

Assessment Center Preparation When You Have Limited Time

You may have been working on your assessment center for a considerable length of time---or just getting started. Either way, this material will help you focus your efforts.

Six things to be working on: There are six key activities that should be taking up a large part of your free time from now until the assessment center. I realize that family and work all require your attention and I'm not suggesting that you neglect either one. But, this is time-consuming work that needs your focus, whenever you can do it.

1. Take your career apart and consider it in detail: You don't need a formal resume (unless your testing process requires one anyway), just a list of your main assignments for the last five years or so—further back if some of those gave you a chance to do some very significant things.

Put yourself back into each assignment, mentally. Think about it carefully, because it could make a difference in how you are able to respond to an exercise.

Did you ever:

*Have a role in bringing something together or take the lead in getting something accomplished?

*Work on a committee of officers?

*See an organizational problem (even a small one) and do something to solve it? (It could have been a problem in the department or in the unit or team.)

*Notice something that was a problem and wished you had the authority to do something about it? (It may have involved other officers, the way work was done, or how sergeants handled a situation or people.)

*Help officers who asked for your help? (Why did they ask you?)

*Create something or make something better?

*Teach or train officers? About what? Why you? Anything significant about that? (The kind of training, a specific trainee or group who needed extra attention, a difficult or challenging environment, etc.) Did you coach one-on-one or teach a class? What was the challenge?

*Voluntarily work with a community member or group to deal with a problem. Were you successful or did it come back eventually?

*Give a presentation to a community group? How many times, to who and about what?

*Help to resolve a conflict between fellow officers or between citizens—really resolve it.

*Work with someone higher in the chain of command to get something accomplished (when others did not work on it too).

*Have significant responsibility in a crisis, emergency situation or critical or tactical incident? Why you? How did it work out?

*Work on a project or activity that was significant for the department?

*Gain expertise in one or more topics or activities?

*Attend training? What subject? Did you learn something you applied?

*Study anything to do the work better? (Manuals, procedures, guides, etc.)

*Have a set-back that you overcame?

*Do anything else that, as you remember that assignment, stands out as impressive or that took a lot of energy and focus?

The bottom line for looking at your career is to see it with new eyes and be ready to consider how you could use aspects of it in your assessment process. Briefly mentioning previous experiences can help set candidates apart significantly.

Whether or not you produce and present an oral resume (career presentation), you need to be able to appropriately interject your career experiences and accomplishments. If you don't say it, the assessors won't assume it or guess at it.

2. Use your career experiences to get ready to answer the unspoken questions that can help you get higher ratings:

(1.) Where did you get that information? If your actions or opinions in an exercise are being influenced by a rule, procedure, statistic, fact, statement by the chief, thought expressed in a book, or some other source, state the source whenever it's reasonably possible to do so. This fits the C (Considerations) in PACTSFID, a great thought structuring method.

(2.) Can you prove it? What have you done in the past to make us believe you about your idea, advice to an officer, statement about your intentions or plans, or whatever it is you're saying or writing? One "for example" is worth a dozen statements with no proof.

Remember, the best indication of future performance is past performance. Many candidates say or write things to indicate they will be committed sergeants, working with the community, helping officers to develop and doing the things that improve the organization—but they never once say what they have done in the past that is the proof that they can do those things in the future.

(3.) So what? What will you do in the future to show us that you'll use this past experience? This ties in with #2. Even if you have had a great career up until now, you have to show how you will apply it in the role of a sergeant, working with and through officers to achieve the mission in the community. I don't know when you'll have the chance to do that---but I know you will have the chance...look for it!

One of the most common assessor comments about candidates is that they are probably very good officers (or corporals) but they aren't thinking like a sergeant. Here are some of the indicators of that limited thought process:

*The candidate never refers to directing officers or working with officers or anything related to the people they will be supervising. Even in an organization where candidates are "working sergeants", there is an expectation in the assessment center that candidates refer to how they will work with and through their subordinates or direct reports in each scenario or in interview responses

*The candidate never refers to working with a commander. The assessors are commander level and notice immediately when candidates don't ever refer to asking for input or critique, reporting to a commander, keeping the commander informed, etc.

*The response of some candidates is so limited and small that it sounds as though their view of work is about one inch square, while other candidates seem to understand so much and have so much savvy about the reality of work and the community that their view is infinite or at least very large.

3. Purposely collect and memorize some Copy and Paste sound bites. A sound bite is a concise phrase that expresses a thought or conveys information, often (but not always) in a memorable way. They are useful for getting and keeping the attention of assessors, in your written work, impromptu presentations or any other exercise.

You only need about ten, covering a variety of information categories or supervisory topics. Then, you copy and paste them from your mind into exercises as you need them. You may know some already, but some you will need to research. It is a great way to show your knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and experiences to the assessors.

Topic areas for which sound bites are effective:

- Supervisory skills, in general. Consider having a sound bite that could be linked to each of the core competencies for the rank you seek (see the other training material for that).
- A significant philosophy that pertains to supervising, the community, leadership or some other topic that is likely to be included in an assessment center for the rank you seek.
- Some statistics or key information about your organization and the community.
- Something you've read or heard that has influenced your approaches to work, people, the community or life.
- The rules, procedures and policies most likely to be part of an assessment center: Pursuits, use of force, harassment, the mission statement, use of force, other significant issues, especially those that have caused problems in the past.

- Some of your career experiences that were significant and can be related to the rank you seek.

Examples of Sound Bites:

- “We have 213 sworn officers and 44 non-sworn employees on our department. As a sergeant, my primary responsibility will involve only 12 officers, but I want to remember that we represent the rest of the department to every citizen in our community.”

- “We had 322 discourtesy complaints last year. I realize we can’t prevent all of those. But, I do think we can reduce the number by teaching officers about effective ways to respond to the anger and frustration of some of those they contact. I’ve worked in some incredibly challenging situations and not only have I never had a complaint, I’ve gotten compliments from many people who started out angry.”

You could add to that soundbite in several ways: Where did you get that statistic and why do you know it? Where did you learn those skills? How could you influence the officers you supervise to have the same good experiences you did? How will that ability help you as a sergeant?

- “I always remember the thought by James Riley (or some other author), that....”

Where did you read that, if it’s significant? How will you share that thought with officers, if it would be good to do? How have you applied it in the past and how might you apply it in the future?

- “A situation I was involved in last year has been a great example for me of the challenges of supervision, because of all the elements I was responsible for while it was happening.”

You can add to that soundbite: How will you share those experiences to develop officers? How might you use the experiences in the future? What was the outcome?

- “A book I read that I find very helpful in many situations is....”

When did you first read it and why? How will it help you as a sergeant? How will you share the thoughts with officers?

- “I’d get a written statement from the officer, before I talked to him in person.”

Why would you do that? What rule, policy or procedure does that reflect?

Note: If you find yourself referring to the same material repeatedly in your assessment center exercise, but it seems relevant, you could say something a bit different about it each time:

- “As I mentioned before....”

- “Once again, the concept I mentioned earlier applies...”

•“I’ve mentioned that case several times, but it is so applicable that I’ll use it again here.”

•“If you recall, I quoted Alexander Smith earlier. That same thought applies here....”

You can do that in both verbal and written work, worded slightly differently, as needed.

The bottom line about sound bites: Develop and memorize a dozen or so and practice saying them. Think of how they could be used in a variety of situations and exercises. Then, look for the chance—and remember to use them

4. Study the competencies upon which you know are likely to be rated in your assessment center. At first you can use the ones in the training material and in my book, if you have it. (A Preparation Guide for the Assessment Center Method. On Amazon or from the publisher, Charles C. Thomas).

If you are given a list by the testing company or coordinator, focus on those. But, you’ll see that every list is very similar. That’s because there are only so many key competency areas required for effectiveness as a supervisor that can be tested using an assessment center or interview.

- What is the definition of that competency and what would be a description of it?
- What words and phrases would be used by a candidate who shows the competency optimally?
- When and how have you shown this in the past?
- How will you show this with the officers of all ranks and the citizens you work with in the future?
- How do you know about this? (Read something? College class? Training? Many significant experiences? What were they?)
- How might you gain more knowledge and skills in this area?
- How will you help officers develop in this area?
- What testing activity could be used to find out the degree to which a candidate possesses this competency? (You may need to refer to the other material to know the options for testing.)

5. Read and study any material related to the rank you seek. Keep reviewing the operations manual sections, R&Rs and SOPs that refer to the rank you seek, specifically, or anything that deals with common activities or roles of the rank you seek. You don’t have to memorize a lot, but be strong in your knowledge of the things you might need to know about on your first shift.

6. Video yourself and self-critique. Seeing yourself on video will help you make eye contact, stop saying “Ummm” and improve your clarity and smoothness. Write some topics on pieces of paper, then pick one at a time and video yourself talking about it for three minutes. They don’t need to be surprise topics, just get used to using sound bites, tying in the competencies and speaking smoothly.

Do you see why it would be helpful to have time for more work or maybe even time to develop a solution to a problem or to join a group or committee? It isn’t possible to change your career activities in a small amount of time. However, you can maximize what you have done. It isn’t unethical or manipulative to do that, it’s simply the way to open up and let all you have to offer be available to you, to share with the assessors in one way or another.

Keep the faith---it isn’t too late and if you have something to offer you can use this material to help you focus and demonstrate your readiness for the rank and role.

Best wishes!

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