

FROM THE EDITOR

# The Need for Assessment

Dr. Douglas Lindsay, Editor in Chief, *JCLD*

Assessment. It is a word that evokes different responses from those that hear it. To some, it is a hallmark of accountability where we can validate what we are doing (i.e., programs, processes, etc.). To others, it is a nice thing to have, but not seen as a core function. Still others see it as a bridge too far, and either too difficult to undertake or they just don't have the time and resources to adequately do it. As a result, the leadership and character development landscape is littered with good ideas, underperforming (or failed) programs, missed opportunities, disconnected success, confusion, etc. This creates a minefield for those attempting to understand assessment and a desire to determine the efficacy of what they are doing. In order to provide guidance on the topic of assessment in the areas of character and leadership development, this issue is focused squarely on examining that topic by looking at what assessment looks like, what should be considered, why it is important and other critical questions. The goal with this issue is to highlight several examples of assessment that are being done so that character and leader developers can see where their programs and processes could be further enhanced with intentional assessment.

Intentional assessment, however, will be impacted by a host of dynamics and those influences are consequential to any assessment program. In order to bring some clarity to this dynamic, there are several propositions to consider with respect to assessment. As you go through this issue, keep these in mind as a guide to see how the researchers/program developers have accounted for them in their own assessment paradigms. They also serve as good reminders for us as we develop our own assessment strategies.

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**Proposition 1:** Assessment is difficult, but that doesn't absolve us from our responsibility. It is common to hear that assessment is hard, takes too long, is expensive, and isn't always conclusive. While that may be the case, it is our obligation to make sure that the programs, education, and training that we do have value. This is not just important to the organization (who is enabling the effort), but also to ensure that we aren't wasting our personnel's time. Providing something is not always better than doing nothing. So, just because we are sending personnel to training programs and workshops, that doesn't mean it is translating into increased performance and development once they return. Bottom line: If we are undergoing some sort of leader development effort, it is our duty to assess what the outcomes of that developmental efforts are to the organization and our personnel.

**Proposition 2:** Build in assessment from the beginning, or you will fight inertia later on. This is a key derailment to many assessment efforts. When assessment is programmed in from the beginning, it becomes an integral part of the effort. It is resourced appropriately and is a fundamental part of the program. Too often, if a program has been ongoing for quite some time and assessment is later inserted into the program, there can be resistance. For example, if a program has been ongoing for a number of years, and all of a sudden assessment is determined necessary, then there could be resistance from program personnel as to why all of a sudden it is important. This not only goes for programs that have no assessment and want to add some, it also applies to programs that may have been relying on simplistic (i.e., affect only such as "How did you enjoy the program?") or inappropriate assessment methods. In addition, people also get attached to programs, regardless of their actual value.

**Proposition 3:** Assessment is a process and not a one-time event. Often, questions will arise about a

developmental effort and leadership or stakeholders want to see how the program is doing. It is very tempting to try to take a snapshot of a program and use that to infer how the program is doing and has been doing. While snapshots in time may give an idea of what is happening at that moment, it does not allow for the long term (longitudinal) assessment of the effort. A single point in time could be impacted by a host of contextual factors that may be having an immediate effect on the program, but may not speak to the longer term benefits of the program.

**Proposition 4:** Assessment = Accountability. In Proposition 1, it was mentioned that assessment is our responsibility. Added to that notion is the fact that assessment is important because it holds us accountable for our programs and practices. It helps the organization to determine if programs have value (i.e., having a direct impact on the organization through better performance, decreased turnover, more engagement, increased skills, etc.). Since developmental efforts take place over time and can be resource intensive, it is important to be able to assess if the program is

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delivering on its promises. This information can be used by leadership to determine if a course correction is needed or if a different program is warranted. Since there are a host of contextual factors that impact the organizations, what was needed 10 years ago may not be needed today based on the changing environment or the availability of personnel. Without intentional assessment, the accountability of the developmental program is at risk.

**Proposition 5:** Understand what you are trying to assess. There are many choices to make when you select an assessment method. It is critical to understand why

you make certain choices, as it will have consequences on the information you are able to obtain from the assessment. In theory, all developmental efforts are done to serve the organizational mission or vision. They are done to increase the chances of the organization being able to do what it says it will do. For example, if the organization is developed around teams as the functional part of the organization, there may be a need to provide training and development around the use of teams. Following that, there is a need to determine if the training that you selected is giving you the desired team-based results. Such an approach will drive the assessment strategy that you choose. As another example, it is common to see an organization shift their focus, but not have the necessary processes in place to support and reward the new focus. Over time, this will impact the organization's ability to accomplish its mission. If we view assessment as a core function of what we do, then when changes are made, it provides a baseline for either what is needed (gap analysis) or what is going well. This allows for evidence-based approaches to development. When we consider character and leadership development, this is critical.

**Proposition 6:** Every assessment effort involves tradeoffs, you have to decide which ones you are willing to accept. Following this idea, some questions to consider are:

1. Will you be hosting the assessment efforts internally or externally?
2. Do you have the staff to do the assessment work or is that a new competency that must be hired to?
3. How will the assessment fit into the overall developmental program of the organization?
4. What information is needed?
5. Will you develop your own assessment measures or will you look to industry standards for the assessments?
6. How many resources do you have to put toward assessment?

While not an exhaustive list of all of the questions that you must address, the answer to these (and other related questions) will help frame what will be practical in your approach to assessment? George Box, a renowned statistician once wrote "Since all models are wrong the scientist must be alert to what is importantly wrong. It is inappropriate to be concerned about mice when there are tigers abroad." (1976, p. 792). The advice for us is while we may not be able to develop a "perfect" approach, that doesn't mean that we can't attempt to answer some of the questions that we need to know about our developmental efforts.

**Proposition 7:** Context will impact the assessment effort. What is the context in which the assessment effort will occur? As mentioned earlier, it is important to understand the context in which the assessment will be enacted. If it is a new program (with a concurrent assessment effort), the culture of the organization can have a large impact on the long term viability of the program. If it is a new requirement within the existing organization, it is important to determine what key stakeholders and leverage points in the organization understand about the effort. At a minimum, the leadership of the organization needs to address and support the effort as they will help to set the tone for how the effort will be received. A well intentioned program, with no perceived value within the organization, can produce less than desired results and could result in negative feelings (e.g., cynicism, apathy, etc.) toward current and future training and developmental programs.

These propositions are not intended to be all inclusive. They are offered as starting guidelines to help shape your assessment efforts. It is likely that you have a few of your own that you have gleaned from your past experiences. Much like most endeavors, thoughtful contemplation at the outset can save a significant amount of time and resources at implementation if time is taken to understand what is needed, what is known, and how assessment can support that thinking.

## In This Issue

As previously mentioned, assessment poses challenges for those attempting to measure character and leadership development. However, that should not dissuade our efforts. This issue of the JCLD with the focus on assessment, is a chance to illuminate the breadth of work that is going on with respect to assessment. However, a caveat must be made. While certain techniques and programs are highlighted in this issue, it is not our intent to validate one approach over another. As will be evident as you read through the different approaches contained herein, there is no single model, technique, or approach that will serve as a panacea for every assessment effort. There are a host of decisions that must be made in any attempt at assessment. That said, this issue is an effort to show how some people are tackling the assessment of character and leadership development in their organizations. If you have follow up questions about any of the articles, please feel free to reach out to the authors. A foundational intent of the JCLD is to help foster dialogue between all those interested in the development of character and leadership. Part of meeting that intent is building a network of people who can inform what we know and what we are doing.

To start out the issue, the first article is a conversation with two senior leadership experts, Dr Robert Kaiser and Dr. John Brothers. In the discussion, they discuss several challenges that assessors face and why many attempts at assessment do not provide the desired results. They offer a thoughtful perspective on how one can approach the idea of assessment and what you need to consider or what they refer to as active ingredients of successful assessment. This advice is gleaned from years of experience looking at leadership assessment across different domains. They wrap up the dialogue discussing how leadership developers should really be looking at Return on Learning (ROL) versus Return on Investment (ROI).

Following the conversation is a series of papers that describe assessment approaches from an organizational (or system) perspective. The first of these is a combined approach by scholars from the United States Military Academy (West Point) and Tufts University that examines a multi-year, multi-disciplinary, integrated assessment effort. The authors describe their developmental approach to assessing character virtue development for cadets as they matriculate through West Point. The authors insightfully describe their approach, associated challenges, and how you can understand character development in an educational setting.

The next article by Ryan Brown and Labena Varghese describes an approach to assessment that has been implemented in the Ann & John Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University. After discussing

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the general lack of student developmental assessment among universities claiming to develop leaders, they describe what they have been doing in order to use an evidence based approach to assess how they develop leaders across Rice University. They explain their approach and present preliminary evidence on the efficacy of their approach.

The next article focusing on the organizational level is by faculty from Auburn University and Air University. They describe a multiyear effort where they will validate and assess an Ethical Leadership Framework (ELF). The foundation of the ELF is the idea that all leadership is within an ethical context. Once validation, and necessary adjustments are made, it will serve as the foundation for evaluating curriculum across the entire Air University enterprise. They describe a methodical process whereby they will

integrate alignment into their processes so the ELF will inform all instruction and curriculum development.

Following the organizational level of analysis, the next article was a joint collaboration between the Deans of the Preparatory Schools at West Point, the Air Force Academy, and the Naval Academy with the support of a colleague from Princeton University. They describe the purpose of the Military Service Academy Preparatory Schools and how they each approach assessment. By explaining different assessment methods at the student, program, and organizational levels, they highlight their integrated approaches to evaluate the accomplishment of their respective missions. Through this description, they provide an in depth look into these important preparatory schools.

The final article at the organizational level is a discussion by an interdisciplinary team at the Air Force Academy that takes a macro view of development around a discussion of surviving versus thriving. Citing developmental research, they discuss how a traditional military approach to training focused on surviving could be supported by inclusion of aspects of thriving. They postulate that this combination (elements of surviving and thriving) which would be supported by rigorous assessment, not only develops leaders who “understand what it takes to survive challenging situations, to persevere through adversity and to have the grit necessary to achieve challenging long-term goals,” it also develops in leaders the capacity to thrive and help instill that in their followers. Using assessment, they advocate that it is possible to understand the right balance between thriving and surviving.

The issue then moves on to several articles that take more specific approaches on assessment at the program, course, and empirical levels. This section starts off with Robert Reimer, Paul Taggart, and Ben Chapman who examine the effects of a practicum experience within a

Leadership and Counselling Master’s Program. They begin with a discussion of how using a combination of individual and contextual factors can be leveraged to help inform leadership development approaches. They follow this with the examination of how practicum (an experiential learning intervention) can be used to supplement traditional educational approaches. They finish with a qualitative explanation of how practicum was introduced into an educational program to supplement learning and leadership development.

As another example of assessment at the program level, Matthew Davidson and Vladimir Khmelkov from the Excellence with Integrity Institute discuss their approach to assessment through understanding organizational culture with the intent of creating assessment for development. They describe their approach and how it has been successfully implemented in several organizations, especially within the context of university sports teams to see the impact of culture and character on performance.

Next, we get a snapshot at the academic course level through a description of a novel approach implemented by Tony Andenoro, JoAnna Wasserman, and Jake Newsome. Through a partnership between the University of Florida and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, they have developed a holistic model of moral decision making. The approach uses instructors, facilitators from the Museum, historical artifacts from the Holocaust, and symposia to provide an integrated educational experience. In the article, they not only describe the program, they also discuss their approach to assessment and how they are looking at the validity of the program to impact leader decision making.

The final article is an empirical examination of moral maturity by Dana Born, William Hendrix, and Justin Hartley. The article is a traditional empirical look at the relationship between the constructs of moral reasoning

and moral excellence. With the prevalence of different constructs present in the literature, they are examining the relationship between these two constructs and how they relate to moral maturity.

As previously mentioned, the goal of this issue on assessment is not to cover every aspect of assessment as it relates to character and leadership development. Instead, the goal is to expose aspects of assessment at different levels in order to show the breadth of work that is being done in the field. It is our hope that through these articles, you will see elements that relate to questions you (or your organization) are asking about understanding how you are doing with respect to development. As we all know about development, it is a continual endeavor and we hope that this issue helps you on your journey to more fully understand character and leadership development through intentional assessment.

### Looking Ahead

This issue wraps up the first year of the JCLD. We have been encouraged by the support and the exposure that the Journal has received. As stated in the initial issue, we want to facilitate the discussion and understanding surrounding the development of character and leadership across all domains. As we look toward the future, we will continue publishing issues that help out in that understanding. The upcoming issue in October will focus on interviews with thought leaders across different domains (military, business, academic, sports, non-profit, etc.). The previous interviews that we have published have done a great job of facilitating dialogue and understanding by having in depth discussions about individuals and their experiences with leadership and character. They haven't simply been "Do what I did" recaps of people's careers but real conversations about the role and importance of character and leadership in their lives. This deeper level discussion is one that is typically missed in a traditional academic journal but is vitally necessary when we are examining

development. If you have any feedback on how we are doing or how we can continue to examine leadership and character development, please feel free to reach out at [jcld@usafa.edu](mailto:jcld@usafa.edu).

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### Reference

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