Strategic Assessments: Setting up Assessments for Success

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"Our leaders need to be more strategic."

"We need to identify our high potentials."

"We need baseline data to launch our coaching work."

"This leader needs to get feedback on progress and opportunities."

As coaches, our clients give us many different reasons for wanting to use assessments. However, rather than simply respond and begin to assess, it is our responsibility to ensure that any assessment process is structured for success for all the parties involved: the person being assessed, the organization and the external partner.

Key Questions

Before launching on any assessment, two fundamental questions that must be addressed.

Question One:

What is the business case? How will assessments help the organization?

While assessment results can be enlightening for a leader, the impact of the improvement must help the organization. To gain senior executive support, the return on investment for the assessment must link to the business in some way. Possible linkages are increased business success, retention of high potentials or higher engagement scores.

The following questions can help build the business case for the assessment:

- How will the assessment and the related work bridge gaps between the business need and the organization's current leadership skills?
- How will the assessment's results help the leader in his or her day-to-day work?
- What is the connection between the business challenges and the leader's coaching goals?
- How will impact be measured?

Many times, organizations often spend significant dollars on helping leaders to be more aware of their own style, preferences and tendencies. For this work to be seen as valuable, there must be a link between the leaders' awareness and the business impact.

Question Two:

Why are assessments being requested? What is behind the assessment request? According to IO psychologists, there are two primary reasons for assessment: selection and development. Within these two categories, assessments are used in a number of ways, as the following scenarios illustrate.

Assessments for Selection Scenarios:

Talent Acquisition

Scenario One: The Talent Acquisition Department identified finalists for a key senior position. They then hired an independent, outside firm to assess the two final candidates. Following an assessment battery, the assessment report offered an external, objective perspective and gave the company a recommendation for the final selection. The report included insights into company fit, long term potential and potential issues. While the organization still made the final selection, there was more data on which to base the decision.

Cultural Fit and Role Readiness

Scenario Two: In another organization, an executive search firm had identified the final candidate for one of their key clients. As a part of the recruitment process, the firm did an executive assessment. This data was given to the internal VP of Talent to ensure the company was aware of the potential hire's cultural fit, strengths and areas of opportunity. When the person was hired, they also received a debriefing of the data in order to be aware of the potential fits and challenges. This assessment data is also helpful for an onboarding and transition coach.

There is a debate in some assessment circles as to the implications and objectivity of the search firm also doing the report on the candidate. While some firms state that they have a wall between assessment and selection, other firms would suggest a conflict of interest by having the search firm also do the assessment results.

Success Profile

Scenario Three: An organization wanted to understand and improve the skills of a given role within their workforce. First, the best performers were identified using objective criteria. Next, an external IO psychologist team assessment team interviewed and assessed the high performers and built a success profile. The organization can now assess current and future leaders against this profile, and create development plans.

Assessments for Development Scenarios:

Hi-Potentials:

Scenario Four: Through the talent process, an organization had identified their strongest future leaders. To launch the high-potential development program, all participants received assessments and executive coaching to heighten leadership self-awareness and provide development direction. The company used a 360 and a validated style instrument to give the leaders crucial feedback. Each participant was given executive coaching sessions to debrief the instruments and support to create the actions plans.

Leadership Skill Evolution:

Scenario Five: With consumer tastes shifting, a company needed their leaders to develop skills in data analytics and strategic planning. Since the leadership expectations were significantly changing, the organization and the leaders needed a baseline of data and a tangible picture of the skills that needed to be developed. The company worked with an outside firm to create a success profile of the successful future leader. The leadership development team then created a curriculum and experience path to

support the growth of the new skills for all the identified leaders. Leaders were then assessed against the profile and given a development path and executive coaching for support.

Leader Development:

Scenario Six: As a part of talent planning, a leader, Robert, was identified as the successor for a key position. Commitments were made to prepare him for the next role. To make sure that Robert was fully ready prior to the promotion, the organization decided to give him assessments and executive coaching in the areas that would he needed for readiness and success in the new role.

Leader Transition:

Scenario Seven: Coming from the outside with an impressive resume, a senior leader, Alicia, started a new executive role. As a part of her transition process, her coach did an assessment when Alicia was four months into her new role. The purpose of the assessment was to give Alicia early feedback and to educate the coach on the strengths and opportunities within Alicia's transition. The coach did a verbal 360 assessment and provided Alicia with crucial feedback on her early wins and also the important challenges within her new system.

Setting Up Assessments for Success

Once the reason for the assessments is clear, the organization has an additional number of key questions.

Question Three:

Who "owns" the data? Before any assessment process launches, it is essential to have clear boundaries on what happens with the results. One of the key considerations is setting up processes to ensure the privacy of the person being assessed.

When assessments are being used for development, it is best practice for the person being assessed to "own" the data. Often, this means giving the report to the person being assessed, who then decides the best way to share the insights with his or her boss. It is often an expectation that the leader shares a summary of the assessment and his or her action plan with their manager.

Question Four:

Once a report has been generated, who gets to see it?

In order to protect a leader's privacy, processes should be put into place to consider how the report gets delivered. These key decisions should occur prior to beginning an assessment process.

There are a number of ways that results can be delivered while protecting confidentiality. In one organization, the assessment firm sent an electronic version of the results directly to the person being assessed.

In another situation, the assessments were used as a part of a leadership program. The results were delivered to the executive coach who debriefed the results with the leader. In this case, both the coach and the leader had a copy of the results.

In another instance, leaders received assessments as a part of the leadership orientation program. The assessments were sent to the learning department who made copies of the reports for each program participant. The reports were secured under lock and key prior to the program and kept in sealed envelopes before being distributed during the class.

Setting up the systems early protects the leader, the coach and the organization. For example, a learning executive got a call from the CHRO. "We are exploring Sam's readiness for a promotion. What reports do you have on Sam?" Months earlier, the department had created policies and systems that stated that all assessment data was the "property" of the leader being assessed and was not available for others to view. As a part of this set-up, it was decided that assessment data would be stored with the firm conducting the assessments rather than being stored within the organization. In order to have helpful data for the organization, each leader created a summary of their assessment results and action plans that were shared with their managers. These summary documents were public documents that could be shared across the enterprise. In responding to the request, the learning leader shared that the assessment firm housed all the reports and that no report data was available. However, the learning leader did have the summary document and shared this with the CHRO.

Question Five:

How long is the data considered current? In other words, what is the life of the data? For a 360 assessment, for example, the data is usually considered relevant for approximately one year. Some tools' results shift significantly based on the position of the person being assessed while some tools change very little over time. This is why it is important to determine the life span of the data as a part of the set-up. In the same vein, determining a secure path for destroying reports ensures that confidentiality is protected.

Question Six: **In a 360 report, how will confidentiality be handled?**

For coaches conducting a verbal 360, the norm is to separate the manager feedback as stand-alone data and to combine the rest of the interview data. This allows for the confidentiality of the participants to be protected while ensuring that manager feedback is delivered to the leader.

When debriefing all 360 assessments, it is crucial to remind the leader to honor and utilize the feedback, rather than attempting to determine the source and to berate those who gave data.

A consultant friend recently debriefed a 360 report with a senior executive. The consultant left the premises feeling that the executive was somewhat reticent to embrace the feedback. The next day, the consultant got a call from the HR department that reported the executive had gone back to the respondents asking, "Did you say this?" "What did you mean?" The consultant was mortified to hear that the executive was attempting to push people to admit to their feedback rather than accepting the data and moving forward with actions. The consultant and HR leader both spoke with the leader and reaffirmed the need to hear and made adjustments based on the feedback rather than focus on understanding who gave what feedback.

In summary, assessments can provide a wealth of value for the leader and the organization. Assessment data can assist in making selection decisions, identifying development needs and delivering valuable feedback. To ensure a successful assessment process, having clear answers for the six questions above enables the assessment process to be set up for success.

Bio: Rose Hollister is an executive coach, consultant and Managing Director of Hollister Associates Inc. She also is affiliated with a number of human capitol firms. Prior to consulting, Rose was the VP of Learning and Development for Equity Office Properties and ran the Leadership Institute for McDonald's. Rose also teaches Global Leadership and Strategic Change at Northwestern University.

Setting Up Assessments for Success: Refection Exercise

To assess the health of your assessment plan, answer the following questions.

How will the assessment process support business needs?	
What are the desired outcomes from doing assessments?	
What are the key factors to consider in selecting an assessment?	
How well does the assessment match with the desired outcomes?	
How well has the assessment process been communicated within the organization?	
What are the stated policies on who “owns” assessment data?	
When the leader “owns” the data, what are the expectations for how the data is shared with the leader’s manager?	
What policies have been created to identify who has access to the data and how it can and cannot be utilized?	
How is every coach instructed to talk with respondents about how to work with those who gave input?	
For each assessment used within the system, are the “life spans” named?	
What policies have been created to identify ways to keep assessment data confidential within the system?	
How will outdated results be destroyed?	