

ASSESSING UNDERLYING ASPECTS OF CHARACTER FOR CHALLENGING AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY DEMANDING WORK – PATRICK TOMLINSON (2025)

Great organizations constantly change, not only to adapt, but to innovate and improve. A product of work is the people who work in the organization. Great organizations develop people at work, not only their competence but also their character.

(Maccoby, 2015, pp. 149-150)

For over 30 years, I have had a specific interest in how personal character affects performance, capability, development, and resilience. This page collects some of the key points of learning and how it has led me to the development of CAST (Character Assessment & Selection Tool).



www.castassessment.com

My first senior management role in 1994 had responsibility for staff selection, training, and development. The task of the organization, the Cotswold Community, was to provide therapeutic residential care for children and young people who had suffered significant levels of trauma and other adversities. To help put this work into context, a PDF can be downloaded from this page of a journal special edition about the work of the Cotswold Community.

Therapeutic Communities, International Journal of Therapeutic Communities, 32, 4, Winter, 2011

As well as the work being physically and emotionally challenging, we worked around 70-80 hours per week. So, unsurprisingly, when I researched the level of staff turnover of the previous 15 years, I found that the average length of stay for workers who were directly involved with the young people was about 2.5 years. The number of days lost through sickness was less than 5% which was better than the 10% at the local government social work department.

The Defence Mechanism Test (DMT)

It was strongly felt in this organization that if we could improve staff retention to over three years, this would be hugely beneficial to the young people and the primary task of the organization. Not long into my new role, I had the good fortune to be introduced to Olya Khaleelee, who had carried out a pilot study at the organization, using the Defence Mechanism Test (DMT). The DMT was developed by Kragh during the 1950s because of a high level of failure in the selection of Swedish trainee fighter pilots.

It turned out to be a useful tool, and since then, it has been used in other dangerous professions, such as deep-sea diving. A further development was the realization that while managers and leaders might not be in physical danger, the psychological threats and dangers elicit similar defensive responses. These unconscious defence mechanisms help a person survive in threatening situations, but can also reduce

their ability to see things clearly and undermine their capability. The DMT continues to be used 75 years after its creation.

The DMT is carried out using a Tachistoscope.



The first tachistoscope was initially described by the German physiologist AW Volkmann in 1859. The machine is designed to flash a series of images very quickly, sometimes so that they appear on a screen at only 1/100th of a second, to create a subliminal imprint in the mind.

The device is designed to measure the visual field for a very short time and to verify the accuracy of perception.

A paper by Olya Khaleelee (1994) summarizing some of this can be downloaded from this page.

The Defence Mechanism Test as an Aid for Selection and Development of Staff

As the pilot study coincided with my appointment to the new role in 1994, it was a perfect opportunity to implement the findings of the pilot study. We began to use the DMT in the staff selection process. We also used it for looking at the development of staff already in post. We did this for the next 4-5 years. We found the tool to be very helpful in improving the development of staff. With better awareness of underlying issues and developmental needs, we were more effective. The DMT was also highly effective at identifying the characteristics represented by different combinations of defence mechanisms that could either promote or hinder resilience.

During the same period, we also developed the in-house training program, gaining accreditation up to the master's level. As a result of the increased attention to the issue of staff selection development, and specifically the use of the DMT, within two years, staff turnover improved by 60% and was maintained for the next four years. This meant that the average length of stay had increased from 2.5 years to 4 years.

In future leadership roles, which I had after leaving this organization, I continued to benefit from what I had learned about the influence. The DMT was also used by Olya and one of her colleagues, Ralph Woolf, for assessing senior managers in several organizations. An article, Tomlinson (2009), *The Use of the Defence Mechanism Test (DMT) to Assess Resilience and Management Potential in Stressful and Challenging Occupations*, can also be downloaded on this page.

The main challenges I have found in the field of staff selection are related to.

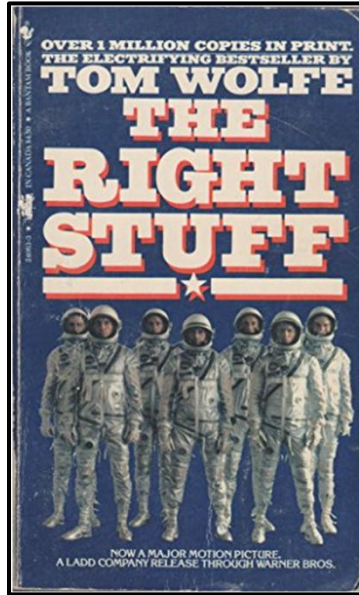
1. Selection for entry-level positions.
2. Selection for promotion with higher levels of responsibility.

The obvious reason is that when a person enters a new position, which they have never been in before, the outcomes are highly unpredictable. Of course, every new position is unique, and no two organizations are the same. But when someone is going into an especially challenging situation for the

first time, the unknowns are especially high. Where the role is highly demanding with high emotional impact, academic learning, theory, and qualifications are not a good indicator of likely success.

Underlying Character and Attributes

Underlying character and attributes are more relevant but difficult to detect in ordinary selection interview procedures.



Certain occupations or tasks require high levels of attributes such as perseverance and fortitude. Detecting the 'right stuff' as Tom Wolfe, writing about test pilots and astronauts, famously put it, is not easy. Our attributes may make us well-suited to one kind of challenge but not necessarily another. It is crucial to find a good match between our attributes and the required task.

Rich Diviney has referred to the underlying character as Attributes. He claims (p.5) that,

"In such extreme situations, how you perform is much less about what you know than who you are. Your skills aren't necessarily important. What matters more are your attributes."

As is the case with defence mechanisms, he states (p.6),

But it's important to remember that attributes are always running in the background. Highly challenging situations, especially ones rife with uncertainty that force you to operate on instinct, will bring them to the forefront.

Rigorous selection procedures, including 1-1 interviews, group processes, written exercises, and psychometric tests, can help improve the likelihood of making good decisions on who to appoint. It is also helpful if the selection process can identify key issues to work on in the person's development once they are appointed. Even with the best methods, identifying underlying attributes and character is extremely difficult. So much so that Warner (1992, p.45), on behalf of the UK Department of Health, claimed,

The Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) noted in their written evidence that on its own, "the interview is not a good predictor of future job performance". Research findings quoted in the evidence suggested that the interview has a validity coefficient of 0.14 (i.e., only 14 in 100 appointments based on interviews will meet employers' expectations on job performance). The IPM commented that this is somewhat worse than making decisions on the toss of a coin.

Character Assessment and Selection Tool (CAST)

"The 1st step in developing a high-performance culture – select on character."
(Owen Eastwood, Leadership Consultant)

"Character triumphs over talent."
(James Kerr)

"Hire Character: Train Skill."
(Peter Werner Schutz, President and CEO of Porsche, 1981-1987)

During the last 10 years, I have continued to see the challenge of creating effective staff selection and development processes. I have worked with some organization to review and redesign their processes. The results of this work have been positive on organizational performance at all levels, including finance, and in improving staff retention and reducing sickness.

A key objective became to develop an assessment process that would improve the quality of staff selection and development, in a way that was practical and accessible. The accessibility issue is especially important for recruitment processes that can include significant numbers of people. So, I carried out research for over a year on what has been learned about the issue of character and its development. I found a rich source of research, some of which is included in the bibliography below.

After the research, I then created an assessment format with around 50 short questions to try and ascertain issues of underlying character. In particular, the assessment looked at matters related to sense of purpose, perseverance, growth mindset, and ownership. These are all matters that are relevant to resilience and the capacity for holding responsibility. I also looked at the issue of how one approaches the development of oneself and others. For example, the combination of being demanding and supportive (see Tomlinson, 2021). **A key aspect of the CAST assessment is that it identifies areas of work for development.**

The assessment questions were designed to try and understand more about a person's underlying character rather than their academic understanding of the work task. Once the assessment was created, I tested by carrying out on around 50 people. The results were exceptionally encouraging, especially in the correlation of assessment results and level of work performance. I carried out a blind testing on 12 people, with no information about their work history or quality of performance. Following the feedback I gave on each candidate to the Manager of Operations, who commissioned the assessments, he wrote,

From Owner/Director to entry-level, almost a fifth of our workforce was assessed to help us better understand their needs and how they fit into the company's overall mission. The results could not be more positive. Through a simple question and answer process, completed over a 75-minute session, we gained insight into employees' strengths and challenges, appropriate methods of support, and current and future role suitability.

I continued to refine the assessment and use it with many professionals and organizations in several countries. The quality and success of the assessment led to a demand for an online automated version so that it can be accessed by larger numbers of candidates, for staff selection and/or development purposes. This is now available. <https://www.castassessment.com/optionsandprices>

A PDF of this article can be downloaded from this page. At the bottom of the page, these two articles can also be downloaded.

Assessing Character & Resilience for Staff Selection & Development - Patrick Tomlinson (2021, Revised 2025)

Assessing Character & Underlying Attributes for Exceptionally Challenging Roles and Work - Patrick Tomlinson (2024, Revised 2025)

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ENDORSEMENTS

Director, Ireland

Our organization has commissioned over 15 CAST assessments during the past two years. We have done this to focus on the development of managers and senior staff. We have also used it for selection purposes. The assessments in my experience are an accurate indicator of a person's current mindset and abilities. They also highlight the areas of development to focus on what will enable an individual not only to develop professionally but also personally.

Development Lead, Marketing Director, England

The CAST Assessment tool is brilliantly insightful and delivered in a careful, thoughtful, and affirming way that encourages self-care and self-challenge. It's different from other assessment tools in that it examines aspects of 'character' (as opposed to personality) to understand individuals' potential for leadership, resilience, and undertaking high-level responsibility.

I'd really recommend CAST for recruiting to board or high-level roles, and when promoting individuals in-house. It's an exceptional analysis.

Director of Talent & Performance, UK

CAST is a very, very smart tool indeed. I was thoroughly impressed with the process too. It's very personable and sincerely accurate, and if you are serious about your personal/professional development and the development of others, then look no further.

Assistant Commissioner, Ireland

The relational approach utilized to complete the CAST, I felt, set it superior from other tools, as within that relational exchange, Patrick was able to ascertain more about my personal qualities, but more importantly, my values.

Operations Manager, UK

From Owner/Director to entry-level, almost a fifth of our workforce was assessed to help us better understand their needs and how they fit into the company's overall mission. The results could not be more positive. Through a simple question and answer process, completed over a 75-minute session, we gained insight into employees' strengths and challenges, appropriate methods of support, and current and future role suitability.

Senior Fieldwork Manager, UK

I thoroughly enjoyed the CAST assessment. Patrick was relaxed, friendly, and informative, and he put me at ease throughout the assessment process. He took the time to explain the different parts of the assessment and the research supporting each part.

The feedback was excellent and informative. I could identify with the strengths and areas for development that the assessment highlighted. The development plan recommended in the feedback report was also very useful, and I am now using this in supervision with my manager. I highly recommend the assessment for anyone seeking to understand their strengths and areas for development and to help them set clear development goals for the future.

Director, Ireland

There are several examples I can recall where the CAST assessment identified strengths and areas of development in an individual early on in their employment with our organisation that became uncannily and highly accurate once the individuals became embedded in their role.

I believe in the CAST assessment to the point that the report generated from an assessment of a candidate for a key role in our organisation would have a big part to play in the decision-making process on appointments and professional development plans.

Assistant Commissioner, Ireland

The assessment process, written report, and feedback were exceptional.

Team Leader, N. Ireland

I recommend the assessment for any manager who wants to focus on selecting the appropriate staff for positions and/or identifying ways of developing resilience.

Operations Manager, UK

From Owner/Director to entry-level, almost a fifth of our workforce was assessed to help us better understand their needs and how they fit into the company's overall mission. The results could not be more positive. Through a simple question and answer process, completed over a 75-minute session, we gained insight into employees' strengths and challenges, appropriate methods of support, and current and future role suitability.

Company Founder, India

I found the CAST assessment extremely helpful in providing me with an understanding of my strengths and areas of future work. Having a greater awareness of areas requiring development has given me an understanding of where my focus should be. I highly recommend CAST as a tool for staff appointment, retention, and workforce development. This assessment not only identifies the right people for an organisation but continues as a management tool. Thanks, I believe I have made improvements in my performance following my assessment with you.

Therapeutic Specialist, Family Services, Australia

The CAST assessment is a highly practical tool that complements standard recruitment procedures, offering a great benefit to individuals and organisations alike. Verbal and written feedback gave me valuable insight into my strengths and areas for development that enabled me to position my career goals effectively. The considered approach to staff recruitment and development encompasses a true understanding of the qualities most relevant to professionals working with people across the lifespan.

Clinical Psychologist, Australia

I found the assessment process straightforward, engaging, and thought-provoking. The assessment outcomes were representative of my approach to work and family life. The assessment supported valuable insights and a sense of empowerment.

University Lecturer, Middlesex, UK

I valued the one-to-one approach used for the assessment, and the personal brief given of the results thereof, opening a conversation for further developments. I found the whole assessment process educational and actionable.

Director, Portugal

Through the assessment interview, I was helped to identify the main characteristics associated with my leadership abilities and skills. The results, and most of all, the way they were presented to me, gave me important information to set goals for professional development.

Operations Manager, UK

For any company wanting to gain a greater understanding of their employees and how they and you can best support the task, I highly recommend this assessment, and we will certainly be using the assessment in our future development.

PATRICK TOMLINSON BRIEF BIO: The primary goal of Patrick's work is the development of people and organizations. Throughout his career, he has identified development to be the driving force related to positive outcomes for everyone, service users, professionals, and organizations.



- ✓ Patrick has over 30 years of experience in leadership, professional, workforce, & organization development.
- ✓ Vast experience in staff selection & development.
- ✓ He has conducted longitudinal studies and research on staff retention & helped organizations significantly reduce the costs of ineffective staff selection & development.
- ✓ He has helped organizations across the world save £100s K & improve all outcomes.
- ✓ Over 8 years of research on the CAST tool.

His experience spans from 1985 in the field of trauma and attachment-informed services. He began as a residential care worker in a therapeutic community for young people and has experience as a team leader, senior manager, Director, CEO, consultant, and mentor. He is the author/co-author/editor of numerous papers and books. He is a qualified clinician, strategic leader, and manager. Working in several countries, Patrick has helped develop therapeutic models that have gained national and international recognition. In 2008, he created Patrick Tomlinson Associates to provide services focused on development for people and organizations. The following services are provided,

- Character Assessment & Selection Tool (CAST): for Personal & Professional Development, & Staff Selection
- Therapeutic Model Development
- Developmental Mentoring, Leadership & Organizational Development, Consultancy, & Clinical Supervision
- Non-Executive Director

Websites:

Patrick Tomlinson Associates: www.patricktomlinson.com

CAST (Character Assessment & Selection Tool): www.castassessment.com

Contact: ptomassociates@gmail.com