

Centered on Assessment

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Assessment of Men was published in the spring of 1948, just as I was nearing the completion of work for my Ph.D. at Yale. It described the development and use of an "assessment center" (a new term) for the selection of intelligence agents in World War II. I read it soon after it appeared and found it compelling. Here at last was a method that was molar rather than segmental and which focused on human behavior, not paper-and-pencil responses, in complex, although simulated, situations.

My assignment in the Aviation Psychology Program in the Army Air Forces during the last year-and-a-half of the war had been in psychological research on airborne radar observer training. My role was to develop observational measures of performance in training, including five-hour simulated bombing missions. Later, at Yale, I was intrigued by McNemar's lengthy review of opinion-attitude methodology, in which he lamented the almost complete absence of evidence of a relationship between such measures and behavior. This was all I needed to hear. It motivated my dissertation, which became my first major journal publication.

So, I was published in the OSS volume because of my work and my long-standing conviction that psychology should focus directly on behavior. And behavior there certainly was at the OSS center, elicited by a wide variety of tasks and simulations. These included leaderless groups, several of a vigorous outdoor nature; assigned leadership roles, sometimes with other assessees and sometimes with role-playing confederates; interrogating a supposedly escaped prisoner; a stress interview; and many others. There were, in addition, paper-and-pencil tests and questionnaires. The whole procedure took more than three days for each group of assessees and a week for the staff.

But this creative combination of evaluative measures was not the only excitement in the book. "The main body of psychology started its career by putting the wrong foot forward. . . . After a century of diligent application, psychologists still lack sufficient ordered knowledge of everyday social behavior." So declared the authors of *Assessment of Men*, as they championed a new approach. A serious weakness of standard methodology, they declared, is that it is elementalistic, as contrasted with the organismic approach that guided the OSS efforts. They concluded, "For researches into normal personality, the OSS system of assessment, or something comparable to it, is essential, since most other selection systems do not include investigations into the dynamic components of the total personality and without these, one cannot even hope to understand the character structure of human beings." I couldn't wait to try it!

I was to wait eight years after reading *Assessment of Men* before I had the opportunity to develop and direct my first assessment center. AT&T had decided to initiate longitudinal

research into Bell System managerial careers and employed me to design and direct it. Here it was, on a silver platter, the perfect setting for an assessment center, and my proposal to use the method as the major research tool was readily accepted! So in the summer of 1956 and for the next four summers, we assessed 422 beginning managers and initiated the follow-up of their careers. The research went on for 25 years, and all who remained with the company went through assessment centers twice more along the way.

In 1958, I was asked to modify the research assessment center so that it could be used by lay staffs to select first-level managers from among rank-and-file employees. This proved successful, and assessment centers spread throughout the Bell System, and then to many other organizations. In 1970, William Byham, then with J.C. Penney, decided to form a company to market assessment center materials and know-how and very generously invited me to co-found Development Dimensions International. The firm expanded over the years into a wide spectrum of human resource programs with impressive success.

So *Assessment of Men* led me to unparalleled opportunities in research and practice, but that was not all. A doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland had published, in 1974, what was to become a classic article on assessment centers. A year later, as she was completing her Ph.D., there was an opening in the AT&T research staff, and she accepted our offer to join us. Thus I gained an incomparable partner who became a leading assessment center expert in her own right and with whom I was to work for many years—my wife, Ann Howard.

Some book!