s career plans. The applicant, their manager and two peers then complete questionnaires which assist in the initial evaluation of their leadership potential.

Selection panels consisting of the Department’s Director, Human Resource Development, a management representative, a representative of the relevant union and the consultancy assess all applications. Ultimately 75 staff participate in the program each year. The proportion of officers from different work areas who participate is weighted to reflect the greatest needs in terms of succession planning.

Development planning

A key outcome for the program as a succession planning tool, is that it concentrates on the development of staff, rather than relying on some form of assessment as a prerequisite for promotion. Consequently, entry into the program is voluntary and those not selected are supported in other ways. Firstly, they have an opportunity to talk to the consultant about their application, and secondly they are offered a place in a one-day Career Planning and Review Workshop. Participation in these two activities is designed to increase their competitiveness for entry to future programs and to provide a platform for further self development.

Candidates initially come together in groups of twelve for an intensive 3 day workshop. They participate in a range of activities including psychometric tests, complex role plays and practical training sessions. Designated executive staff are trained as assessors for the program and they also attend these workshops to observe, participate and to provide feedback.

Developing specific capabilities such as leadership, thinking and judgement, strategic view, business acumen, communication and team management are the focus of the workshops. Sample groups from similar industries (in this case United States law enforcement personnel) are used as a benchmark for results of participants against the psychometric instruments which are administered. This serves the dual purpose of identifying individual capability and also allows the organisation to gauge its collective performance and identify areas of weakness and whole of organisation strategies to address them.

Attendance at the Development Centres is followed three weeks later by a meeting between the consultant, the participant and their manager for the purpose of documenting and agreeing to the development plan.

Developmental opportunities

Many developmental opportunities arising from the program are cost neutral. They involve the identification of mentors, workplace coaching, shadowing and project work. Others involve short courses through professional bodies, courses through TAFE and community
colleges; site visits and secondments to other organisations; aptitude tests, in-basket exercises and simulations. Departmental training through the NSW Corrective Services Academy also remains an option and some participants have elected to commence tertiary studies.

By far the most significant activity undertaken by participants involves secondments to work roles within the organisation which would otherwise be out of reach to them. This is proving to be a challenge for the organisation. To get real value from these opportunities the average time for such placements is usually six months. The benefits include exposure to a position and a range of skills which are untested. The key to each secondment for the participant and the manager is to tailor the experience as much as possible to the individual objectives identified in their development plans.

A potential conflict with the development plans for each individual involves their release from core duties to undertake specific tasks in their plan. Therefore the co-operation and support of functional managers is vital to the success of the program. The active and visible support of the Department’s executive and from the Human Resources Branch are key factors in making this happen.

Commitment of participants

All participants in the program are allocated $3,000 to assist with expenditure towards the developmental opportunities included in their individual plans. During the biannual workshops, participants are asked to provide a verbal report on their progress towards their identified goals.

Although the program has been generally well accepted by employees, there was initial scepticism about its purpose and the integrity of the selection process. Efforts were made to predict staff concerns and address them in the planning phase. For example, the appointment of an external consultant to run the program and the inclusion of management and union representatives on selection panels, ensured the process was fair and transparent. There is also growing acceptance of the program in the workplace, as more people become involved and its benefits are acknowledged.

The true effectiveness of a development centre as it applies in the NSW Department of Corrective Services will be examined in the years ahead. Among the strategic benefits that are already apparent is the nexus which has been created between HR functions which were previously operating in isolation. This program has allowed training, management development, recruitment and selection and job rotation to become inter-related and has allowed the organisation to begin to establish models for interventions such as coaching, mentoring and shadowing. Naturally the high costs associated with such a program must be balanced by future productivity gains. However, these costs are relatively insignificant compared to the long term human resource and business costs that confront an organisation that has not addressed the issue of succession planning.

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