Assessment centre roles: the role-player and the facilitator

Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal

Background

You are in a role all the time. At home you may be in the role of mum or dad, husband or wife, cook, host, nurse or whatever, and you shift between these roles as demanded by the situation. At work you may be in the role of supervisor, coach, chairperson, expert, and so on. In other words, you are always adjusting your skills to fit the role you are in. The greater your skills, the greater your opportunity to excel in a range of roles. The greater flexibility you have in adapting your skills to the role, the more successful you will be. Role-playing is natural.

Responsibility

Your responsibility to the participant is to create opportunities for them to display the required behaviours, if they possess them. You are required to do this consistently with all the participants.

Your responsibility to the assessor is to enable them to have reliable observations.

Training

For any professional assessment centre, you will be trained. Role-player training is focused on the content of the role-play and the way it should be played. The training is very practical and includes practice.

The briefing will have a number of elements, such as the exercise purpose, scenario, role description, role behaviours, role emotions, expected participant behaviours and the role responses. The role briefing is not a script, it is a set of guidelines for you. To assist you in helping the assessor, you will have access to the participant’s brief.

Stay in role

Never, under any circumstances, move out of role while in the assessment sphere. Occasionally, participants will suddenly change their behaviour and make a statement to the effect that ‘I can’t do this.’ This is an indicator that they have been role-playing rather than handling the situation. Just stay in role and handle the situation as the role-person.

Another, more regular, occurrence is for the person to become so embroiled in the ‘reality’ that they lose track of time and engage emotions as they would if the situation were ‘real’. Again, stay in role and manage the situation.

Managing the participants

Your most time-consuming role is managing the participants through the assessment centre programme. Each participant is likely to have their own schedule that says where they should be and what they are doing at a particular time.

Let’s look at this juggling act

You will have a sub-set of the people preparing for an exercise. You will brief them on what they have to do and start them on their preparation. They have instructions about what they have to achieve, where and with whom (the role-player). During preparation some will seek further information from you that you do not have. Some will seek clarification about the information they have been given. This means that you will have to be fully conversant with the information that they have and, at the same time, have the skill to convert that knowledge into terms that the individual participant will understand. Some will seek guidance on how to tackle the situation they are going into, and you will diplomatically have to avoid giving assistance. Furthermore, you will have to be supportive and keep up morale.

As this sub-set goes off to their exercises, another group is returning from an exercise. They may need to fill in participant report forms prior to embarking on the briefing and preparation for the next exercise. One of these people may be concerned, or even upset, at their performance in the exercise. You will need to apply your counselling skills to ensure they are positive about the next exercise.

You may, at the same time, be invigilating a paper-based or computer-based task such as an in-tray exercise.

Handling problems

You are the person in the ‘hot seat’ when things go wrong. An example may be that an assessor becomes unwell. This will require rapid rescheduling of the exercise and you will diplomatically have to avoid giving assistance. Furthermore, you will have to be supportive and keep up morale.

Facilitating the wash-up

The information gathered by the assessors has to be shared during a results ‘wash-up’ discussion. That sharing has to be facilitated, and you are the person to do it.

Normally, you will deal with each participant in turn and each competency or criterion across the exercises. You will ensure the evidence is solidly based on observed behaviour. You will summarise the findings and establish an agreed rating for each competency or criterion.

Moving on criterion by criterion, the overall assessment of the person is established. In an assessment centre for development, you will establish the development needs, and in a selection centre the decision for or against the position or promotion.

Conclusion

Facilitating is a tough, demanding, much undervalued and highly skilled role.

References

Barry E Johnson BA MCMi MCIPD and Mandy Geal BA are directors of learning partners Ltd. Both Mandy and Barry have considerable business experience. Barry was the senior manager responsible for training, resourcing and development in Europe for a global company before joining learning partners. He operated training on a ‘zero budget basis’. Mandy was the M.D. of her own software house before becoming a founding director of learning partners Ltd.

Telephone: 01279 423294 • E-mail: info@learningpartners.co.uk • Website www.learningpartners.co.uk
Key skills

Responsive mode
- Expressing emotions
- Non-assertive
- Assertive
- Aggressive
Proactive mode

The facilitator
The role of the facilitator, in an assessment centre is normally grossly undervalued.

As a facilitator, you have two prime roles:
1. The first is to manage the operation of the assessment centre.
2. The second is to facilitate the ‘wash-up’. In a selection centre this is to manage the sharing of information by the assessors to reach a select/reject decision on each candidate. In a development centre it is to manage the synthesis of information to provide the basis of a development report.

The facilitator in action
Let’s consider the unfolding of an assessment centre and the activities that you, as a facilitator, will undertake.

The participants to be assessed have arrived. The apprehension is palpable; you can feel it. You can almost hear running through their heads the thought, ‘Oh my word, they (the ubiquitous ‘they’) are going to assess me’. Looking around the room, you see some people are silent, turned inwards, while some chatter brightly to their neighbours as a displacement activity. Some try to look cool and confident and clearly are not, and some are calm and confident and perhaps looking forward to the challenge – or are interested in finding out what the assessment will discover.

Conclusion
Remember, you are not acting. You are probably not a trained actor; consequently, you are always you. Relax and enjoy. Role-playing is great fun.

Top tips for role-players
- Maintain consistency of behaviour.
- Be flexible and respond appropriately to the participant.
- Stay in control of your emotions.
- Be consistent in your responses to participants.
- Don’t trigger anything that you should not know about in the role.
- Don’t move your body in a particular way to one participant, or give a particular piece of information, you must respond in the same way to other participants in a similar situation.
- Avoid triggering anything that you should not know about in the role. However, use this additional information to construct your replies and initiatives.
- Draw on your experience and improvise. If the participant behaves in a way that has not been anticipated, respond appropriately.
- You are in control of yourself. You don’t know about in the role.
- Draw on your experience.

Facilitating is a tough, demanding, much undervalued and highly skilled role

So, you are managing the participants, some of whom are stressed and some confused. You are managing the programme, so the right people are in the right place at the right time. You are catering for the needs of the assessors and the role-players, who always seem to believe you are the only one who understands what is going on. You are managing the interface with the venue, and you are managing anything that goes wrong, from sick participants to the venue catching fire. Doing this requires immense organisational skills, calmness under pressure, problem-solving skills, attention to detail and strong interpersonal skills.

Tracking the programme
Time is crucial in an assessment centre. One participant exercise slips and the whole programme slips. This means that you have to have your eye on the clock to make sure all sets of exercises start at the same time and finish at the same time. This requires enormous amounts of energy as you move round the facility and occasionally chivvy people to be in the right place, stopping them doing what they are doing without upsetting them.