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The Transformation of Selection Procedures

The War Office Selection Boards*

The Presenting Problem and the Initial Response

Towards the end of 1941, the impending rapid expansion of the British Army required a large number of officers. The ensuing crisis in officer selection was of sufficient magnitude for a major innovation in assessment procedures to emerge—the War Office Selection Boards. These boards enabled the army to officer itself when traditional methods were failing and when there was doubt as to whether a sufficient reserve of officer material existed among the other ranks. The process of collaboration between experts and administrators, which the boards exemplified, became a model for many other joint undertakings. The methodological revolution consisted in replacing a military judge using a short interview by an inter-disciplinary group of selectors who assessed groups of candidates over two-and-a-half days. The extent of the participation achieved among all those concerned made the Boards profoundly acceptable to the war-time army.

Failure rates at Officer Cadet Training Units (OCTUs) had risen to over 20 percent in many courses and to over 30 percent in some. Not only did these failures represent a great deal of effort wasted on unproductive training (courses were of three months), they created undue stress in the training units. Next, there were insufficient numbers of good applicants. This lack was complex in its origins; letters of complaint received by the War Office indicated that there was a reluctance to apply for a commission. Furthermore, the return to their units of a noticeable number of failures reinforced this reluctance.

At this time candidates for commissions went before a Command Interview Board (CIB) consisting of a permanent president and two commanding officers (COs) as ad hoc members. These boards conducted a short interview with each

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candidate, usually some 20 minutes, and decisions were made on the impressions gained, together with the information contained in a brief report from the man's CO. Many candidates felt that they could not do themselves justice in such short interviews. The presidents felt equally dissatisfied. Reports from units were also proving less helpful than had been hoped. COs had not yet had experience of men under sufficiently varied conditions and the course of the war had been such that relatively few candidates had had the critical test of battle. Potential officers were being drawn from an ever-widening range of social classes so that presidents no longer had those signposts to leadership qualities with which they were familiar in young men from the public (USA = private) schools. The uncertainty felt about such short interviews was increased by pressure to find all possible candidates rather than to take only those who were obviously good.

BACKGROUND TO THE CHANGE

Early in 1940 a psychiatrist was posted to each of the Army Commands and soon afterwards other psychiatrists were added to assist the Command psychiatrists. Many of the breakdowns they encountered were obviously precipitated by factors in the military environment as well as by limitations in the individual. The psychiatrists began to occupy a therapeutic role in relation to their employing institution, the army, as well as to individual patients within it by making suggestions for the prevention of psychiatric illness from social causes (Sutherland and Fitzpatrick, 1945). One of the most important causes of difficulty in adjustment was unsuitable employment in the army itself. A new Directorate for the Selection of Personnel was established which, working in close collaboration with the Directorate for Army Psychiatry, prepared a scheme which radically altered the recruiting arrangements of the army and entailed the building of a new social system—the General Service Corps—into which men were now taken for a short period before being sent to a specific arm of the service. During this induction period they were given several psychological tests and a short interview which enabled Personnel Selection Officers to make recommendations for each man's training in keeping with his abilities and, as far as possible, his preferences (Vernon and Parry, 1949). The psychometric underpinning of this scheme was in sharp contrast to the methods then used for the selection of officer cadets.

In creating practical schemes for handling various manpower questions, it became the rule that the schemes had to be jointly planned by the army officer and the "expert," each contributing from his own special experience and knowledge (Rees, 1945). The social-therapeutic role of the psychiatrists, both in diagnosing problems from the human side of the military environment and in

fostering the development of specially adapted military institutions to meet them, paved the way for the early experiments and for some of the most characteristic features of the selection boards.

PRELIMINARY EXPERIMENTS

Experiments by army psychiatrists with both officers and officer-cadets pointed to ways of providing the CIBs with more evidence than they were accustomed to have. An experiment by Bowlby was stimulated by comments on the unsuitability of many officers recently commissioned: the numbers of unsuitable officer-cadets were intolerably high, they lacked the ability to master the technical training or the degree of leadership required for an armored regiment, or both. Since psychological tests and interviews had proved useful in identifying other-rank recruits likely to prove failures, the new inquiry aimed to discover whether an intelligence test and an interview by a psychiatrist could accurately predict the technical ability and officer-like qualities of cadets at OCTU.

A critical experiment with serving officers (Wittkower and Rodger, 1941) arose out of a Command psychiatrist's work with problem officers and the interest of his Army Commander in the methods of officer selection used in the German army. An initial experiment was set up at a school for company commanders whose commandant and staff had, during an intensive five-week course, formed a thorough-going opinion of the students' all-around capabilities as officers, their technical proficiency and their human qualities. They could give ratings of their students with which the opinions of the psychiatrist could be compared.

The investigation included written and laboratory tests and an interview. In order to compare opinions, the commandant and the psychiatrists each made a brief evaluation of the student's personality, together with a judgment on his suitability as a combatant officer. Both sides read their reports and then rated the results of the comparison according to the degree of agreement. Of the 48 comparisons, 26 (55 percent) were in essential agreement, 12 (25 percent) in substantial agreement and 10 (20 percent) in essential disagreement. Nine-tenths of these disagreements were due to underlying personality deviations which had escaped the attention of the commandant, in some cases the psychological abnormality being very severe.

The program, with the addition of a psychologist to administer intelligence tests, was repeated with another course of officers at the company commanders' school. The results reduced the 20 percent disagreement by half. The improvement appeared to be due not only to the psychiatrists incorporating the results of the intelligence tests into their reports, but also to the mutual