

Enhancing Academic Administrators' Professionalism through the Application of Development Centre

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Introduction

Given that high quality services of administrations are essential, there must be an effective and continuous development of faculty members who assume leadership roles in higher learning institutions. The efforts to equip them with necessary qualities that determine the effective role as academic administrators and competent managers for higher education and research activities are important in the process of making higher learning institutions excellent centres to boost nation building. True to the emphasis made by the Malaysian Government in developing knowledge workers, worker competencies, and knowledge productivity (Government of Malaysia, 2002), a proper mechanism needs to be strategised in order to bring about desirable characteristics of academic administrators in higher learning institutions.

In general this paper aims to introduce the concept of development centre (DC), and highlight the applications of psychology within the centre which would be of benefit to higher learning institutions in establishing effective training programmes for academic administrators.

Historical Background of Development Centre

DC has its roots in Assessment Centre (AC), which has proven effective in providing rich and developmentally relevant information, paving professionals to apply DC in many human resources management decisions. The term DC is used to denote a method or an approach, rather than a physical space meant to develop employees (Woodruffe, 1995). It is an organisationally standardized procedure for assessing employees in order to identify their competencies by using multiple assessment methods. The definition highlights three key components of DC: competencies, multiple assessment methods, and development. DC permits organisations to analyse and diagnose employees' competencies, which is important to indicate the employees' further development, infer employees' behaviours, and enhance the likelihood of successful future job performance. A vital characteristic of DC is solely of developmental purpose.

Tillema (1998) outlines four focal dimensions of DC, which encompass three key components from the definition, namely (a) identifying ones' potential qualifications which can be developed through training; (b) setting up new development tracks connected to the work settings, (c) administering perpetual monitoring on the progress that individuals made (d) providing opportunity for growth in competencies.

The British Psychological Society (2003) outlines that a good DC would help organisations by:

- a. providing highly relevant, observable and comprehensive information of an individual
- b. promoting effective decision making and workforce planning
- c. yielding added fairness from multiple judgments as opposed to a single judgment
- d. enhancing the image of organisation among employees
- e. providing effective preview of the role or job level
- f. developing employees' self-insight thus leading them to change and progress
- g. providing insights to observers due to their involvements in the process
- h. predicting work performance
- i. providing legally defensible selection system

The need for Development Centre

The objective of DC is to develop and promote learning culture among participants of DC. DC uses assessment outcomes to help the identification of training needs of participants, and enhance their ability to create, innovate, generate, and utilize new ideas and skills. This is in line with the concept of career development system, which refers to an organized, formalized, planned effort to achieve a balance between individuals' career needs and the organisations' workforce requirements (Leibowitz, et al., 1986, p.4).

The objective of DC also befits the current trust in human resources management, that is knowledge productivity and knowledge worker. Organisations can support these two trusts by treating assessment as a part of a more encompassing and continuous system which goes beyond measuring performance. In order to make assessment part of a continuous system, it should serve as fundamental to development and learning processes, characterized by relevant feedback, monitoring, and coaching. Only upon meeting these characteristics, development and training

can be successfully linked to assessment, which is the developmental approach to assessment.

The Malaysian Remuneration System (MRS) has a fundamental component, the Competency Level Assessment (CLA) or Penilaian Tahap Kecekapan (PTK). The objectives of CLA are (a) to promote self-development among civil service members through continuous learning, (b) to strengthen learning organisations in the public sector in line with the aim to produce knowledgeable workers (k-workers), (c) to promote utilisation of knowledge, skills, creativity, innovation and multi-skills in performing duties, (d) to manage human resources based on competency, and (e) to recognize excellent civil service members (Government of Malaysia, 2002). On the same theme, the literature of DC indicates that the approaches and tools used in DC would support and compliment the effort to develop professionalism among academic administrators in higher learning institutions. DC is to the benefit of academic administrators, if it could be the central spine to the Competency Level Assessment (or Penilaian Tahap Kecekapan), for through it the approaches to enhance and improve the competencies of academic administrators could be managed in a more comprehensive manner. However, the CLA would not be a DC, and would be to the detriment of the academic administrators, if it is aligned only to remuneration purposes.

The Application of Psychology in Development Centres

There are few hard and fast rules for designing a DC, looking at the fact that each organisation has different needs to develop its employees. In fact, an organisation's DC designers must creatively think of the best design to achieve the developmental aims of the organisation by acknowledging the uniqueness of individuals in organisation who thus have different developmental needs. This and even the three key components of DC (competencies, multiple assessment, and development) reflect the application of psychology.

Competencies

Boyatzis (as cited in Woodruffe, 1998) broadly defined competency as "an underlying characteristic of a person. It could be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses" (p.64). Woodruffe (1998) described competencies in relation to performance by referring it to "dimensions of behaviour that lie behind competent performance" (p.66).

Multiple Assessment

The DC related-decision is not controlled by one tool, such as a test. In order to identify one's competencies, DC uses multiple assessments so as to form a complete picture of a person and give more meaningful prediction of his/her job behaviour. DC may involve the following exercises; presentation, group discussion, one-to-one role play, in-tray-basket, written analysis, interview, psychometric assessment, peer assessment, and self assessment (British Psychological Society, 2003; and Woodruffe, 1995). Refer appendix 1.

Development

The assessment in DC provides opportunities to identify competency levels of employees' knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics for the purpose of development (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004). This developmental approach of assessment promotes and facilitates learning, a truly psychological phenomenon. Learning is defined as "a relatively permanent change in knowledge or behaviour that results from practice or experience" (George & Jones, 1999, p.145). In organisations, learning can be achieved through many mechanisms, one of which is training (Riggio, 2003), which can be systematically designed to make employees acquire the desirable attitudes, concepts, knowledge, roles or skills which would help them to improve work performance (Muchinsky, 2000). However, training should not be offered without any valid reasons for the high costs involved. As such, it is important for organisations to assess employees' training needs, an exercise which could be accomplished through DC.

Participative management

The other application of psychology in DC is evident through the concept of participative management, defined as the collaborative-oriented relationship involving participants and observers characterized mainly by openness and trust, and maintaining them after the end of each exercise. A professional who runs processes in a development centre is known as an observer, trained to be in charge of evaluating behaviours observed in exercises. As for its targets, the term participant is used. Participants are individuals who undertake the exercises in DC, and receive extensive developmental feedback on their performances. Being interactive in nature, the participants' involvement in DC exercises is essential. DC exercises are observed by a team of trained observers. The observers adopt a coaching role, leaving behind status and power thus using the word facilitator or observer for some matter.

Conclusions

Organisation development is one of the pertinent issues when productivity is addressed, and indeed it is the focal point of DC. The application of psychology is inherent in the key features of DC. In fact, DC paves the foundation to an organisation's effort to plan and implement programmes designed to enhance the effectiveness of an organisation, which could be managed by Industrial/Organisational psychologists, human resources manager, and the like. The Industrial/Organisational Psychologists are specifically trained to help organisations grow, thus enhance their productivity, and subsequently promote positive work-related attitudes, and workplace harmony among employees (Shukran, 2005). Besides the Industrial/Organisational Psychologists, the involvement of psychologists specializing in testing and assessment is desirable, as DC also needs the use of assessment in its exercises, a method which has been taken up by the public sector in Malaysia for the purpose of selection and placement (Fauzaman et al., 2005).

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Exercises in Development Centre

Exercises	Aim
a. Presentation	To assess the participants' public speaking i.e. their capabilities at giving briefing to a relevant audience group
b. Group discussion	To assess the participants' team work spirit, assessed through the team interaction based around given information. In DC, this is observed through leader less group discussion, in which a participant is placed in a situation without leadership or authority structure, allowing the observer to assess the way the former behaves in such situation (Hogan, 2003)
c. One-to-one role play	To assess the participants' communication skills through communication/ negotiation exercises within one-to-one interaction.
d. In-tray-basket	To assess the participants' capabilities to perform job, assessed through simulation of role-based in-tray/ in-box, requiring action and prioritization.
e. Written analysis	To assess the participants' writing capabilities assessed through writing problem analysis exercise against work-based issue
f. Interview	To assess the participants' job related information. This is done through gathering information against key criteria
g. Psychometric assessment	To assess the participants' personal psychological profiles. This is done through standardized measures of cognitive ability, personality, motivation or interest.
h. Peer assessment	Each participant is assessed by another participant in the group, who must be trained to assess the competencies in question
i. Self assessment	May be the entire means of assessment in DC.