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*This newsletter features topics related to managing change and improving our work environments. If there are topics you would like to see covered or feedback you have about this newsletter, please submit your ideas and feedback to the following link:*  
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Assessments can help in times of change. They often look like the “tests” you took in high school in that they typically have multiple choice questions or ask you to compare two words or ideas. These days most can be taken on-line and require 20 or 30 minutes to complete.

The advantage of assessments is that they can help a person gain insight into their personality preferences, leadership style, and overall strengths and weaknesses in the workplace. They can also be a starting point for making change.

- As leaders gain insight into their own strengths and weaknesses, the hope is that they will modify their approach to leading.
- Hiring managers, seeking to change or improve a work group, rely on assessments to help guide that choice.
- Team members use assessment results to better understand how to interact with peers.
- Coaches use assessment reports to help executives identify goals for becoming more effective.
- Those seeking to select or change careers use assessments as a starting point to identify career choices.

The types of assessments available for use in business have really grown since I started working in corporate America in the 1990s. I’ve had several clients ask me for my choice of the “best assessment” and I have to say that is a very complex question to answer.

In graduate school I learned that cognitive ability tests (a.k.a., intelligence tests or IQ tests) were the best assessments because they help hiring managers predict which person might be a better candidate for a job. My doctoral thesis was actually a response to this very dense and well-validated research. My hunch was that other things also predicted success.

My research examined practical intelligence, also known as “street smarts.” This is the ability to acquire, manipulate and use information learned from poorly defined, unstructured, real-world experiences.<sup>i</sup> Or in lay terminology, being able to make good use of past experience.

Turns out my gut feeling was on target. Research indicates that practical intelligence does help predict success. Howard Sternberg’s research is quite interesting in this area<sup>ii,iii</sup> but much of his work is still in the halls of academia where the construct is being debated and developed for further research.

Many other assessments have become available and applied to the practical business setting. For example, measures of emotional intelligence and learning agility have gained some credibility in corporate settings. Other instruments, based in a variety of leadership theories, have also emerged and are available through organizations such as the Center for Creative Leadership, Human Synergistics, Aon Talent Solutions, Management Research Group, and Personnel Decisions, International.

### **Choosing The Right Assessment**

Now I am back to the complex choice of recommending the “best” assessment.

For selecting the right candidate, cognitive ability and personality assessments are important, especially when you’re choosing a candidate for an important role in your organization. When they are combined with an accurate job description, effective interviewing methods and reference checks, the likelihood of identifying the best candidate for the job is increased.

When using assessments to motivate, communicate, or inspire change the choice really depends on the situation.

For example, I recently worked with a large global technology group who chose to use assessments as a method of helping highly talented and experienced technologists change how they saw their role in the organization. Participants in a multi-day leadership program were asked to begin developing their ability to partner with outside vendors and work more directly with clients than they had in the past. Assessments this organization used included a conflict styles assessment and a report summarizing the participant’s scores in a 2-day assessment process.

Another organization I’ve worked with chose to use a personality assessment and a career assessment to help employees determine whether they would be interested in becoming a supervisor. This client invites high potential individual contributors to attend a six-hour training in which they examine the requirements of a supervisory role and then spend time reviewing their own assessment data to help them gain insight into their personality preferences and interests.

### **How To Choose**

My best advice on choosing an assessment comes from my knowledge of the research and my experience – yes you can say I’m about to use my own practical intelligence here.

First, take a good look at the purpose of your assessment. Identify why you want to change, motivate or influence yourself or others in the organization.

Second, do your research. You can do this yourself or hire someone with a background in assessment. Either way, do your best to choose assessments that have some credibility and are supported by research. For example, Human Synergistics’ Leadership/Impact (L/I) assessment is based in part on research conducted decades ago by Rensis Likert and Douglas McGregor. These researchers studied the types of assumptions managers make about employees and the influence of these assumptions on leaders’ reactions and managerial style.<sup>iv</sup> The idea behind this line of research is that if you identify people’s assumptions you might change behavior if you can get them to make different assumptions (e.g., managers who assume people need constant reminding and checking will behave differently if they begin to assume that employees will be motivated by a challenging assignment). It’s also

based in part on the work of Warren Bennis and James O'Toole whose decades-long research has identified certain behaviors that seem to be effective for leaders in any situation. The Leadership/Impact assessment assesses managers' assumptions and behaviors in 16 areas that were identified by using this previous research as a guide.<sup>v</sup>

Additionally, you'll want to identify what type of research has been done on the assessment itself. If you are looking for a tool to help you select candidates you will want to see if studies have used the assessment to actually predict the likelihood that a candidate will be successful on the job.<sup>vi</sup> For example, cognitive ability tests like the Watson-Glaser or the Wonderlic have been studied in this way. Some personality assessments have as well but it's important to note that others have not. This means that assessments like the California Personality Inventory (CPI) or some of the Hogan personality instruments are appropriate to use for selection while the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and DISC are not. To make sure you're using the appropriate assessment, it's usually best to contact an expert in this area.<sup>vii</sup>

Likewise, it's important to ensure that the instrument is assessing what it says it is assessing and not something completely different. Assessments of emotional intelligence are currently undergoing research of this type. Researchers are working to determine exactly what it is that "emotional intelligence" means and whether it can be assessed.<sup>viii</sup> Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership assessment also shows some room for further research in this area. Despite its popularity in business, it is still unclear whether it actually tests what it purports to assess.<sup>ix</sup> Again it may be helpful to

contact an expert for guidance in this area.

Third, talk to your business leaders about how they see leadership, what type of culture they want to create in the organization and what they see as critical for its leaders in the organization. Compare this information with your knowledge of the assessment tools available so you can choose an assessment or set of assessments that will compliment the business leaders' objectives.

Fourth, develop a strategy for introducing the assessments. If you aim to use the assessment for selection, do not use it for development purposes. If you launch the assessment as a development tool, do not use it as a means to fire participants who take the assessment and get results you're not happy with. Sounds logical, but I've seen organizations make this mistake. Be clear about how you want to use the assessment, make a commitment to use it in that way and be consistent with that commitment.

Finally, evaluate your choice. You can use a pilot program to do this. Additionally you may want to assess things like satisfaction with the process or identify the value it brings to the business (e.g., retention of new hires, improvements that participants in a leadership development program make that save money or improve productivity). An annual evaluation is also a good idea.



## **In Summary**

While choosing the right assessment is complex, running a business and leading people in that endeavor is infinitely more

complex. This is why I believe that the right choice of an assessment must be made based on what the business needs to communicate, motivate and influence in order to succeed. Most managers and executives I worked with have found the assessment process an insightful tool for developing themselves in their career. It's always been my own rule of thumb that

an assessment process should be well worth the investment of time and resources. It should communicate what the organization requires of the participant.

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This newsletter is edited by Larry Offner of West Palm Beach, Florida.

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<sup>i</sup> Offner, A. (1999), Tacit Knowledge and Group Facilitator Behavior. Doctoral dissertation.

<sup>ii</sup> Sternberg, R. J. (1995). For whom the bell curve tolls: A review of the *The Bell Curve*. Psychological Science, 6 (5), 257-261.

<sup>iii</sup> Boehle, S., Dobbs, K., Goldwasser, D., Gordon, J., Stamps, D. (2000). Finally a Test for Common Sense? Training. 37 (11), 30.

<sup>iv</sup> See Leadership/Impact Facilitator's Guide (2000). Human Synergistics/Center for Applied Research, Inc.

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.humansynergistics.com/>

<sup>vi</sup> These types of studies are usually called criterion-related validity studies.

<sup>vii</sup> Usually a person trained in evaluation, psychometrics and/or I/O or Organizational Psychology can provide expert advice regarding selection. If you have a question I'd be happy to point you in the right direction.

<sup>viii</sup> See for example: Conte, J.M. (2005). A review and critique of emotional intelligence measures. Journal of Organization Behavior, 26, 433-440.

<sup>ix</sup> Northouse, P.G. (2007). *Leadership Theory and Practice*. CA: Sage Publications, 97-100.