



WHITE PAPER

THE DYNAMIC DUO OF ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT MUST BE INTEGRATED TO REALIZE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL AND VALUE.

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Jobs and Wozniak. Ben and Jerry. Simon and Garfunkel. You can pick any dynamic duo you want, but the point is the same: Sometimes two things, when brought together, create a degree of value beyond simple addition. As is often said, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” In other words, when the combination is just right, 1+1 can equal 3, or possibly more.

We may not think of assessment and development in this way, but maybe we should. When it comes to talent management, we have found that a sizable percentage of organizations have separate assessment and development strategies that are led and executed by different teams of people. This division of labor may not necessarily be a bad thing. But when the two functions are *disconnected*, as is too often the case, or there is a lack of alignment with organizational strategy, the result is that neither function fully meets the organization’s needs. In other words, without alignment, 1+1 equals something *less than 2*.

The combination of assessment and development is not so much about bolting together two separate functions as it is about making sure that both are tightly aligned with the organization’s business drivers and talent strategy—and with each other.

In this white paper we will examine the issues that can arise when assessment and development are separate, explore the important advantages of integrating them, and present a framework for combining them for the biggest payoff.

THE CURRENT STATE—HOW WE GOT HERE

To understand the disconnect that occurs between assessment and development practices, let’s look at how these two functions address leader or executive development within an organization.

Assessment takes different forms and can be used for a variety of purposes. Assessment practices are associated with selection, promotion, and, sometimes, succession. Those running the assessment function often appropriately emphasize its technical qualities and the measurement accuracy. As we know, assessment is also often used in development to diagnose strengths and gaps, and focus individual and group development efforts. There are leadership assessments ranging from inventories, to 360s, to simulations and assess-

ment centers. In a developmental context, good, robust assessment should provide focus and specificity about the skills, behavior, and capabilities in which the individual or population needs to improve.

I have seen leader and executive development initiatives driven from both the assessment and development functions. Assessment-driven development initiatives often feature individualized development planning or coaching as a follow-up strategy to the assessment. These initiatives are defined by both pluses and minuses. On the plus side these assessments typically feature in-depth tools, diagnostic precision, and the opportunity for deep personal insight—a critical starting point if true leadership growth is to occur. On the minus side, however, these efforts often run the risk of placing more emphasis on initial assessment activities than on issues like rigorous development planning, access to learning resources/support, and development accountabilities.

Meanwhile, leader and executive development initiatives, driven by learning and development groups, focus on providing the best available resources to drive the leadership capability required to meet business challenges. Some may view these initiatives in terms of curricula, while others may consider the broader spectrum of learning resources, including action learning, special projects/assignments, coaching, and so forth. These initiatives often take into account the need for high-quality content, audience relevance, holistic learning, and emphasis on application. When initiatives such as these exclude an adequate assessment component, potential liabilities can include relying on underpowered assessment

approaches that can lack breadth, specificity, and depth of insight. This can lead to the participant experience lacking needed personalization and individual ownership.

When assessment and development are disconnected, several vulnerabilities and missed opportunities can result, including:

- 1. The organization isn't optimally addressing leader skill gaps.** When a leader population is accurately assessed, the resulting assessment data make clear where the leadership skills gaps exist in that population. When this assessment data isn't used as the starting point for development, identified skill gaps—and, therefore, gaps in the organization's leadership capability—aren't addressed. As a result, valuable development resources can be spent building the wrong leadership capabilities.
- 2. Leaders don't necessarily have their individual development needs recognized and addressed.** When either individual leaders or a large cadre of leaders attend a development program not connected to specific learning and development needs, some skill gaps may get ignored while strengths are inefficiently reinforced. These learners will be less likely to buy into, and personally engage in, development when the learning is designed as a series of generic, one-size-fits-all events.
- 3. It's difficult to accurately measure the effectiveness of the development initiative.** Without assessment data as a baseline to gauge behavior change after development, the impact development has on an individual, or a group of leaders, is hard to ascertain.

Why are assessment and development disconnected in so many organizations? It may have to do with the focus of the different disciplines or siloed structures. But whatever the reason, an opportunity is missed to achieve a bigger payoff. An integrated approach is needed, and it is best guided by an integrative architecture grounded in the needs of the business.

THE BIG SYNERGY OPPORTUNITY—WHY ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT CAN (AND SHOULD) WORK TOGETHER

When organizations don't integrate assessment and development under a unifying architecture, they miss a golden opportunity to optimize their leadership capability and, ultimately, to help address business priorities and meet critical goals. This being the case, it can be instructive to examine what a fully integrated approach looks like and how it works.

When a business-focused architecture guides both assessment and development, there is clarity about why the individual or group is being assessed, whether it's to identify potential, inform promotion or placement decisions, get a snapshot of a leadership team's combined strengths and growth areas, or pinpoint an individual's strengths and development needs.

Similarly, an integrated architecture can make clear what action needs to be taken on the assessment data. When assessment and development work in concert, these data form the basis of an individual or cadre development plan. If this connection is absent, valuable assessment data never gets fully used.

Another characteristic of a guiding architecture is that the right amount of assessment can be employed for each purpose and level. For instance, the assessment process for a high-potential leader targeted for accelerated development will require both depth and rigor to ensure that he or she gets the exact development needed—and to ensure that the organization's significant investment in developing that leader can be optimized. Alternatively, there may be some development efforts intended solely to raise broad awareness rather than facilitate deep transformative change. In that case, a lighter assessment approach may be sufficient.

AVOIDING THE RISKS

When assessment and development aren't properly aligned, the organization can face significant risks. Consider an organization that needs to transform in order to respond to new market demands. Perhaps it's an established organization that needs to become more nimble, or to position itself to compete in new markets. If the organization's assessment and development initiatives aren't aligned with these critical business needs, the effort will struggle to have the leadership capability to drive the transformation.

Assessment and development systems and structures created separately and/or at different times can lead to disconnects that cause confusion, consume resources, and require reverse engineering of some of the designs previously put in place. Ultimately, the goal of development in talent management is to grow talent to propel leader and executive readiness. The business and its leaders deserve an efficient and well-

thought-through framework to make the most of what high-quality assessment and development have to offer.

BUILDING AN INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT ARCHITECTURE

Below, I outline a framework to bring assessment and development together, highlighting the essential component parts of integrated thinking (see Figure 1). Based on DDI's years of experience in both assessment and development, we have learned that addressing all of the components of the framework will lead to much greater success in fully realizing leadership development and growth.

Figure 1:
DDI's Integrated Assessment-Development Architecture



Strategic Alignment and Governance.

The first part of the strategy framework includes important strategic considerations about how the overall process is aligned and how it will be governed. Oftentimes, when embarking on a development initiative, it's tempting to jump right to the core solution. We have found that an initiative is much more successful when the organization's environment and business strategy are examined first. Before getting into discussions about assessment techniques or development solutions, it's critical to

understand the problem to be solved, who the stakeholders are, what success will look like, and how the solution will be kept alive on an ongoing basis. How many times have you seen initiatives have great momentum in the beginning but then falter when priorities and focus shift to the more "urgent" issues? Too often, the result is an initiative that dies due to a lack of governance, accountability, and sustainability.

We recommend starting with the business context and identifying the critical few business drivers that are essential for organizational success. These business drivers have direct implications for the kinds of skills required for executives and leaders to achieve the desired outcomes. For example, if your organization wants to drive aggressive global growth, your executives and senior leaders need to be skilled in areas such as strategic capability, global acumen, and entrepreneurship. Considering high-priority business drivers will help you isolate the specific capabilities, attributes, and experiences that will enable success.

We also recommend defining the growth initiative's purpose. Is its aim to build awareness, or to drive the long-term transformation of leader capabilities? Defining the purpose will help you lay the foundation for creating a sound business case and identifying initial approaches for integrated assessment and development activities.

Next, it's important to ensure that you have defined accountabilities for participants as well as for senior sponsors. You will want to identify the stakeholders and, from their ranks, establish a steering team to ensure ongoing guidance, commitment, and engagement.

A fourth broad consideration within strategic alignment and governance is the need to define the resources available to participants as they advance in their development journey. For example, will there be a curriculum? If so, what kind? Will there be a need for developmental or rotational assignments for key participants and high potentials? How will those assignments be made available? Will internal mentors be enlisted to support the leaders' development? If so, who will be involved, and how can it be assured that these mentors have the capabilities and preparation to make the most of their role and assignment?

Assessment Strategy. The next component of the framework concerns the creation of the assessment strategy. When thinking about the integration of assessment and development, the first two questions to be considered are, "What's the purpose of the assessment?" and "How will the data be used?" For example, is your organization looking for an in-depth, robust assessment that gives participants deep insight into their capabilities and their attributes, or do you need an assessment that's lighter, less costly, and provides only a broad view of strengths and development needs?

The answer should lie in how the data will be used, but also in the degree of the development effort's rigor. Development aimed at making incremental improvements to a general set of skills may only warrant a light assessment, whereas deeper transformational leadership development, characterized by multiple development methods and tools, will require the precision of higher-quality, more in-depth assessment, such as Acceleration Centers, which include simulations, personality measurement, and interviews.

Once you have determined the purpose of the assessment and the amount of needed depth, the next step is to create alignment between business needs and the capabilities to be assessed. This means not just accepting the existing competency model (in many organizations we have found that these models can be eight to ten years old, or older), but also challenging the process by investigating the criteria that will be needed for future success and ensuring that this is part of the assessment design.

Today, conditions and strategies change more rapidly than ever. If you haven't ensured strategic alignment, you might as well not go any further. Using the business drivers to forge alignment between the business and assessment criteria is a key place to start.

It is critical to consider who is to be assessed when crafting the assessment strategy. The methods used for senior leaders will need to be different from those used to assess first-level leaders. That being the case, you also need to think about both assessment depth and the scale of rollout.

It's best to carefully consider your communication strategy, as well. As assessment is one of the first phases of an effective development process, participants will need to know what is being assessed, why, and how the data will be used in their development journey. This is in addition to other important communications they must receive related to the broader development program and implementation.

There is also information that must be communicated to other stakeholders, including senior sponsors and talent management staff. How will they receive feedback on the assessment data? How will they leverage that data as talent analytics? And, what

will be the process for participants flowing through the assessment phases? What handoffs will be needed between different players who will support learners' development efforts? As you can see, there are many potential questions, and it is a good idea to have thought through the answers ahead of time.

Individual and Cadre Development Strategies. When considering the overarching leadership development strategy, we have found that both individualized and cadre or group-based development efforts are crucial to helping leaders grow their capabilities. We also have found that it's helpful to distinguish between these (hopefully integrated) pathways.

Individualized development approaches include in-depth, personalized development based on the participant's assessment findings. This personalized development planning process includes documenting the specific learning goals, actions, learning methods, applications, timelines, measures, and support to create a game plan for each participant's unique needs and learning goals. Cadre development, meanwhile, is best thought of in terms of common curricula and other group-based learning methods, such as action learning teams and peer learning consortiums.

Let's examine individualized and cadre development strategies separately.

Individualized Development Strategy. A strategy for individualized development is needed to ensure leaders have clear execution plans for their development and the right environment in place to support achievement of those plans. First and foremost, for learners, you need to facilitate a

clear understanding of what an individual development plan must look like. An individual development plan isn't a loose wish list of things a person might do when time permits. It should be a rich, detailed, and specific learning plan with timelines and accountabilities spelled out. There's little argument over the criticality of this essential foundation; however, many participants struggle with recognizing and documenting how they will specifically acquire or apply new learning and capabilities. A key question to be answered is, how will participants get the coaching and support they need?

Another key element to consider in your strategy is the range of resources to be made available to learners. Don't assume a leadership training curriculum solves everything. You need to provide a sufficient variety of development alternatives, including those that are self-driven (readings, webinars, interviews with experts), curriculum-driven, and experiential. Experiential options include special projects, assignments, rotations, and access to internal experts who can serve as coaches. You should communicate the availability of these resources ahead of time so that your participants have the options at their fingertips when assembling their learning plans.

Oftentimes, the biggest mistake made in an individualized development planning effort is not placing enough emphasis on supporting development over time. We have seen many cases in which assessment feedback is delivered and development plans crafted, but then stakeholders shift their focus elsewhere, with the result that the plans never get executed and development never takes place. For this reason, accountability is probably the most important element of the

process. It's necessary to think about the standards participants should adhere to in terms of the rigor of their development plans, and there needs to be an established, ongoing process for reviewing, checking progress, and, ultimately, completing the learning plan. While participants need to be accountable for their development, managers, talent management professionals, and others supporting the process will also need to be held accountable for their own roles and responsibilities.

Cadre Development Strategy. The last part of our framework concerns the strategy for cadre-based development. Cadre-based development initiatives often target either high-potential leaders, leaders transitioning through new milestones in their careers, or in-role development for leaders within a particular level or business unit. The most common approach to developing these cadres is the offering of a curriculum or a broader learning journey consisting of courses, action learning, and other group-level experiences intended to foster learning partnerships and networks.

There are many factors to consider in formulating a strategy and design for developing cadres of leaders or executives, and much has been written about curriculum and learning journey design, which I won't repeat here. The strategy is not about content, per se (although content does cascade from strategy). Cadre development strategy should encapsulate factors such as alignment with business strategy, alignment between assessment and individual development, senior leader advocacy, learner communication and engagement, application sustainability, and measuring return on investment.

If you are developing a curriculum, it's important to understand the business-specific leadership challenges the curriculum will address. Ask yourself, is this curriculum connected to organizational strategy and business drivers? Chances are, when you seek initial approval, others will be asking this fundamental question. Another important question is, what does the assessment data tell us about critical capability gaps? Clearly, alignment to strategically relevant capability gaps should form the basis of the cadre development strategy.

Among the host of considerations in getting a cadre-level development program off the ground are communication, engagement, alignment to audience and culture, and ensuring sustainability. Cadre development programs require sizable investments of time, energy, and commitment beyond the financial costs. Accordingly, you will want to be sure you have a compelling value proposition for learners and stakeholders alike. Communication, engagement of learners, and active endorsement/involvement of senior leaders will help drive commitment.

Alignment to audience and culture is another critical success factor. What are the unique needs of your learner audience? What kinds of learning programs and designs "work" in your organizational culture? Answering questions such as these will help to confirm that the learning design, timing, and modalities will be the right fit. Similarly, it's critical to take steps that ensure sustainability of development and ultimately allow for establishing a return on your investment. Key questions include: What will be participants' required

follow-up steps? Who will be accountable for what outcomes? And, how will you measure success and impact?

CONCLUSION

Although there is much to consider when seeking to broaden your organization's focus toward a fully integrated assessment-development architecture, starting with a broad, strategic foundation will pay dividends in leadership growth and business outcomes.

In addition to facilitating integration, the framework described above includes a consideration for target audiences such as senior leaders, high-potentials, and first-level leaders. While applying the framework to different audiences is strongly recommended, it is likely that the strategies and ingredients will differ according to the needs and scale of the situation.

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