

2020 Virtual Management & Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference

Getting Real - Online Leadership Assessment Center

Abstract

Assessment centers have traditionally been used in organizations for selection and developmental purposes. An online leadership assessment center was created using the best practices of assessment centers to allow undergraduate students from the university's global online campus to experience a simulated work setting, engage in real-time developmental activities, and subsequently have their leadership competencies evaluated in an equivalent way to in-person leadership assessment centers. What are the implications of assessment center activities for undergraduate students delivered in an online format? In this 60-minute activity session, we introduce participants to the online assessment center and its benefits. Participants have the opportunity to briefly assume the role of an assessor, and use rating scales developed to assess leadership competencies for one of the online assessment center activities. The session concludes with a discussion of what went well, the challenges, and future considerations.

Keywords: Online assessment center, curricular activities, leadership.

Introduction:

The online leadership assessment center is an interdisciplinary project that provides students the opportunity to engage in a variety of structured activities to assess their leadership competencies according to Bartram's Eight Great Competencies (Bartram, 2005), including interacting and presenting, analyzing and interpreting, leading and deciding, adapting and coping, and prioritizing and meeting multiple work demands while functioning in a leadership capacity. This online leadership center was created to provide an online equivalent to the assessment center offered to residential undergraduate students. The online leadership assessment center design integrates the best practices of traditional and on-campus leadership assessment designs (Jacobs, Griswold, Swigart, Loviscky, & Heinen, 2018) while allowing online students to engage in equivalent types of activities, such as multiple competency-based exercises, work related simulations, the use of multiple assessors to observe and rate leadership behaviors, the statistical analysis of data, and personalized feedback with a development plan. This activity supplements the organizational leadership curriculum and can be used as a credit-bearing course or as a stand-alone extra-curricular professional development activity. The online format allows the online assessment center to be used as an alternative design for student engagement during events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Assessment Centers: Historical Background

From the first business application by AT&T in the mid-1950s, to the now global use of them for various selection and developmental purposes (Thornton & Krause 2009), assessment centers are widely used in businesses and organizations. In terms of selection, they are used to determine appropriate candidates for leadership positions both external to and within organizations. They are also used for developmental purposes as a means to determine the skills leaders need to be successful in their particular roles within specific organizations, and to be used as the basis for leadership development

planning and training (Thornton & Krause 2009). Typical exercises include written reports, responding to emails, or presentations, and interactive activities such as one-on-one role-plays and group activities to assess emergent leadership and individual and team problem-solving (Thornton & Rupp, 2006).

Teaching Implications

This activity focuses specifically on assessment and development planning for undergraduate students. Our session relates to effective learning because it allows students to use the competencies learned in their prior leadership classes and apply them to simulated work activities. In a half-day format, students are given the opportunity to assume the role of a leader, engage in real-time work activities with the associated pressures and demands, produce work products, and get the chance to experience what it is like to be a leader on a given workday. The results of the assessment center activities provide other opportunities for student learning as a result of personalized faculty feedback and the creation of an individualized developmental activities plan report. This leadership assessment center provides students the opportunity to learn about their leadership strengths and areas that need further development through planned actions over time.

Online Assessment Center Learning Objectives

- Students will participate in activities to assess leadership competencies, such as role play, presentation, and written exercises.
- Students will be able to identify specific competencies associated with effective leadership performance.
- Students will be able to identify their leadership strengths and areas for further improvement.
- Students will complete identified developmental activities for further leadership skill development.

All of these learning objectives are discussed in the session. The teaching topics relevant to these topics are competency areas listed in the introduction, the use of assessment methodologies for student growth, the use of individualized feedback regarding leadership competencies, and the discussion of how leadership can be further enhanced through developmental activities. All of these teaching topics are addressed in the conference session.

Exercise Overview

This activity is presented in an online format and geared towards non-traditional undergraduate students taking online organizational leadership courses. Students are selected and sent an invitation to participate in the Online Leadership Assessment Center. This activity starts with an orientation to the center, information about the simulated organization, the identification of the role that students will assume, and prework written exercises (donor complaint and hiring selection) that students complete and submit before their day of assessment. Students meet with a faculty member at the beginning and the end of the assessment day. During the day of the assessment, students are asked to have their personal computer ready to be used in further assessment activities. During the day of assessment, the student resolves an employee conflict situation by meeting with one of two employees (played by an actor) engaged in a major work project and afterwards prepares and provides a presentation for the simulated organization's director (played by an actor). Student behaviors for written and in-person activities are rated by multiple trained assessors. After competency-based behaviors for all activities are rated and analyzed, an appointment is arranged for student follow-up with a faculty member who provides personalized feedback and a written development plan.

Prior to the day of assessment, assessors are identified and trained (graduate human resources or psychology students) to assess the participating student's behavioral competencies, rate them according to rating forms for each activity, and analyze the data. The participating students spend

approximately 2 hours completing prework activities and 2 hours participating in activities during the assessment day. The first cohort consisted of 3 students. The expected student participation will be approximately 10 students per semester in the future. There can be variations in the type of organizations presented and the specific role played. There are also additional exercises that can be included, such as leaderless group discussions. Students get the chance to ask questions at any time as well as during the day of assessment (about the activities) and the follow-up session (about their results and development plans).

Session Description

This 60-minute activity session presents an overview of the online assessment center with an opportunity for participants to briefly assume the role of an assessor, and use rating scales developed to assess leadership competencies for one of the online assessment center activities. The online assessment center was also created to give online students an equivalent opportunity that is available to on-campus students. In this session, we discuss the impetus for the creation of the online leadership assessment center, the process and methodologies used to create the center, the technology tools and platforms used, as well as the administration of the center along with some analysis of the aforementioned steps after the first cohort passed through the process. The assessment center provides a competency-based approach to the assessment of leadership competencies. We address the specific competencies used to assess student leadership competencies as well the exercises used to assess these competencies. Participants also get a first-hand look at some of the materials and activities that students engage in during the leadership assessment process. They also have the opportunity to experience some of the activities involved in the assessment center and engage in a discussion about how this activity enhances student growth. We also discuss the format and process of individualized faculty feedback. We discuss our successes, areas identified for further improvement in the next cohort for the online leadership assessment center, and ideas for the future. Conversation regarding all of the

above follow a brief presentation so that participants are able to discuss information related to the assessment center, their experience of the material, and have their personal interests addressed.

This session's multi-disciplinary approach to student learning and the use of innovative technology align with the conference's theme of Innovate and Collaborate.

| Session Overview and Topics | Time Allotted (60 minutes) |
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| What is an Assessment Center? | 2 minutes |
| Why Create an Online Assessment Center for Students? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-residence assessment center • Online assessment center | 3 minutes |
| How the Online Assessment Center was Created | 3 minutes |
| Online Assessment Center Learning Objectives | 3 minutes |
| SHL's "Great Eight" Competencies | 3 minutes |
| Pilot Study: First Cohort for the Online Leadership Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruited and trained assessors and actors • Selected and invited participants • Developed and ran assessment activities • Provided feedback to participants | 3 minutes |
| Creation of Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative team approach • Focused on Bartram Competencies—Competency-based behaviors • Use of high-fidelity simulations—engagement in real-time work activities • Use of realistic activities • Development of activities with enough ambiguity to allow for variance in behavior • Development of assessor materials that are clear and concise, but very detailed | 5 minutes |
| Materials: Participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background information on company and participant's roles • Exercises | 3 minutes |
| Online Assessment Activity--Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written exercise handout • Completion of assessor rating form | 5 minutes |
| Materials: Assessors & Actors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessors • Actors | 3 minutes |
| Participant Experience of Assessment Process: Prior to Day <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant selection and invitation process • Assessment timeframe—4 hours total • Orientation and pre-assessment work materials | 5 minutes |
| Video Clip of Role-play Exercise | 3 minutes |
| Participant Experience of Assessment Process: After | 3 minutes |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personalized faculty feedback—the follow-up meeting | |
| Data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The rating process--Assessor Rating form data Results of the Assessment Report | 3 minutes |
| Lessons Learned: Challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not everything translated exactly from face-to-face to online Technological limitations versus physical interaction (ex. cut emergent leader group activity) Adult population versus traditional age students Need significant person power to accomplish Assessors need more training for this to be an effective learning experience for them as well | 5 minutes |
| Lessons Learned: It Worked! <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most did translate effectively Students really like and benefitted from activities and feedback | 3 minutes |
| Future Considerations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership Assessment Center activities Student involvement Funding sources Technology Collaboration with other departments and programs | 5 minutes |
| Recommended Readings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bartram, D. (2005). The Great Eight Competencies: A Criterion-Centric Approach to Validation. <i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>, 90(6), 1185–1203. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.6.1185 Jacobs, R.R., Griswold, K.R., Swigart, K.L., Lovisky, G.E., & Heinen, R.L. (2018). From Campus to Corporation: Using Developmental Assessment Centers to Facilitate Students' Next Career Steps. <i>Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council</i>, 19(1), 125-154. Pennsylvania State University. (2020). From Classroom to Career: PNC Leadership Development Center. https://www.shc.psu.edu/life/career/leadership/index.cfm | |

Conclusion

The results of the first cohort of the assessment center demonstrates that online assessment center activities can be used to assess leadership competencies according to Bartram’s “Great Eight” Competencies identifying strengths and opportunities for further development. Assessment center activities traditionally targeted for in-person use is now available to undergraduate students online.

References

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