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Below are some extracts from the Talking Blues guide to passing the police recruitment process, just to give you a flavour! It can be purchased by visiting www.talkingblues.co.uk

Inappropriate behaviour in the general context of the assessment centre

I have already touched on inappropriate behaviour in terms of the exercises, and will return to it in more depth later. However, it is vitally important to realise the extent to which your behaviour will be monitored on the day. It is also important to remember that you're not just being assessed inside the rooms where the exercises take place. It is not so much that your behaviour outside the rooms is being monitored or marked, but more the fact that if you are overheard making any form of inappropriate comment, then the rules allow the assessment centre staff to fail you immediately on the basis that you have shown a lack of diversity. The theory behind this assessment centre rule is based on that of the National Police promotion examinations for the rank of Sergeant and Inspector. There is a story about how standards concerning inappropriate behaviour developed. The promotion examinations are also role play based. Several years ago, one of the exercises concerned a scenario whereby the candidate met a traffic warden, who had some particular issue they were unhappy with. The role actor's script required them to be quite argumentative and negative about this particular issue. According to the story, one candidate finished the exercise and left the assessment room heading for the next exercise. As they did so, they turned around to another candidate and said "if that bitch worked for me in real life, I would soon sort her out." This remark was overheard by a visiting Assistant Chief Constable observing the examination. This senior officer, who either had no sense of humour or was particularly good at keeping their own feelings in check when under pressure, immediately demanded to see the head assessor and stated that they wanted this candidate failed. Remember that the comment was made outside of the assessment room and was effectively a private conversation. Fortunately for that particular candidate, at the time there were no rules in existence which allowed such a failure to take place. However, the rule has now been introduced for both promotion and recruitment training.

The moral of the story is to be very conscious on what you say throughout your entire time inside the assessment centre building. Do not under any circumstances make any comment that could in any way be considered to be inappropriate. If you find a fellow candidate is particularly attractive, appears grotesquely ugly, or would appear to be as dumb as a box of frogs, keep this opinion to yourself. If you make any kind of comments, and these are overheard, the chances are you will gain effectively an automatic grade D for diversity. A single grade D in diversity means an automatic fail.

The Welcome Pack

It has already been explained that the assessment day revolves around providing the candidate with the fictional role of a Customer Service Officer

inside a fictional leisure complex. The police realise however that in order to make the assessment as fair as possible for every one, there need to be some guidelines, or advance information, as to the roles and duties required of a Customer Service Officer. This is quite logical in many ways. If your experience of working life since school is being in the army, you would be at a definite disadvantage in terms of dealing with a customer service issue compared to somebody already working in that sector. Personally, I'm not quite convinced that the provisions the service make to try to equalise the situation are adequate, but at least they try.

In order to try and let the candidate understand the role expected of them on the day, the following takes place. Between two and six weeks before your assessment date, you will be provided with a document known as a "welcome pack". This document should be treated as being a set of guidelines provided to you upon starting your new "job" as a Customer Service Officer. It contains a number of documents, although candidates should be aware they do change from time to time. The documents are made up generally as follows

What information it really contains.

I have described above the type of information contained within the welcome pack. A fully prepared candidate however will also understand the significance of each of those pieces of information.

To begin with, details about the Operations Department are meant to give the candidate key background information about the centre. It is likely that the centre information will impact to some extent on the role plays and written exercises. For example, the centre information may contain facts about disabled access. It is not therefore inconceivable the one of your scenarios could deal at some point with somebody complaining about access to some centre facility for a disabled person. Knowing the background to the centre will enable the prepared candidate to deal with customer complaints more easily.

For example, imagine you're dealing with somebody complaining about lack of disabled car-park spaces. They may well accuse you, as the representative of the centre, of not being interested in the needs of disabled people. If you are able to state that the centre is actually concerned, and evidence that by reeling off the fact that a certain number of places are actually reserved for the disabled, as stated in the information pack, you are much more likely to score a better mark.

If you find yourself with somebody who is complaining about the cleaning standards in the centre, it may help to know how many cleaners work in the centre, and what their chain of command is. If you're dealing with somebody who's complaining to you about gangs of youths roaming around the centre, it may be useful to know how many security guards are on duty at any one given time, along with the fact that there are a number of CCTV cameras inside the centre.

Whether you are fortunate enough to be a customer services officer in your normal job, or whether you have never experienced customer services before, the fact that the police provide a copy of the main duties and responsibilities for your new role has to be useful. You may well find that within the role play or written exercises, there exists a problem which needs to be taken in hand by someone. Many candidates will be wondering throughout the exercise who the correct person for dealing with that problem should be.

For example, many candidates when confronted by a problem in an exercise will try to pass it on to a manager. However, the description of the Customer Service Officer main duties and responsibilities clearly states that customer problems are to be dealt with and solved by customer services officers. The significance of this is that if in a role play, the candidate tries to duck responsibility for the problem by passing it on to somebody else, then clearly they are failing to comply with their own job description. Of course, if you're familiar by now with the competencies, you will also recognise that this sort of action would be in direct contravention of the points concerning taking responsibility for solving problems.

The equality statement is almost invariably ignored by most candidates. Many people will read through the equal opportunities policy provided, and think that this is just political correctness, and has been put in just for the sake of being included. This could not be further from the truth. In the case of the assessment centre, the inclusion of the equal opportunities policy is two fold. Firstly, it is designed to explain and emphasise the kind of behaviour the police themselves will consider totally unacceptable. Secondly, it actually goes on to provide three distinct steps that should be taken by staff if such a complaint of inappropriate conduct is received by them. Although the vast majority of candidates never even realise it, this document even goes on to stress that if somebody at the centre feels that they have been subject to discrimination, they should actually seek advice from a Customer Service Officer. This is another subtle way of the assessment centre planners telling you, the candidate, that if you encounter such inappropriate behaviour, you must deal with it. Fail to deal with it means you will probably fail the centre.

The importance of policies and information.

There can also be important clues contained in the welcome pack about the scenarios. Knowing these policies in advance of the assessment day by studying the welcome pack makes your life a lot easier. Such knowledge should also start you thinking well in advance of the centre as to what ways such a scenario could develop.

On Role Plays

How are role plays developed?

The basic outline of a role play can come from a number of sources. It maybe that the exam writers will hear a story about customer-service, a real incident that has taken place, and feel it interesting enough to actually turn into a role

play. Alternatively, they may decide that there are certain issues they want to put to candidates. So, they may actually write a role play which reflects those issues. Role play writers make a great deal of play about the extent to which role plays are tested and developed. Simplistically however, they are developed as follows. An assessment writer will come up with an idea of an outline role play. They will build into it certain elements that they wish to assess. So, for example, they could write the scenario in such a way that the candidate is required to ask a number of questions, so the assessor can test the candidate's ability to gather information. The writers will probably include a number of "clues" as to what options may or may not be available to solve the problem. Although they will deny it, they will often throw one or two red herrings into the script to trip up unwary candidates. A secondary issue may also be thrown into the scenario, for example the use of an inappropriate phrase, or the introduction of some form of welfare need. In this way, the candidate's flexibility and ability to react under pressure can be measured. Finally, the candidate's ability to actually make a decision, and explain it to the person they are meeting, can also be included for marking purposes.

The draft role play will then be reviewed to see whether or not it contains the competency areas that the assessors wish to mark. Remember they are looking for the full range of the seven competencies across the assessment centre. If they have realised that the other exercises do not contain as much questioning as they may like, then individual role plays can be "tweaked" in order to make the candidate ask more questions. Once the exam writers are happy with the draft format, they will then "pilot" it. The exercise is piloted by having a number of, for example, probationary constables, taking the exercise in a controlled examination setting, and seeing how they deal with it. If nobody passes it within the allocated time frame, then it is rewritten to make it easier. If everybody passes it, it is rewritten to make it harder. This process will go on until the exam writers are satisfied that compared to the average successful candidate, the required percentage of candidates will actually pass it.

The significance of this for future candidates is the following. People have often said to me that they were unable to finish the exercise within the time period allowed. My reply is that they cannot have been doing it properly. By the time the real candidate sits the role-play exercise, scores and scores of individuals will have sat it in the piloting stage. The average successful candidate will be able to complete it within the time frame allowed.

So, to be fair to the assessment centre staff and exam writers, each role play is designed and tested to ensure that the average candidate of the required standard can complete it within five minutes. In short, if they can do it, you, the potentially successful candidate, must be able to!

Are the role plays realistic?

I am often asked whether the scenarios used are actually realistic or not. The answer really depends on your perspective. It is certainly not unrealistic that as a Customer Service Officer you'd expect it to deal with somebody who felt

disappointed by level of service that they have received. Nor is it unrealistic for you to have to deal with a member of staff who is underperforming.

It is without doubt however that you would most certainly not be expected to deal with such meetings inside a tight five-minute schedule. It is a long standing complaint about the role play elements of the national Sergeant and Inspector examinations that this time-frame is unrealistic. Indeed, recruitment professionals in the real world have long since moved to much longer role plays, of up to fifty minutes in some cases. However, the bottom line is that whether the scenarios are realistic or not does not matter. What is important is that candidates fully understand how role plays are constructed, the limitations placed upon the exercises by the design process, and understand how to perform in such a manner as to attract the most marks.

Whether or not people actually behave in the way they are depicted in the role plays is also irrelevant. I will shortly describe techniques which in the real world would make our Customer Service Officer sound foolish. However, in the context of the assessment centre they will allow the role play to move forward and score marks. This of course is the whole purpose of the exercise and this book.

It must be remembered therefore that the interaction between the candidate and the role actor will not mirror that of a normal conversation. In most meetings in real life, the people involved will take a while to familiarise themselves with one another ("small talk"). The person making the complaint can probably be relied upon to explain their case fully, and to explain to the Customer Service Officer exactly what they want. This will not happen in a role play. Candidates must remember that the whole purpose of the exercise from the markers perspective is to see how many competencies the candidate scores in the five minute period. It is not about how nice a person you appear to be, nor whether you are able to make the assessor like you or not in your role as a Customer Service Officer. The role actor's presence in the room is merely a mechanism for the candidate to show to the assessor that they can display certain abilities. No more, no less. The role actor is exactly that, an actor, so do not fall into the trap of trying to establish some kind of rapport with them.

So do I need to behave the same way as I would in real life?

The exercises are based on situations that may have happened, and then are adjusted to suit the needs of the assessment centre. So, the police argue that they are therefore as realistic as possible. Of course, the reality is that it is highly unlikely that you will ever deal with a situation where:

- You have exactly five minutes to deal with it
- Where the person you are meeting is pretending to play a part
- Where they will deliberately try to catch you out effectively by withholding key pieces of information just to see if you will ask key questions
- Dodge the issue when you ask them what they want from the meeting.

- Effectively refuses to say which of the options you offer them they actually want.

So, the role play may be realistic in that it describes a potentially realistic situation, but the manner in which it is dealt with in the assessment is completely unrealistic.

Remember though that it is simply an examination, nothing more and nothing less. Therefore, you have to abide by the rules, and the key to that is understanding them. You may not agree nor understand the offside rule in football, but if you want to play a proper game you have to follow it. The same principle applies.

So, despite what the police would say, forget real life and play the game. The same basic principles of the real world do need to be followed, but adjusted to compensate for the artificial nature of the exercises.

Can candidates prepare, as the police say you cannot?

The Police Service takes every opportunity to stress that candidates cannot really prepare as such for this particular phase of the assessment centre. The very bland advice given by recruitment departments is usually along the lines of “act naturally and try not to worry about the situation.” This is complete and utter rubbish. Over the following pages I will describe techniques commonly used in industry for dealing with role plays. These techniques have been customised to deal specifically with the police recruitment system. There are three types of people who pass role plays. There are those whose life experience has already trained or prepared them to deal with similar situations. Secondly, there is a very small minority of people who just happen to be lucky and possess naturally the approach to deal with problems. The third category of people is that of those who thoroughly plan and prepare their approach to role plays, and fully understand the mechanics, aims and techniques of the exercise.

A search of the web, particularly education establishment sites such as those of colleges and universities, will show that most run some form of assessment centre training for their students. Many police forces run training to help people pass the promotion examinations, on which parts of the assessment centre are based. It is laughable for the police to suggest therefore that you cannot prepare for them. The reality is that as stated before, they wish to see candidates in their unprepared state.

It is probably fair to say that it is role plays which catch most people out. As there are four of them, they count for a proportionately large section of the marks. They therefore deserve a large amount of consideration when it comes to the preparation undertaken by the candidate.