It's All About Development: Assessment Is Only the Start

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A critical evaluation of the state of assessment and development for senior leaders raises several important questions and identifies knowledge gaps that can be used as a framework for establishing future research programs. Reynolds, McCauley, Tsacoumis, and the Jeanneret Symposium participants (2018) present a great starting point for questioning the practices in executive assessment, particularly surrounding the use and impact of executive assessment for selection and/or development. Our commentary is focused on expanding the dialogue on executive assessment and development, providing insight into this question based on our executive assessment experience within a variety of organizations, ranging from financial services to healthcare to retail.

Executive Assessment and Development

Senior-level assessments are frequently conducted for selection, promotion, and determination of potential. In this context, assessments are used as a piece of the decision puzzle, albeit often a big one. In the least-effective use, assessment data are shared with the stakeholders who make a selection decision, and the results are archived and forgotten. They are only reviewed if the decision turns out poorly. In many instances the challenge that ultimately led to turnover was captured in the data. However the data were not used to manage the potential challenge. This one-and-done approach is unfortunately all too frequent, with organizations not fully utilizing this rich information to protect the investment they are making in the leader. Not using the data developmentally can result in unnecessary turnover or off-the-mark development plans.

Reynolds et al. (2018) outline some of the justifiable concerns with using the same assessment data for *both* selection and development, such as (a) honesty in 360 rating processes or (b) socializing what would relate to higher assessment ratings, potentially reducing the value of assessments. We argue that it would be a limited return on investment to only focus on selection decisions; the potential pitfalls of being transparent about what is learned

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during the assessment process are outweighed by the benefits of using this information. Assessment data provide clear insight into how the person can develop in their job role, how they can leverage their strengths and address their gaps, how the person will fit in with the culture of leadership and the organization, and how the person will complement his or her new boss's style.

Understanding the implications of assessment data during the onboarding or transition processes leverages the investment into something with wider-reaching benefits and a better ultimate return. The individual's strengths and talents can be highlighted and leveraged to ensure early wins and successes, whereas their weaknesses can be improved through targeted training, coaching, and action planning. Practitioners can champion this process, using the assessment data to write onboarding plans that capture the essence of a candidate's strengths and weaknesses. For instance, relationship management based on the assessment data can lead to leveraging strengths and managing behaviors, such as high task focus, that can slow down acceptance of the new leader by staff and peers in a relationship-oriented culture. Even gaps in business knowledge can be more easily filled when they are specifically defined. Looking holistically at the benefits to be gained from the assessment output is a key element in answering Reynolds et al.'s (2018) questions.

Even assessments completed for purely developmental purposes impact the opportunities that the person will receive to accelerate his/her career progress. For example, an assessment that shows strengths in learning agility and a potential strength in strategy can result in the leader being put on a highly visible strategic planning committee. The leader and others will infer strengths and development needs simply based on the types of developmental assignments and programs offered to the individual. Visible assignments create opportunity and exposure that will in turn influence future opportunities. Even developmental assessments impact career trajectory and organizational decision making in a way that can be visible whether or not the data are directly shared.

Given the potential benefits of sharing assessment data, research on best practices regarding *how* we share that data in a constructive way may be more important than research about *whether* we share that data. Providing assessment data to both the leader and the organization creates transparency and establishes a developmental partnership. Not sharing full data, although a long-standing practice, is not a well-researched best practice. There is a societal trend toward increased transparency that is broader than just assessment data and will continue to influence expectations of those who take assessments.

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HR leaders are concerned about the potential turnover of leaders who become discouraged by their assessment results and see their careers as hindered by it. For example, Reynolds et al. (2018) discuss that cognitive ability tended to be highly sensitive to share in part because it was not movable. However, long-standing cognitive tools such as the Watson-Glaser have developed versions that are developmental and contain suggestions for improvement, such as identifying assumptions, drawing conclusions, and evaluating arguments. The understanding of multiple intelligences, harnessing the knowledge of others, and decision-making science all contribute to a potentially different, more comfortable developmental conversation about cognitive ability. As Reynolds et al. (2018) argued, "accepted wisdom" may change over time, and that may be the case with cognitive ability and other maligned or misunderstood aspects of assessment for development.

Executive Assessment and Teams

Beyond just individual development, executive assessment data should be used for development at the executive team level. Understanding how the team will work together and giving team members an understanding of each other's strengths and competencies is another use of data that may be collected as part of a decision-making process. Interventions such as new leader assimilation (Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2008) and executive team building can be enriched with assessment data. Understanding how data at a team level can build trust, decision making skills, and effective group process is a useful area for practical research. Aggregated 360 results and other data (work styles indicators, personality typologies, emotional intelligence) are commonly used in practice to identify developmental opportunities for the team. This goes beyond using the data for decision making and requires a significant degree of transparency.

As an example from our experience in using developmental assessment with an intact executive team, each team member provided the group feedback on his/her results in order to ensure that the team was mindful of leveraging each member's strengths. Individuals also took an opportunity to gain ongoing support for a development opportunity by working it into their formal or informal role on the team. Finally the team was able to see if there are strengths—such as short-term planning and execution—that needed to be balanced with longer term thinking and brainstorming. The team was able to develop a group-level action plan by redesigning the cadences and agendas of their standing meetings, and the overall experience was positive for the executives' effectiveness in achieving their shared objectives. Using assessments to build transparency and trust within a team has risks, but it can also have high reward.

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Executive Assessment and Coaching

Linking assessment data to practices in development and coaching is an important area for study. Coaches and HR practitioners are often assigned to help leaders understand assessment data and move it into an action plan. However, the work on the assessment framework is frequently not done in conjunction with the creation of development tools and job-based opportunities to grow specific skills or gain needed experience. This leaves it to the coach and leader and his/her line manager to figure out how to jump that divide.

Practitioners can help bridge this gap by identifying specific areas for long-term coaching as an outcome of the assessment process. For instance, a general recommendation could be that a leader has to improve her interpersonal relationships. A coach, of course, can spend time to support the client to raise and isolate this issue. But, by using assessment data to inform, a coach will help the leader see that a specific set of competencies needs to be improved (such as listening, managerial courage, or trust building). The coaching relationship can accelerate development actions more quickly by utilizing this existing data and delving even deeper with direct questioning to raise awareness of patterns and connections in the data. Behavioral assessment data leads to clear behavioral actions for the leader.

Organizational Culture and Development Through Executive Assessment

At the crux of the usefulness of assessments for executive development is the organization's culture (Kelser, 2002). In our experience, there can be resistance to using assessments for selection and subsequent development, particularly with organizations that lack trust and openness to feedback and in organizations where assessment is a new, unproven process. There is often a fear of what the assessments might reveal and a skepticism of the accuracy of this work. In order for assessments to overcome these significant obstacles, there needs to be a cultural shift toward accepting assessments as data points without becoming defined by the results. Slowly building credibility and adding clear value builds ground.

The socialization process needs to accurately communicate the different components of the executive assessment measure and how they support success in executive roles. This is where practitioners can help. By distilling scientific knowledge into layperson language, practitioners can communicate the goals of assessments and ensure that key stakeholders understand the major constructs being measured. Accurate understanding of the process is the foundation for an effective development culture. Removing mysticism and being clear about the construction and outputs allows leaders to see the data as a starting rather than an ending point.

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Once the assessment is socialized, it is critical for executive stakeholders to be engaged and have buy in into the process of leveraging data to develop leaders. They set the tone for engagement with the assessment and development processes, which are some of the best predictors of developmental success (Church, Del Giudice, & Margulies, 2017). Maintaining lines of communication between practitioners and executives as the organization changes to ensure that the assessment continues to meet the needs of the organization will allow for continual buy in. Even having executive sponsors go through developmental assessments, and publicizing their experience and developmental activities, can bolster a culture that values assessment.

Conclusion

Although there certainly are risks to using selection-based assessments for developmental purposes after hire or promotions, we argue that the assessment data are too valuable to be ignored after a decision. Whether for individual development, team development, or coaching, these data can help deepen the bench when it comes to prepared and qualified leaders. Our experience has highlighted the value of assessments for development, and we recommend more research be conducted in this area. For instance, is there a clear process to link mentors, assignments, outside volunteer work, and new job roles to the development needs identified in the assessment process? How can development informed by executive assessment results be used to transform an organization's leadership culture? When during an organization's life cycle would it be most appropriate to implement assessments for developmental purposes? Although there is ample good practice to link assessments to jobs, culture, and context, there may be room for improvement in linking the practice to effective developmental outcomes.

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