

THE FALLACY OF USING IN-BASKET BASED MEASURES FOR THE VALIDATION OF LEADERSHIP DIMENSIONS

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The stated aim of a recent article in the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology by Spangenberg, H.H. and Theron, C.C. was to investigate "The Validation of the High Performance Leadership Competencies as measured by an Assessment Centre In-Basket". In designing such a study, one would expect that the authors would select the most valid measure of the Schroder Leadership Dimensions, namely the High Performance Leadership Competencies (HPLCs), based on the research evidence. It is therefore puzzling to understand why the authors selected in-basket based measures of the 10 HPLCs when the existing evidence clearly failed to support this choice.

The authors themselves state that on the basis of previous research which investigated relationships between in-basket based measures of leadership and performance, its "validity was at best marginal". In addition, the major founding research publication on the validity of the HPLCs (Schroder, 1989), clearly presented data showing that measures of the HPLCs based on in-basket responses alone were only marginally correlated with hard measures of unit performance.

The in-basket exercise cannot be used as a complete measure of leadership and therefore cannot be used alone as the basis for investigating the validity of the HPLCs. This is not surprising when we understand that managing is a job which requires interaction with others to achieve outcomes, like inspiration and the highest levels of collective thinking and action. Measures of leadership based on the in-basket alone view it from one dimension only. It is an incomplete picture and will remain so, no matter how much refining of the in-basket we do.

A more valid and complete measure of leadership dimensions requires multi-dimensional observations of managers in a broad range of situations, either in the work place (Cockerill, 1989) or across several different exercises which simulate the breadth of a leader's work (Schroder, 1989). A number of comprehensive studies in the USA and UK (Schroder, 1989; Cockerill, 1989; Cockerill, Schroder and Hunt, 1993 and Chorvat, 1997) and preliminary observations in South Africa demonstrate the construct and criterion validity of the HPLCs. In all assessment centre based validity studies, the HPLCs were measured on the basis of four exercises; the in-basket plus three interaction exercises. In line with other studies, our research over many years attests to the wisdom of using multi-dimensional observations as a basis for measuring leadership. The validity of

the HPLCs is also supported by other research using different methods to measure leadership dimensions similar to the HPLCs (Schroder, 1975; Streufert and Swezey, 1986; Boyatzis, 1982; Huff, Lake and Schaalman, 1982). For a summary of the relationships between these bodies of research see Schroder (1989).

Therefore the design of the Spanenberg/Theron study was inappropriate for investigating the validity of the HPLCs and the title itself is inappropriate and misleading. More accurately it was a study of the validity of in-basket based measures of leadership dimensions. As we would expect, their results were in line with a number of earlier studies showing that the in-basket used alone is only marginally correlated with performance.

So does the in-basket have a place in management development and research? Indeed, it does. While it is inappropriate to use it alone when more accurate measures of leadership are demanded in research and assessment, these measures:

- (1) are needed to round out our picture of leadership based on multiple exercises; and
- (2) provide an efficient and effective vehicle to offer "hands-on" experience for leadership development programmes. Feedback on dimensions of leadership measured by non-interactive methods like the in-basket can be used to demonstrate the dimensions and as a basis for coaching. They can be used on a pre-post basis to plot developmental progress in non-interactive aspects of leadership which will build the readiness of participants to transfer this to the broader job of leading.

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