

Preparing for Interview Exercises

Career Skills

Team FME

www.free-management-ebooks.com

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Preface

This eBook describes various interview exercises including: in-tray, presentations, group discussion, role play, and media interviews. These exercises form part of the job selection process and are designed to assess factors such as your interpersonal skills, attitudes, and compatibility with the organization's culture.

You will learn:

- How and why organizations incorporate practical exercises into their management selection processes.
- How to approach an in-tray exercise and what the assessors are looking for.
- Why you need to fully 'buy in' to the role play exercise even if it does not seem very realistic.
- What the assessors are really looking for in the group exercise.
- Why you need an efficient method for preparing presentations that leaves you with enough time to demonstrate that you can add value beyond the employer's expectations.

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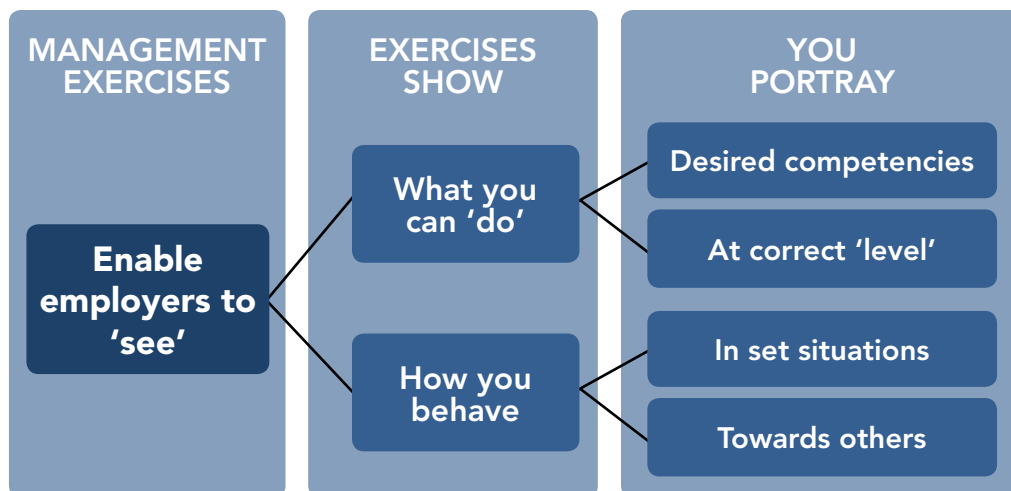
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Introduction

Many organizations incorporate practical exercises into their management selection process. These enable potential employers to see how you behave when you are asked to perform some of the tasks required by the role in various situations. They are designed to show:

- How you approach a scenario
- How you react to problems
- How you relate to others



Whether you are seeking a position in a commercial, nonprofit, or educational organization the successful candidate will be able to show:

- The desired role competencies
- At the level appropriate to the role
- In their actions and words

Your success in these exercises will depend on your ability to display the 'right' behaviors and use language that reflects the ethos of the organization.

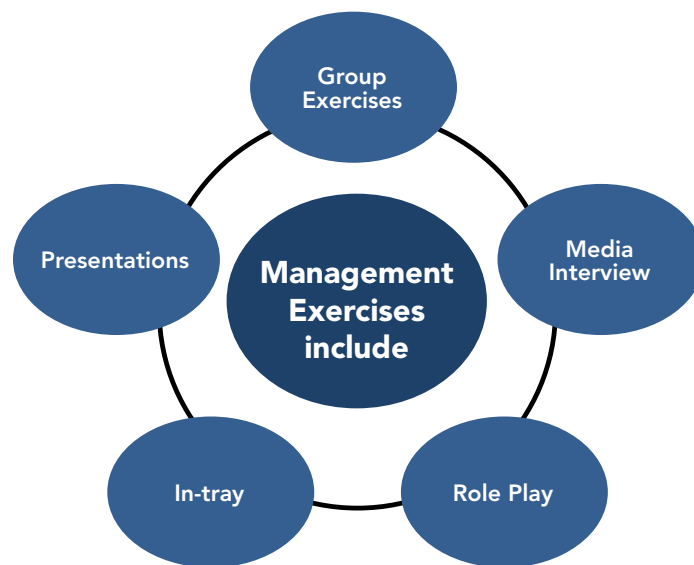
The development of your competencies is a continuous process and taking the time to regularly check how they compare to your desired role is paramount if you want to succeed. This comparison of how well your current competencies match those required in the role should be an essential part of your preparation for an interview or internal promotion.

It is important to keep your mind focused on the fact that each exercise you perform is designed to determine how well you demonstrate the required competencies of that specific role. This often means being able to act appropriately at the 'next level up' from your current management level.

This eBook describes how competencies and their associated behaviors relate to the management exercises used in selection. If you would like more in-depth information on what competencies are and how they are measured then download our [free eBook 'Developing Competencies'](#).

Management Exercises

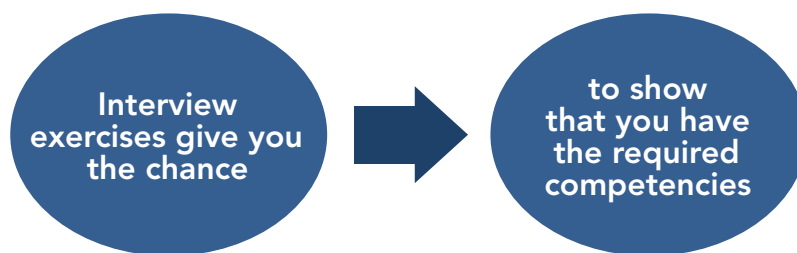
The most common management exercises can be grouped under the following five headings and are recognized as the most effective for assessing competencies and their associated behaviors. (Our free [Management Competency Framework](#) template defines twelve competencies and their associated management behaviors.)



- **In-Tray (can include a justification element)**
- **Role Play**
- **Group Exercises:**
 - Critical Incident
 - Organizational Issue
 - Problem Solving and Simulation
 - Written Output
- **Media Interview**
- **Presentations:**
 - Flip-chart
 - Group Exercise
 - Impromptu

- Prepared
- Verbal Career

Frequently you will encounter an exercise that combines several of these elements into one. For example, a critical incident may incorporate a media interview. Many exercises use 'real-life' scenarios that are designed to test an individual's ability to adjust to the different situations that they are likely to encounter in the role.



These exercises will be your only opportunity to 'show' a prospective employer that you are able to **behave appropriately in the role**.

Prior to each exercise, you will be given instructions describing the exercise, your role, timeframes, equipment, etc. You will not be told in detail about the individual indicators that will be measured. During each exercise, a group of observers will rate you on a range of set indicators, using a prescribed performance scale.

Results are then cross-compared against the same indicators, which are measured in other exercises. Following exercise completion, observers meet to discuss the test results and reach a group consensus about your ratings.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Interview exercises allow potential employers to see how you behave when performing some of the tasks required by the role.
- ✓ Your success will depend on your ability to display behaviors that reflect the competencies required by the organization.
- ✓ If the job represents a promotion then you may need to show competencies at the 'next level up' from your current level.

In-Tray or In-Basket Exercise

In this exercise you will be asked to assume a particular role as an employee of a fictitious organization and to work through a pile of correspondence in your in-tray. The in-tray exercise items will be specifically designed to measure job skills such as: ability to organize and prioritize work; analytical skills; communication with team members and customers; written communication skills; and delegation.

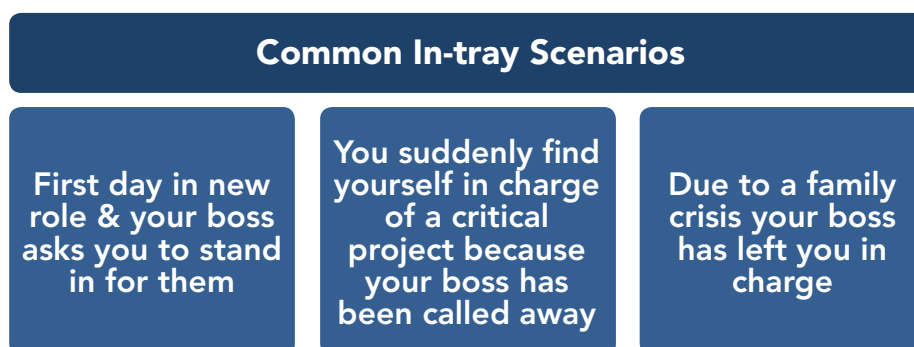
The in-tray exercise is popular because it has considerable 'face validity.' In other words, candidates can see how it relates to the job they are applying for and therefore they tend to take it seriously.

If you have not practiced an in-tray exercise before it is very easy to be overwhelmed by the amount of material you are expected to work through in the time available. At the very least you should practice working through items and classifying them according to their urgency and importance. You will invariably find that there are one or two 'major issues' hidden among the in-tray items and if you miss these you will struggle to remain a credible candidate. This exercise consists of two parts:

Firstly, reading and assimilating all the information contained in the in-tray items.

Secondly, answering questions that will judge how well you would perform the role and react to the situations presented.

The format varies according to the type of role but generally you will have between 12–35 items to read through and then answer 15–30 multiple-choice questions. The more senior the role the more complex the issues; in some instances a short written explanation or a verbal explanation of your choices may be required.



The circumstances you are asked to handle will most likely be some sort of emergency or crisis as these situations are best for showing how an individual manager deals with stress and uncertainty.

The more familiar you are with the type of questions you will be asked as part of an in-tray exercise the easier you will find it to display the required behaviors. It is important that you are able to demonstrate that you can:

- Easily identify the 'Key' issue of each item
- Interpret and evaluate the information accurately
- Quickly arrive at a decision
- Explain how your action/decision deals with the problem

Don't make the mistake of worrying about the topic. You will be judged on how well you can handle complex information, determine priorities, make decisions within time limits, display sensitivity to potential problems, and communicate clearly. Try to imagine that you are at work doing the described duties, rather than just completing an exercise, but make sure that the reasons for your actions are clear and documented.

The type of issues you will be asked to review and action will reflect the 'nature' of the role you have applied for. This does not necessarily mean that the scenario will be based on your industry or sector, but it does mean that if you are applying for a strategic role then it is likely that you can expect a significant number of your in-tray items will be designed to test your strategic decision making; whereas if you are hoping for a management role, the in-tray items are more likely to raise issues about team building, coaching, motivation, and other management issues.

Before you begin the in-tray exercise you will be handed several items that are numbered or lettered for easy reference—these will provide you with all of the information you need to complete the exercise. Do not make any assumptions and only use the information provided to arrive at your decisions. If you know that you are going to be given the opportunity to justify your answers, then you may be able to take a few more risks in the decision-making process. However, if you are not going to be given the opportunity to justify your decisions then you should choose the most obviously 'correct' answer.

Be wary of falling into the trap of making a decision or selecting an answer that you would normally want more detailed information about before making. If it is appropriate

for the nature of the question—your answer could be ‘None of the above,’ or ‘I’d want to delay my decision until I had more information.’

When you are working through the items in an in-tray exercise always try to be as logical and systematic as possible in the way that you work. The information may be presented in a haphazard way, but you don’t want to be seen to work in a haphazard way. Be mindful of how your desk or working area looks during and at the end of the exercise. Always try to present an organized appearance and try and avoid looking as if you are in chaos. Using Post-it notes to identify items and clearly annotating items will greatly enhance your efficiency and help you to keep things under control.

Firstly, you should scan through each of the in-tray exercise items quickly and sort them into chronological order. At the same time, look out for items that are interdependent or items which make a previous item redundant. This is an important step as you don’t want to waste time with items which have been superseded and which don’t need to be actioned. Also, you may think you have quickly solved one problem only to find that a memo sent three days later has added a further complication, which makes your original decision unworkable or impractical.

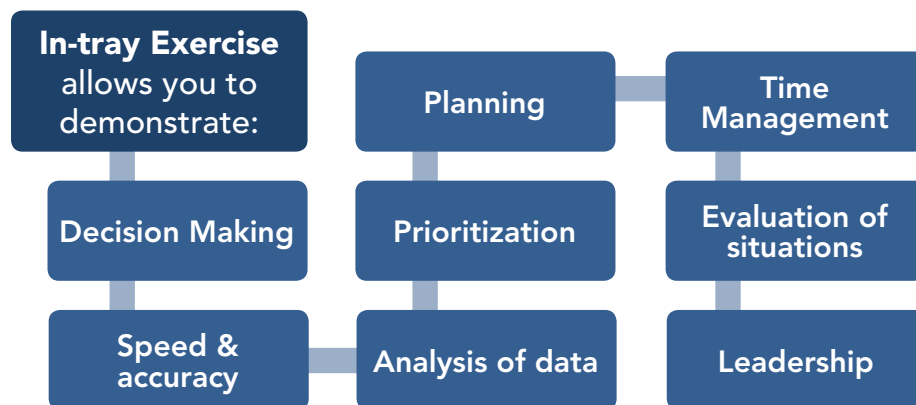
For example, you may want to put items into three piles using a Post-it to identify each one—Urgent, Important, and Routine. For each of these piles you may then segregate them further by who is to deal with them—Myself, Delegate (Name), and File, or it could be based on a timeframe—Next Hour, Today, Tomorrow, and Later. If you are using a timeframe as a method of prioritizing then you may wish to use the calendar provided or create your own to make notes on so that you can easily see an overview of the situation.

Use your highlighter to identify key information you have been given:

- Who you are,
- Your function,
- Type of organization (government, industrial, or nonprofit),
- Recipient and how they relate to you,
- Date on the item in relation to ‘today’s’ date
- Dates of meetings and deadlines.

Sometimes details contained in your role overview may consciously try to limit your ability to respond so that the interviewers can assess how you deal with such a situation.

There are eight behaviors you need to demonstrate whilst you perform this exercise and as you consider each one you will be able to ascertain any areas that need further development for the role.



Looking at how each of these behaviors is tested in the in-tray or in-basket exercise allows you to judge whether your current performance is at the correct level for the position.

- **Decision-making**—your ability to make well thought-out decisions is paramount to your success. This exercise looks at your ingenuity when resolving problems and making decisions. It assesses what use you made of any other resources that you had at your disposal in the scenario.

It also tests your commercial insight by examining how well your decisions match the organization's culture and needs created by the scenario. Your answers will also indicate how well your management style reflects that of the organization. For example,

A question asks what you would do with a paper copy of an email detailing an old supplier's terms and conditions. Selecting 'Discard' as your answer may be appropriate if you are working in an operational role in manufacturing company, but filing it would be more appropriate if you were in the purchasing department where it is essential such data is held for a fixed period in case of a contractual dispute.



- **Speed and Accuracy**—In the type of situations usually used for this exercise where you suddenly have to accept another’s workload you need to demonstrate that you can work through the items quickly and efficiently.

This judges your ability to work under unexpected stress and maintain high levels of accuracy at the same time.

By practicing and becoming familiar with the type of errors frequently used as part of an in-tray exercise (e.g. diary clashes, contradictions, errors, and missed communications) your behavior will demonstrate your ability to take on the unknown.

- **Analysis of Data**—you will be given several different items that detail the circumstances you are presented with as part of this exercise.



You will be judged on your ability to recognize the potential areas of conflict and get to the root of any problem by collating and analyzing details from several in-tray items.

If you are tempted to scan some items rather than read them carefully then you will run the risk of missing something important.

- **Prioritization**—is a fundamental part of the decision-making process and the in-tray exercise usually includes several items that are designed to divert your time and effort away from the more important items. You will have to make a value judgment as to whether the task is appropriate for delegation. It is key that you also take account of the organizational goals along with each item's level of importance and urgency.

Your answers need to show an appreciation of any external factors and internal resources that impact the priority you assign each item and action. Finally, the priorities you assign must reflect those someone in the role would make and this may be a 'level up' from where you are currently.

- **Planning**—how well you use the resources at your disposal including the skills of your team to ensure that all commitments are kept and met in a timely fashion. It also tests your ability to alter your plan to incorporate additional responsibilities.

Your planning skills are reflected in how you answer the questions. You need to show that you have grasped the key issues raised and can develop strategies to accommodate the additional workload.

- **Time management**—it is vital that you are able to show that you can use the time you are given effectively in a structured and productive manner. Make sure you spend the majority of your time on the most important items.
- **Evaluation of situations**—being able to judge the implication of items accurately is essential. This exercise provides the perfect opportunity to demonstrate your ability to analyze the pertinent data from each in-tray item so that you can make sound decisions that suit the circumstances and organization.

Even though the situations you are presented with might be unrealistic, you need to take them seriously. Remember you are being assessed on how well you show the required behaviors of the role and this is always easier if you 'buy in' to the exercise as much as possible.

- **Leadership**—it is essential that you combine [different styles of leadership](#) throughout the exercise. The issues you are presented with will sometimes require you to be people-orientated and at other times to focus on resolving the situation.



Your success in exhibiting this behavior during the exercise depends on the knowledge you have garnered from your research into the organization. The more in depth your research the more easily you will respond in a way that reflects the organization's culture.

In certain circumstances and for particular senior roles the in-tray exercise concludes with a 'justification' discussion. During this discussion remember you are still performing the role assigned to you as part of the exercise. Your answers need to be concise and make your point succinctly as you will only have a few minutes to respond. If the exercise does not include a justification then make sure your notes are readable (maybe print in capitals) by anyone so they can see your reasoning.

Frequently there is a central theme to the in-tray exercise items. This could be an impending takeover, potential merger, management buy-out, re-organization with redundancies, or

poor financial performance. Whilst you are reading through the overview and the items provided be mindful of this re-occurring theme. You will not be expected to have specific market or product knowledge, although being up to date on current industry issues may be useful. It's important to focus on how you deal with issues, how you manage the information, and what actions you subsequently take, as this is what you will be scored on.

Your assessors will want to see how you gauge the impact on the organization of your decision, or action, and also the implications this could have on resources and other projects. They will be looking to see what your initial planning stages consist of and how you will monitor and measure their success. (The eBook [‘Preparing for an In-tray exercise’](#) has three complete practice exercises.)

If the exercise involves the opportunity to explain your decisions then you must remember that you are also being assessed in terms of how you handle yourself under ‘interrogation’ of your work. The assessor will be observing how you respond to criticism and how easily you can be persuaded to alter your decision.

The justification provides you with an excellent opportunity to explain why you prioritized things in the way you did. This may be because of your experience or the type of environment you currently work in. You will also have the opportunity to bring into the discussion the knowledge gained from your research into the organization, its ethos and mission statement.

To summarize, you will be assessed on how persuasive and reasoned your arguments are, how you respond to criticism of your decisions, and how well you interpreted the information provided. The employer is looking to assess how flexible you are, how much conviction you have and how well your management style suits the organization.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ This exercise involves assuming a particular role and working through a pile of correspondence in your in-tray.
- ✓ This exercise is popular because candidates can see how it relates to the job they are applying for and therefore they tend to take it seriously.
- ✓ It shows how well you can analyze information, make decisions, organize and prioritize work, and manage your time.

- ✓ Read through each of the in-tray items quickly and sort them into chronological order.
 - ✓ Decide whether some of the later items make earlier ones redundant or cause complications.
 - ✓ Make notes as you go through items, as it can be difficult later on to remember why you made certain decisions.
-

Role Play Exercise

This exercise is popular because it gives a real insight into how an individual will interact with others in situations they have little direct control over. It is an excellent way for a potential employer to see if you possess the attitudes and behaviors they want in their organization.

Most people find it difficult to act naturally in contrived situations like those used for role play exercises. It's important to remember that the role play scenario may seem artificial but it will imitate the types of issues and problems you will encounter in the role. The more you can overcome the discomfort of being in an unnatural situation the better you will be able to demonstrate the behaviors required by the role.



Typically you will be given an overview of your role and the background circumstances that have resulted in the scenario you have been asked to act out. Forms and procedures used will be as realistic as possible without compromising confidentiality.

You will be given an objective to achieve in the time allocated. For example:

- Negotiate a significant alteration to a project deliverable
- Resolve a customer complaint
- Discipline one of your team
- Address underperformance with a team member

The best use of your preparation time is to use the information contained in the brief, along with your knowledge of the role and the organization's culture to define the most effective strategy you should adopt ensuring you attain the desired goal. You need to quickly identify the key issues presented in the exercise brief and decide the best tactics at your disposal to attain the objective set. This structured approach enables you to ascertain potential obstacles that may arise and how best to deal with them.

The more prepared you are for this type of exercise the better you'll be able to demonstrate the behaviors required for the role and show you closely match the role and the organization. This means researching the organization's culture, leadership styles, and role competencies so that you know what is required.

Having identified the required competencies you need to break them down into the expected behaviors. By mapping your own behaviors against these you can assess how well they match. If this gap is excessive you need to use the [competency development](#) cycle to raise your behaviors to those of the role.



The most common trap individuals fall into during this exercise is to become sidetracked from the objective, which results in running out of time. To avoid being ensnared in such situations you should incorporate the T.A.C.F. philosophy into your strategy and notes you will use during the exercise.

TIME—plan how best to use the time allocated to achieve the assigned objective.
Take a minute or two to verify your understanding of the situation with the other

party (or parties) involved in the role play. Clearly state what you want to achieve at the end of this discussion.

Do not forget to allocate enough time so that the final few minutes are dedicated to drawing the discussion to a close. Ideally, all parties will agree on the substance of what has been said and on any forward actions.

ACTIVELY LISTEN—to everything the other party says and avoid getting sidetracked or distracted by the other party's emotions. (Read how to develop your [active listening skills](#).)

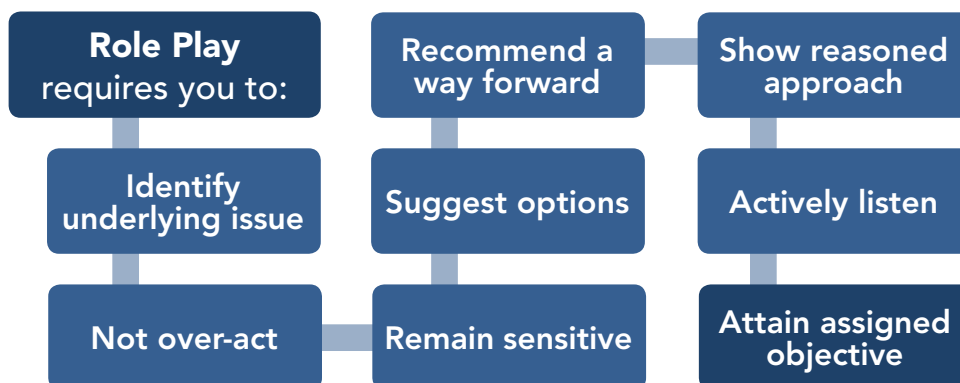
This exercise is designed to test this particular behavior as the situations you are presented with often arise from poor communications in some previous interaction.

CONTROL—ensure that you maintain control of the conversation at all times and keep it focused on attaining the exercise objective. You need to demonstrate your ability to control and defuse any conflict that may arise.

Remember the other party's reasoning may not be realistic or typical because their objective is to test how you react and behave in stressful and aggressive situations.

FOCUS—keep the aim of the exercise at the forefront of your words and actions. Do not end the exercise without having achieved something even if it is only to arrange another opportunity to continue the discussion.

If you feel the assigned objective is confusing then rephrase it at the outset so that expectations are clear. This may be your first test to see if you behave appropriately for the role, i.e. do you behave as a manager or supervisor?



The behaviors this exercise assesses are your verbal communication and interpersonal skills, but role play can also evaluate other less obvious competencies.

The type of examples you could be presented with to demonstrate such behaviors are:

- **Change Agent**—you are responsible for a key strategic project which will significantly change how your organization and its employees operate. One member of your project team (Jim) is consistently missing deadlines and this is beginning to undermine the project.

The task you have been given in the role play is get Jim on board with the project plan. You need to understand why Jim is having problems and explain how his missed deadlines are impacting others and the project as a whole. By the end you must gain his agreement on how best to move forward and how issues the discussion has raised will be handled.

For this type of scenario it will also be expected that you tackle the issues that Jim may have with the strategic change that will occur on the completion of the project.

- **Coach or Mentor**—you have inherited an inexperienced team that you need to develop so that you can properly delegate tasks. Your role play is to brief Sarah, one of your supervisors, so that she is able to take on the responsibility of briefing and training her team to perform the assigned task.

This scenario allows you the opportunity to demonstrate your abilities as a coach or mentor. The style of leadership and skills in communication you adopt in this exercise will show how well it matches the expectations of the organization. It also offers you the chance to demonstrate your delegation skills and how you would develop team members.

- **Customer Centric**—every organization has the 'awkward customer'! Your team has a longstanding 'problem' customer that they are actively avoiding. Unfortunately you have received a complaint from the customer about the way Powell handled their last call.

Your role play task is to decide on an initial tactic to deal with this complaint and gain Powell's support in devising a team strategy for dealing with these types

of customer. You need to demonstrate a clear understanding of the customer's business (as far as the brief allows) and demonstrate how you would set the customer's expectations of the future interactions with your team.

In all these scenarios prospective employers are able to gain an excellent sense of your level of [emotional intelligence](#) (EQ). Are you able to demonstrate the right level of personal and social awareness so that you can be seen as someone who would be competent in the role?

You need to show that you remain calm and objective during aggressive or stressful situations. You gain a rapport with the other party demonstrating your ability to understand the emotions of another person. The concept of EQ was popularized by Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence—Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996). In it he states that there are three criteria we are judged by in the workplace:

“... We are being judged by a new yardstick: not just by how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other.” (Goleman 1996)

As part of your preparation for interview exercises, and especially role play, it is essential that you know your level of EQ and how it relates to the competencies of the role. To ensure your success in attaining the role it may require some [development of your emotional intelligence](#).

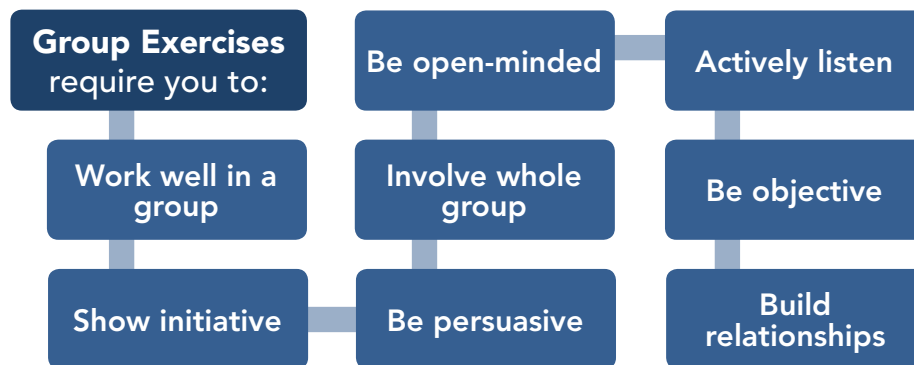
KEY POINTS

- ✓ Role play exercises are popular because they give an insight into how you interact with others in situations you have little direct control over.
- ✓ Common role play scenarios include: handling a difficult customer or complaint, disciplining or appraising a member of staff, negotiating a contract or project delivery, and similar situations where conflict is possible.
- ✓ Research the organization's culture and preferred leadership style, as well as the competencies specified in the job description so that you know what is required.
- ✓ Use the TACF method: plan how to use the Time, Actively listen to the other party, maintain Control, and stay Focused on the objective.

Group Exercises

This exercise is most popular when the interview process involves several candidates being present for a whole day, as this offers sufficient time and numbers to make this type of exercise possible. Group exercises provide the perfect opportunity to assess how you interact with others, your natural role in a group, and your flexibility when working in a team.

A typical exercise will see you presented with a brief that describes the scenario you are to work in and the problem or issue that the group needs to resolve. In emotional intelligence terms, the group exercise enables you to demonstrate your level of self-management and relationship management at the level needed in the role.

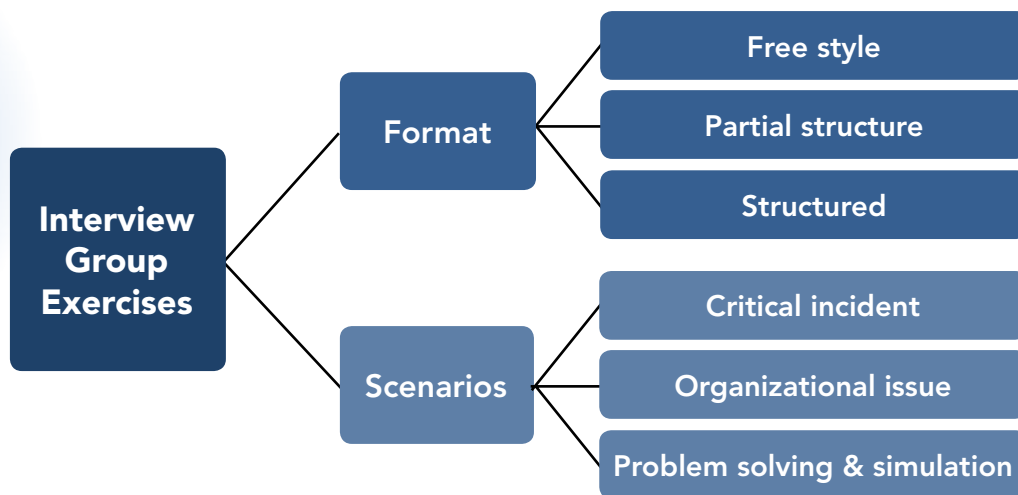


Practicing for this type of interview exercise is difficult. The best way to prepare yourself is to [measure your level of emotional intelligence](#) especially in the areas mentioned above. You also need to familiarize yourself with the culture of the organization so that you can illustrate its beliefs and ethos in your actions and words.

There are three basic formats used for group exercises of usually between 4–8 people.

1. The group is left to its own devices as to how it structures itself and attains its objective.
2. The group is given a partial structure. This means that each person in the group is set a specific task to lead.
3. A fixed structure is assigned to the group. Each individual is assigned a specific role within the group, e.g. chair, sales, finance, etc. These may or may not be assigned to match your skills. Either way the purpose of the exercise is to assess how well you work within a group in or out of your field of expertise.

Whatever the format, you need to quickly assess the skills and attitudes of the other participants and decide how best to work with them. If you have been given a role that is unfamiliar to you, then use the description in your brief to guide your behaviors.



Remember: whatever role you play or have been assigned it is how you interact and aid the group in achieving its objective that counts. Always work within your brief and don't make assumptions or pretend to have more knowledge than the scenario demands. Don't worry if the scenario appears too complex to be resolved during the time allocated, the important thing is to be seen to work cooperatively towards a solution.

A common scenario is to present the group with a critical incident that they must respond to. The incident may be of an operational nature—for example, one of your suppliers has to recall a batch of its product which is a major component of your own product.

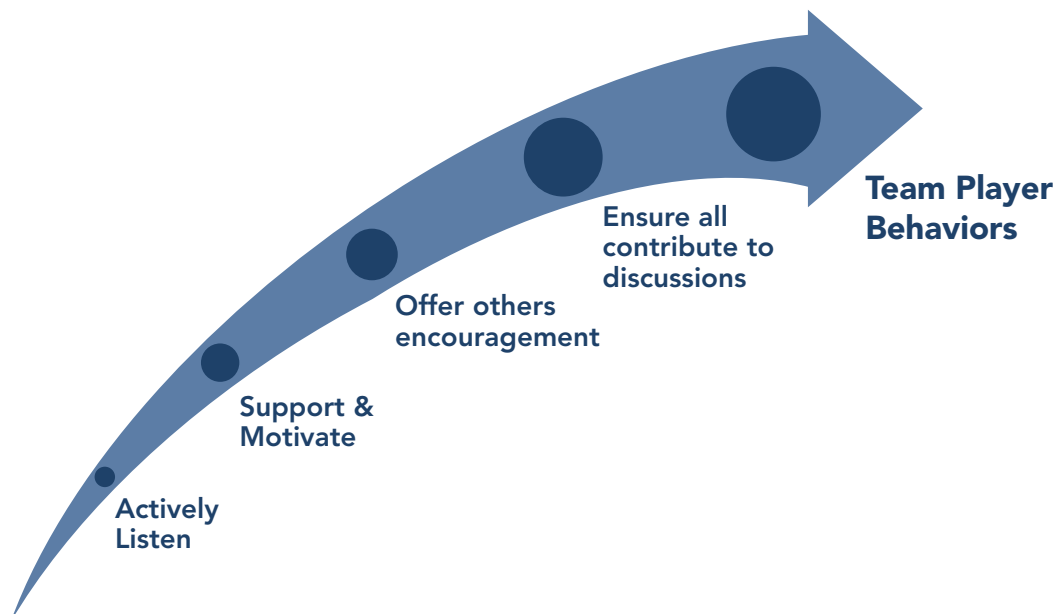
Another option is to give the group a strategic incident. This could be responding to an article in the press that describes instances where the organization has disregarded the environmental impact of its actions.

Another example would be that of an organizational issue, for example incorporating a new acquisition into your organization and how you would plan for the human resource implications.

The exact nature of a group exercise will reflect the nature of the role, but the behaviors you need to display are similar whatever scenario you are presented with.

- **Team Player**—this is your only opportunity to show your skills in behaving as part of a team. You need to demonstrate that you are supportive of others in the group and motivate them with your enthusiasm to attain the group objective.

You can display this by ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. Often the quietest member just needs a small amount of encouragement to add their contribution to the discussion. Seek out opportunities to show that you are aware of the activities and contributions of others. This may be simply giving a smile and saying 'that's a great idea, does anyone want to add anything?' to encourage others.



You will be assessed on how well the group interacts and divides up the tasks required. Your ability to identify others' strengths so that tasks can be assigned to those best suited to accomplish them will also be observed.

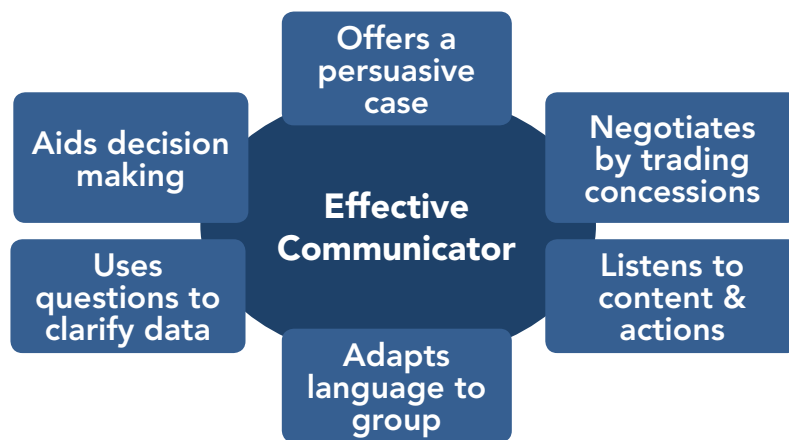
A good team player is someone who demonstrates their ability to [actively listen](#) as well as talk, and doing so enables you to summarize things and get the group back on track when necessary.

- **Target Driven**—this means keeping your focus on achieving the goal and resisting diversions, using persuasion and tact so that the whole group concentrates on

using the facts in the brief to address the issue at hand. The part you play in ensuring that the group arrives at a consensus will be assessed.

- **Interpersonal Communication**—is an essential skill to demonstrate in this exercise, as without [effective communication](#) the group will achieve very little. Facilitating effective and speedy decisions is vital because of the limited time available. Assessing the most appropriate level of language to use or getting others to define the industry jargon they use can be an important part of this. This ensures that everyone in the group, regardless of background, has the same level of understanding of the issues at stake.

A group exercise will usually consist of several negotiations regarding resources, priorities, or how to approach resolving the issue presented. You should use these to demonstrate your powers of listening, asking questions, summarizing points of view, and presenting a course of action.



Try to find common ground, ensuring that nobody is sidelined or becomes overly confrontational. The most important thing is to direct the decision-making process in a constructive and objective way. Don't become so focused on winning your point that you forget to listen and stop being a team player.

- **Analytical**—this skill is an essential part of any decision making. How well you identify and interpret the key facts from the data supplied is critical. You will be assessed on how well you present your arguments. Are they clear and concise?

This shows that you take a structured approach to a problem and have the ability to organize others to attain a goal.

To summarize, employers are looking for management skills, one of which is the ability to get the best out of your co-workers. Your social skills will be included in the assessment so listen to other people, be friendly, and participate. Employers don't usually want people who are withdrawn, or those who are aggressively dominant.

In group exercises try to forget the assessors; give your attention to the task and the group. You will be assessed on the quality of your contribution and how you relate to the other participants.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Group exercises provide the perfect opportunity to assess how you interact with others, your natural role in a group, and your flexibility when working in a team.
 - ✓ The majority of group exercises are done with a group size of 4–8 people as this will give everyone the opportunity to contribute.
 - ✓ Typically, you will be given a problem or scenario which requires a collective decision to be taken.
 - ✓ The type of scenario used in group exercises varies from physical problems—for example, how to build a bridge over a stream using materials provided—to purely theoretical problems that can be solved by discussion.
 - ✓ This is usually presented in the form of a brief, which also includes a strict time limit after which the result of the discussion will need to be conveyed to the assessors.
 - ✓ Many scenarios are too complex to be solved within the timeframe allowed for the exercise.
 - ✓ Don't be put off by this—what you are being assessed on is how you behave within the group.
-

Presentation Exercises

Presentations give you the perfect opportunity to show that you can get your message across in a concise and coherent way. It also allows you to show your ability to handle a question and answer (Q&A) session.



An interview exercise gives you the greatest level of control over your behaviors, providing you with a golden opportunity to stand out from the crowd. So before you get to the interview you should make sure that your abilities to plan, prepare, and deliver a presentation are the best they can be.

The most obvious competency that you are being asked to demonstrate is 'interpersonal communication,' especially your ability to communicate a message in a clear and persuasive way. This covers three separate areas:

1. How you organize the material.
2. How you actually present it.
3. How you handle and answer questions.

However, there are two other areas that are often tested implicitly during the presentation exercise. These are:

Enthusiasm for the Role

Do you sound as though you really want to be there?

This aspect of job selection is often overlooked by candidates but most employers want someone who has a genuine enthusiasm for what they do. You need to deliver your presentation with a certain amount of passion—don't go over the top but you must engage the audience of assessors. They may be listening to a whole series of presentations on the same or similar topics so don't underestimate how much energy you need to put in if you are going to capture and hold their attention.

Organizational/Strategic Interpretation

Try to demonstrate that you can add value beyond that which the employer expects from the role.

This is easier in some presentations than others; it depends on the topic you're given, but it is often this 'added value' that marks out the successful candidates.

Not everyone is a natural presenter, but there are ways you can make the best of your own individuality and play to your strengths. If you want to read more on the topic of presentations then our trilogy of eBooks described below offer you practical advice.

- [Planning a Presentation](#)—describes a simple four-step process to adopt when planning a presentation. This enables you, even with minimal time, to give a strong and persuasive performance to any audience.
- [Preparing a Presentation](#)—following on from 'Planning a Presentation' this eBook outlines how to take your plan and create a presentation that is based on your aim and audience. It helps you define a key message statement and identify the key points you want your audience to take on board.
- [Delivering a Presentation](#)—is the final of these three presentation eBooks and explains how to keep your audience engaged whilst you deliver your presentation and how best to organize the material to suit your audience.



There are several ways presentations can form part of an interview exercise:

- Each candidate is given a topic to present in a predefined timeframe. This may or may not be related to the role or organization. You will be told what facilities are available to you, e.g. PC, Mac, flipchart, overhead, etc.
- Within a group exercise. This may be on your own or as part of a group.
- You are asked at some point in the interview process to provide a verbal account of your career path. This could be the most important presentation you give and you need to leave your audience with the view that you are the one for the role.
- Impromptu presentations are often a favorite. You will only have a few minutes to think about how to present the topic you have been given.

Whatever type of presentation you are faced with you need to demonstrate your enthusiasm for the role. You can achieve this by being enthusiastic in your delivery and showing that that you really want to be there and that you believe what you have to say is important.

The behaviors you need to demonstrate will reflect your level of planning and preparation as well as how you actually present your material. A significant element you must display is the depth and quality of your research. This is made easier with the Internet but be mindful to check that the information you have is up to date and accurate.

Any argument you present must be done in a persuasive manner. Be aware of how your tone of voice and pace of delivery affect how successful you are in doing this. The extent of your success in this will reflect on how well you have planned putting your message and key points across to your audience.

It is essential that you make effective use of the time available to you and avoid getting sidetracked by a question. Remember this may only be asked to see how you handle interruptions. It also shows how confident you are with your topic and how you assert control during the presentation.

Include time in your preparation to anticipate the types of questions you could be asked. Don't be unwilling to ask for clarification when you are not clear about what is being asked and always be honest—if you don't know, say so.



There are a few ways to keep your focus throughout the Q&A session and to ensure that you answer the question that was asked.

- Listen to the 'whole' question. Do not interrupt until the person asking the question gives you the cue to reply.
- Repeat or rephrase the question as appropriate so that not only you, but the rest of the audience are clear what was asked.
- Check after your explanation that the question was answered to their satisfaction. Make sure that you give everyone the opportunity to ask questions.

If you can see there are more questions than you have time for then ask these individuals what topic their question relates to. This enables you to group the question by topic and avoid unnecessary repetition in this session.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ The assessors will be listening to a whole series of presentations on the same or similar topics so don't underestimate how much energy you need to put in if you are going to hold their attention.
- ✓ Try to demonstrate that you can add value beyond that which the employer expects from the role.
- ✓ Find an efficient method for preparing presentations and practice it.

Handling the Media Exercise

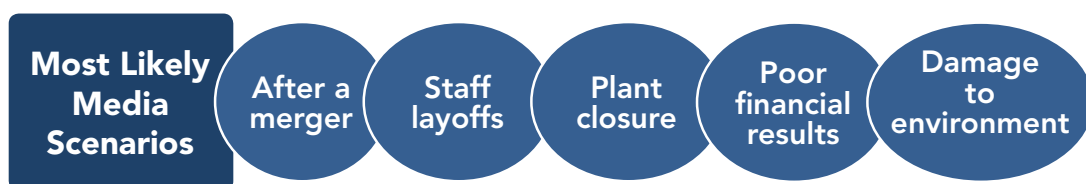
If you are seeking a senior management position or directorship then it is a good idea to familiarize yourself with this exercise. You can view it as a unique role play designed to assess how well you perform with the press.

For the majority of 'Media Interview' exercises the behaviors you need to show are:

- Excellent Verbal Communications
- Awareness of Corporate Strategies
- Ability to Manage Stakeholder Expectations
- Confident Decision Making
- Leadership
- Evaluation & Analysis

Interaction with the press and acting as a spokesperson for your organization is most likely to be stated in your job specification, but be aware of subtle inferences that you may have to perform in this activity. The more senior your position within an organization, the more likely you are to have some dealings with the press.

For example, you may be seeking a role as 'Finance Director' and think that media interaction doesn't apply to you, but consider who the press may call to ask about the latest annual report. You could find yourself acting as the organization's spokesperson, even if only rarely.



This exercise is really a specialized role play that assesses how well you deal with and react to being interviewed by a journalist. By reading annual reports and copies of press releases you can gain an appreciation of an organization's stance when communicating with the press. Part of your preparation needs to take into account how someone in your role would be called upon to express the '*corporate*' opinion.

There are a wide variety of ways you can familiarize yourself with the ethos and culture of an organization's media voice. These include looking at the internally produced material and external sources of information so that you have a balanced impression of how the organization wants to be seen and how others see it.

Internal sources involve looking at the organization's website, annual reports, current press releases, and the resulting coverage. If you have sufficient time you may even want to contact the organization's Public Relations (PR) agency to get a more in-depth view and learn its main PR focus. In some situations it is a member of the PR agency that acts as the journalist so they may be reluctant to answer your questions, but it will demonstrate initiative.

External sources require you to look at the industry press and editorials comparing the media coverage of the organization with that of its main competitors. It will also help you to see the spin journalists have put on the PR messages of the organization and forewarn you of potential traps a journalist may present to you. It also helps you substantiate your own impression of the organization and compare it with others in its industry sector.



The brief you will be supplied with prior to taking part in this exercise will guide you regarding the corporate stance on the issues the interview is concerned with. It will provide you with sufficient background information for you to be able to communicate

appropriately with the journalist. This interview may take place over the phone as this is the usual method of contact used by journalists.

It is your behavior and reactions that are being assessed, not how well you understand the situation you are dealing with in the exercise, but it will have a strong correlation to the activities expected of someone in the role. The final aspect of this exercise may be a mock-up of what the journalist wrote following your conversation, which you can then comment on. Be honest in your reflections and don't take the resulting article to heart because how you react to such feedback is what is being assessed.

A good and quick way to help you prepare for this exercise is to ask yourself three simple questions. In doing so you will highlight the likely areas of contention and risk you need to guard against and how you too can steer the thread of the conversation to portray the messages you and the organization want.

- 1. What three things would your organization not want you to be asked about?*
- 2. How could a journalist steer the conversation into a 'danger zone'? For example, as the main employer in this district what are you doing to safeguard the local community in light of your announcement to close this plant?*
- 3. How can you bring your organization's key message into your replies?*

The main behavior you need to exhibit during this exercise is excellent communication skills, which includes active listening. You need to display confidence in the way you handle the situation and be precise in what you say. Don't get drawn into saying something that can be misconstrued or misleading. You will be assessed on how you manage stakeholder and corporate expectations, as well as how you interpret them in relation to the topic of the media interview.

Those who perform best in media conversations always give consistent messages to the journalist and have prepared themselves well in terms of understanding the culture, ethos, and public voice of the organization. Don't forget to focus on your delivery of the messages and try to avoid inappropriate emotions creeping into your tone of voice. This is especially important if the media handling exercise is performed face to face because the journalist can assess how well your nonverbal and verbal signals match.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Media interviews are a specialized role play that assesses how well you deal with being interviewed by a journalist.
 - ✓ If you are seeking a senior management position or directorship then you should familiarize yourself with this exercise.
 - ✓ Find and read any press releases and any resulting coverage so you can see how the press views the organization.
 - ✓ Try to speak to the organization's Public Relations (PR) agency account manager who should be able to provide you with a 'Notes to Editors,' which lists key achievements, strategic objectives, and target press.
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Summary

Whatever interview exercises you take part in as part of a recruitment or promotion process your preparation plays a key role in your success. You need to understand the competencies required for the role and ensure that you portray this at the level required. When taking part in interview exercises there are two things critical to you attaining a high score.

Firstly, read and evaluate the information contained in the brief so you clearly understand your role in the exercise.

Secondly, make clear and concise notes using a consistent method for all exercises to ensure you maximize your efficiency.

Working methodically through the exercise information explains your exact role and describes the parameters of the situation it presents. For exercises such as in-tray, critical incident, or media interview you may want to create additional information that gives you an overview of the timeline of events.

This will help you understand the implications potential decisions could have on the outcome of the situation. It is extremely important that you work within the parameters outlined in your instructions and overview information. Do not make assumptions or read more into an item than actually exists.

You are being assessed on your ability to evaluate the data you are given as well as how appropriate your decisions are given this knowledge. This might mean that selecting a *'None of the above'* or *'I'd delay my decision till I had more time / information'* is the most appropriate answer considering what you know.

There are certain items you should take along to interview exercises so that your preparation and exercise time is as effective as possible.

- Calculator (if allowed)
- Colored pens, pencils, and highlighters
- Post-it notes, scrap paper, and eraser
- Geometry set (if required for role)

The intensity of these types of exercises often means that it is extremely difficult to complete the whole exercise. This is because you can be assessed on how you respond to such circumstances! But your goal should always be to complete it all.

By practicing interview exercises prior to taking part you will become familiar with the competencies each one requires you to display. You will also become conscious of any behaviors you need to alter or acquire to ensure you behave at the correct level for the role. The ultimate bonus of preparing thoroughly is that you will greatly improve your overall score and your chances of success.

The other eBooks available in this skill set from www.free-management-ebooks.com are:

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