

How to Develop Practice Exercises For Your Assessment Center Preparation

One of the most beneficial things you can do in your assessment center preparation is to develop practice exercise scenarios and items. It's like getting to be an intern for a testing company, right before your assessment center.

This material can't give you the kind of expertise you need to be professionally effective at developing exercises, but it will help you develop some draft-quality practice items. (It will also help you appreciate the work that goes into developing effective exercises for your real process.)

Why it's so helpful to develop practice exercises:

- It requires you to identify department-specific concerns, so you can incorporate them into exercises.
- It allows you to clearly see how the structure of an exercise is based on the competencies or effectiveness factors being rated.
- It involves thinking through a wide range of potential issues that might be part of testing—and some of those will be in your actual test.
- You can have as many practice exercises as you want to develop. You don't have to wait for someone else to produce them.
- You'll be able to have department-specific exercises with the ranks, titles and units that are familiar to you, rather than something generic.
- If you work with a study partner or a group, you can develop exercises and still have the surprise factor now and then.

One more thing to understand: A person who develops practice exercises for you may take a full day to develop a useful exercise like a ten item In-Basket that you will work through in 45 minutes—and be ready for another one. They may take several hours to develop a Critical Incident scenario that fits your jurisdiction and rank—then, you'll work through it in twenty minutes. It's not very rewarding to develop practice exercises—unless you're doing them for yourself.

HOW TO USE YOUR PRACTICE ITEMS:

1. Slow walk-through, in-depth practice: There is tremendous benefit to looking at an exercise and spending considerable time—maybe several hours—thinking about it from several perspectives:

- What responses would solidly and significantly link to the competencies being rated?
- What policies, procedures and rules apply?
- What resources are available and appropriate?
- How could your career and professional experiences be used in a response?
- What has happened in your community or jurisdiction that might provide insights?
- What would you really do, within the culture of your organization?

- How can you do Expanded Thinking about it?
- How do the Action Arrows apply?
- How does PACTSFID (or some other thought organizer) apply?

2. Real-time practice: Set your timer and work through the exercise as if a panel was observing you or a video of you and making judgments about how well you fulfill the competency areas being rated.

Do it several times, until you feel you have responded in a way that would merit an 8-10 rating in each competency area. Take some time after each practice to think about what words flowed together and what didn't, what phrases seemed more effective and which were less so. Did you waste time in some portions? Did you feel you spoke in a way that was strong and significant?

Video record your exercise at least once: You will benefit tremendously from video recording yourself and watching the playback to see and hear yourself. (It's uncomfortable for most of us to see ourselves on video, but do it anyway.)

Use a rating form for each type of practice: If you have a list of the competencies/KSAs upon which you will be rated, list those and leave a space to put some notes and a numerical rating, from 1-10.

If you don't yet have know what competency areas will be rated or if you aren't going to be told, use a general list that is applicable to almost all assessment centers:

Job, Task and Organizational Knowledge
 Verbal Communications/Presentation
 Problem-Solving and Decision-Making
 Leadership
 Tactical/Operational Knowledge
 Community Orientation
 Judgment
 Interpersonal Skills
 Flexibility/Adaptability
 Development of Self and Others

You'll need to know how those titles are defined and how they can be demonstrated in an assessment center. The process of learning about the rating areas is a tremendous method of preparation, which is why I mention it in my book and in training.

You can see why thorough preparation takes time!

**STEP ONE: Select five competencies/factors
from the generic list, which you want to identify in the exercise.**

For the purposes of developing draft-quality, practice exercises, you can take either of two approaches:

(1.) Decide what exercise you want to develop. Write it well enough that you have a basis for practice, then decide what rating categories (competency areas) will be appropriate for that exercise.

Or,

(2.) Decide what competency areas you want to test through an exercise, then write the scenario, in-basket items, presentation topic, critical incident or interview question, to fit those competencies.

Limit your list of competencies to five per exercise, which is the usual number and is easier to evaluate than a longer list.

Sometimes the competencies are obvious. For example, if you are going to develop a Tactical Exercise, Tactical Knowledge will be one of the competencies---but it wouldn't be for a role-play involving a citizen who is concerned about vandalism in his neighborhood. Interpersonal Skills are certainly needed in a counseling role-play, but not as easily identified in a Tactical exercise.

**STEP TWO: Make a list of exercises you might have
in your assessment center**

If you know the names of the exercises that will be in your assessment center, list those. If not, use a list of the most common exercises: In-Basket, Structured Interview, Role-Play, Presentation, Written Assignment, First Briefing/Roll Call, Critical Incident/Tactical Incident.

Every exercise will require Job, Task and Organizational knowledge and almost all exercises that do not involve writing will include Verbal Communication Skills as a rating category.

You may need to do some research to fully understand the exercises and how they might be used. My book and other material has information about them and you may find additional information in other sources or by talking to former and current candidates.

Remember what I mention in training: Any exercise can usually be adapted to another format. An interview question can be made into a Role-Play, an In-Basket item can be used as a presentation topic, etc. *Learn how to articulate your thoughts in a variety of settings and formats.*

STEP THREE: Pick an Exercise and Develop It

General Criteria:

*Whatever you develop for any exercise needs to be complex enough to be challenging but not so complex it couldn't be at least start to be handled in twenty to thirty minutes.

*It shouldn't be something a person of your rank would be expected to defer to someone else, immediately, without any action on your part at all. If you wouldn't do anything except refer or defer, you don't have a chance to demonstrate other competencies.

Some In-Basket items may include a request that you defer, but those are usually administrative rather than investigative, technical or operational.

*It shouldn't be something that will give an advantage to one candidate over another. This criteria is frequently ignored by test developers and it always causes problems.

*It shouldn't be about something so emotional that it could have an effect on testing. For example, I've never seen a scenario involving an officer's death or finding a child's body or anything of that nature—not only would it be emotional, it couldn't even start to be handled in twenty minutes.

Guidelines for the content of typical exercises: These aren't guidelines for every possible exercise, but you can use them to help you think about guidelines for the others.

Role-Play: Subordinate Rank and You

These role-plays will be about the subordinate officer's behavior or performance (or both) or about a personal issue that is having an effect on his behavior or performance, or about a conflict or concern he or she has about the department or the team or shift.

They may require counseling and referral to other resources or setting the stage for coaching after the first meeting. They have to give the candidate (you) the chance to demonstrate the competencies in several ways.

You may make yourself a new sergeant or a sergeant who has been in place for a while, but consider the differences in the structure and your responses according to that choice. If you have been his or he sergeant for a while, the counseling would need to be about something that is recently occurring, not long-term (otherwise, what does that say about your ability as a sergeant up until this point?)

If you are a new sergeant, consider the reality of your department, its size and your former assignments. In reality, would you know this person fairly well or probably not very well, except for the time since you've been his or her sergeant?

The Role-Player's role: The role-player does not decide the approach he or she will take, that is scripted ahead of time—so don't hate them forever because of it. The role-player will be told to say specific things at specific times and will be given general

guidelines for responses: angry, stubborn, afraid, rude, emotional, or a combination. Consider how each of those responses might require different competencies from you.

Role-Play: Briefing, Roll Call or Staff Meeting

It's useful to prepare a first briefing role-play, just in case you have to talk about how you'd conduct such meetings, even if you don't have it as a role-play exercise.

In these exercises the candidate is usually given something they must talk about, train about or announce—usually something unpopular, and often about something current in the organization. How could it be structured so you would have a chance to demonstrate the competencies?

Note about your response to a briefing, roll call or staff meeting: Please don't structure this to tell your new team your "expectations". How offensive! You can say you've talked to your lieutenant/captain/commander/chief and will be focused on the things that are important for accomplishing the mission of the department or shift or area. Then, you can list those priorities, using the things you might usually have referred to as your expectations.

We are at our best when we are leading people in the direction of department goals and missions. Within that, there is room for your personal style, but we shouldn't have some idiosyncrasy that subordinates have to endure, even if it seems worthwhile.

After you get promoted, talk to your commanding officer if you want to be a stickler about something that other people of your rank are not so adamant about. Otherwise, maybe you should be less uncompromising until you have enough influence that people *want* to follow your lead.

Role-Play: Citizen

A role-play with a citizen can involve the citizen being concerned about a crime, a neighborhood issue or an officer. Rarely is it a serious complaint, because that would require more formal action than would be possible in twenty or thirty minutes.

Consider your jurisdiction and the types of crimes or community concerns that might be present. Look at a map of an area where you might work. Are there parks, schools, businesses, outdoor areas, highways, side streets, alleys, varying economics, shelter areas, homeless encampments, upscale housing, apartments, vehicular traffic, pedestrians, bicycles? Any of those are good topics for citizen concerns.

Vary this role-play by making the role-play with a group of citizens (the panel). How could you create even more tension or challenge? How could the competencies be shown?

Role-Play: With a Higher Ranking Officer or Group.

This type of role-play may be structured as a follow-up interview about one of the other exercises or it may be a presentation about a department program or problem—with

you explaining what you will do in your new role. As with other role-plays, the panelists will be given guidelines for their behavior and responses.

Use your knowledge of current issues to decide what this would be about. How could you be given extra challenges in this role-play? How could it be structured to emphasize specific competencies, rather than all equally?

In-Basket (In-Box, In-Bin)

This exercise gives you an opportunity to demonstrate competencies in many ways. You develop the items to fit the competencies you want to rate and emphasize. It's a great preparation strategy, whether or not you will have an In-Basket in your assessment center. Identifying and solving problems is the same in any exercise.

An In-Basket is just a group of memos, reports, letters, emails, phone messages, etc. that someone of the target rank might get all at once, at the beginning of a shift. They vary in significance and complexity, but they have to be doable in the time allotted.

Incidentally, if someone tells you they didn't finish their in-basket, but they still got high ratings in the exercise consider these things: 1.) They had less-than-effective or incorrectly-generous assessors 2.) They won't have those assessors next time and neither will you. 3.) They could have gotten higher ratings if they had finished it.

All in writing or with a justification?

Some In-Basket exercises are completed by the candidate in writing, then given to assessors to rate. Others involve having the candidate write quick notes on their In-Basket pages, then they explain (justify) their actions or planned actions, to the panel. How would the competencies being rated need to be changed for each of those options?

Even if you don't think you'll have a justification interview, it's a good idea to practice talking about your decisions.

Nearly always you will be new in the rank, because, such as with the role-play, it's easier to structure it if you haven't already been involved in the situations mentioned.

A menu of potential items. (For practice, choose five or so each time. For a more realistic practice, choose 12 and require yourself to make notes in 30 minutes, then talk about your decisions. Put more pressure on by reducing the time or increasing the complexity of the items.)

1. An email from a higher rank, directing a task.
2. An email from a subordinate asking for assistance.
3. An email from a subordinate, complaining about an issue. (Or a subordinate two levels down, in the case of a test for higher ranks.)
4. A letter from a citizen complaining about crime.

5. A letter from a citizen complimenting a subordinate.
6. A request from within the organization.
7. A request from outside the organization.
8. A request for a response to a higher ranking person, in which an opinion is needed.
9. A phone message with a request/complaint/concern from a citizen.
10. An email that discloses a problem having an effect on all shifts.
11. An email from the outgoing person before you, with or without information.
12. A request from the chief executive, asking for input.
13. An announcement from the chief executive, addressed to all of your rank.
14. An email to the outgoing person in your rank, which he or she did not handle.
15. Something to schedule.
16. Something that conflicts with something else.
17. Multiple items that, viewed together, indicate a common concern or problem.
18. Statistics that indicate a problem for the shift or for you.
19. A report that is written incorrectly or poorly.
20. An item that is about one thing, but has the indicators of something else in it.
21. Multiple items that require further investigation.
22. One or more things to delegate or direct.
23. One or more things that have the potential for a liability concern.
24. One or more things that indicate strong leadership will be required.
25. Several items that could be handle various ways, but some of those ways might cause other problems. (Having options is the only way to demonstrate judgment.)

Presentation

Whatever the length of the presentation, candidates are usually given an equal amount of preparation time or a bit more.

Presentations can be topical or scenario based.

Topics can be informational, philosophical or problem-solving:

Informational: "The Early Intervention System." "The Role of a Sergeant on the XX Police Department" or "Public Trust and the Police."

Philosophical: "The Kind of Leader I Intend To Be." "How I Can Help Build Public Trust." "What I Want to Achieve, if Promoted."

Problem-Solving: For these presentations, candidates are given a scenario—often about an area where they will serve in their new rank. The presentation allows them to explain how they will approach the problems and concerns of the area.

Critical Incident/Tactical Incident

These are very challenging for an outsider to develop without being very generic. If the goal is to personalize it for the department, the preparer has to do quite a bit of research. You already know your jurisdiction, so it should be easier for you.

A critical incident: An incident of significance to the organization and/or the community or jurisdiction. It may be an emergency, criminal or non-criminal event, natural disaster or a planned event. For example, a lost child, a major accident, a parade or protest, a serious accident, weather emergency or something similar.

A tactical incident: Usually an incident involving threatening or hazardous criminal situations. Examples are, an armed barricaded person, a hostage situation, a threatened suicide, a major crime and the suspects are in the area.

Some testing companies use the terms interchangeably, but most stick to those two ways of defining them. Occasionally the incident will start out sounding less threatening, then devolve to a tactical incident.

One way to prepare these exercises is to develop a very broad scenario rather than providing a lot of details, then challenge yourself to develop a list of the first ten things you would do, or a list of the most important priorities, or your responsibilities, etc. Later, you can practice responding to it by talking through the situation.

•Consider how you would change the scenario if you knew you needed to rate yourself on Interpersonal Skills, or if you thought Flexibility and Adaptability was a rating area.

Interview

This is another exercise about which I've written quite a bit in my book and in other material. It's gotten common to have "Rapid Fire" Interviews, where the candidate answers many questions in a short amount of time. That's probably a good way to practice anyway.

Interview questions fall into these general categories:

- 1. Hypothetical:** "What would you do if....." How would you handle a situation where...." (Essentially scenario-based questions.)
- 2. Experience-based:** "Tell us about a time when....." (These are designed to find out the experiences you've had that relate to the rank you seek.)
- 3. Knowledge-Based:** "Explain....." "What do you know about....?" "Tell us about..."

4. Philosophical: "How do you feel about..." "What do you consider to be....." "How have you applied the concept of...."

5. Self-Disclosure: "In your career, what do you consider to be....." "Which trait do you possess that you think will....." "What will you find most challenging about..." "How have you prepared yourself for...."

As you think of those interview questions, notice how they could almost all be developed as other exercises.

SUMMARY

I'm well aware this document can be formidable and discouraging, especially if you're working on limited time—which is why preparation optimally starts about a year out. But, if you want to do some really useful practice, this gives you the steps to make it happen.

It's also a useful study guide to remind you of what each exercise might involve.

Video practice: Practice in front of a video camera or use the video capability on your phone. Seeing how you look and sound may not be fun, but it is very, very helpful for refining your responses and improving your appearance when speaking.

Best wishes to you!

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