



Assessment Center Case Study: Nationwide

Overview

Employees:
35,000

Assets USD:
\$158 billion

Industry:
Financial Services

In today's business world, organizations are defined by the quality of their talent. Smart companies, like Nationwide, realize that bright leaders are crucial competitive assets.

While some organizations use assessment programs as a way to fix talent problems, Nationwide wanted an assessment program that focused on enhancing an already strong executive team as a source of marketplace advantage.

"Our assessment center program is aligned with our strategic outcomes. To be a great company, you need great leaders," says Gale King, senior vice president of property casualty human resources at Nationwide.

Challenge

Unlike many companies, Nationwide "walks the talk" of valuing talent. Part of the company's value proposition is a commitment to talent development and the belief that great leaders are essential to the success of the business.

"We have a strong culture of living our values," King continues. This means putting action behind Nationwide's commitment to leaders and leadership development. King explains that leadership development is a priority felt throughout the entire organization.

Nationwide's proactive approach to development aims to provide ongoing development to senior executives in order for leaders to stay at the top of their games. Continuous development allows leaders to hone in on skills and competencies needed for current conditions and anticipated challenges ahead.

Realizing the worth of the strong leadership team, Nationwide wanted to be sure that it leveraged the strengths of each executive. They needed to get accurate, powerful insight on the executives' strengths and weaknesses and specific, actionable development plans for each leader.

Solution

Nationwide turned to Personnel Decisions International (PDI) to accurately assess each executive, examine the overall makeup of the leadership team and

create tailored development programs for each leader as they fit into the greater team. Nationwide valued PDI's reputation as a top firm in both assessment and development.

PDI designed an assessment center program, which includes cognitive and personality testing and a simulation experience, for all of Nationwide's senior-level leaders.

The customized two-day assessment program examines a leader's experiences and skills, and puts executives through a full day of simulated business challenges ranging from direct report interaction to handling client complaints to delivering business presentations. PDI consultants, most of whom are Industrial/Organizational psychologists, play the roles of boss or direct report and then immediately give participants direct feedback on how they reacted in the situation.

PDI's simulation experience is called a "year-in-a-day" simulation. The goal of the program is to simulate a number of different challenges an executive might face throughout a year. This allows assessors to understand how the executive responds to challenges and how they apply strategic thinking to each situation they face. Although an executive would not face all of these situations in any one given day, the condensed experience allows the leader to learn where their strengths are in the most important circumstances. And, when their response is not as strong as it could be, PDI can coach the executive in that specific area. The results of the simulation experiences help organizations make important talent decisions that leverage the strengths of each executive and outline specific areas for development.

Nationwide is putting each one of its senior leaders through the assessment process. So far, Nationwide has put about 80 of its senior leaders through the process, including Doreen Reinke, vice president of operations at Nationwide's Scottsdale Insurance.

"When I first discussed the assessment program with my boss, the president of Scottsdale Insurance, he made it clear that the process would help me see where I am now, and where I could go from here," says Reinke. "I never felt that the process was trying to 'fix' me, but instead, was an opportunity for self-awareness and continuing development."

Result

This assessment program helped Nationwide put its value on leadership development into practice.

The insight gained from the executive assessments allowed Nationwide to make better talent decisions on development, promotion, and hiring at leadership levels. In addition to identifying new development opportunities for each participant, the assessment process also validated current development programs given to leaders by showing marked improvement in the areas where training and development have already been provided.

This gave the company confidence that they have the right leaders in place now and, with targeted development, these executives will continue to lead successfully through future company strategies.

"It was clear to me that the company wanted to assess the talent they have now, and make sure that they would continue to have leaders that would align with future business plans," says Reinke. "This process made me feel like my company really cares about me and my development within the organization."

While the assessment center program provides rich insight on senior leaders to the company, the design of the program on the individual level is to provide each participant the opportunity to go through the process and find new areas to explore for future leadership roles and challenges.

"I expected to find out more about the role I play and how I compare against other leaders," Reinke continues. "What I was really impressed with was how enjoyable and insightful the process was. By the end of my two-day assessment session, I sat down for my de-brief and was amazed with how well PDI got to know me as a person, a

leader, a wife, a mother, and a member of my community. They confirmed my strengths and identified an area where I could grow to develop further in the company. It was the most powerful feedback I've ever received."

Reinke said the most beneficial part of the process is that the development did not stop. She continues to meet with her coach and her boss to track her progress on her development plan and she will have ongoing development throughout the year.

"I think any organization that sends executives through the PDI assessment process has the best intentions and values the professional development of their talent," said Reinke.

"It's important to the company to position the process as a reflection of our value in development. Every participant should know—it's about them," says King.