

**Population: 100,000**

**Municipal workforce: 1,000**

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## Synopsis

Roseville, California has extensive experience using assessment centers as a tool for developing groups of employees — in contrast to the more common use of such centers as a candidate-selection method. Initially, the centers were designed for middle-managers who might be in the running to replace department heads as they retired. Since then, Roseville has adapted the process for specific occupational groups (such as police or fire personnel) and for other position levels. The city won the Helen Putnam Award from the League of California Cities for its use of assessment centers to promote employee development. The lessons drawn from Roseville’s experience are relevant to organizations at any level of government.

## Challenges

■ **Retirements.** In 1997, Roseville city leaders looked around and realized that 11 of 15 municipal department heads would be eligible for retirement by 2003. Suddenly, succession planning became a priority.

Roseville anticipates about 50 retirements in the next five years. That’s a small percentage of the municipal workforce, but it’s concentrated at the most senior levels of the organization. Looking only at its management and supervisory-level employees, approximately 80 percent will be eligible for retirement by 2007.

■ **Growth.** Since 1997, Roseville’s population has grown from 63,500 to 100,000 and it’s projected to increase by another 30,000 over the next ten years. The need for city services has kept pace with the growth rate. The city anticipates adding 300 new positions in the next three to five years. Another consequence of this growth, notes City Manager Craig Robinson, is that “the complexity of being a department head in city government has grown exponentially.” As a result, “Today, people who aspire to promotion need to be better prepared.”

■ **Competition for talent.** Located 18 miles from Sacramento and 100 miles from San Francisco, Roseville long had an advantage in recruiting and retaining talented city employees: Its housing costs were much lower than surrounding communities. But with Roseville’s growth, real estate prices have risen. That’s made it increasingly important that both prospective and current city employees view Roseville as offering excellent career opportunities. “We want to promote from within, whenever possible,” says Robinson. “We want our employees to see ‘there’s a future for me here.’”

While Roseville faces a variety of challenges, it was the threat of imminent retirements that first persuaded the city to focus on developing internal talent. “In retrospect, we were just focused on department heads,” says Training and Development Manager Lisa Achen. “Since then, we’ve looked more broadly at our workforce.”

## Approach

Roseville’s integrated strategy for leadership development has many components: a competency model for senior managers, a tool to adapt that model to fit other position levels and specialty fields, a succession plan, assessment centers, a hefty catalog of training and development opportunities, scholarships to university programs, a mentoring program, and individual development plans.

Yet one area of Roseville’s experience stands out: That is its broad experience designing and conducting assessment centers in partnership with CPS Human Resource Services. An assessment center is a method in which a group of employees takes part in a series of activities — including written exercises, interviews, and simulations — while being observed by trained assessors. The exercises are designed to mirror the competencies required by a higher-level position for which the participants might be considered in the future. [See sidebar on page 34: “What Is an Assessment Center?”]

Since 1998, the city has used assessment centers as a tool for developing groups of employees, which is different from their more common use as a selection method. Initially, the centers were designed for middle-managers who might be in the running to replace department heads as they retired. Later, the process was adapted for specific occupational groups and for other position levels. The League of California Cities recognized Roseville’s efforts with the Helen Putnam Award for Excellence in City Government. Roseville’s experience using assessment centers to promote employee development is deeper and broader than any other jurisdiction we interviewed. The lessons drawn from these experiences are relevant to organizations at any level of government.

## The Management Development Assessment Center (MDAC)

Like many people who work for the city of Roseville, City Manager Craig Robinson went through an assessment center when he applied for his previous job as administrative services director. “We were very comfortable using assessment centers for recruitment and selection,” he says. But when the city realized it needed to begin preparing the next generation of leaders in city government, “we converted the assessment center into a development process.”

By sending current managers through such a comprehensive process, the City would get a high-level status report on the cohort that was next-in-line to become department heads. With information about their overall strengths and weaknesses, the City would also gain a clear picture of what was needed to prepare them for possible promotion in the future.

The assessment center would also benefit the individuals who participated. Three or four weeks later, each would have a confidential, face-to-face meeting with a neutral person (sometimes it was Achen, in other cases it was a consultant) to review the assessors' ratings and written comments and to discuss the results of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory. Individual results would be shared with each participant and with HR. Aggregate results would give the City's senior managers a high-level take on the potential succession pool.

### Deciding What to Assess

Before launching the assessment center, Roseville first had to determine exactly what skills and capabilities department heads needed. CPS Human Resource Services was hired to develop a competency model based on interviews with city managers. These interviews generated a list of eight clearly defined "management dimensions" that department heads in all areas of city government must master to be effective. The dimensions included: communications, decision making, interpersonal effectiveness, leadership style, administrative effectiveness, flexibility, planning/organization and developmental orientation. Department heads also described what each dimension "looked like" in action and gave examples of actual situations that would require facility in one or more of the eight dimensions.

Once Roseville had decided what to assess, it spent time making sure city employees understood why the city would be offering an assessment center that, unlike previous ones, wasn't intended to select the finalist for a current job vacancy. The initial buy-in process was carefully planned to ensure that both the eight management dimensions and the rationale for creating an MDAC were understood by the target population of middle managers. The first MDAC was conducted in 1998 and repeated in 2000 and 2001.

### Components of the MDAC

While the term "Management Development Assessment Center" brings to mind a building or place, it was, in actuality, a process with six components:

- **Background questionnaire.** Participants completed this instrument at least one week before the MDAC. In addition to providing information about their background, they were asked to assess themselves in each of the eight management dimensions. They also had to describe a work experience that illustrated their strength in one dimension and their need to develop in another.
- **Personal interview.** Each employee was interviewed by one of the assessors. Based on the questionnaire, the interviewer asked follow-up questions related to the eight management dimensions.
- **In-basket activity.** An in-basket exercise is a set piece in most assessment centers. Participants had to sort through a pile of documents representing the range of issues Roseville department heads must deal with, making decisions about how to handle each. The in-basket items provided an opportunity to demonstrate skills in six of the management dimensions. Following the exercise, each participant had to explain the rationale for each decision to the three assessors.
- **Group-interaction activity.** Participants role-played a cross-functional task force that had been charged by the city manager to analyze a citywide issue and make recommendations, while the three assessors observed.
- **Team planning activity.** Building on the group-interaction exercise, participants were assigned to two teams that had to develop an implementation plan for their recommendations and prepare a formal presentation to the city manager. One assessor observed each team.
- **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).** Participants completed this written instrument.

At the end of each day, the assessors spent an hour and fifteen minutes preparing their notes on each of the activities they had observed, in relation to the eight management dimensions. These written comments would later be shared with each participant. Then, in the last hour, the assessors met together to reach a consensus rating for each participant on every dimension, using a five-point scale.

The duration of each MDAC depended on the size of the cohort. Department heads could nominate employees to participate; individuals could also self-nominate, so long as they also had their supervisor's support. The first year, 35 employees participated, which required seven, day-long sessions. In 2000, an additional 22 employees took part in the MDAC and in 2001, 19 more.

## Developing the Succession Pool's Successors

Once the majority of Roseville's middle managers had participated in an MDAC, the city had a good grasp on the potential succession pool for departing department heads. Since then, it has used a similar model to assess more junior people. It was the next logical move, says Achen. "We've spent a lot of energy developing the top level. We need to spend time developing the levels below, too."

Since 2000, several city departments have conducted assessment centers for their own employees. The Roseville Police Department adapted the MDAC model to assess officers who were eligible to take the promotional exam for sergeant. It offered another assessment center to sergeants who might be moving up to the rank of lieutenant. The fire department has also put its captains through an assessment center. Roseville designed another assessment center for employees from several departments who might be contenders to become the next environmental utilities operations manager.

Last year, there was a citywide assessment center for those in line to become superintendent of a division or section within a department. Unlike the specialized assessment centers for police, fire, and environmental utilities, the one for prospective superintendents drew employees from a range of departments—from the library to the electric department to parks and recreation.

Both the successes and the dilemmas that have resulted from Roseville's assessment centers offer valuable lessons to other jurisdictions.

## Insights from Roseville's Assessment Center Experience

Because Roseville has used assessment centers extensively—and has learned from successful as well as less successful experiences—it offers a number of lessons that other jurisdictions can learn from.

### Who Gets Assessed

■ **Homogeneous vs. heterogeneous groups.** It made perfect sense on paper to create an assessment center for supervisors who might someday be promoted to superintendent. But, as Roseville discovered, it wasn't easy to find a common set of competencies that all superintendents, across all departments, must have. Putting a heterogeneous group through the Management Development Assessment Center had worked because department heads could agree on a common set of management dimensions that should be assessed. But

there was no comparable consensus regarding superintendents. "It's very difficult to build a single assessment tool that will give you the pick of people doing very different things," Achen concludes. The experience imparted an important lesson: If you can't measure a cluster of employees against the same yardstick, then they shouldn't be participating in the same assessment center.

### What Gets Assessed

- **Developing a model and assessment center exercises.** Before designing an assessment center, incumbents must be interviewed to pin down the knowledge, skills, and attributes their job requires and to collect actual scenarios of the kinds of challenges they need to handle. This research and design work takes time and, when it is outsourced, money. Such costs may outweigh the benefits if only a few employees participate in a highly specialized assessment center. But when an organization wants to assess many people against the same competencies, as Roseville did with its MDAC, that initial investment can be amortized across fiscal years and the number of employees who participate.
- **Technical vs. managerial knowledge and skills.** From Achen's citywide perspective, it's clear that superintendents need to know, and be able to do, similar things, regardless of which department they work in. Yet what department heads said that superintendents needed was highly specialized skills and knowledge. The challenge, then, is to design an assessment center that rates both the competencies that department heads are looking for and the more generic skills that superintendents need to have.
- **Calibrating assessment exercises to the experience-level of candidates.** Roseville ran its MDAC three times so that 75 managers could have the opportunity to participate. Overall, the process was viewed as a success. In retrospect, however, the third cohort was significantly less experienced than the first two. As a result, some MDAC exercises were too much of a stretch for them. While less experienced managers might also benefit from the assessment, it's important to adjust either the activities or the metrics they're assessed by, rather than holding employees with different backgrounds to the same standards.

## Who Does the Assessing?

Roseville's experience with assessment centers highlights several important factors that should be considered when choosing assessors. Most of these issues can be addressed by making sure that assessors are adequately trained.

- **Internal vs. external.** Roseville has experimented using internal assessors as well as external ones. There are pros and cons each way. When assessors are recruited from other local governments, participants may view them as more objective and less likely to be influenced by prior impressions. Yet there's also a downside: Outside assessors may not know the local culture or the "Roseville way." If the city's police have been drilled in customer service, will an outside assessor take that into consideration, or will he or she fault the participants for being too soft on the public?

While there's a potential for internal assessors to be biased by past experience, Achen found that didn't happen. In fact, internal and external assessors made similar observations and gave similar ratings.

Department heads who served as assessors benefited. They got to watch the employment version of a screen test in which potential candidates tried out a future role. Through the assessment training, they learned transferable skills in coaching and conducting performance evaluations.

- **Technical vs. managerial expertise.** Choosing the right assessors is a decision that often strikes at the heart of a larger issue: Should assessments focus on technical or discipline-specific knowledge, skills, and aptitudes or on broader, managerial competencies? In some occupations such as police and fire, the department's tendency is to insist that only sworn personnel can be assessors. This point of view is deeply rooted in the occupational cultures of these professions (See sidebar: "Developing Leaders in Public Safety" on page 45). In theory, assessors from any discipline should be able to perform the role effectively, so long as the required competencies have been well researched, clearly defined, and agreed upon, and so long as the assessors have been well trained. But the perception that only a professional insider can assess candidates may be the deciding factor. There's no value to be gained from an assessment center if the participants and senior managers don't trust the assessors' judgment.
- **Continuity of assessors.** When Roseville launched its MDAC, the target audience was 110 employees at the level of middle manager and above. Three iterations later, 75 had been through the process — a marathon undertaking that stretched over seven days in 1998, four days in 2000 and four days in 2001. In the first year, public sector managers and administrators were

recruited from neighboring communities to serve as assessors, in addition to some City of Roseville department heads. In the second and third year, an effort was made to recruit the same assessors to serve again. These veterans were supplemented, as needed, by additional city department heads.

All assessors volunteered. It is not surprising, therefore, that some declined to serve again in subsequent years. New assessors were recruited and trained. Although there was continuity across the three MDACs — not only did some assessors return, but so did the CPS consultants who administered the program—there were also inconsistencies. In the first cohort, assessors were seeing the very top tier, the city's *crème de la crème*. By the third MDAC, not only were participants more junior than in previous groups, the assessors seemed more generous in their ratings.

Is it realistic to expect the same volunteers to keep coming back? Could more training have eradicated completely any inconsistency between one group of assessors and the next? In both cases, the answer is probably no. The scale of Roseville's MDAC undertaking — assessing a large number of employees over a four-year period using a common set of managerial dimensions — may be unusual. Nevertheless, the city's experiences suggest that continuity and consistency are important considerations when designing assessment centers and choosing who will staff them.

- **Borrowing vs. buying assessors.** Because Roseville has run so many assessment centers, the potential pool of volunteer assessors is thinning out. When it was time to staff the assessment center for superintendents, Achen decided it would be more efficient to hire consultants. "Professional assessors know how to focus on behaviors rather than on specific skills needed in this or that department," she explains. The lesson for other organizations interested in using assessment centers as a development tool: It's important to weigh the costs and benefits of training assessors vs. buying professionals who are already trained and experienced.
- **Training assessors.** Initially, MDAC assessors participated in a full day of training provided by CPS. In subsequent years, training has been reduced to a half-day to reduce the time demands on assessors. The training includes an orientation to management development assessment centers; instruction and practice in observing, classifying, and evaluating behavior; getting familiar with the various activities and rating forms; and practice describing strengths and developmental needs.

Such training not only ensures high quality assessments; it can also be a selling point in recruiting volunteers. Learning the art of giving effective developmental feedback is valuable for any manager, and it is not an area in which many have been trained.

■ **Developmental assessment vs. selection assessment.** It is particularly important, says Achen, that assessors understand the difference between making assessments for developmental purposes and making them for candidate selection. Every participant should benefit, even if the simulation exercises led them to conclude that they're not interested in a promotion, as sometimes happens. Unless the assessment center truly is a developmental experience, the pool of willing participants will quickly dry up.

### How Assessment Center Results Are Shared

If making good assessments is an art, so is giving feedback. Each MDAC participant received two written reports: The first of these reports was structured around the eight management dimensions. It provided a description of each dimension, the assessors' consensus rating, and the participant's self-rating. It also included specific comments grounded in the behaviors they observed during the MDAC activities. Finally, the report offered a summary of the assessors' comments regarding the individual's overall strengths and developmental needs in relation to the management dimensions. The second written report explained their MBTI results.

Rather than simply sending these reports, Roseville took an extra step to make the feedback process more of a developmental experience. Each participant received the results in a one-hour meeting with an assessment center consultant, who first explained the MBTI results and then used that to frame the assessor's comments. "Because you're an ENTJ," she might say, "you're probably most comfortable doing such and such, but you need to be aware that, as a consequence, others may view you as harshly critical. The assessors observed that, in the group activity, you did X,Y, and Z, which led them to conclude that you can be overly judgmental." It was this one-on-one feedback process that many assessment center participants found to be the most valuable part of the experience.

For many police and fire employees who participated in an assessment center, the feedback process was the best part. It's an experience they don't get from a promotional exam, the normal route to advancement. In fact, when the Police Department ran a second assessment center, Achen encouraged the external assessors to provide the participants with some immediate feedback if there was time.

### What Happens Next?

What assessment center participants do with the feedback is up to them. Ideally, they share it with their supervisor and use it to create or update their Individual Development Plan. Achen estimates that that occurs about 30 percent of the time. Roseville contracted with local universities to deliver a leadership-skills course that would address the five competencies—decision making; leadership style; administrative effectiveness; flexibility; and planning/organization—shown by the MDAC as needing the most development. Again, it's up to the individual to decide whether to pursue this developmental opportunity.

At the city-level, what happens next is that the assessment center results for each cohort helped to shape Roseville's training and development agenda by indicating where the biggest gaps were between current competency levels and the levels required to be an effective department head.

### Cost

The cost for the MDAC, including the initial development of the assessment center exercises and the three cohorts who participated was \$40,128, or about \$850 per person. The cost of creating the assessment centers for the police and fire departments and for the superintendents ran from \$10,500 to about \$14,000. The per-person cost ranged from \$477 to \$2,000, since the number of participants for each center varied.

### Evaluation

Roseville analyzed 67 participants' career progress after they completed the MDAC. Seven retired and six left city government for reasons other than retirement. Of the remaining 54, 30 (55 percent) have been promoted since the MDAC and 24 (45 percent) have not.

## Next Steps

- **Can we do it again?** It's been six years since the first group of managers participated in the MDAC. Recently, some alumni have asked whether they could repeat the experience to see how they'd be rated today in the eight management dimensions, in comparison with the assessors' earlier rating. While Roseville is still weighing the possibility, Achen anticipates the city will implement the suggestion. It's further evidence of how valuable participants found the assessment experience to be.
- **In-house training vs. external programs.** The city's training catalog is bursting with courses, including coaching skills, a Supervisory Skills course developed by the International City and County Management Association, Steven Covey's "4 Roles of Leadership," "Why People Follow the Leader," and DISC Training, based on William Moulton Marston's model of behavioral styles. With departmental approval (and a \$4,800 program fee), employees may also attend "Leadership for the New Millennium," an intensive program offered through the Executive Leadership Development program at California State University, Sacramento. Its curriculum includes 360-degree feedback, marquee-name speakers, experiential exercises, an action learning project to apply course material at home, and a network of other program alumni.

While Roseville offers a rich assortment of classroom learning opportunities, in-house training is not always the best preparation. Currently, the city allocates \$28,000 per year for scholarships to prestigious leadership-development programs at places like Harvard and the Center for Creative Leadership. Robinson, the City Manager, would like to increase the pot. "I've seen tremendous growth when individuals improve their formal education and are exposed to new ideas and best practices," he says. Getting the opportunity to attend a nationally known program can also lead to "phenomenal confidence-building."

- **Building managers' awareness of the bigger picture.** Roseville has made a significant commitment to developing future leaders, but it still hasn't closed one troubling gap: "Many managers are so focused on their department that they don't see its connection to the city as a whole," says Achen. To ensure that the next generation of department heads can rise to the task, Roseville will need to determine, "What are we not doing to stimulate managers' awareness of cross-departmental issues?"
- It's a challenge that many jurisdictions express. In Roseville's case, assessment centers have vividly demonstrated the gap in managers' awareness of the interconnections among departments. In the future, the city may use additional assessment centers to monitor its progress in closing that gap.

## What Is an Assessment Center?

Assessment centers enable an organization to gather relevant information, under standardized conditions, about an individual's ability to perform a supervisory or management job. Organizations in the public and private sector are using assessment centers to serve many purposes: to select and promote supervisors and managers and for promotion and for succession planning, career development and training needs-assessment. In essence, the assessment center method gives candidates an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities in a variety of situations that might be outside the scope of their current, day-to-day job activities. In addition, the assessors who evaluate candidates' behavior can observe and compare all the members of a specific cohort (for example, supervisors with at least three years' experience) at the same time, as they perform the assessment activities. Not only do these procedures help reduce many forms of rater bias; they also help senior managers accurately predict candidates' career potential and development needs.

## What is Assessed?

The design of the assessment center activities is based on an analysis of the target position or job for which assessment center participants might be future candidates. Both what is assessed and how it is assessed are determined by the behaviors required to perform the target job successfully. These "job performance dimensions" often include communicating, planning and organizing information, solving problems and making decisions, delegating work, directing and guiding subordinates, maintaining interpersonal relationships, and so on.

## Who Does the Assessing?

Assessors are typically experienced and successful managers (at least one or two levels above the target position) who have a thorough understanding of the target position's requirements and demands. Assessors receive advance training in how to observe and evaluate behavior associated with the job performance dimensions.

## Why Are Assessment Centers Effective?

Simulation exercises minimize evaluation errors because they elicit behaviors very similar those required in the target position. Appraising an individual by having him/her perform simulated supervisory/management tasks is similar to appraising typists by actually having them type.

Typically, the setting for an assessment center is relatively isolated, enabling assessors to give their full attention to observation. Present behavior is used to predict future behavior. By observing performance across a variety of assessment exercises, assessors get a broad base of information with which they can accurately predict future behavior.

## A growing number of organizations are utilizing assessment centers because:

1. Research has found that assessment centers can predict successful performance more accurately than alternative methods.
2. Participation in assessment centers is a valuable career development experience for both assessors and assessees.
3. Managers accept the results of an assessment center due to its rational, organized approach and the way the assessment exercises simulate supervisory and management challenges within the organization.
4. Participants accept the results of assessment centers because of their "face validity" and the fair manner in which they are given the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities.
5. Assessment centers can be used for developmental purposes as well as for selection. They can be used to analyze current abilities and make individualized and organizational-wide recommendations for specialized training.
6. Assessment centers concentrate on the evaluation of observed behavior. Managers who serve as assessors often report an increased ability to assess the performance of their own subordinates and peers.
7. Assessment centers have been shown to be equally fair and accurate in the prediction of supervisory and management potential for EEO "protected" group members.
8. Employers have successfully defended the use of assessment centers in a number of district court challenges. In fact, assessment centers have been mandated in some consent decrees to overcome the effects of past discriminatory practices.

Source: Jack Clancy and Matt Gruver, CPS Human Resource Services ([www.cps.ca.gov](http://www.cps.ca.gov))