

ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCIES IN THE FINNISH DEFENCE FORCES – SYSTEMS AND METHODS

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ABSTRACT

The current paper presents how the Finnish Defence Forces assess the potential future representatives of the high command. A computer-based system (Armyfull[®]) for assessing and developing leaders' competencies has been in use for four years. The system provides a 360 degree evaluation of each leader on items assumed to represent desired values and competencies. Factors of success are recognized. This gives a means to both assess qualifications and provide information that can be used for personal development. The Finnish Defence Forces' development of, and experiences with Armyfull[®] are summarized, and plans for further improvements to secure the best possible candidates in leading positions are presented.

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The decision to develop an instrument for assessing competencies was done in the mid 1990's. It was concluded that assessments should be based on noticeable behaviour in the actual working environment. The development of the instrument (Armyfull[®]) with extensive testing took three years – from 1997 till 1999.

The fundamental purpose of this method is to make good use of the abilities and capabilities of military leaders. By means of this method it is possible to recognize factors of success and give tools for personal development. The items used to represent competencies were initially formed with the help of the high command and should therefore reflect the desired values. Competence in this connection is defined as the characteristics that predict success for military leaders in their posts. The assessments are also used for personnel management purposes.

Items were formed and collected by interviewing commanders including generals to find out which are the most important personal characteristics and course of actions that are typical to successful military leaders. Based on the interviews a questionnaire was constructed. The original number of items was 210 but it was first reduced to 159 after the management had determined the relative importance of the items. After the final analyses the number of items was reduced to 91. At the same time demand levels in different roles were defined. This was done by representatives from three different groups of management. Each group pondered the requirements in their own role. This work resulted in three different competence profiles for different management roles, i.e. expert, operational, and strategic. Each evaluated individual can thus be compared against the desired role.

The system for assessing and developing competencies has now been in use for four years. The first assessments with the new methodology were done during the course for

the high command in the year 2000. Since then some 700 officers, special officers and civilians in leading positions have been assessed. Some 150 superiors have been trained to give feedback to the assessed.

THE INSTRUMENT

The instrument consists of 91 items divided into four main factors and 15 sub-factors (table 1). The assessments are made on a six point scale where the person assessing has to decide whether the person assessed exhibits very little or very much of the trait in question.

Table 1. The factor structure of the competence instrument.

MANAGEMENT OF PEOPLE	MENTAL CAPACITY	PROFESSIONAL CREDIBILITY	DETERMINATION
SKILLS IN HUMAN RELATIONS	CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION	COMMITMENT TO VALUES AND GOALS	INDEPENDENCE
MENTAL FLEXIBILITY	KNOWLEDGE OF THE ORGANISATION	BROAD KNOWLEDGE (EXTENSIVENESS)	RESOLUTE IN PURSUING MATTERS
ENCOURAGEMENT TO CO-OPERATION	CAPABILITY TO LEARN AND CHANGE	ORGANISED ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY
ENCOURAGEMENT TO SELF-PILOTING ACTIVITY	AWARENESS OF THE ESSENTIAL		
	PROMOTION OF SMOOTH ACTION		

Table 2. Examples of items in the competence instrument.

Sub-factor	Item
Skills in human relations	Copes with different people
Creativity and innovation	Develops and revises things
Organised activity	Works systematically with good results
Independence	Expresses his/her own opinions even if others disagree

Each sub-factor is presented with 5 – 10 items interspersed within the questionnaire. Examples of the items are listed in table 2. Answering the questions can take place either on a paper form or by filling in the alternatives in a text file. The assessments are sent to the DFEDC either by mail (paper form) or by email as a file.

The results are printed out on several sheets. For each demand level there are five sheets. The first one lists all 15 sub-factors from the highest numerical result downward along with the demand levels. The process is repeated for each main factor. On the sheets for the main factors there are also printed out strengths and weak points. They are based on single items. If the mean of an item exceeds the demand level with 15% or more it is printed out as a strong point. If it falls below the demand level with the same amount it is printed out as a weak point.

THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The Personnel Staff selects the persons to be assessed. From there the list is sent to the DFEDC. From DFEDC the assessment material (including instructions) is sent to the persons in question. The assessment starts with deciding who will evaluate the particular person. This is done by the person himself and his/her superior. Thereafter the material is sent to the persons agreed upon. They send their assessments directly to the DFEDC where the data are fed into a computer, checked for inconsistencies, and the results are printed out.

After receiving the results the assessed person has a feedback session with either one of psychologists from the DFEDC (round 2; see chapter "Timetable" below) or a trained superior (rounds 1 and 3). The process ends in writing a short resume of the strong points and the areas which need improvement. This resume and the numerical results are stored in the personnel management system along with other career information.

Assessments are made by a superior, a colleague, two subordinates and the evaluated person himself. All assessments except those of the person himself are summed up. This makes it possible to visualise the difference of opinions between fellow workers and the person himself. The results also show how the person obtains the demanded levels of competencies. Personal feedback helps the evaluated person to pay attention to his strengths and weaknesses.

TIMETABLE

The assessments take place three times during the career. The first time is when a person reaches the status of senior officer (round 1 or first assessment). His rank at that time would be major. The second round (round 2 or first reassessment) is conducted during the course for the high command and the third time (round 3 or second reassessment) takes place three to four years after the course for the high command. During round 2 the assessed person's rank is usually that of major or lieutenant colonel and during round 3 that of lieutenant colonel. Also special officers in comparable positions and civilians in leading roles are assessed.

The assessments are done twice a year. The first one for the year is before the course for the high command (round 2; n=50-80) with start in the spring and the feedback sessions in August. The feedback is given during the course by psychologist from the DFEDC. However, every assessed person has another session with his (trained) superior after the course. This is because the superior is the key person when it comes to career decisions.

Every employee in the Finnish Defence Forces has a session with his/her superior once a year. In this session plans are made (among other things) for advancement on the career.

The winter assessments (rounds 1 and 3 combined) start in October or November. The number of assessed persons during the winter assessment is twice or three times that of the course for the high command. The feedback sessions are held by superiors in February. No DFEDC psychologists take part in the feedback sessions during the winter round. When the names of the superiors reach DFEDC each superior not trained so far receives an invitation to training at the DFEDC. The training takes one day and it includes both theoretical instruction and practical rehearsal with real (but anonymous) cases. The superiors that receive training have been assessed earlier. They are lieutenant colonels, colonels, and generals.

EXPERIENCES

After initial hesitation the instrument has been well received. Almost all assessed persons have accepted their results. The superiors that give feedback have found the instrument both valid and reliable. Most of them have found it easy to interpret the results.

The use of the instrument has some problems, though. The first problem is encountered when the person to be assessed and his/her superior try to decide who the assessors should be. It is not always easy to find people who have known the person in question for a sufficiently long time. The minimum requirement is set to one year but even that is sometimes difficult to fulfil. The alternatives are to refrain from the assessment or to use assessors that have not known the person long enough. The second alternative leads usually to great variance between the assessments and the results must be discarded. Some 10% of the cases are lost on each round.

The second problem has been with us right from the start. It is the strong halo effect when it comes to those that receive medium or high assessments. The profiles tend to be quite flat instead of being multidimensional. This problem is not visible if the overall grade given is below average. Improving the instructions has had some effect but the problem still persists.

The third problem is the large number of people involved in the assessments. One hundred assessments mean five hundred people involved. Some 10 – 20% of them send in their assessments late or only after they have been reminded of their duty. That means quite a lot of extra work for the employees of the DFEDC.

The fourth problem is the amount of work involved. The assessments must be fed into the computer manually. However, this problem will be dealt with this year because we are moving the assessments to an intranet server which can be reached from every desktop computer in the Finnish Defence Forces. Thereafter all assessments are sent to this server and manual work is no longer required by the staff at the DFEDC.

CONCLUSION

We are quite satisfied with the competence assessment system despite the problems listed above. When the new software is operational our work will be much easier than before. The assessments have been well received both by those assessed and by the Personnel Staff. The assessments add to the information needed in selecting the best possible persons to the dutiful posts of the high command and the assessed receive feedback which helps them with their own decisions concerning their careers.

However, times change and so do values. The values on which this instrument is based on stem from the mid and late 1990's and it is becoming more and more evident that the values have changed. So we have a major revision of the instrument in front of us. That work is scheduled to start right after the implementation of the new software. The new value basis and the new items should be operational in late 2005.

REFERENCES

Vainikainen A (1999). Assessment of competencies in the Finnish Defence Forces. Paper presented at the 35th IAMPS, Florence, Italy.