

How to Study—Really Study—For Your Assessment Center

Whether you have a few days to study or a year, this material can help you maximize your time. You may think it looks rather difficult and complex—it is! But, it is surprisingly fun to really immerse yourself in the issues involved with supervising and managing effectively—and applying it to yourself and your department.

A few years ago, I was contacted by an officer who told me he was desperate to do well on his assessment center, coming up in about three months and would I please, PLEASE, PUHLEEZE, work with him? I don't do one-on-one work very much at all, because of the time required, but he seemed so anxious that I said I would. Shortly after that, another officer contacted me about the same thing and said he'd gotten my book and was reading it, but felt he would really benefit from some coaching. I decided to work with both of them because I thought their differences were interesting.

Rather than write out the whole timeline for the first officer (which I did in a previous version of this document, but found it depressing), I'll compare the two of them.

Officer One (Puhleeze Help Me!!)

Officer Two (I'm Already Working!)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Never read my book or any other. *Never did any research about supervisory topics. *Didn't seem interested in gaining any knowledge and skills to help him be effective if promoted—he just wanted the stripes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Read my book several times. He knew it better than I did. *Had a notebook with dividers, each with information about a different KSA area he had researched. *He developed lists of ways he could apply the material if promoted.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *When we met he only wanted to practice exercises, even though he knew none of the fundamentals of the process and what he needed to demonstrate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *When we met he essentially said, "Here is what I've been doing. Tell me what I need to do better and how you want me to study. I'm committed to this."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *As meetings continued, he always had a reason he hadn't done the assigned work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *He started every session with excitement about what he learned when doing the assignment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *In the fourth session he was doing as poorly on every practice exercise as he did the first time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *By the fourth session he was hitting every KSA purposefully and effectively, in every practice exercise.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *I told him I wasn't going to be able to schedule more time with him. He said that was OK, he felt pretty confident about it, if the fix wasn't already in. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *He and I worked together up until his testing day. He did well, was promoted and is soon going to be testing for the next rank.
<p>He ranked mid-range—not well enough to be promoted, but better than the two previous times. I've been told he has been even more negative than usual.</p>	<p>We don't stay in contact, but I enjoyed our training times and I respected his commitment.</p>

Your Study Plan

I know that some of you are studying with purpose and commitment—and have been for the last year or more. However, I would bet that not all of you are as focused as you know you should be. That may be because your test is not coming up for a few months. Give yourself the benefit of focused study right now.

1. Study to learn how to be excellent in the rank you seek, not just in the assessment center.

Any time you are confronted with a hypothetical scenario or question in a testing process, you will do better if your response is based on what you know to be a best practice for the rank you seek, not what you think “they” want to hear. Study to learn how to be excellent in real life if you are promoted and apply those things in your process.

Also, study the pros and cons of various options, so you know why one method is better than another, and can discuss it.

•Write out the list of the competencies upon which you will be rated, if you know them. Otherwise, go with the generic list you have seen in all of my material. It will be almost exactly what will be used in your test, because they are always going to be the key competencies for ranks that are responsible for others (supervisors and higher).

- *Effective Communications (Verbal and Written)
- *Interpersonal Effectiveness
- *Problem-Solving and Decision-Making
- *Job, Professional and Rank Knowledge
- *Planning and Organizing
- *Community Orientation
- *Employee Development and Motivation
- *Self Development and Initiative
- *Leadership and Role-Readiness

•Below each of those, write a full definition, to describe what it involves and what kind of behavior would typify it. Use a dictionary, Internet articles about the topic, books you have studied for the test or other books about the topic in general or about supervision and management. Reading material does not have to be about law enforcement settings.

What would indicate very high levels of learning in this competency? (Refer to my material on levels of learning, in the PowerPoint slides from the seminar and in the book. It is Bloom’s Taxonomy or Bloom’s Levels of Learning.)

Studying is developing that kind of in-depth material, not just having it provided to you. I have talked with hundreds of candidates who were given a list of competencies and

definitions, but never used it for study. What is given to us is rarely viewed as seriously as what we work on, on our own. So, work on this.

Note: Those of you who have read the first edition of my book will recognize this as the “Rating Sheet Activity”. I incorporate it in other ways in the second edition.

What to study:

- Read and fully understand the most significant procedures, processes, rules and policies related to the rank.
- If you had a supervisory or managerial text for your written test, continue studying it for your assessment center, especially if it involves working with subordinates.
- Find other books on police supervision and study them—do not just read quickly through them. Especially focus on the chapters that relate to the competencies or situations you have identified as typical for the rank in your department.

2. Study my book, “A Preparation Guide to the Assessment Center Method”.

I only make about \$2.75 a book, so I’m not getting rich from it, I swear! I do know, however, that it contains information you won’t find anywhere else and an approach that is useful for everyone who applies it. You can get it from Amazon or directly from the publisher Charles C. Thomas ([www. ccthomas.com](http://www.ccthomas.com)). Even if you only have a few weeks to prepare, you will invariably get something specific out of the book to help you with your process.

Even if we work together on your testing, we won’t have time to cover the material in the book—and it’s all crucial material. I depend upon you to get the book and read it between sessions. That’s the only way to know you’re getting all of the needed material.

3. Study department material that is most likely to be used by the rank you seek.

List the most common issues being dealt with, or work being done, by the rank you seek, in your department. Dealing with the behavior and performance of subordinates is probably #1 for sergeants. What else? What about higher ranks, if that applies to you?

It is unlikely that your assessment center will have an exercise that is off-the-wall and obscure. For one thing, it is difficult to uphold those if they are challenged in court. Your exercises and interview questions will most likely be about things that are most likely to have an effect on the rank you seek. Study those significant issues, not about minutiae or about things you would not use on the job.

For example, a candidate told me he was studying obscure state statutes, “just in case”. There is no case where any obscure state statute is going to be used in your assessment center. If you know it, you would probably wedge it in somewhere, if it worked for the situation. However, why waste good study time for that? Read one or two, memorize them and get back to real study.

Focus on:

- *Information about the most common work of those you will supervise.
- *Sections of your department material that are specifically about the rank you seek.
- *Significant issues related to your department and its mission.
- *Your community and problems facing it, in which you and officers you supervise might be involved.
- *Recent training materials that the rank you seek and those you will supervise are supposed to know—especially if it is a priority for your department or your chief or sheriff.
- *Anything that will help you gain the knowledge and skills needed to be most effective in the routine or most-likely emergency work of the rank.

Do not spend excessive time reading books about leadership. Books on leadership, especially those that espouse a specific approach to it, can be interesting and helpful, so they are worth reading and contemplating. However, if you have limited time or have not yet carefully studied department material and related skills-development material, only spend part of your daily study time reading about leadership. Learn to do your job well and people will be more likely to follow you anyway.

- The best use of leadership books is to refer to them in a general sense. So, you do not need to read every word, if you already are pressed for study time. Examples:

“I recently read *Leadership Under Fire* by Henry Thomas and liked his idea that we should be thankful for daily tests because they prepare us for the big ones that may only happen once in a lifetime.”

Or, “Bob, let me loan you my copy of, *Ten Small Step to Big Accomplishments as a Leader*. It has some very practical advice and might help you as a new sergeant.”

Or, on an In-Basket Item you might write or say: “Use the book, *Leading the Way*, by Helen Graham, to develop some training for officers. Helpful for learning to develop groups.”

I made up those books, but you get the idea!

4. Study your own experiences in work and life.

Take your resume apart and list the items in it (assignments, awards, etc.), by year. Under each item write about any aspect of it that you can use in the rank you seek.

- *Knowledge and skills you can share
- *Experiences that have taught you good lessons for the future.
- *Contacts you still maintain as useful resources.

*A change of attitude before and after.

*How it helped you grow and develop.

*Mistakes you made or observed and how you or others corrected them.

•Push yourself to look at every aspect of your career and find ways to link it to your future as an excellent sergeant or higher. This area of study should take you several study sessions of a couple of hours each, if you have worked to develop yourself and your career.

•Do something to increase your experiences: Put *at least one* full study session of an hour or so into thinking about what you could do between now and the time of your test to add to your list of experiences and maybe even your assignments (if you're studying far ahead of time).

*Ask to participate in a committee or in a group on your department or in some other organization. Use the experience to learn to work with groups and to have a leadership role, as well as to gain knowledge about the group's focus.

*Identify a problem in your department or in the community and take the lead to either solve it or make it known to resources that you identify.

*Interview people of the rank you seek. Limit the time to twenty minutes and send questions ahead of time. Ask about their most common challenges and daily work and what departmental procedures they use the most. What training has helped them the most?

(Do not become discouraged if some of those interviews are not very helpful. You still will gain some insights.)

*Show initiative about doing small but needed tasks around your workplace. See if you can get others to assist you and be able to mention it as an example of daily leadership.

Note: Only now and then does any candidate follow through on that last suggestion. It is much easier to talk "cosmic leadership" than it is to straighten up the roll call room or clean the refrigerator!

A lieutenant wrote to me last year and said he had gotten two officers and a sergeant to help him straighten up the roll call room and it was the talk of the department that he had been seen cleaning tabletops! And, inevitably, some officers made fun of it and never said thanks. Officers (of all ranks, but especially patrol officers) really are mean-spirited too often! Don't you be that way.

5. Study the Assessment Center Process and Potential Exercises

Spend some time every session refreshing your knowledge about the assessment center process and how the exercises work. This is where the book will come in handy. The more you know what is being accomplished through the process, the better you will understand how you can do your best.

Ask everyone who has participated in an assessment center to describe the setting and what they remember about it. (You'll get very different views!)

- If you know the exercises that will be used (or if the same exercises have been used every time and the same person or company is producing this AC), study those. If you do not know the exercises consider the most frequently used ones:

- *Role-play

- *In-Basket and verbal justification.

- *Presentation.

- *Critical Incident (verbal or written explanation of your responses).

- *Structured Interview.

- *Written assignment.

- Consider five of the most-likely competencies that could be identified using each of those.** Almost all of the common competencies mentioned on Page Two can be identified by any exercise, but some are more likely than others are. You will not make a mistake about them, because it is not that difficult, but it will be good practice to do it.

- Develop scenarios:** In every study session develop a hypothetical scenario for one or more of the exercises, just as if you were the producing company. Write it as though a candidate was going to read it and have half an hour to prepare. If you are going to have a structured interview you could start it with, "Let's assume you are promoted ... Then, you can explain the scenario and close with, "How would you respond?"

- *Make sure the scenario relates to the likely daily work of the rank you seek, so it is relevant and valid.

- *You should also write it in a way that allows the candidate to show at least five competencies several times.

- Write the scenarios and your responses (as well as practicing saying the responses) so you have a complete record of your efforts and can study them.

The most frequent request from candidates to me is that I develop sample scenarios, in-basket items or role-play situations for them. Apart from just not having the time, I do not do much of that because it is far, far better for the candidates to develop most of them. Exercises do not need to be surprises all the time, and figuring out exercises is tremendously helpful.

6. Study by practicing.

If you practice exercises, do not just stop there. Take the time to write down your key responses (even if they were verbal) and analyze them. What competencies did you demonstrate and how strongly do you think it was? (Did you say anything above the norm? Did you refer to anything to back up what you said? Did you refer to the bigger picture of the situation? Did you mention any facts or examples?)

What would have benefited you or added to the response? (Then, find that information and study it, or study how to improve in whatever you were doing—speaking or writing.)

You may think you could not answer those questions, but answering those questions is what will put you in the higher levels of learning that you need. (As I mentioned on Page Two, refer to my book or to the seminar material, to refresh about levels of learning—Bloom’s Hierarchy of Learning.)

7. Talking is another way to study:

If you have a study partner or two, assign topics for that person to discuss briefly (maybe two or three minutes). Then, each of you contributes information, something you have read or a life experience that supports your opinions about it.

*Try two approaches:

(1.) Limit your response to 3-5 minutes. This will help you practice being concise but still including significant information.

(2.) Work through a list of topics and spend at least half an hour talking about one topic, to the most in-depth level you can think of. Include:

Quotations

Your philosophy or beliefs about the topic

Facts and opinions

The future of the department in this area

How you agree and disagree about popular thought related to the topic

How you would train officers about it

See what that would require you to do? If you take one little topic apart and teach about it as long as possible, you will need to know a lot about the topic and about you in relation to it. Those are both ways to be more effective in your testing process.

•If you study on your own, write out thoughts about a myriad of rank-related topics. Then, write key thoughts and talk about each of them.

Video or audio: If you can record your verbal practice, do so. You will learn more by watching yourself with the eye of a critic than you will by having someone else critique you and trying to make the changes they suggest (although that can be helpful). Remember to critique based on the competencies.

*Do you fulfill the full definition you developed about Verbal Skills?

*Do you explain your thoughts clearly, briefly and with Expanded Thinking?

*On a scale of 1-10, how much did you demonstrate each competency on your list, based on what you said and did in that short response? (You may not have covered everything possible, but you should always aim for something above the norm. If you thought of it, others did too. What else can you add?)

Note: If you read my book you will recognize this as the “AC Practice Cards” exercise.

Summary About Study: Do it.

I have known hundreds of candidates who study in every way mentioned here, plus a few other methods. They put in about an hour a night and four hours on a weekend day. One study group met every Saturday for four hours, for a year! (That might be a bit much to expect of most people, but it's better than wasting time every month or so, in a B.S. session with friends, disguised as a study session.)

- If you have several months before your test, you can reduce time a bit, but not by much. Use study time to gain in-depth knowledge and skills and become comfortable speaking about them.
- If you have only a few weeks, study every chance you get. Really study. Sit by yourself and focus without interruptions. Make the study time feel as important as if you are in school and you have a pass/fail test the next day.
- Think of something new to do every study session and keep a record of your study activities. You will enjoy reading it someday.

Final thought: *Study* is from the Latin words that mean zeal, care, and to be diligent. Those are good approaches to your study time as you prepare for your assessment center.

Best wishes!

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