



The assessment of resilience and leadership potential for senior managers and professionals in challenging and stressful occupations

Possibly the most important qualities that underpin effective performance in organizations are the skills, continuity, reliability and consistency of the workers involved, in particular those in key senior and leadership roles. In challenging and stressful work which can have a huge psychological impact on the worker, his or her level of psychological resilience will be a major factor in determining survival and effectiveness in the work. The psychological 'fit' between the worker and the role is a crucial factor. As well as being critical to performance, effective staff selection is central to achieving the optimum level of retention and in **reducing**:

- poor performance
- illness and absence rates
- stress reactions in the workplace

Additionally, a candidate's suitability to a particular role is critical to:

- clear and effective judgement
- clear and positive decision making within that role

Defence Mechanisms

Defence mechanisms (Freud, S. 1926, Freud, A. 1937) form a kind of psychological protection against threat or stress, a protection which is necessary in order to cope with or endure difficult situations without becoming overwhelmed, and of which we are, for the most part, completely unaware.

Under great stress or in a critical situation defence mechanisms are like 'shock absorbers' of the mind. They are developed during our formative years as a response to psychologically challenging and threatening circumstances. They are unconscious reactions that help us to manage our circumstances without becoming overwhelmed.

However, all defence mechanisms, to some extent distort a person's capacity to see reality clearly. For example, we might all be familiar in everyday life with the defence mechanism of 'reaction formation' or 'laughing in the face of adversity' – a person is faced with a threatening and distressing situation and reacts by laughing about it or brushing it off as a small problem. A well known example is the scene of someone in the sea in distress, frantically waving for help and a person observing just sees someone waving at them and waves back! This type of reaction might enable the person to stay on their feet in the short term, but does not help them deal effectively with the reality of the situation.

Too great an amount of defence, or a defence setup of a certain kind, may be a serious disadvantage, since it will prevent us from getting a correct perception of reality and thereby guide us to the wrong decisions, possibly with catastrophic results.

Because of constitutional factors and formative experiences, we all differ in our ability to tolerate and manage stress (Khaleelee, 2007). There are a variety of different defence mechanisms and we all have some of them, though the type and how much of it we have is unique to each person.

For example, we might refer to someone as being 'thick skinned', which means that they are quite defended and difficulties are like 'water off a duck's back' to them. This type of person may be a good survivor in ordinary situations but they might be insensitive to some of the issues surrounding them and possibly not very 'tuned in' to people's feelings. They might not read situations very well and therefore be unable to make the best judgements.

Additionally, too great an amount of defence will consume so much psychological energy that the capacity for rational behaviour and decision-making is severely diminished. The amount of energy needed to maintain psychic stability also affects how much is available for engaging with the outside world and is linked to inner resilience (Khaleelee, 2007).

Conversely we might refer to someone as being 'thin skinned', which means that they are quite undefended and sensitive to encounters they are involved with. This type of person may be very 'tuned in' to the detail of things around them, including people's feelings. They might see objective reality very clearly and have sound judgement. However, because they are thin skinned and have relatively few ways of protecting themselves they will have a tendency to become overwhelmed in particularly demanding and stressful circumstances.

Each person has their own unique defence mechanism profile which will lend itself positively to some circumstances but not others. Whilst a person may be able to recognize some of their tendencies in response to stressful situations, these reactions happen at an unconscious level and cannot be consciously controlled – therefore they tend to be a consistent factor in the way a person reacts to situations. Strategies can be put in place to help compensate for these tendencies, though the strategies will be going against the grain of the person's natural instincts and are therefore difficult to maintain for prolonged periods.

Therefore in a work situation it is ideal to have a good match between a person's defence mechanism profile and the requirements of the person's work role. The positive thing is that different profiles lend themselves very well to different roles. For example, a highly undefended person might not be suited to the constant pressures involved executive leadership, but might be very suited to a specialist role where a crystal clear perception of reality is crucial. For example, a fighter pilot needs to see threats very quickly and make instant judgements that have critical implications. The number of missions these pilots are involved in is closely controlled due to the potential for burn out. The pilot's sensitivity is essential for the job but too much exposure is overwhelming.

Interestingly, The Defence Mechanism Test, a tool that assesses a person's defence mechanisms was developed initially for the assessment of pilots in the Swedish Air Force.

Defence Mechanism Test

A particularly useful tool for assessing an individual's profile against a specific role is the Defence Mechanism Test (DMT) (Kragh, 1955). The assessment is adaptable to any post that is emotionally challenging, stressful or dangerous – it has been used widely in the managerial and executive sector, the military,

deep sea diving and work with traumatized children, amongst others.

In several scientific studies the DMT has proved highly accurate in predicting performance and accident-proneness under stress - studies have shown that in many instances involving operational error, the operator - quite unconsciously - 'refused' to perceive or recognize the threat in time. Cooper (1988, p. 381) stated that the DMT is 'the most elegant and best-validated technique that exists for the study of defence mechanisms in normal and neurotic persons'.

The DMT is a perceptual personality test, assessing the interaction between an individual's awareness of stress and his/her psychological defence, and how this may influence the ability to perceive reality in critical situations.

Through an analysis of a person's defence mechanisms the DMT gives a profile including,

- level of resilience under stressful and threatening circumstances
- how the person is likely to respond in such circumstances
- the likely implications for their ability to perform the required task
- useful information to support the person's work
- a clear sense of future developmental potential

The test is especially useful in relation to senior positions, because the higher the individual progresses within an organizational hierarchy, the more resilience is required to cope with the increasing ambiguities and political processes that operate. The capacity to provide continuous effective leadership and maintain competence in role in the face of such uncertainties is a central factor in our assessment of the individual (Khaleelee, 2007).

Therefore the results of the DMT assessment, will give us information about the person's overall resilience, levels and type of responsibility a person is suited for – specifically in leadership and management, how the person is likely to experience different types of organizational culture and work scenarios, and the developmental support and experiences that will be most useful for that person.

While the DMT is the core of this process it is embedded within a range of measures, all of which help to develop as complete a picture as possible about the individual. For example, it is possible to evaluate whether a person's profile is more strongly suited to operational or strategic roles. This evaluation

can be crucial when a successful operational manager is applying for promotion to a more strategic role or the other way round!

This type of evaluation is very difficult to achieve through normal selection methods based on competency interviews. This is because different types of role have quite different challenges and stresses involved. It is only when the person is in the new role that they will experience the psychological impact and it is only at that point that their defence mechanisms will be activated with both positive and negative consequences. The DMT assessment activates these reactions with the advantage of it being done in a safe and humane way, and as part of a selection process where potential strengths and problems can be identified before the person is in post.

Positive outcomes of in-depth assessment include:

- improved leadership and management
- improved staff retention and performance
- improved organizational performance
- reduced recruitment and associated costs
- more effective staff development plans
- greater capacity to work effectively in stressful and challenging circumstances

Where there is a high level of emotional intensity and risk involved in an occupation selection methods should include;

- assessment of a candidate's emotional resilience
- ability to perceive threats and make effective judgements under stress
- specific support and development needs

It is not possible to achieve this by only considering an individual's competencies and qualifications in relation to the role. Normal selection interview methods are relatively ineffective at ascertaining a person's likely performance in a challenging job over time. This is especially true where a person is, being promoted or taking on a very different type of role. An understanding of less conscious processes such as how defended or undefended, 'thick or thin skinned' and the specific nature of the individual's defences is also necessary.

Information for Candidates Undertaking the DMT Assessment

You will be taking part in an assessment, which we hope will be helpful, and an interesting contribution towards understanding how your particular skills and attributes relate to the specific requirements of your role.

We use an advanced approach, incorporating exercises and interviews, to focus in some depth on formative and professional experiences throughout your life. From such considerations, it is possible to form a view about your likely development and aptitude for the matters under consideration.

This integrated approach whether looking at new appointments, promotion or personal development is always set within the following format:-

- We consider the general elements which 'make you tick' as a professional and give you your distinctive style.
- We look at the approach you bring to problem solving and the ways of thinking you find most natural and accessible.
- We look at how these abilities are translated into action – your particular way of making things happen.
- We comment on the way you work with others – how your needs and theirs come together in the world of work.
- We then summarize our findings in respect of the issues specific to your assessment. You are given a copy of this summary.

This assessment can make a significant contribution to exploring your professional development and role. The intention is to enlarge and deepen the information base against which choices can be made.

All our work is confidential (agreed with the employer in terms of who the assessment information is shared with) and we shall be happy if we have elucidated important personal questions, which help to improve choice and practical effectiveness.

References

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