

The Use of the Defence Mechanism Test (DMT) to Assess Resilience and Management Potential in Stressful and Challenging Occupations

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We have developed an Assessment for staff selection in work in the Human Services/Social Care sector. The Assessment is adaptable to posts ranging from Residential Care Worker to Director of Services. The DMT is the core of this process, but embedded within a range of measures, all of which help to develop as complete a picture as possible about the individual.

Taken as data and put together with other information from test results, and discussions about work and formative experiences, we can form good enough hypotheses to help the candidate understand better how they function and the reasons for what has happened to them most recently, thereby connecting up the past and the present. From this understanding, we can either comment on the fit between candidate and role in a selection process, or we can highlight the factors that need to be incorporated into the developmental plan to maximize a candidate's potential.

Defence Mechanisms

Defence mechanisms form a kind of psychological protection against threat or stress, a protection which is necessary to cope with or endure difficult situations without becoming overwhelmed, and of which we are, for the most part, completely unaware. Because of constitutional factors and formative experiences, we all differ in our ability to tolerate and manage stress (Khaleelee, 2007).

Under great stress, or in a critical situation, defence mechanisms function as the 'shock absorber' of the mind. However, 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.

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).

The Defence Mechanism Test (DMT)

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.

The DMT was invented by Professor Ulf Kragh (1955) of Lund University. During the late 1960s, it was applied to stressful occupations such as air force pilots and air traffic controllers. Statistical analysis proved a highly significant connection between DMT prognosis and accident-proneness. Over the past two decades, it has been successfully used

in assessing pilots (both military and civil), paratroopers, divers, car drivers, as well as in the managerial sector. The DMT is also in extensive use for clinical, psychiatric purposes.

In several scientific studies, the DMT has proved highly accurate in predicting performance and accident-proneness under stress. Studies have shown that in many accidents where operator error was the main cause, the operator, quite unconsciously, failed **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. It should be mentioned that although the DMT is designed to provoke subconscious defence mechanisms, it is generally not conceived as unpleasant or disturbing by the test subject.

Instead, the DMT is a humane way of retrieving important psychological data. The test is very useful concerning 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 one's role in the face of such uncertainties is a central factor in our assessment of the individual (Khaleelee, 2007).

Rationale for Use in the Selection of Staff in the Human Services/Social Care Sector

Possibly the most important thing that underpins effective work in the Human Services is the continuity, reliability, and consistency of the workers involved. In stressful work, which can have a huge psychological impact on the worker, the level of psychological resilience will be a major factor in determining the length of stay and effectiveness.

Effective staff selection is central to achieving the optimum level of retention. Ineffective selection contributes to high levels of staff turnover, absence through illness, sudden staff leavings, breakdowns, or other stress reactions in the workplace.

Additionally, a candidate's suitability to a particular role is critical to effective judgement and decision-making within that role. For example, candidates without a suitable profile are more likely, when under stress, to not see the reality of what they are working with clearly. This can lead to serious misjudgements, putting themselves and those they work with at significant risk.

The cost of all this can be substantial to the staff and those they work with, as well as to the organization as a whole. A vast amount of time, money, and other resources can be absorbed into supporting and replacing staff who exit prematurely, as well as in dealing with the consequences of poor performance.

The DMT is an especially useful tool for staff selection and development in highly stressful work, such as in the human services, police force, military, leadership roles, etc., and this is supported by research (see Khaleelee, 1994; Khaleelee and Tomlinson, 1997).

By providing an analysis of a person's defence mechanisms, the DMT provides a profile of a

person's level of resilience under stressful and threatening circumstances, how the person is likely to respond in such circumstances, and the likely implications for their ability to perform the required task. The DMT analysis also provides very useful information to support the work with that person and gives a clear sense of future developmental potential.

In the research study referred to above (Khaleelee, 1994; Khaleelee and Tomlinson, 1997), a profile of effective and ineffective candidates was established. Through using this in the staff selection process, the length of stay for residential workers, including managers, improved from an average of 2.5 years to 4 years, and this 60% improvement was maintained over 4 years.

Outcomes

- Improved staff retention and performance - this will be achieved specifically by focusing on selection processes for new workers and for positions that involve promotion to senior or more demanding roles.
- This will reduce recruitment and overtime costs and potentially improve levels of absence due to sickness.
- Reduced disruptions to the services offered, for example, reduced placement breakdown for children.
- The DMT assessment identifies the developmental needs of candidates, leading to greater awareness, improved quality of supervision, and better performance in their role.
- Improved leadership and management through the successful identification of suitable candidates.

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 that '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 concerning 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.

References

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