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# Best Practices in the use of Employee Assessment Instruments in Leadership Development

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BEST PRACTICES IN THE USE OF EMPLOYEE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS  
IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

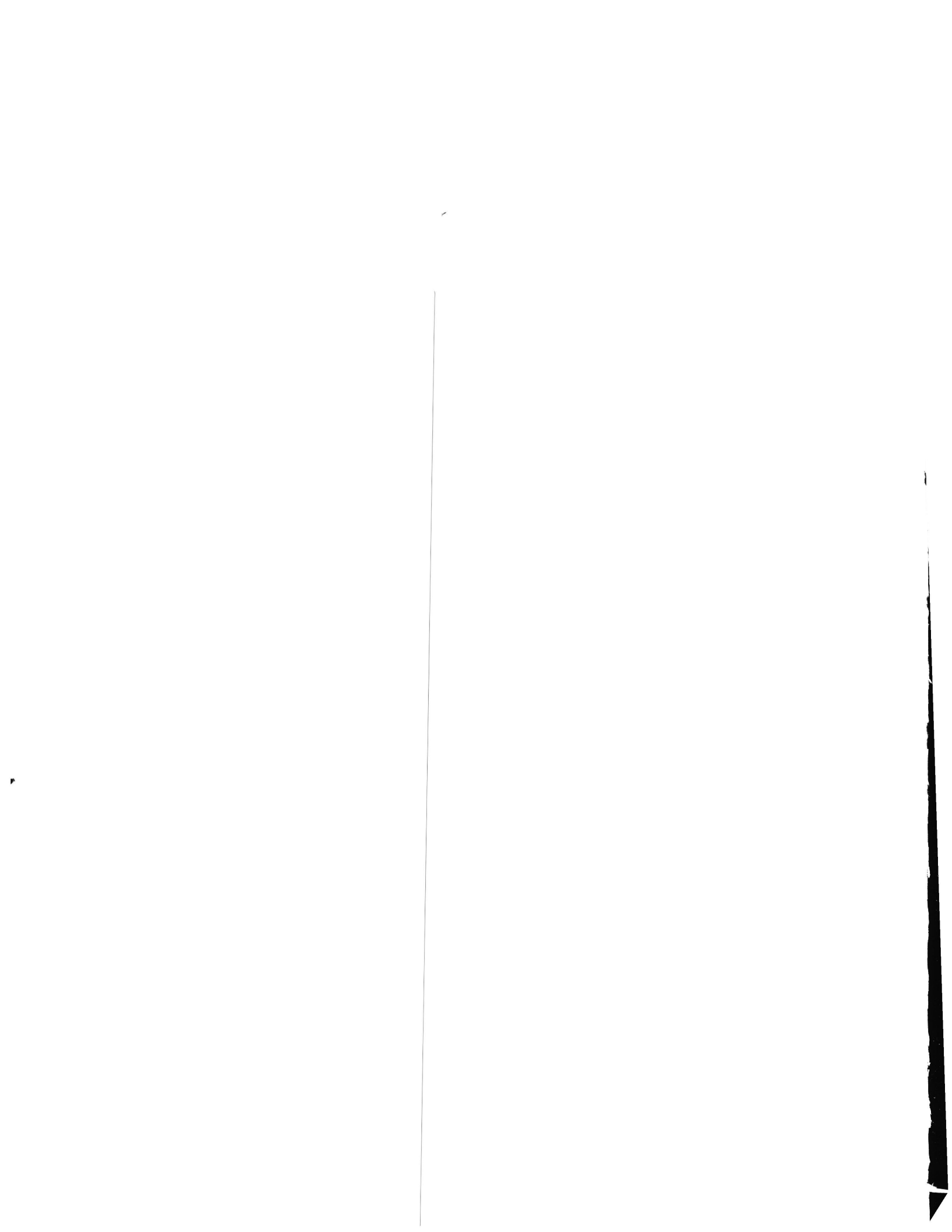
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Non-Thesis Project of

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## ABSTRACT

BEST PRACTICES IN THE USE OF EMPLOYEE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

YVONNE KINNEY-HOCKERT

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- Thesis
- Leadership Application Project
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## Abstract:

Companies both large and small have been interested for decades in offering skill, talent and leadership development opportunities for their employees. These experiences can take place through a variety of talent management methods through selection, formal and informal training, performance management and succession planning.

One of the most common ways to begin or enhance any development for teams or individuals is through the use of assessments, surveys and instruments employees complete online or fill out in paper format. Utilization of assessment instruments is a beneficial practice in creating a foundation where individuals begin to understand differences in leadership styles, decision making approaches and work preferences. This study focused on defining best practices for companies using assessment instruments across the spectrum of talent management systems and in particular leadership development.

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## Introduction

Self awareness is a vital aspect of leadership development.

Previous research tells us that companies will develop their leaders to compete in a global marketplace in an effort to assist with both an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses so the acquisition of new skills can continue. (Hayes, 2009).

Many organizations invest in some sort of leadership development for their top talent. This occurs for a variety of reasons including individual skill enhancement, maintain or increase global competitiveness and retention of top talent as well as many other purposes. The practice of gaining awareness occurs at many intervals for organizations including hiring, promotional opportunities, performance management, succession planning, team and organizational effectiveness.

Self awareness is a critical element and starting point for many traditional learning and employee development processes as well as current practices. Self awareness consists of any mechanism whereby an individual learns about self, their leadership style, decision making preferences, approach to conflict and a host of other components. Ongoing self awareness is crucial so leaders can continue leading in a rapidly changing environment with systems that are complex and ever changing. Self awareness requires ongoing attention and focus as the individual evolves in their leadership. It is not a onetime event nor is it an

endpoint. One avenue to gain awareness comes from utilization of assessment instruments, and thus assessment is a common practice for many companies when beginning development programs, whether the programs are for teams, leaders, or departments.

Assessment instruments typically provide useful information from which any gaps can be identified and from that baseline data career and leadership development programs can be customized and tailored for the individual. There are thousands of assessment instruments to choose from, and the market for assessments is large, spanning many industries and companies. Several of the more well-known assessment instruments include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DISC, MMPI and Strengths Finder just to name a few. MBTI, as just one example, is administered over 2.5 million times every year (Shuit 2003). In addition, the cost of administering the assessment can range from \$150 for one-on-one feedback up to a full day at \$6000 for a group session feedback ("What Does it Cost," 2007).

Before delving into the research about how and in what instances companies might use assessment instruments, it is important to understand a brief overview of various assessments. There are several factors including standardization, reliability and validity that aid in distinguishing a quiz or test an individual might take online or in a magazine versus a valid psychological assessment (Winslow Research Institute Inc. 2004). The

following is a partial list of assessment uses within talent management: applicant screening, hiring and selection, organizational development, performance appraisals, succession planning, career pathing and reorganization decisions.

To continue the assessment discussion, it is important to understand the types of assessments available and their role in talent management. For example, many companies utilize various personality assessments for team development, individual development, succession planning and promotional opportunities. There are several types of personality assessments including: normative, ipsative, multi-rater, diagnostic and trait assessments.

Normative assessments can be defined as having some standardized performance with a reference group that describes average or typical performance. When an assessment is normative, the scales have been tested against other groups so that each new participant's scores can be compared to the norm- group. An employer can then draw comparisons between individuals or compare an individual to a group provided there is a wide enough cross section of participants in the norm group. Ipsative assessments are characterized and defined as a person measuring against only that individual when completing the assessment. This type of assessment provides information of an individual's preferences relative only to that person. An ipsative



assessment provides useful information for a person to learn more about oneself for development but is not as useful when comparing to others within a group. A multi-rater assessment involves gathering data and feedback from an individual about themselves and from persons other than the individual about that person. This type of assessment provides information about how others perceive the subject which can be compared to what the subject perceives about oneself. This can be an especially useful tool with leadership development and performance management if administered correctly. Participants of a multi-rater assessment should be aware that focusing on the report information is critical and diminish the importance of who filled out the assessment. If done incorrectly, participants may be focused entirely on who said what in the assessment rather than summarizing the information and looking for learning and improvement opportunities.

Diagnostic personality assessments are most typically used in clinical settings and in most cases predate the more recent popularized personality assessments. These assessments would also require a degree or licensure to administer requiring most organizations to outsource this type of assessment administration if used at all. Lastly, personality trait assessments identify underlying inherent behavioral tendencies that are at the core of a person. Individuals can be motivated and influenced by outside factors, learn new behaviors and focus efforts on changing

aspects but inherent behaviors are most influential in predicting future behaviors (Winslow Research Institute Inc. 2004).

Significant research has been done in support of utilizing any type of assessment as an approach to create opportunities for individuals to learn about important qualities in becoming a leader in today's challenging marketplace. In fact, according to Linda Haneborg, senior vice president of Express Personnel Services, reminded attendees at a leadership conference where she was the keynote speaker to evaluate their own style and strengths as part of increasing their leadership skills and competencies. (Franchising World, 2006). Her message emphasized that leadership development is not only achieved through books, conferences and coaching but also requires knowledge and understanding about oneself for individuals seeking to hone their leadership skills.

Indeed, there are many companies who know and understand the importance of investing in various types of assessment instruments to glean greater information in order to select, hire and develop their leaders or groom emerging leaders as part of their succession plan or for career advancement within the company. They invest large amounts of money to identify and create opportunities for leaders and emerging leaders to become self aware. They hire outside consultants to provide feedback, interpretation and even coaching to help professionals digest and implement the new data into their professional development plans.

However, the startling reality might very well be that even though companies have access to the data, they may not use it to the fullest potential or on a regular basis in selection and talent development. For instance, companies who have enlisted consulting services to help them better understand their leaders may use the information on a one time basis but to not ensure knowledge has increased or behavior change has occurred. Often the assessments utilized may be chosen based on the presentation, cost and other palatable items. The impact of the information from such instruments is best utilized when it becomes part of a larger employee development program, thus motivating the ongoing use (Goodstein & Lanyon, 1999). They may even move on to the next type of assessment instrument in hopes of learning more or different information when in fact they would best be served by consistently using any one of the resources they already have. Indeed, the type of individual assessment information that companies have gathered can be accessed repeatedly throughout that person's career. Personality, for example, is comprised of traits that tend to be consistent throughout adulthood with predictive capabilities in leadership. (Strang, 2009).

This research proposes to investigate what the best practices are for companies who use assessment instruments for the purpose of talent management, i.e. hiring and selection, training and development, performance management and succession planning. Do companies use

the information and reports provided for single or multiple purposes across the spectrum of talent management systems and in particular for leadership development?

This topic is important as organizations continue to search for ways to grow and develop their leaders, and any significant talent or skill development starts with creating individual or team awareness. Companies are looking for new ways to train and develop their leaders; but many fall short by not reviewing the critical information at their disposal already. It has been proven, for example, that personality data are useful in any kind of development from succession to leadership. What keeps a company from using the information on an ongoing basis rather than only once?

This topic is especially relevant today as companies continue to tighten their training and development budgets and consistently look for cost effective ways to provide insight and education to their leaders. In addition to current economic conditions and the bearing it has on company willingness to invest in any talent development, the need for leadership development and succession planning will only increase with the impending onslaught of baby boomers that are predicted to retire in the upcoming years. It is clear that companies need to utilize assessment findings for all components of talent management and specifically leadership development now and definitely in the near future as

workforce demographics and dynamics will be rapidly changing thus creating a new talent environment for companies.

### Literature Review

This review of literature on leadership and assessment use will focus on studies conducted from 1986 to 2009. These studies focus on the various uses of assessment instruments and interviews in an attempt to predict leadership performance or possibility in pre-determining such in selection and hiring leaders. It is commonplace to use many different tools; however, there is virtually no information suggesting that companies should utilize the data and reports they gain through assessing people to actually develop their leaders.

Numerous studies have been conducted on executives in a variety of levels of leadership and across industries with a common denominator of participation in an existing development program. One could surmise that those individuals already have a conceptual perspective of leadership and may very well respond differently from leaders who have not been exposed to any sort of development program thus not having created the self awareness to begin a process.

For example, Strang and Kuhnert (2009), sought to study the differences in leaders' performance as a function of Leadership Developmental Level (LDL, constructive-developmental theory) by conducting interviews on 67 management executives who were current

members of a leadership development program in varying job levels from manager to the top officer level, i.e. CEO, CFO, with a mean age of 46.13 years old. The sample was composed of 70% male and 30% female leaders. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted by an Industrial/Organizational Psychologist to determine the constructive-developmental stage or LDL of the participants. The variables assessed in the interviews were personality dimensions and leader performance. The dimensions assessed were: conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience, extraversion and agreeableness. Leader performance was gathered via a 360-degree feedback method for the purposes of this study.

In addition, the Strang and Kuhnert study was seeking to learn what the contribution of constructive-developmental theory may add to the current understanding of leadership. The findings of this study suggest that there is more to do in understanding how the workplace can benefit from utilization of constructive-developmental theory. Specifically, the importance of the study suggests lateral development, which focuses on what the leader knows about leadership and the depth of their knowledge and learning (what you know). On the other hand, the vertical development of a leader concentrates on how the leader gained their insight and knowledge (how you know). Both lateral and vertical development may be necessary components for effective leadership

(Strang and Kuhnert, 2009). This study demonstrates valuable research that connects earlier studies on the notion of the application of constructive-development theory and its relation to leadership. The study does not make clear how this information can be used to assist in leadership development. It does suggest that LDL be utilized as a framework for organizational design, vision etc.; however, it is not as easy to interpret true implementation with tangible results other than it would appear to be beneficial as is any talent development.

One weakness of this particular study was the use of two separate interviewers. While participants were asked the same five questions, the researchers did not take into account the variation of interviewer interpretation. This study was conducted through an interview process with structure by having the same five questions for each participant; however, the responses were gathered by two separate interviewers. Although the interviewers were trained, there may very well be a lower degree of accuracy because of the variation in deciphering what the participant was saying versus a standard personality instrument. This study provided valuable baseline data such as a link between developmental approaches to leadership and relevant personality research but failed to return at a later date to retest at the close of the leadership development program. Such follow-up could provide valuable information regarding the return on investment for the program. Therein lays an opportunity to

conduct a sort of pre and post testing. Even though the sample size was small, the reliability was 93% which is very high, partly because the individuals scoring the interviews were trained in the process but they also discussed any discrepancies until a consensus was reached. One could argue that the reliability was inflated because there may be some factors contributing to how the consensus was reached and whether or not it was reliable.

Folk, Crow and Hartman (1994) investigated the correlation between leadership development programs and effectiveness. The study was composed of 149 executives from the manufacturing industry that were part of a management development program. They conducted their initial research and then repeated the study 10 years later to compare the results. The study showed that there may in fact be very little relationship between leadership development programs and performance improvements. The performance improvements were measured by the individual's change in organizational rank, ability to be promoted or to survive in the organization. The study did not consider unit performance or other measures of success. However, whether or not the simple act of participating in a program may lead to greater self-awareness and improvement may, or may not, be observed or even attributed to the program. This study even suggested that perhaps other



factors like personality, a given situation, and many other organizational factors may have just as much to do with managerial effectiveness.

This study added yet another dimension of information around development programs, personality assessments and a host of other inputs but left a gap in how variables were defined, i.e. success, and the fact that the study looked at only one organization. The study is narrow in scope. Caution is warranted because of small sample size and limited success factors for the referenced leadership development program. With that in mind, it can be surmised that additional research would be highly advantageous before too much weight is put on the results of the study. Likewise, it supports the idea that companies should consider ongoing use of personality information and talent development to reap long term benefits. This study highlighted that some benefits may not surface until a later date. If organizations choose to use data only once and then put them to rest, they may miss out on the long term benefit they desired.

There is a strong relationship between personality and leadership in the military which has been known for a long time, (Bradley, Nicol, Charbonneau & Meyer, 2002). Leadership development was assessed in a group of 174 military officer candidates based on six personality traits that are used to discern leaders from followers. The six factors measured were: surgency, achievement, adjustment, dependability, agreeableness

and locus of control. There were 745 individuals that volunteered for the research of which 174 (74% males, 26% females) were selected to participate in the program. The factors are defined as:

surgency - tendency to like positions of influence and leadership

achievement – tendency to strive be energetic in work

adjustment – tendency to have an even and positive affect and perform well under stress, i.e. emotional stability.

agreeableness – a person who is easy to get along with, pleasant in interpersonal relationships and considered a good team player.

dependability – tendency to be disciplined, respectful of rules and regulations, obedient and accepting of authority.

locus of control – tendency to perceive reinforcements as being under one's control.

The information suggests that there are limited studies addressing prediction of leadership over several years in military samples which make this study particularly interesting for the military population. Specifically, this study focused on male cadets and their leadership development and personality without including other interpersonal aspects such as style, past behavior etc. The study uses information from a 1999 study where leadership emergence and effectiveness were predicted based on the same study of the subjects from three years prior. The study focused on cognitive ability, physical fitness, and prior influence experiences measured through: 1) self-reports; 2) interview ratings; and 3) reference

ratings in Year 1 which in turn predicted leadership effectiveness in Year 4 (Bradley et al. 2002).

Of particular interest to the leadership development industry at large might be how a similar study might predict the same results in the civilian world. Physical fitness would likely not be applicable outside of the military study; however, the remaining factors would be relevant. One gap in the research and ending results after the four year period was the drastic decrease in sample size which started at 174 and ended at 53 candidates. Some of the participants self selected out of the study, others had been promoted or finished their assignment and were no longer in the military to participate in the study. One could argue that those who remained in the study already had an advantage over those who were out due to attrition, failure in the program or voluntary attrition from the study. The correlation may not be as strong as it initially appears in terms of leadership development and subsequent effectiveness. In fact, it could mean that only those who possessed a higher level of leadership were able to sustain membership in the candidate program or others may have had a change in their desire to continue membership. The study utilized personality assessment as part of the criteria for leadership advancement both from a peer rated assessment as well as an individual assessment.

Overall the study suggests a relationship between personality, leadership and effectiveness. This research demonstrates valuable information that is useful for future understanding of cadets which could be instrumental in selection criteria and identification for individual development. Again, this study focused on finding correlations and relationships but left open the opportunity to use all of the data in ongoing development beyond just the cadet program.

Additional relevant information to be considered in the understanding and study of personality traits and assessments is the definition of the Big Five Personality Traits, (Goodstein & Lanyon, 1999). According to this study "the bulk of literature has labeled these five factors as follows: (1) Emotional Stability (calm, secure, and non-anxious), or conversely, Neuroticism; (2) Extroversion (sociable, talkative, assertive, ambitious, and active); (3) Openness to experience (imaginative, artistically sensitive and intellectual; (4) Agreeableness (good-natured, cooperative, and trusting); and, (5) Conscientiousness (responsible, dependable, organized, persistent, and achievement oriented)." These traits are understandable in the requirements of an evolved leader but can also apply to any person or employee regardless of the presence or absence of leadership responsibilities. This information is easily understandable but is not the one and only common trait information used by all personality assessment instruments.

The study by Bradley, Adelheid, Charbonneau, & Meyer (2002) suggests that inclusion of personality traits is helpful when differentiating leaders from followers. The authors reference several time periods and the suggested traits that align with their studies. "In his summary of this literature, Northouse (2001) identified five traits - intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability - which often emerged in major reviews (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Lord, DeVader, & Alliger, 1986; Mann, 1959; Stogdill, 1948, 1974). Hogan, Curphy, and Hogan (1994) reviewed some research, not examined by Northouse, which showed that surgency, conscientiousness, and emotional stability were related to managerial advancement. Similarly, Barrick and Mount's (1991) meta-analysis revealed that extraversion and agreeableness were valid predictors of job and training proficiency for managers. More recently, Bass (1998) reported that traits such as self-acceptance, ascendancy, sociability, and internal locus of control are associated with effective leadership." It has long been supported in the military that there is a relationship between personality and leadership. The variation in trait names and definitions creates an opportunity for misunderstanding and confusion on the part of participants and organizations utilizing the information for many aspects within Talent Management.

There are many applications of assessment instruments in the workplace. A comprehensive review of numerous studies initially revealed there is relevance to learn about individuals, their personality and the impact on their performance as well as that of their team's. Three independent lines of research have reached a similar conclusion in that two very separate types of behavior shape the quality of a manager, task completion behavior and relational behavior. Through various talent and leadership assessments, effective managers show high levels of both of these behaviors and conversely less effective managers have lower scores on both scopes. The information was gathered via a variety of questionnaires i.e. the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) which was very dominant in earlier studies and then later inconsistencies and contradictions were noted. There is opportunity to look into the numerous studies used to predict effectiveness for leaders and managers. For example, the comprehensive study completed at Exxon Corporation where 443 managers used a number of predictors and several measures to assess effectiveness among this large sample size. Initially it was discovered that a high correlation between studies and findings of ( $r = .70$ ) was noted. Later this correlation decreased to ( $r = .47$ ) to which situational factors in the workplace were responsible for the big shift. It is not known what the exact situations were which would be helpful in understanding the accurate nature of the shift and would be good

information for other companies determining their interest in using leadership assessments to predict and assess leader and manager effectiveness (Goodstein and Lanyon 1999).

In support of ongoing studies and research of personality measures in staffing decisions, another study was conducted and published since the 1980s suggests wide usage of the information. In a comprehensive summary and review of studies and meta-analyses Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge (2007) found that the use of personality measures and available information was highly useful for organizations. The summary cites a study where industrial and organizational psychologists are encouraged to reconsider the use of published self-report personality tests in personnel selection contexts. The authors suggest that a very low validity of personality test for predicting job performance which is not widely supported within the research community. The summary indicates a gain, albeit a small gain (validity of  $r = .20$ ). In addition single traits may correlate around .40 with ratings of performance. These findings can be useful in assisting organizations with additional information to help select and develop leaders for improved performance. The summary does suggest that even though the validity coefficients are small they should not be ruled out for usefulness. In fact, the summary cited suggests that the validities of personality inventories are "practically useful" i.e. they are helpful in understanding, explaining and predicting job satisfaction,

leadership emergence and effectiveness, as well as motivation and effort (Ones et al. 2007). It should be noted that some personality traits may, or may not, be related to a particular position within a company and therefore would not warrant much authority in the selection and performance management aspects.

The Ones et al summary provides additional insight that there is much to be gained from various assessment instruments even though broad organizational decisions would not and should not be solely based on this type of information with low validities. However, if organizations ignore the opportunity for insight that is available to them, this could be a deficient approach to job applicant selection and development. The summary cites numerous studies which focus once again on the Big Five personality variables and the value for understanding and predicting important behaviors at work as well as motivation and attitude. This summary is helpful by giving valuable information on the effectiveness of the selection tools available to organizations and the likely use of them in their workplace.

The Ones et al summary focused on the utilization of many variables and measurements for organizations to consider when selecting for job applicants. It was also suggested to ignore the key personality characteristics would be a deficiency in the selection process. Therefore it might likely be questioned as to how this same information can be



utilized beyond the hiring setting and into the workplace far beyond the initial preview of the information. This summary emphasizes the vast availability of information, meta-analyses, measurements and indicators of job performance; however, it does not address how an organization can continue to use the information with succession planning, promotion, and overall development. Another study including both self proclaimed leaders and non-leaders looked at leadership traits and a more general view of self-concept which can broadly be defined as personality characteristics with other small traits included to help determine personality congruence among the leaders (Pepper & Ryan 1986). Although a t-test was utilized which suggests a stronger reliability, the leader group was not only functioning in a leadership position, but they were also nominated by superiors to participate in a community leadership program. It is not surprising to see the results that leaders view themselves differently than non-leaders because they are in that position; however, the incongruence may very well surface because the non-leaders are not in a position of leadership and therefore they view themselves differently. The study specifically looked at the agreement between perceived and aspired self for both leaders and non-leaders. Not so surprisingly, the leader group was more congruent with their perception of themselves as a leader and the non-leader group had a higher congruency with their aspired self. This is all valuable information

for any group of leaders, aspiring leaders etc. The unanswered question is whether or not the congruency changes with any reassessment of the characteristics. If an organization continues to track this information with the hiring and promotion of non-leaders they would be able to determine those individuals whose self perception changes in relation to their position and/or becoming a leader.

#### *Literature Review - Conclusions and Need for Additional Research*

Although the research study is based on the utilization of assessments within companies for the wide spectrum of talent management, the majority of published information relates to personality assessments, traits/characteristics and behavioral information. It would be relevant to have future research that includes information beyond the personality related data.

Many studies utilize a combination of five personality traits. This is a common approach; however, there is not always agreement on which five characteristics or traits are most important. It is clear that many of the traits are similar in definition but described by different names, and this causes some confusion across all studies making it difficult to gain a clear and decisive understanding of exactly which traits are most important to include in research. For example, the following traits may appear under a different name depending on the instrument utilized: achievement

orientation or drive, agreeableness or flexibility, and emotional stability or composure.

The research indicates that many organizations invest in the topic of leadership on an annual basis (Folk et al. 1994). The real question continues to be whether or not companies use the information from the many personality assessments, studies, research etc. for single or multiple purposes across the spectrum of talent management and in particular to hone leadership skills? Although there is more than adequate research to encourage employee and leadership development programs which may include some sort of testing or assessment, there is controversy about the long terms effects. Likewise there is little research that speaks to the ongoing use of the data and information that professionals garner as a result of their involvement and participation in any formal program with a personality assessment or any of a number of other mechanisms used to create awareness.

A common theme which emerges from the research studies completed by notable psychologists and researchers suggests a need for common language and vocabulary in the assessment industry. If that existed, there would be uniformity from company to company and across industries whereby consumers of the tools would have consistency in recognizing the information; it would also increase the lasting value as well. As it is, there are inconsistencies that leave the non-expert

wondering how to proceed and what to use or believe when it comes to selecting and developing leaders. Therein lays the potential concern for ongoing use of the information which can create questions among companies of the validity of the results and benefits for any future utilization.

Regardless which aspect of leadership a leader desires to study and learn more about, there is almost guaranteed an assessment or instrument to aid in that process. If not, new tools are developed regularly for those who seek to learn more about potential or actual leaders, their performance and how organizations can use this information in selecting efficiently, hiring better, thoroughly developing and overall advancing the knowledge and leadership performance across industries, companies, associations, and nations. There is, however, very little information on what is done with all of the data and information after the initial use of it. Is there ongoing use of the plethora of information that companies seek to learn about their leaders? If not, how can that be explained? Information does not become outdated or useless once it is processed or delivered to the individual or company. Perhaps consolidation and standardization to narrow the many options and definitions for personality traits, styles and assessments would create a need for ongoing use. Because there is such widespread use of personality assessments across organizations and industries, it is relevant to learn more about the efforts, or lack thereof, of

companies to utilize this information in a continual and consistent manner rather than a limited or one-time use.

### Methodology

This qualitative study investigates what the best practices are for companies who use assessment instruments for the purpose of talent management i.e. hiring and selection, training and development, performance management and succession planning. Do companies use the information and reports provided for single or multiple purposes across the spectrum of talent management systems and in particular for leadership development?

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will apply:

Assessment information is any instrument or assessment used by a company within the spectrum of talent management completed online, through self assessment, interview or in person. There are a plethora of instruments available to organizations, with a few including MBTI, DISC and MMPI, Strengths Finder, other technical assessments etc.

Ongoing and effective application in the utilization of the assessment findings is defined by use of the information:

- on a regular basis – at a minimum, during annual performance reviews
- for talent management to assess and develop leaders
- for performance management

- for hiring and selection
- for purposes of training and development of leaders
- for succession planning to identify key leaders and begin developing the leaders
- as interpreted by either in-house or external experts

Executives may be HR leaders, talent managers, Chief Learning Officers, or similar employees with the knowledge independent of job level/title. The interviews will be conducted after targeting and identifying three companies that are known for their development programs and optimal use of assessment tools.

#### *Study Sample*

The first step in this research study was to identify the companies to be interviewed. Companies were identified through my professional network of business contacts, colleagues and associates. The targeted individuals were functioning in an executive role or were employees within the realm of talent management independent of job level/title. I contacted the individuals via email to obtain their interest in participating. The companies selected for this study were from a variety of industries, including financial, medical device, product, retail, manufacturing, pharmaceutical and foods. The selected companies were both publicly and privately held companies.

### *Measurement*

Research data for this qualitative study were collected through face-to-face interviews with talent management professionals. Prior to collecting the data, I received approval #2010-38-3 from the Augsburg College Institutional Review Board (IRB). As a result of the interviews, I measured the assessment practices of eight companies varying in size from small to large as defined by number of employees.

### *Data Collection*

After identifying a small number of companies that make use of any type of assessment information for hiring, selection and workforce development, I contacted talent management professionals in those companies to request interviews. These professionals varied in position and level within the organization from manager, director, senior level and former executive. I described the research purpose and process and explained the nature of the interviews including that the company and individual identities would remain confidential. Participants were informed they could withdraw from the study at any point. Any information that was obtained in connection with this study and that could be identified with the individual subjects will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with their permission. Before I met with the interviewees, I emailed the research question, hypothesis and consent form (see Appendix B).

The interviews took place in person for four participants either at their office or mine as feasible. The remaining four interviews took place over the phone due to geographic location and travel limitations. The consent form was reviewed with consent granted prior to beginning the interview. Participants signed the form if the interview was conducted in person and faxed or emailed a signed copy to me if the interview was conducted over the phone. The questions were open-ended with each interview lastly approximately one hour. In some instances additional questions were asked to garner clarification and understanding based on previous responses. I took hand-written notes of each interviewee's responses. The eight interviews were conducted within a three week timeframe.

#### *Data Analysis*

After completing the interviews, I created a table that summarized information from each interviewee based on their answer to the questions see Appendix C. I analyzed the responses looking for similarities and differences among the eight companies. In particular, I analyzed key information related to *success with the use of assessments* and *repeat use of the information* for development, succession planning etc. across all the companies interviewed.



## Interview Results & Findings

After analyzing the data from the eight companies, it should be noted that each company approaches the use of assessment instruments for different purposes. With that in mind, I was not able to compare the results exactly from one company to the next due the various ways in which assessments are used in these companies. For example, one organization may use assessments for a variety of purposes in one division or team and not with others across the company. Therefore it is not possible to make one conclusion that applies to the entire company.

During the interviews, each participant was asked if their company used assessment instruments and, if so, for what purposes. All eight companies reported using assessment instruments, and all reported successful use with some variation. Each company defined their use for a variety of purposes within talent management.

Participants were asked to respond whether or not they found utilization of assessments to be successful within their company to rate that success on a scale of 1 – 10 with 1 = very unsuccessful and a 10 = very successful. All eight companies reported success in assessment utilization in varying applications and uses. The rating of success for using assessments within the companies is summarized as: 50% of the interviewees stated success based on a rating of 7/10; 37.5% stated success based on a rating of 8/10; and 12.5% stated success based on a

rating of 10/10. Hiring and selection was one of the primary topics that many interviewees commented on as related to whether or not they had enough time to administer the assessment. In addition, they noted that a chief concern was not to utilize an assessment or not, but rather, if they remembered to consistently include it in the hiring process. Often, there may be time constraints within the recruiting, interviewing and hiring process and sometimes the step of administering an assessment may get cut short. It truly seems to be more of a time issue and not one of relevance or importance. Likewise, others felt the real success from the instrument was in the professional development that the individual embarked on as well as the follow up and follow through from the immediate manager or leader. The amount of follow through on behalf of the manager was often related to the depth and breadth of development experienced by the individual.

Participants responded to the utilization of the initial assessment information and whether or not their organization used the information and report beyond what is typically provided upon the initial completion of any assessment. This was a critical question within the interview process and a foundational interest for the research. Surprisingly, seven of eight companies stated they use the initial report information more than once. Participants described assessments as providing a common language within organizations for people to understand one another and team

dynamics. With this understanding and commonality, there was shared meaning to help with conversations for future leadership needs within companies. Several organizations utilize a variety of assessment information for professional development via leadership and executive coaching. Still others described both a formal and informal use of the information. On the other hand, common reasons for not using the information on an ongoing basis were related to several factors: 1) the leader who initiated the instrument use may no longer be in the organization or that position; 2) another reason is that the team or company may have moved on to a new assessment tool; and 3) participants commented on the fact that their own learning and expertise had been exhausted, and they didn't feel they had more to offer employees by revisiting the same information. This last comment speaks to the next question about company use of outside trained experts.

Interviewees all stated that their company utilized outside experts who were trained in the particular assessment instrument. On some occasions, companies had opted for internal employees to be trained for advanced knowledge of the assessment. This advanced training only took place after the company embraced the instrument and was committed to ongoing use of the assessment. In most cases, a trained expert is needed for the initial administration, compilation and interpretation. As companies move on to other initiatives, they may, or

may not, access experts to solidify or extend the use of the information which presents an opportunity within the assessment market. Budgetary constraints were often cited in the reasons for not bringing in the outside experts on a regular basis, especially in 2009 during a down market and tough economic times for companies. Even companies that may not have had a reduced budget for talent management initiatives focused on using in-house talent instead of accessing external resources.

Upon inquiring about whether or not the companies had a written policy on the use of assessments for hiring and/or development, it was learned that none of the eight companies have a formal policy. However, most of the participants were quick to cite that their company had recommended guidelines for assessment use but did not require the talent management professionals to use assessments in all situations. The participants alluded to the fact that if guidelines were used, and not a formal policy, it allowed for flexibility and the ability to address each situation on an individual basis. There were undertones but no specific mention of concerns about liability reasons with a policy for assessment use. The concern was more about what would happen if there was a policy and it wasn't followed. There may be potential liability and impact on the company if a formal policy exists and is not followed or if an employee or candidate raised concern rather than if the organization consistently used assessments without a policy. As a general rule of

thumb, when a company has a formal policy for any process or procedure and does not implement or follow it, the company may be more closely scrutinized by regulators, legal and other outside agencies than if a guideline exists and is consistently followed but not required.

The next two questions of the interview process relate to what constitutes an organization trying a new assessment instrument and finally who within the company makes the decision to invest in an assessment tool. Regarding the determination for companies to initiate use of a new assessment instrument, the factors considered included recommendations by leadership or internal and external talent management experts, appropriateness of current instrument for employee population, i.e. some tools are not appropriate for all industries from manufacturing to retail or health care. Most companies rely on their internal experts and executive leaders to make recommendations based on the current needs within the organization.

Lastly, participants were asked if their company had criteria for investing in assessment instruments. The criteria varied greatly across the spectrum of:

- Time to administer assessment on behalf of company
- Time to complete on behalf of employee or candidate
- Report format received
- Cost of assessment
- Access to assessment expert

Cost of the assessment instrument was a factor for five of the eight companies with two of the five stating it was a very big determinant as to whether or not the company used the assessment as well as how far reaching beyond the senior and executive level they would use the assessment. In many situations, if the internal experts recommended and promoted a particular assessment, the leaders and executives would approve unless the bottom line investment exceeded prudent business decisions.

During an expanded discussion with one interviewee regarding the use of assessments and his personal interest in utilizing assessments within the leadership selection and development of his team, he stated: "There is nothing more exhilarating than building a business with people you like." His point regarding "people you like" was less about whether or not he liked the individual on a personal level and more about liking the idea that a current employee or candidate is a good fit for the company. In utilizing the assessment information to determine a match with company and individual, it is easier to support investing in the person for development opportunities and upward movement in the organization when the data supports it.

On a similar note, another interviewee noted that the business climate calls for a specific and formalized success planning process when she stated, "growth of the business is demanding a more robust

succession process with use of assessments." For this particular organization they are in a growth phase and their old approach to succession planning was not fulfilling the company needs. Likewise, they determined that assessment use was another layer of information in their more formalized process.

The research and interviews point in the direction that assessments can be very beneficial for companies on many levels. With that said, there is no specific information taking into account the need for consistent use of the data across the workforce. Even more, the relevance for an entire organization to use the assessment information consistently would yield great benefits with teams, departments, etc. Another interviewee mentioned, "...the more we use and understand assessments, the more our leaders can impact their teams and the business..." This particular leader knows and understands the importance their leaders gain with using assessments for selection and employee development. The interviewee stated that one of the challenges for busy, scheduled leaders and executives is in the utilization of the information they have at their disposal. It becomes increasingly hard to keep the reports and information in front of them so they don't forget about it.

### Research Summary

The following statements summarize the information noted in this research:

- All companies in the study use assessments for at least one purpose within talent management but to what degree is unclear.
- Culture played a distinctive role in one Japanese owned company and whether or not they would expand use of assessments in the future.
- Companies are good at offering assessments to uncover areas of need for employees to develop; they may even offer classes or something similar but tend to fall short on the manager following up once the learning is complete to aid in implementation, sustained growth and long term behavior changes.
- Individual leader/executive determines use of assessments and at what level utilization occurs within the organization.
- There are no standard best practices across the board identified through this research.
- Divisions within a company may or may not use assessments
- Most follow "guidelines" not policy for use of assessment, in some cases it is strongly suggested and bottom line is that the leader determines.



## Conclusions

Assessment instruments do have the potential to contribute to leadership from an awareness standpoint initially for the individual as well as the manager/leader. The benefits rest solely on the level of understanding, internalizing, developing and use of the assessment report information. Companies have many choices for assessments they can use. The downside of the variety of instruments is that many companies shift their use from one assessment to another without long term commitment to any one assessment. The variety of assessments is appealing from an interest standpoint; however, it also creates opportunity for low commitment and long term sustainable impact if new assessments are repeatedly introduced without maximizing the effects of the current assessment.

Not so surprisingly, the larger the company, the greater the variation in internal consistency of assessment use across the organization. This point is magnified in the absence of defined practices and guidelines for overall assessment use. In contrast, the smaller the company, the repetition of administering assessments consistently is greater; however, the ongoing use of the assessment data from one component of talent management to the next is lessened due mostly to resource availability, time and cost.

Most companies excel at providing assessment opportunities to increase self awareness as related to development and specifically development as a leader. The company may even determine areas to strengthen but may or may not encourage or create opportunities for the employee to go the next step and partake in formal or informal learning. In addition, there is very little repeated follow up with individuals on any given assessment data beyond the initial purpose. Likewise, there is very little connection between assessment use and development. In most companies, the actual process of gaining self awareness and development is truly left in the hands of the individual. Similarly, individuals learn so much about themselves and their leadership but often do not do anything beyond the initial learning due to lack of follow through, direction and accountability on the part of their leader. Therein lies the opportunity to implement ongoing discussions and opportunities for practical experience to solidify one's learning beyond the classroom.

#### Contribution to Leadership

This study intended to contribute to leadership by understanding the best practices for companies utilizing assessments within talent management and specifically leadership development. Because assessment administration and use is often utilized with leadership development, it is important for companies to know and understand their practices as compared to other companies and the larger spectrum of

leadership. Assessment use is vital in contributing to the process of self awareness and discovery as related to development as a leader. The findings of this study provide a greater understanding of assessment use within talent management. As a result of this study being one of the first that I am aware of to focus on practices of assessment use within companies, it is hoped that this research will provide a good baseline for additional advanced research in this area of study. It is also hoped that the research and findings will provide knowledge on the variation of assessments and uses within companies.

#### Research Study Limitations

One limitation of this research study is that the sample size was small. Conducting interviews was time consuming so professionals at only eight companies were interviewed. Interviewees were representing varied positions within the companies which provided a wide spectrum of information but also made the comparisons difficult due to level within the organization. Future studies should focus on consistent level within an organization for example, executive level to first line of management. Likewise, the companies in this study were varied in size from one to multiple divisions and locations complicating the scope of answers as some individuals could only respond based on knowledge within their division/department rather than companywide. The final limitation of this study was that the researcher interviewed only professionals working

within some scope of talent management. In future studies, it would be beneficial to gather input from leaders from a structured development program to gain insight about benefits of the assessments used within their company to aid in determining best practices.

Another notable limitation with the study focuses on the original intent of the study which was to identify best practices for companies utilizing assessment instruments as part of their talent management. Because the eight companies involved in the research study originated from a professional network of companies and contacts, there was no initial understanding of the use or amount of use of assessment instruments within the companies. Therefore, the research was more focused on common practices rather than best practices. In future studies, the researcher may invest time up front identifying companies who clearly have a reputation for using assessment instruments efficiently or effectively and limit the study to only those companies.

In an attempt to understand the success rate for companies using assessment instruments, it might have been an oversight and thus a limitation in asking the interviewees if using assessment instruments was successful in their company. Because many of the interviewees might very well be the responsible individual in their company to determine whether or not the company uses assessments and which ones, they may not have felt they could say it wasn't successful. In future studies, the

question could be designed to ask whether the participants feel use of assessment instruments are positive, effective or beneficial in their company and at what rate on a scale of 1 – 10 rather than success or no success.

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*Appendix A – Interview Questions*

1. Does your company currently utilize assessment instruments with employees?
  - a. If yes, for what purpose:
    - i. Hiring
    - ii. Training and Development
      1. All employees
        - a. Individuals
        - b. Teams
        - c. Leadership groups?
      2. Select employees
    - iii. Team building
    - iv. Succession planning
    - v. Leadership development
    - vi. Skills assessment
    - vii. 360 Assessments
    - viii. Other?
  - b. If yes, what assessment instrument do you use? (Participant will identify name of exact instrument(s) used.
  - c. If not, why don't you use assessments?
  - d. How long has your company utilized assessment instruments?
  - e. What do you measure with the assessment?
2. How many different assessment instruments have you used in the past?
3. Do you find it to be successful using assessment instruments?  
Yes or No  
If yes, on a scale of 1 to 10, how successful is it for your company?
 

Very Unsuccessful					Neutral					Very Successful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
4. Do you use the information from the assessment beyond the initial report provided?  
Yes or No
5. Does your company utilize experts trained in assessment application, compilation and interpretation? Yes or No
  - a. If yes, how often: never, seldom, frequently, often and always
  - b. If no, why not?
    - i. Is it related to access of the trained expert? Yes or No
    - ii. Is it related to systemic accountability? Yes or No



- iii. Is it a factor of time? Yes or No
  - iv. Is it a factor of cost? Yes or No
  - v. Other?
6. Does your company have a written policy on use of assessments for hiring and/or development?  
Yes or No
  7. How do you determine or what constitutes moving on to try a new assessment instrument?
  8. Who in your company is responsible for deciding on what assessment instrument to invest or administer?
  9. What are the criteria for investing in an assessment instrument?
    - a. Time to administer assessment on behalf of company?
    - b. Time to complete on behalf of employee or candidate?
    - c. Report format you receive?
    - d. Cost of assessment?
    - e. Access to assessment expert?

## Appendix B – Consent Form

### Best Practices in the Use of Employee Assessment Instruments in Leadership Development

You are invited to be in a research study on the use of employee assessment instruments and leadership development. You were selected as a possible participant because of your role within your company and knowledge on the topic. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by me as part of my master's project in Leadership Studies at Augsburg College. My advisor is Norma Noonan, Ph.D.

#### **Background Information:**

Companies both large and small have been interested for decades in developing their employees and offering opportunities for personal and professional development. These experiences can take place through a variety of methods which may include but are not limited to formal training, workshops, on the job training and various other means. By way of investing time and resources into their employees, companies may gain broader commitment, loyalty, contentment and job satisfaction from their employees meanwhile the organization increases in skill, knowledge and an educated workforce. Most learning opportunities begin with the instructor or trainer creating an awareness of the topic for the learners. One of the most common ways to begin professional development for teams or individuals is through the use of assessments, surveys and instruments that employees complete online or fill out in paper format. This process creates a baseline for the team or individual to begin to understand themselves and others through a different lens. This is a beneficial method for people to understand differences in leadership style, decision making and work preferences. Learning and behavior change can typically begin to take place once this foundational preparation occurs. ***The research question to be investigated: What are the best practices for companies who use assessment instruments for the purpose of talent management i.e. hiring and selection, training and development, performance management and succession planning? Do companies use the information and reports provided for single or multiple purposes across the spectrum of talent management systems and in particular for leadership development?***

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to meet with me for approximately a one-hour meeting either in person or via phone. I will ask you numerous questions related to the research as stated above. I will record our meeting for my purposes of data collection and to listen to the recording to refresh and verify information from the interview if needed.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

This study has the risk of producing misinterpretation surrounding the intention of the research. A participant may sense doubt or insecurity while answering the interview questions if they assume other participants have or may answer the question differently resulting in a favorable or unfavorable comparison to other organizations. The likelihood of this risk is very small.

There are no direct benefits to participation in this study such as money, credit for information, etc.

There will be an indirect benefit to you as a participant in the study. You will receive an Executive Summary of the research and findings which will contribute to your knowledge.

**Confidentiality:**

I will present information about this research and my findings on the topic of assessment instrument utilization in companies and the relationship to leadership development at Augsburg College's Colloquium on June 2, 2010.

I will publish a final report that will be at the Augsburg College Library. If I publish any other kind of report I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Real names of individuals or companies will not be used in the final report. All data will be kept at my home in a locked file cabinet. Only my advisor Norma Noonan and I will have access to the data and any tape recording. The tape recordings will only be used for purposes of clarifying and validating my understanding of the interviews. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small number to be studied. Only my advisor Norma Noonan and I will have access to the tape recordings. They will be destroyed after the required three-year time frame.

Raw data will be destroyed by June 30, 2013 following the federal guidelines which specify a minimum of 3 years for retention of data.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Augsburg College, Consulting Solutions or Yvonne Kinney-Hockert, the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Yvonne Kinney-Hockert. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 320-766-7788. My advisor is Norma Noonan, Ph.D., chair. [noonan@augzburg.edu](mailto:noonan@augzburg.edu); 612-330-1198.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. Do you understand what the project is? Are you willing to participate in the project by completing the taped interview? Do you have any further questions?

I consent to participate in the study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of investigator \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to be audio taped:

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C – Table of Interview Results

The following information is depicted as preferred by each individual interviewee and how they preferred their information to be represented.

<b>Company/ Industry</b>	<b>Number of Employees</b>	<b>Company Reach</b>	<b>Interviewee Job Title</b>
1. Large Financial Institution	Estimated 300,000	National	Learning & Development
2. Large Medical Device Company	Estimated 1150	Local Twin Cities	Talent Acquisition
3. Medium sized Product Business	Estimated 130,000	Business Unit within Large Organization	VP of Human Resources
4. Manufacturing Company	Estimated 400	Global	Organizational Development
5. Large Retailer	More than 20,000	National	Employee Selection
6. Japanese based Pharmaceutical	10,000 worldwide	Global	National Senior Director
7. Fortune 100 Retailer	–	International	Director of Learning & Dev.
8. Large Privately Held Food Company	Over 20,000	National	Former President & COO

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