

The TWO Main Reasons for Differences Between the Ratings of Candidates, And How You Can Have an Effect on Both of Them.

The following material contains some information that is also found in other items I distribute. Read all of it anyway, to focus your thoughts on what will be required of you if you want to receive high ratings in your assessment center.

There are nearly always *only two fundamental reasons* why ratings differ between candidates—and both point to why preparation takes time and should be a constant part of our career development. Those two reasons are:

1. Differences in communication skills—manner, style and habits.

and

2. Differences in how significantly and strongly the rated competencies/dimensions are demonstrated.

At first glance you might think those two things would be obvious, but to most candidates they are not. Many candidates feel disappointed and angry at their ratings, because they feel confident they responded correctly to each exercise scenario. However, they do not perceive the flaws in their verbal communication and they do not perceive the difference between their responses and responses that more solidly demonstrate the competencies being rated. As one candidate said, after he improved appreciably, “I didn’t realize how much better I could be.”

REASON ONE:

**Candidates vary in their verbal communication skills:
Their abilities to speak smoothly, confidently and effectively.**

You will get higher ratings if you can speak and write in a highly effective manner. As in real life and work, to be understood and valued fully, you must put effort into what you say and write. When you only have ten to twenty minutes to say the words that demonstrate your level of competency, every word matters—and everything you do while you’re talking matters too.

If your experience has shown that you are not very good at speaking to groups or that you have difficulty putting your thoughts into words in stressful situations, you will need to work to gain skills in those areas—but it is possible to do so. The way to begin is to identify the components of effectiveness and work to improve in each of those areas.

The components of verbal effectiveness:

•**Speak clearly and smoothly.** Articulation and enunciation involve pronouncing words distinctly and correctly and having a rate of speech and tone that makes it easy to understand the words. That kind of smoothness also sounds more sure and solid—as though the speaker knows what he or she is talking about.

When words come out in a jumble or in a stammering way, it is uncomfortable for the speaker *and* the listener and detracts from a confident and sure sound.

ESL: Sometimes promotional candidates for whom English is a second language have difficulty speaking clearly while they are also mentally composing thoughts. This may cause their words to come out in a halting way and they may start and stop two or three times before they complete a thought.

Those candidates may be very knowledgeable and have effective thoughts, but stress and time-pressure makes them sound unsure and disorganized. (The same problem can cause them to be difficult to understand on the police radio, when they're speaking rapidly or are excited.)

Practice speaking slowly and clearly. Whatever the cause, if enunciation is difficult for you, practice while purposely talking slowly and distinctly, enunciating each word clearly. Make an audio or video recording, so you can hear how the words sound when you take the time to pronounce them correctly and speak clearly.

Develop and memorize sound-bites. Another way to ensure clarity is to have some phrases that are well-developed and practiced, to interject into a wide range of scenarios. For example, if you know you will have an In-Basket and a justification of it to a panel, have brief opening and closing statements you know you can say clearly and effectively.

•**Speak concisely but completely and in a well-organized way.** Practice expressing your thoughts so you do not ramble or use a great many more words than necessary. Use good judgment to decide what your comments *must* include, what they reasonably and helpfully *can* include and what isn't necessary and will only detract from your communications.

Many candidates do "stream of consciousness" talking, in that they say whatever pops into their head without any mental editing. Others just say the basics and do not explain their thought processes.

Just as in real life, you don't want to sound curt or brusque or as though you have nothing much to say, but you certainly do not want to irritate your listeners by telling long stories, being redundant or rambling from one point to another. You want to sound engaged, interested, knowledgeable and even a bit inspirational.

•**Speak in a manner that shows purposeful self-control and composure.** This means you may need to work like never before, for months in advance, to eliminate habitual verbal and sound fillers, repetitive phrases, distracting mannerisms, odd quirks and other habits that make people start keeping track and also cause them to "turn you off" mentally.

If anyone has ever commented on the way you habitually do something or say something, swear you will break that habit—not just for the assessment center but for all of your communications.

•**Speak in a way that sounds credible, sincere, energized, interesting and engaging.** In real life and work, you will not be able to influence others if you sound unconvincing because your words don't match your demeanor, if you don't present proof to back up your assertions or if you sound as though you are just saying buzz-words without any real conviction or understanding.

*If you can't define a term and explain concisely and effectively how it relates to your potential work or to your organization, don't use the term.

*If you have never used a term or referred to a concept in your conversation or work and only intend to use it in your assessment center, don't use it.

One way to ensure that you sound sincere is to *be* sincere and sell your thoughts by using your voice and facial expressions, within reason and appropriateness for the setting.

How to Increase Verbal Communication Skills

Video yourself for self-critique and critique by someone else, if possible.

On cards or pieces of paper, write topics and interview-type questions, related to your potential rank. There are some ideas in this and other material I distribute.

Pick one and talk about it for a specific amount of time, varying the time from one minute to five minutes. Do that for two or three topics every few days, putting used topics in a separate stack. Then, take the stack and move through it again, keeping cards in the stack so you can practice them all repeatedly.

Add to the cards regularly, as you read more or have ideas for topics or questions.

•Self-critique by watching and listening for a good tone, comfortable rate and an engaging sound, as well as overall smoothness of speech.

•Ask someone else to do the same thing. If the person is not in law enforcement, just ask them to notice the way you look and sound but not to worry about critiquing the actual thoughts unless something sounds obviously wrong or confusing.

The most important part: Use the critiques to be purposeful about making changes.

The bottom line about Verbal Communication Skills: I have never seen someone who received low or only medium level ratings in Verbal Communication Skills get high or very high ratings in every other competency area. I think there are two reasons for that.

First, communication is all about conveying information to the listener, so it can be evaluated effectively. Second, people who have worked to develop themselves in the other competency areas have usually found opportunities to talk about a wide range of professional topics. They gain and practice verbal skills every day.

I have also seen candidates get very high ratings in Communication Skills and receive only mid-range to low ratings in the other competency areas. That is because being able to speak effectively does not overcome the lack of something to say. (I've never let that stop *me*, but you should do better!)

**REASON TWO FOR RATING DIFFERENCES:
Candidates vary in their operational, technical and interpersonal
knowledge and skills and how strongly they demonstrate them.
(Rank, role, task and professional knowledge and
skills, experiences and positive attitudes.)**

Remember the formal definition of an assessment center: *An Assessment Center is a process employing multiple techniques and multiple assessors to produce judgments regarding the extent to which a participant displays selected competencies.*

You get your ratings according to the degree to which the assessors for each exercise think you demonstrated each competency being rated (often called a *dimension*, a *KSA area* or simply a *rating area*). It really doesn't take all that much to demonstrate them to a high degree, but you need to communicate more than fluff and you need to be focused and clear, so the assessors can clearly link your words and actions to the competencies being rated.

As a reminder: You will never get a high rating in any competency, solely because you fulfilled it in the past or because you've done positive things in your current rank or are well-respected. The real value of those positive things is to link them to what you will do, if promoted.

It's a one-two punch: Essential you need to be saying.....

I did this. Here is how I will use it in the rank I'm seeking. .

I know this. Here is how I will apply it in the rank I'm seeking.

I have this attitude or philosophy. Here is how I will demonstrate it in the rank I'm seeking.

I have this reputation. Here is how that will help me in the rank I'm seeking.

(You should also have ideas for how all of those can be used to develop those you will be supervising or commanding and how it will ultimately help the community you serve.)

The most commonly assessed competencies:

- Problem-Solving and Decision-Making
- Judgment and Professional Maturity
- Organizational, Job and Rank-Specific Knowledge
- Development of Self and Others
- Community and Mission Orientation
- Interpersonal Skills
- Planning and Organizing
- Professional Demeanor/Role Readiness
- Leadership Commitment and Potential
- Communication Skills (Verbal and Written)

The titles in some processes may sound different than those, but somehow and in some way you can be sure they will be considered.

How to use the list of competencies: If you know the specific competency/dimension titles being assessed in your process or if you are preparing early and are using the generic list above, you can apply each of the following questions to each competency, as a way to prepare.

This is similar to the Rating Sheet Exercise I often suggest as part of practice. Look at each competency, one at a time, ask yourself these questions and answer it fully, on paper or verbally. Don't assume you could answer it if you needed to, force yourself to do so.

1. What is the definition of this competency or knowledge and skill area? Research it and decide what would fully demonstrate it to assessors in the types of exercise you are likely to have.

*What *words and phrases* are part of the vocabulary of this dimension? (What would let an assessor know you understand the concepts behind this competency?)

*What best practices or suggested actions are among the most obvious for this area?

*What would someone of the rank you seek look like and sound like if they are NOT demonstrating this? If they ARE demonstrating this?

2. What have you done in the last one to three years that demonstrates this strongly?

*What sets you apart from other persons of your rank in this area?

*What do you plan on doing that would set you apart from others of your rank if you are promoted?

3. What book or magazine article, if any, have you read in the last year that relates to this area? What is the most memorable material you've read about it?

4. What do you think is the biggest challenge for the rank you seek, as it relates to this?

5. What would you train officers under your leadership, about this area?

*How does it relate to the work of those you will be supervising and/or managing?

6. Have you ever attended training that was about it?

Did you save the material? How could you share it with those you supervise, if it is appropriate?

7. How could this competency area be demonstrated for the rank you seek, in some of these common assessment center scenarios? (This may be a challenge!)

*Complaint from citizens about crime.

*How to increase the self-initiated work of officers.

*Discussing an unpopular command decision.

*Dealing with an officer who seems to have a negative attitude.

*Resolving conflict between two officers.

*Increasing community involvement in crime prevention.

8. What is something you have thought about this area or concept that you think might be a slightly different approach than others might have?

9. Why is this competency or dimension important for the rank you are seeking?

10. When the rank you seek demonstrates this to a large degree, how does that help officers and the organization? If it is not demonstrated, what is the harm to officers and the organization?

11. If someone of the rank you seek demonstrates this to a large degree, how does that help the community? If it is not demonstrated, how could it harm the community?

12. Have you improved in this area over time? What will you do to improve even more?

13. What might an exercise contain that would require you to demonstrate this competency area strongly? (In-Basket Item, Presentation, Role-Play, Tactical Incident, etc.)

14. How have all of your career experiences until now, prepared you to be highly qualified in this area?

15. Interview by phone, email or in person, at least two ranking people, either sworn or non-sworn and ask them what they think is important about each topic area and how they think each can be demonstrated in the assessment center.

16. Be creative! What else can you think to consider about this competency area?

Reason Two-A: Candidates vary in how solidly, significantly and consistently they demonstrate the competencies

I recently added this “Two-A”, rather than making it a third issue. Many candidates simply do not demonstrate the rating areas strongly enough in what they say or write. They use general statements rather than specifics and do not give solid responses or make solid statements, even when they have the knowledge to do so.

For example, in response to an interview question about an officer who makes a sarcastic and cutting remark at roll call, when another officer is talking about something he observed, the candidate may say what he would do at the time, then say what he will do about talking to the officer:

“I’ll call him in and talk to him about what he said and remind him that comments like that don’t help anybody and end up being negative for everyone. I’ll also make sure he knows that it’s not acceptable and that I don’t want to hear that again at roll call.”

That response could be developed by anyone, whether or not they were a sergeant, because it doesn’t indicate knowledge of a technique to be used, just a general concept. There is not much there for an assessor to make a note about.

Instead:

“I will call him into my office, so we can talk in private. I’ll repeat his remarks and tell him that they disrupted roll-call and shut down further comments. Then I’ll ask him to tell me what he was thinking when he said it and what his intentions were. I want him to talk about it rather than me just lecturing him about it. Even if I don’t agree with his justification, it gives me insight into some of his other actions or how he might act in other situations, or it might uncover some conflict I didn’t realize was going on.

After he explains why he made the remarks, there may be something disclosed that I need to deal with, but I will also make sure he is aware that he is not to make that kind of comment again. One way I could do that would be to ask him what he will do the next time he’s tempted to make a sarcastic comment in roll call. That way he actually makes a statement that he knows the right way to act.

I could also use that as a time to let him know his remarks concern me because I wonder if he uses that same tone of voice or makes that same kind of comment to members of the public when he’s upset. I think it’s important for all of us to realize that most of our behavior is habitual. If it’s not right in one setting it’s probably not right in other settings.”

If you were an assessor, comparing the two responses, which would give you more notes under Problem-Solving, Role-Readiness, Interpersonal Skills, Supervisory Control, or other areas that might be rated? The difference is not just in the number of words, it’s in solid, significant information that demonstrates supervisory KSAs.

Like a pinball machine: I often compare hitting the rated competencies solidly with the concept of hitting the posts in a pinball machine. The way to make points is to keep the pinball in play and hit the high-point posts repeatedly. The same thing applies in your assessment center exercises.

FINAL THOUGHT:

The Degree To Which You Demonstrate the Competency Areas Is Based on The Sum Total of the Two Elements You Bring to the Process

A harsh truth that I often say in class or to individuals is, “You’re probably not as good as you think you are.” (True for most of us on occasion, in every setting.)

I have talked to officers of all ranks who think they are incredibly insightful and knowledgeable about many aspects of organizational development, supervision, management and leadership, but the reality has been the opposite. They’re not usually being arrogant, they just don’t realize how much more there is to know, so what they do now seems like quite a bit.

Sometimes the issue is just that they haven’t had to think about the Big Picture of the department or the requirements of a sergeant or higher. Their thoughts and responses are from the viewpoint of the person being supervised, not from the perspective of a supervisor. That is understandable. But, from the first minute of the first shift they will need to be thinking like a sergeant who will be representing the chief or sheriff, through the chain of command—so they need to be thinking that way already.

You have probably heard the thought that we don’t know what we don’t know. I refer to that as “the irony of ignorance.” On the other hand, the curse of knowledge is that once we know something, we tend to forget what it was like to not know it—and we start thinking we always knew it. Teachers, trainers, supervisors and commanders always need to keep that in mind.

Make it your goal to not only learn more but to think in more complex ways about topics related to the rank you seek.

However, even if you are highly knowledgeable and skillful, you must demonstrate your readiness through what you say and write and how you say and write it, if you want the perfect line-up of high ratings in each competency area.

You must show a high level of *verbal and written communication skills* in order to effectively convey *operational, technical and interpersonal knowledge and skills*.

Your ratings will reflect the degree to which you combine those two things in your process.

Best wishes to you---keep practicing and make every day an assessment center.

Tina Rowe
Denver, CO