



*Maximising
Development Centre
Potential*

MAXIMISING DEVELOPMENT CENTRE POTENTIAL

Development centres are widely used as a core development tool for many organisations. Employing traditional assessment centre technology, they aim to improve self-awareness and provide insight in order to stimulate self-development. Given the popularity and expense of development centres, however, research literature on their impact is surprisingly sparse. Of the studies that have been carried out, several show that the outcomes following a development centre could be limited.

This article summarises our research in which we set out to understand the real impact of development centres and to determine how their value could be maximised.

Development centres are one of the core elements of Pearn Kandola's talent management offering and, as technology and innovation make an impact on the level of learning and engagement for participants, they are increasingly becoming a preferred option for many of our clients. As a result we have designed and delivered a large number of bespoke development centre solutions. To deepen our understanding of their impact, we conducted a detailed investigation of the processes with involvement from the Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield.

The research was conducted at a leading professional services firm, which had been using a development centre designed in conjunction with Pearn Kandola for senior manager development. The two-day event uses a series of individual and group interactive exercises to highlight strengths and development areas in staff identified as having realistic promotion aspirations in the near future. Staff are benchmarked against higher level competencies and given guidance by colleagues and Pearn Kandola psychologists on how they can develop. The evaluation of the development centre examined the outcomes and progress of 96 senior managers who had been through the event in the past two years.

There were a number of important and useful findings from the research, including:

1) The true value of self-insight gained on the event was highlighted by the research. There is an underlying assumption that attending the development centre and receiving feedback will improve the individual's insight into their performance. It has never been shown, however, that this enhanced insight has any real impact on follow-up development.

According to this study the extent to which individuals reported learning on the development centre (in terms of greater self-awareness and knowing how to address development needs) was directly related to the extent of their development activities afterwards.

2) The research underlined the huge influence that external factors can have on an individual's development after a development centre – something that had not been established previously.

These findings have implications in at least two areas:

> Support from the work environment had a big impact on the extent to which participants reported undertaking development activity after the event. These factors included time to undertake development activity, support from line managers, peers and other individuals. However, the single most important environmental predictor was support from internal

development staff such as internal coaches and mentors who provide ongoing support and guidance.

- > The formation of a personal development plan (PDP) was also vital. Individuals who produced a PDP after the event reported significantly more development activity than those who did not. This underlines the importance of development planning in that setting objectives and planning how to achieve them are both positive steps in encouraging individuals take the appropriate action.

The research established a link between the learning on the event and the extent to which individuals undertook development activity afterwards, confirming the valuable role that development centres play in employee development. The relationship between environmental support and creating a PDP on undertaking development activity after the event suggests, however, that these external influences cannot be ignored. For employees to realize fully the benefits of development centres, and for organisations to achieve a return on their substantial investment, these external factors must be integrated into the development centre process.

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