

HOME STUDY MATERIAL FOR MANAGERIAL EXAMINATIONS

Before you attempt to answer in-basket questions, it will be helpful for you to have some background information on the subject, and also on in-basket exercises.

Dessler, Gary; Personnel Management, Reston Publishing Company, Reston, Virginia: 1984, p. 178.

"The in-basket. With this type of exercise, the candidate is faced with an accumulation of reports, memos, notes of incoming phone calls, letters, and other materials collected in the in-basket of the simulated job he or she is to take over. The candidate is asked to take appropriate action on each of these materials by, for example, writing letters, notes or agendas for meetings. The results of the candidate's actions are then reviewed by the trained evaluators."

Mr. Dessler was describing one of several tools an organization might use to recruit new managers. He also touched on the leaderless group discussion, management games, individual presentations, objective tests, the interview.

Re. the leaderless group discussion:

"A leaderless group is given a discussion question and told to arrive at a group decision. The raters then evaluate each participant's interpersonal skills, acceptance by the group, leadership, and individual influence."

A favorite discussion question is for each participant to imagine themselves as being in charge of the budget of a small city agency and then being asked to proceed to implement an order to take a 10% cut in personal services in their agency.

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Burack, Elmer H. and Mathys, Nicholas J.; Introduction to Management - A Career Perspective, John Wiley and Sons, New York: 1983, p. 107.

"An even simpler simulation format involves the use of 'in-basket' exercises. These present the trainee with some samples of letters, memos, telegrams, and other communication devices that require judgment as to appropriate action. Within a given time limit, the participant must deal with a variety of situations. After the participant has dealt with each communique, the exercise is reviewed by the trainer or the class to see if each individual has properly allocated his time, recognized all of the dimensions in a particular situation, and reached the 'best'

decision. In-baskets are an interesting training technique because the participants are involved in problems that are realistic to them. These exercises are relatively easy to construct and can reflect the problems that a group is experiencing. They provide a good test of a manager's organizing and problem-solving skills. With continued advancements in computers and mathematical modeling we are likely to see additional uses of simulation models for training and development purposes as well as problem solving."

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Stallard, John J. and Terry, George R., Office Systems Management, Richard D. Irwin, Inc., Homewood, Illinois, 1949 to 1984, pp. 480-1.

The authors discuss in-basket techniques and incident-process, which may be given in the form of in-basket questions.

"The in-basket technique realistically simulates actual office conditions. It is a kind of business game. From 2 to 15 persons play the game, which ordinarily takes two hours --- one hour playing time and one hour of discussion among the players following the conclusion of the game. Each trainee or player sits at a desk on which there is an 'in' basket and an 'out' basket, paper, and pencil. The instructor then indicates, for example, that you have certain helpers and that you are leaving on your three-week vacation tomorrow. Identical packets of papers are then placed in the 'in' basket of all the players. These papers require your office managerial attention. A typical packet may contain three letters, five memos, a telegram, two reports, and four telephone messages. The trainees each study the materials and write what they believe is the most appropriate action, clip the material to the original paper, and place it in their 'out' basket. The in-basket technique is reasonable in cost and highly practical, and it can include an almost unlimited number of potential problems and situations."

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Porter, Lyman W.; Lawler, Edward E. III; Hackman, J. Richard; Behavior in Organizations, McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, 1975, page 151.

"Another situational test that has been used is the leaderless group discussion. Here a group of applicants is put together and asked to discuss a broad problem or topic.

They are evaluated by observers on their effectiveness during the group discussion. Both the in-basket and the leaderless group discussion have been shown to have some validity for selecting managers."

"One of the most popular of these (interesting selection devices for managers) is the 'in-basket,' a technique for simulating some of the decisions a manager has to make during a work day. In its most frequently used version, the job applicant is given a series of letters, memos, etc., and asked to deal with them in a short period of time. The way he handles them is quantitatively scored and an evaluation of his performance (is) developed."

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Chruden, Herbert J.; Sherman, Arthur W. Jr.; Personnel Management, South Western Publishing Company, Ohio, 1972, p. 257.

"The In-basket training technique is another method that can be used to simulate a problem situation. In this technique, the participants are given several documents, each describing some problem or situation the solution of which requires an immediate decision. This technique forces them not only to make decisions under the pressure of time but also to determine the priority with which each problem should be considered

From the same textbook, p. 94: "Personnel planning provides the formulation for organizing, staffing, directing and controlling those activities of employees that must be performed in order for established objectives to be achieved. It is only by anticipating what work is to be accomplished and how it is to be accomplished that managers can develop, staff and direct the organization that is required for this purpose."

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Yoder, Dale, Personnel Management and Industrial Relations, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970/1.

Understand delegation.

P. 149: "Delegation means letting go. It is a process in which a superior allocates a portion of his authority to his assistants, entrusting them with the assignment thus defined. It should be noted that what is delegated is authority. Responsibility may be assigned or shared. A delegate may welcome the assignment of a degree of responsibility, but the delegator of authority is still the person responsible. 'The buck stops here.'"

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Understand feedback. If delegation is your answer to an in-basket question, be sure to have control, upward communication. Louis V. Imundo writes, in The Effective Supervisor's Handbook, (Amacan, A Division of American Management Associations, New York, 1980, writes on page 85:

"Effective upward communication starts at the bottom of the organization and moves through each level all the way to the top. It is incumbent upon all levels of supervision to create an environment where employees feel free to communicate feelings and concerns, as well as accomplishments and activities, to supervisors. The feedback that takes place through upward communication is necessary for supervisors to determine if what has been transmitted to employees has been received, properly understood, and will be complied with to the degree expected.

"In general, downward communication serves to initiate the feedback process. The content of downward communication is mostly of an informative or directive nature. The resultant upward communication tends to be more of a questioning and reporting nature, including suggestions, concerns and complaints or grievances."

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What, very specifically, is the problem?

What is the time schedule for solving the problem, for each phase of the solution?

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Understand Management by Objectives (MBO) John B. Miner and Mary Green Miner put it this way in Personnel and Industrial Relations --- A Managerial Approach, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1973, page 190:

"In contrast (to the job enlargement or analysis, i.e. description of specific duties), Management by Objectives frequently involves the use of self-established prescriptions wherein the individual largely establishes for himself what he is to do. Under such conditions, the official job description, if it exists at all, may be totally ignored.

"In essence, Management by Objectives requires that an individual and his superior work out a precise statement of performance objectives in a variety of areas, each with a clearly stated accomplishment date. Subsequently, when this date arrives, performance is compared against objectives, and accomplishments as well as variances are discussed. Superior and subordinate then establish a new set of objectives for a new time span, and the cycle is repeated... By comparing role prescriptions, stated as

objectives, with performance, an appraisal or evaluation of the individual's work may be obtained. Compensation may be tied to the extent to which objectives are obtained. The goal-setting process provides an opportunity for considerable coaching and training by the superior. Basically, however, MBO is a procedure for planning. As a planning process it helps role prescription. That is the aspect which is of primary significance for job analysis.

"The major problem arising out of incorporating self-established role prescriptions into MBO as a central feature below the very top managerial levels is that of coordination and integration of efforts. Often self-established role prescriptions turn out to be overlapping, or basic tasks are left unperformed. The objectives established may have little relationship to overall organizational goals.

"...But incorporating self-establishment of role prescription to the point where job analysis in its usual form is either eliminated or ignored does not seem warranted. It would seem preferable to stress interview and job occupant description method of job analysis, and thus to obtain considerable input from the individual as a basis for establishing role prescriptions for his job. There is in fact no reason why much greater use cannot be made of position analysis so that the work is adjusted to the individual. However, the need for some overall coordination of the job structure, presumably as a function of personnel management, remains apparent. It does not seem desirable to extend MBO in such a way as to substitute it for job analysis."

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Dale Carnegie and Associates, Managing Through People, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1975, page 231:

"In Basket Exercise. The participants are presented with a series of papers which might appear in their in-baskets on a typical day. They are asked to determine the priority they would assign to each item (memos, letters, telephone messages, etc.,) and what action they would take on each one. This is particularly valuable in training managers on time management and in helping them evaluate real life situations they may face in their regular jobs. Each individual is given the opportunity to explain his reasons for his action and to compare it with those of the other participants."

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Continuing, on page 351:

"Simon suggests four basic ingredients or phases in the decision-making process:

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Kast, Fremont E. and Rosenzweig, James E., Organizational Management -- A Systems and Contingency Approach, McGraw Hill Series on Management, New York, 1970-74-79:

"Management and Decision-Making

"To decide means to pass judgment or to make up one's mind. It implies two or more alternatives under consideration, with the decision-maker choosing one of them to and his or her deliberation. Behavior is goal-oriented, and human beings move toward goals by making decisions and implementing them.

"An integral element of the managerial task is organization decision making -- choosing an overall strategy, setting specific objectives, designing structures and processes, selecting people, delegating responsibility, evaluating results, and initiating changes. Our understanding of management can be enhanced by viewing it from a decision-making perspective and recognizing that managerial decision making is a sequential process rather than an act, in that problems are seldom resolved once and for all. Subsequent decisions are affected by previous decisions and developments over time. It is a process that includes searching out and recognizing problems as well as analyzing them (inventing, developing, and evaluating alternatives) and choosing courses of action to be implemented.

"A wide spectrum of decision-making methods are relevant to the managerial system. Within the operating system there is relative certainty, hence, well-defined problems can be solved via straightforward computational techniques. For long-range strategy, the board of directors and top management are faced with considerable uncertainty and novel, ill-structured problems. Computational approaches are less appropriate for decision-making at the strategic level except for subparts of some problems. For managers at all levels, subjective judgment plays an important part in many decisions.

"Decision-making is fundamental to organism and organizational behavior. It provides the means for control and allows coherence in systems.

"All managerial activity might be considered decision-making.

"If all behavior results from decision-making, and if managing is a particular kind of behavior, then managing is decision-making.

"Decision-making is one of the most important tasks of managers. It pervades the performance of all managerial functions. In this context, management can be studied in terms of decisions made in planning, organizing, or controlling enterprise activities. In short, decision-making is a pervasive activity and provides a useful approach for studying managerial systems.

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- "1. Searching the environment for conditions calling for decisions.
2. Inventing, developing and analyzing possible courses of action.
3. Selecting a particular course of action from those available.
4. Assessing past choices, review."

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Slonno (sp), Richard S., Non-Nonsense Management -- A General Manager's Primer, MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., New York, 1977, pages 11-12:

"Your job as a general manager is to achieve excellent results. Your superiors expect that of you. Your entire organization hopes that you'll be successful, because through your success, you assure their future.

"If you're going to achieve excellent results, not only must you perform excellently, but so must level upon level of your organization. Your people must identify you with an expectation of high levels of performance. The minute you accept mediocrity, you lower the performance levels of your entire organization.

"This rule is probably the most difficult rule to consistently and persistently apply. As you remain with an organization, you begin to establish business friendships. You face the temptation of being excessively understanding of the many problems subordinates face. It is too easy to sympathize and empathize.

"Unswerving enforcement of this demand for excellent performance will lead to unpleasant circumstances. There will be people who won't understand and, despite your best efforts at communication, never will understand why you set the levels of performance you do. But it isn't necessary that they all understand! You run the risk of becoming ineffective if you waste time attempting to achieve 100% understanding in your organization.

"You cannot expect more in performance or commitment than you yourself are willing to deliver. Therefore, the yearning for excellence, the drive for improvement, and the commitment to seek out more responsibility must start with you. But once it does, then it is not only fair and appropriate but expected that you will demand similar levels of importance (competence?) on the part of everyone in your organization.

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"You must become callous to (comments) that sound like:
'He failed to achieve the objectives but he really worked
very hard.' The hard-business-world fact of life is that
no rewards at all are provided for effort; they are granted
only for results. Results are never published as effort
per share. Only earnings per share draw any interest, and
mediocre earnings per share are of no interest at all.

"If you allow your organization to perform with mediocrity,
you will be labeled, accurately, a mediocre manager."

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IN-BASKET EXERCISES

Modeled after an in-basket test, in-basket exercises were first used in the 1950's for training managers. While the exact format of in-basket exercises will vary, they frequently involve each trainee in a group first individually assuming the role of a manager who is faced with a number of letters, memos, and notes to which he must respond in writing within a limited time period. For example, the trainee may be told that he has just returned from vacation and that he must leave on a trip in four hours, during which time he must respond in writing to all the items on his desk.

To further complicate the exercise, you, the trainee, may be told that you have just returned from vacation and must leave on a business trip in five hours. Also, it is a holiday and your secretary is home, and no one else is around the office to help you. There are more inquiries and problems to respond to than is possible in five hours and so you will have to determine the relative priority of the work to be done.

As you can see, the in-basket exercise demands good decision-making skills, rather than learning new facts or acquiring new skills. The time pressure factor may result in your finding out how well you perform under stress.

When these exercises are conducted in an oral format, and after each exercise is finished (time runs out), you may be asked to justify your decisions and actions to the examiner and the other participants when it is held as a group exercise, and then they in turn will evaluate your actions and critique it. The rating, of course, is done differently in competitive examinations.

The fact that this type of exercise can be given to groups of managerial trainees is considered an advantage to management, i.e. it is easier and cheaper to administer than other training methods. This training technique also tests managerial candidates for decision-making abilities, particularly due to the time constraints involved. This is considered a vital skill for most managerial positions and, although other training techniques such as role playing can also provide stress, in-basket exercises do more so and are specifically designed for this purpose.

There are limitations, too. As with in-basket questions pertaining to case study examples, they are in large part hypothetical in nature, or static, in that the managerial candidate does not have to live or "die" with the consequences of a poor decision, except where he/she is rated poorly on an examination.

Some in-basket exercises provide guidelines or suggestions for solution. The candidate may be presented with a problem which requires a series of decisions and actions but is also presented with a number of alternate means of resolving the problem, from which he must choose the best option. Next, the problem may be further developed and you may be provided with a number of new choices to resolve this new, or expanded, problem. It may even be required a third time. Then comes the evaluation and critique.

So, with this technique, the trainee receives information evaluating the consequences, good or bad, of his decisions at each decision point in the exercise.

In order to properly critique the trainee's decisions, the examiner must be highly skilled in conducting the exercise and in conducting the critique. At its extremes, the critique, as with performance evaluations, can be so general as to be meaningless or be so specific that the trainee becomes so overwhelmed as to render the while training exercise pointless.

In-basket exercises are often used in on-the-job management group training programs, together with case studies.