



Developmental Assessment: The power of person-centric assessment

What's the need?

The last few decades saw a significant shift in the world economy and how organisations operate. New patterns are emerging that impact on how we structure organisations and lead, motivate and engage people to ensure we remain responsive and competitive in a VUCA world.

Today's leaders face growing pressure to deal with increased competition, more informed and demanding customers, a faster pace at which the business landscape is changing, increased regulation and legislation, changing demographics of their employees as well as commoditisation, pressure on fees, client fickleness and less loyalty. The characteristics of a successful leader are becoming increasingly fluid and dependent on the strengths and the potential of each individual and the organisational context they operate in.

Leadership capability is a key issue facing organisations today. 86 % of organisations in the UK claim leadership to be one of their biggest challenges, and the capability gap is growing steadily despite huge investments in leadership development. Only 6% of companies report feeling ready to address their leadership issues, according to Deloitte's UK Human Capital Trends 2015 report.

To successfully compete in the new environment, organisations need to adjust the way they select, develop and promote their leaders, raising the bar in terms of rigor, depth and relevance of the approaches used for identification, assessment and development of their leaders.

In this paper, we discuss the added value of using developmental assessments in a VUCA environment to provide a platform for self-directed behavioural change whilst building leadership capability able to respond to the fluid environment in which they operate.

Prevailing assessment approaches

A Google search on "Leadership Assessment" produces an astonishing 286,000 results in just under half a second. Most results fall under questionnaires assessing Leadership Styles and assessments based around various generic competency based frameworks, identifying leadership behaviours as well as organisation specific competency frameworks.

These popular approaches to leadership assessment tend to define standards, criteria or competencies and then use a variety of tools to measure these in the individual, using structured interviews, business simulations, case studies, and psychometric assessments (for example, trait based personality questionnaires or ability tests).

Organisations set out their criteria and require their workforce to adjust themselves accordingly, whether that may be their knowledge, hours or their behaviour.

Ultimately, the individual is defined by constructs such as knowledge and skills; which can be aligned and modified as per the organisation's requirements.



This approach has several drawbacks in the volatile, ambiguous and complex world we now inhabit:

- Viewing an individual as a series of traits and demonstrated behaviours is limiting and prevents a holistic understanding of the person;
- Competencies date quickly as strategy changes to adjust to rapidly changing market circumstances;
- Competency models overplay past performance and current capability, paying insufficient attention to future potential and capacity building;

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- Individual's mindset and values that play a critical role in performance are overlooked;
- Finally, from a diversity and inclusion perspective, traditional approaches can reward those with 'traditional' career histories at the expense of those who have followed different pathways or come with different perspectives. As the talent pool becomes increasingly more diverse, we risk overlooking or losing key talent.

How does the person-centric assessment approach differ?

The idea that an individual solely needs to match organisational requirements to perform a role is a risky assumption on which to base key strategic talent decisions in the current reality.

The alternative approach – person-centred assessments look at the individuals holistically, examining a whole range of attributes that define a leader. They are not only measuring behavioural standards and competencies, but also accounting for the individual's motivational drivers, experiences, emotion and personal values.

Person-centric methodologies go beyond how people operate at work, considering individuals as comprised of experiences, emotions and thoughts in all aspects of life, including outside the workplace.

Without denying that organisational fit is important, a holistic view of the individual probes into the 'why?' and 'what?' of their way of leading, working and more generally, thinking, feeling and relating.



The MDV approach

The MDV leadership assessment approach is underpinned by the belief that only by understanding the whole person can you tap into the potential strengths, derailers and leadership potential.

This approach is firmly based on evidence based practice and psychological theory and validated by over 20 years working with and assessing leaders in the most complex business environments.

Understanding the whole individual makes the assessment inherently developmental, as it allows links between the job demands and individuals' potential for development.

'Inside out' approach

The MDV developmental assessment procedure takes an 'inside out' rather than 'outside in' approach – adopting a holistic perspective rather than dissecting people into a series of component parts, scales, scores and competencies.

It enables generating an inclusive view of performance and potential and provides powerful insights into development opportunities, appreciating that at a senior level, individuals have developed through their life experiences, at work and outside, and have the capacity to make meaning from their experiences.

"The process was professional, thorough, enjoyable and interesting."

Multi-domain

The approach typically focuses on 3 domains:

1. Core - judgement, drive and self-management;
2. Interpersonal - relationships, influence and conviction;
3. Organisational -political sense, practical grip and internal/external perspective.

Developmental focus (Reflective practice and meaning-making)

Influenced by Keegan's Constructivist Development Theory (1980), MDV's developmental assessments observe how individuals recognise where they stand in terms of their system and their self throughout the different phases in life.

Reflection may be quite familiar to many but practised by few. It's understandable that finding time to reflect whilst caught up in the everyday work pressures isn't always

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easy. This is why the MDV assessment process promotes a reflective approach.

From a couple of recent interviews, Mike Vessey, Managing Partner of MDV noticed that, *“One of the senior candidates was unable, or not yet ready, to make much meaning from his experiences and found accessing and taking a perspective on his formative years particularly difficult. Intellectually able, he had not developed much reflective function and this made it difficult for him to operate in ambiguous interpersonal situations. Another candidate, more developmentally advanced, had a very ready access to deep insights on his experiences. His answers were crisp and concise, not simply as a facet of communication style but because he had made meaning of his past and what this meant for his practice of leadership in the present and potentially in the future.”*

“It has given me an opportunity to reflect and to be challenged.”

The methodology at MDV engages participants in a meaning-making process – encouraging exploration of matters beyond the surface and work life. This aspect allows consultants to probe into the complexities of the individual’s processes in thought, feeling and doing.

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The MDV methodology considers the idea of ‘joining the dots’ and discussing what individuals are noticing about the turning points and transitions in their career. It takes the time to explore the in-between ‘grey’ areas regarding feelings and experiences, especially as most senior decision-making is rarely black or white.

“It has been good for me, I have got something out of it, and it has given me some key take-aways / actions which I own.”

Using the individual’s understanding of themselves and their experiences, the person-centric assessment process engages with the participants to initiate a journey of development. Promoting an enthused end result rather than leaving them feeling dissected into traits and behaviours, consultants avoid throwing psychological jargon at participants.

Consultants familiar with the MDV approach say that *“The back story added real richness to the interview and allowed me to make connections and see the ‘why’ in the person and not just the ‘what’ and ‘how’.”*

Others refer to the process as a “fluid conversation” which explores beyond the psychometrics and integrates a fruitful, holistic view which has proved to be beneficial for the individual’s future use.

Benefits of using a person-centric assessment approach

There is a wide range of benefits of using a person-centric approach:

- *Enables behavioural change.* Adjusting mindsets is a key driver for achieving behavioural change as a part of leadership assessment. Understanding how the individual has been influenced by experiences and emotions and crucially, what sense they have made of these, helps the individual make that change.
 - *Future focused.* Person-centric assessment looks towards the future and keeps in mind the values and requirements of the individual and the business in a VUCA environment. Essentially, it provides clarity on how the person can deal with change and complexity in the work place.
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- “The process was insightful, not intrusive.”*
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- *Improves collaboration and team work.* Better understanding of personal drivers and motivators also feeds through to better understanding between the individual, their peers, superiors and within teams.

Potential challenges

Of course any approach, especially when incorporating a subjective sense of understanding, will present some challenges.

- Firstly, it is essential for individuals to be able to reflect. For the developmental assessment, reflection is a part of the outcome that would influence development. It can be hard to carve out time to develop reflective practices in busy organisations.
- Secondly, individuals may not want to disclose certain situations with their interviewer. The interview

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method allows the participant to set the tone for the dialogue and to steer the conversation away from more sensitive topics if need be. However, consultants typically find that people are very open, enabling them to benefit fully from the experience. Psychometrics can be helpful in identifying and opening up areas to probe but they don't dominate the conversation.

- Thirdly, the developmental assessment approach isn't necessarily suited for early career individuals. This tool is most effective with mid-career and senior individuals who have developed their own sense of 'making meaning'. Reflection on the past and projection into the future requires a level of ego-development or psychological sophistication – to take a third person perspective.

The participant's perspective

Some MDV clients have found that the person-centric assessment feedback and interview process has created new ways of making sense of their thoughts and experiences, particularly within the job interview process. Others have found that it a very insightful, therapeutic and stimulating discussion which has increased their insight into and acceptance of their strengths and weaknesses.

"I came away with themes and a deeper understanding of what makes me, me. The dialogue between us meant the findings resonated."

Mike Vessey comments: *"Although we follow a standardised script, taking a person-centric approach ensures every conversation is quite different. Last month I met with someone where you could literally see the 'light-bulb moments' for her as we went through the three hours together. Her facial expressions and eyes conveyed the meaning-making dot-joining insights she was gleaning as we went on the journey together. Even though I didn't recommend her for the role, she reflected that she had gained enormously from the experience."*

Summary

- In a VUCA world static models of leadership become dated quickly and there is a need to have a more fluid, responsive frame of reference.
- Traditional leadership assessment approaches fail to take into account a whole range of factors impacting an individual's performance and only focus on fixed, past orientated skills and knowledge.
- New methods of leadership assessment attempt to strike a balance between the use of traditional methods with a greater element of the person-centric approach, placing greater value on the humanistic constructs which contribute to the individual's effectiveness in the workplace.
- The MDV approach to developmental assessment does more than focus on issues at hand, it allows individuals to dig deep and make sense of their journey to develop insights which may assist them in the future. Human beings are whole persons, they make sense in a comprehensive way through a coherent narrative.
- Person-centric methods place the individual at the centre and are better equipped to facilitate the individual taking ownership for subsequent development and career management and practice development.

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