

FIRE SERVICES EXAMINATIONS BOARD STUDY NOTE

EXAMINATION

SUB-OFFICERS EXAMINATION

PAPER

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

SUBJECT

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

ITEM

ASSESSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

STUDY NOTE No.

2304

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY NOTE

This study note has been prepared as the basis of study in connection with the qualifying examinations for promotion.

Candidates will be expected to demonstrate knowledge of the information contained in the study note and understand how it should be applied:

The 'References' made at the end of the Study Note are included for information only and candidates will not be expected to study these as part of the bibliography.

ASSESSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

1. Introduction

Assessing the performance of firefighters is an integral part of the Sub-Officers role. It is about the effectiveness of the Sub-Officer helping their staff to develop, to ensure that personnel meet their contractual obligations of being competent and ensuring that the delivery of service to the public is maintained at a high standard.

Assessment can be described as the measurement of a firefighter's performance against prescribed standards.

Properly conducted assessment will enable individuals to take more responsibility for their own performance and training needs, and the lessons learned from the assessment process will provide valuable management information in the identity of trends at local and brigade level.

This study note introduces a number of the key issues of the assessment of personnel on the watch as part of the day to day activities of a Sub-Officer.

2. Identifying and Collecting Evidence

For a firefighter to demonstrate competence, evidence must be gathered from work place activity. Workplace activity is not confined to operational incidents but encompasses all functions of the work and across all environments.

The opportunity to collect evidence for assessment will vary according to the role and workplace of firefighters. It will be possible, when working within an office environment for example, to regularly assess the performance of an individual. However, the opportunities for direct observable assessment on the incident ground will be less since they occur less frequently. These constraints mean that assessment processes will need to be flexible and appropriate to the role, task and environment.

The guiding principle is to view as much evidence of performance as is necessary for the assessor to make an objective judgement on the individual's performance. The primary source of evidence will be an individual's own performance at work. Both the processes and outputs of work can be used as evidence and may include:

Reports

Development logs

Memos

Witness testimony from other agencies attending training or operational incidents

Minutes

Appraisal reports

Specific tasks or projects to generate evidence where none exists within the current work role
Record of activities
Notes for action
Video / audio recordings of a individual's performance
Records of projects
Witness testimony from members of the public, eg letters of complaint appreciation, etc.
Staff objectives
Training plans.

3. Direct Observation

Direct observation is the preferred way of collecting evidence of workplace performance and is often the most straightforward and cost effective method of assessment. Observation of staff carrying out their duties is something supervisors and managers do every day. Observation as an assessment method has many advantages. It may require only a little more extra time than would normally be required in monitoring a staff member's performance since assessment is an integral part of a manager's role. It takes place at work with as little disruption as possible and it gives a real opportunity to gather evidence over a long period of time, which is necessary to confirm competence.

As with all other methods of assessment, planning plays an important part and using observation to collect evidence is no different. Before observing an activity within a structured assessment at work, both the assessor and the individual being assessed must be clear about what is being assessed and the evidence required. It can be very easy to miss a piece of evidence if the assessor is not prepared to look for it.

When undertaking a structured assessment by observation of a work activity an assessor should be clear about:

- (a) What is being assessed.
- (b) How much evidence is required to confirm when the required standard has been reached.
- (c) Being as unobtrusive as possible while being in a position where it is possible to see everything.
- (d) Making sure that the assessment is not interrupted.
- (e) Giving help, advice and support if needed.
- (f) Taking notes or referring to a checklist can assist in judging what supplementary evidence, eg questioning, will be required to confirm competence.

4. Simulations

Because of the difficulties that an assessor may experience in trying to carry out an assessment on the incident ground, it will be necessary on occasions, to set up simulations to carry out assessment. By careful design of the simulation and observation of performance, it will be possible to elicit evidence which will help judge how an individual is likely to perform on the incident ground.

This method of assessment can be particularly useful if collecting evidence about an aspect of work which occurs infrequently, or is potentially hazardous, eg dealing with radiation. Simulation, as a tool for assessing competence, can be applied equally well across all environments and roles. Assessors must never lose sight of the fact that simulation in this context is only a method of assisting assessment. Any simulation devised must be in support of the individual achieving the performance outcomes relevant to their role-map.

5. Assessment Methodology

An assessment methodology should:

- (a) Make it possible for workplace performance to be measured objectively.
- (b) Allow the achievement and maintenance of workplace standards to be demonstrated.
- (c) Be flexible and fit for purpose.
- (d) Allow the measurement of performance in a variety of different roles, environments and situations.
- (e) Facilitate a two way process between the assessor and the person being assessed so that the assessor is able to comment on performance and identify training and development needs.
- (f) Allow assessment of individuals in their normal work role.

There should be a common assessment system that can operate across the brigade.

6. Formative Assessment

When assessors give guidance designed to cause an individual to alter their performance, or an aspect of it, they are giving a 'formative assessment'. This term is used to indicate that an assessor is "forming" an individual's development towards a final outcome. This type of assessment is often part of a trainer's or line manager's normal function. If formative assessment is carried out in a sympathetic and meaningful way, it can be an effective motivational and development tool. If however, formative assessment is delivered in a negative way, then the opposite may be equally true.

7. Summative Assessment

This assessment "sums up" an individual's level of competence in a particular function and is recorded in the training records to serve as a statement of competence at a point in time.

Formative and Summative Assessments are often used together when supporting an individual's development. The assessor will also be forming a view on the overall competence of their performance.

8. The Focus of Assessment

The focus of assessment is in two distinct areas of development, these are firstly in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the job role and secondly in the actual practical application of the job.

(a) Assessment in Acquisition

The focus of assessment in acquisition is to ensure that the learning outcomes of training have been achieved. The environment for assessments may include:

- (i) Drills.
- (ii) Lectures.
- (iii) Workplace activities.
- (iv) Written questions.
- (v) Oral questions.
- (vi) Simulations.
- (vii) Design activities and tasks.
- (viii) Reports.
- (ix) Table top exercises etc.

The key stages of assessment within the environment of acquisition will be:

- (i) Plan the assessment.
- (ii) Observe the assessment.
- (iii) Question underpinning knowledge.
- (iv) Examine any additional evidence.
- (v) Make a judgement.
- (vi) Feed back.
- (vii) Feed forward.
- (viii) Performance review.

(b) Assessment in Application

The focus of assessment in application is the ability of the firefighter to consistently demonstrate an appropriate, confident and intelligent application of the necessary knowledge, skill, attitude and understanding in the actual job role in the workplace.

The necessary skills must be demonstrated within their differing workplaces and could be:

- (i) the incident ground;
- (ii) the station or office; and
- (iii) the training environment.

The demonstration is usually over time, and must include all of the different environments that can be encountered in the fire service. eg adverse weather, night time etc.

9. Continuous Assessment

Continuous assessment is defined as regularly engaging in processes that review the workplace performance of all aspects of a firefighter's work, measured against the standards applicable to that role. Continuous assessment brings the benefit of using normal workplace activities as the primary means of assessing performance.

Debriefing and performance reviews are effective tools in ensuring that appropriate evidence is gathered and that the findings are discussed with the participants so they can learn from the experience. Continuous assessment will identify the currency of a firefighter's competence. Continuous assessment provides one of many components that collectively assist the effective management of firefighters.

10. Performance Reviews

Assessment of competence is an ongoing process, which will require regular performance review. These will help to develop firefighters by looking at their long-term training and development needs within acquisition and application.

The firefighter's record of achievement is essential to performance review. This should identify the competence achieved, incidents attended and training received, allowing firefighters to profile their achievements and plan their continual professional development. The process of carrying out performance reviews will also assist in confirming whether there are more widespread problems across the brigade.

Within a fire station, performance reviews should take place:

- (a) at regular pre-determined intervals;
- (b) as a risk critical response; and
- (c) at the request of the individual.

(a) Regular pre-determined intervals

The brigade training policy will determine the frequency for firefighter performance reviews. In the interests of maintaining quality in the review process, it is important for line managers to devote suitable time for preparation. Equally firefighters require time to assess their own needs prior to the review. Spreading reviews throughout the year will ensure that the process is taking place within the structure of the watch on a continual basis allowing experience to be gained and continuity applied. The length of the review itself will be dependent on the needs of each firefighter and will take place on a one to one basis with their line manager. It is likely therefore that all officers on a watch will be involved in the process.

(b) As a risk critical response

There will be occurrences at work that are critical to the safety of a firefighter and/or other members of the watch. In such a case, a firefighter's training and development plan may need to be adjusted in order to facilitate training in a particular field. For example, in the case of a breakdown in breathing apparatus search procedures, it is essential that the training priorities change to address this urgent, risk critical training need.

(c) At the request of the individual

It is important that firefighters share ownership of the assessment process and are able to review their own progress. Occasionally firefighters may wish to adjust their training and/or assessment programme. This may be due to personal or professional reasons. Supporting firefighters within a constructive environment, should allow the review outcomes to be revisited and adjusted according to the needs of the individual and the overriding requirements of the brigade.

References

A Competence Framework for the Fire Service