THE LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT CENTRE:

A LEARNING LAUNCH PAD FOR MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR – AMY MOORE

Amy Moore is adjunct faculty and a professional associate at GIBS. In her association with the School, she specialises in developing executive programmes, lecturing on organisational-behaviour-related topics, and coaching individuals. Outside of GIBS, she helps teams solve problems through action learning and volunteers a portion of her time helping non-governmental organisations scale.

A concerted focus of Amy's time over the last six years has been writing teaching cases and developing the competencies of others in this field internationally. Her writing has placed in 10 international competitions and featured in Forbes, Forte, and the Financial Times.

At the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), we take a personal, holistic and integrative approach to learning. The Personal and Applied Learning department is an area established within the business school to be the custodian of expertise, best practice, and thought leadership in the domains of personal change, transformation, and applied leadership practice. This department guides teams throughout the school on designing and delivering applied learning and leadership development in their programmes. The unit also delivers programmes on facilitation and coaching direct to market.

Importance of managerial skills

In an increasing global competitive environment, an organisation's advantage can come through a variety of different avenues. One of these is through its people, especially managers. While no management position is exactly the same (Whetten & Cameron, 2020), a focus on developing managers' skills can be a way of organisational differentiation and success (Mathur, 2015).

In recognition of the importance of managerial skill development, Jonathan Cook has developed a framework and process called the Leadership Assessment Centre (LAC), initially while at the Graduate School of Business Administration of the University of the Witwatersrand, and subsequently at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), the business education arm of the University of Pretoria. The LAC process is designed for participants to practise their management skills in a number of deeply participative simulated management activities, assess their own performance in these activities (on an individual, peer, and facilitated basis) and, on the basis of the feedback, draw up a learning contract that contains the plan for how they will develop the competencies identified. Therefore, this white paper highlights the:

| Thinking behind the LAC; | Competency within GIBS that has been developed; and | Benefits to both participants and organisations that participate. |

Jonathan Cook

Cook (n.d.) received his undergraduate degree in psychology before finishing his master's in counselling psychology and religious studies. After serving as a community worker and then a psychologist at the National Institute for Personnel Research, since 1990, Cook's career has been steeped in managerial learning. Initially, he served at the University of the Witwatersrand's Graduate School of Business Administration as a member of faculty and then director of the Management Development Unit before becoming Academic head. In 2004, Cook moved to GIBS as a senior lecturer and then director, reporting to the Dean on all academic aspects of running the School. Concurrently, he founded Thornhill Associates (www.thornhill.co.za), a customised online 360-degree feedback offering that provides information for different levels of management.

Since co-founding the African Management Institute (AMI) in 2013, Cook's focus has been on developing and measuring tailored tools and training to help African business thrive. Based on the principle of practical business and management tools that could be downloaded easily and immediately applied at work, over the years, AMI (2025) has had 45 000 learners across 39 countries on the continent.

Background to the Leadership Assessment Centre

Cook's thinking on the LAC was informed by various different influences. As a trained psychologist, he was always interested in how people grow and how leadership emerges. In particular, he believed that insight was helpful for leadership development. Furthermore, for insight to be impactful, it needed to include three components:

1.
insight into what is required to be effective;

2.
an awareness of one's own strengths and opportunities to become even better, based on evidence from the person's actual behaviour; and

3.
a self-generated and peer-affirmed practical action plan to develop in the direction identified.

Consequently, Cook decided to focus not on aptitude testing or personality for the LAC, but on the behaviours of managers and the self-assessment and awareness associated with that which could lead to management learning and development. This approach was also informed by the work of Richard Boyatzis and Daniel Goleman (Goleman et al., 2002). Goleman identified personal competence and self-awareness as some of the core aspects of emotional intelligence that could be applied to work. Meanwhile, Boyatzis created and taught a core course in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme at Weatherhead School of Management that enabled students to assess and update their mental models of themselves and what is required of managers. While assessments by others could

provide managers with information that they could use, Cook believed the process of self-directed assessment could offer a greater likelihood of leading to deep and continually growing self-awareness as well as an ability to cope with the demands of organisational change (Cutler, 1999; Cook et al., 2005).

Cook was also introduced to Herman Gilligan, a learning specialist in the United Kingdom, who believed that self-managed learning holds several advantages over traditional forms of training for managers. One of the criticisms of fixed curricula, Gilligan (1994) thought, was that they could be wasteful by forcing students to spend time studying material unrelated to the jobs they are required to do. According to J. Cook (personal communication, 20 November 2024), this

> was less true of general management education programmes, where it could be argued that the students are being formed through exposure to a wide range of different disciplines, without which they would not be in a position to decide what they need to learn.

"All genuine learning is active, not passive. It is a process of discovery in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher."
(Adler, 1982)

Purpose of self-directed learning

Executive education, which focuses on the development of managerial competence at higher levels (see Table 1), had a specific context suited to self-directed learning, Cook believed. Managers that occupied demanding positions typically know reasonably well the requirements they face, and

are loath to surrender one minute unnecessarily.... Executives look for a kind of "Just-in-time learning" that equips them specifically for what they need to do. The attraction of self-managed learning is that the learner can make sure this happens. The role of self-directed assessment in this is that the learner has a sound basis on which to make decisions about what is most important (J. Cook, personal communication, 10 February, 2025).

Degree of customisation to the individual	Customised (self-managed learning)	Coaching-based programmes and MBA programmes with a major component of self-assessment and choice to compile a curriculum from a range of options to suit the individual's needs.	Executive programmes designed with two streams: one for all participants to address the strategic management development needs of the client organisation; and the other for individuals to create to address their own development needs.
	Generic (curriculum-based learning)	Traditional MBA Traditional executive education programmes	Executive education programmes created to address the strategic management development needs of the client organisation
		Generic (open enrolment)	Customised (closed enrolment)
	Degree of customisation to the organisation		

Table 1: Different management programme types depending on customisation
Source: J. Cook (personal communication, 10 February, 2025)

Following a review of management learning, J. Cook (personal communication, 10 November 2024) thought that literature supported how understanding the self through self-directed assessment contributes to learning. Kolb (1984) defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). There are four critical aspects related to Kolb's work that J. Cook (personal communication, 20 November 2024) highlighted as being important:

Emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to content or outcomes;

Knowledge as a transformation process, being continuously created and recreated, not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted and based upon concrete experiences that are reflected upon (see Table 1);

Learning as transforming both subjective and objective experience; and

To understand learning, it is necessary to understand knowledge, and vice versa.

In a similar vein, Cook drew on the work of Bigelow (1995), who preferred inductive (learning by example and through experience) over deductive learning (general concepts, teacher-driven) for managers, because "the variety of actions a manager may effectively take in a particular situation is unlimited, leading to the possibility of creating new approaches that capitalize on the peculiarities of a particular managerial situation" (pp. 318–319). He argued for "managerial skilfulness" as the aim of management learning, rather than management skills. In other words, J. Cook (personal communication, 10 February 2025) explained:

Management learning is less a matter of transferring information, perspectives or skills, and more preparing a person to act effectively in situations that cannot fully be anticipated. When a manager learns, he/she is creating a capacity to act, rather than simply adopting correct action from an expert source. This being the case, self-directed assessment for management development should focus less on enabling the learner to list information or skills he/she requires, and more on discovering directions he/she needs to develop in, so as to be more effective.

Principles associated with the Leadership Assessment Centre

Therefore, Cook explored and brainstormed with colleagues what would be appropriate for the specific South African context for management development, where resources for such development might not be equal to the demand. The LAC was founded on the active steps of Kolb's learning process: active experimentation, concrete experience, and reflective observation, leading to abstract conceptualisation, in the sense of participants developing new sets of assumptions about their abilities and where they need to grow, to complete and continue the cycle by providing hypotheses to inform further active experimentation (see Figure 1).
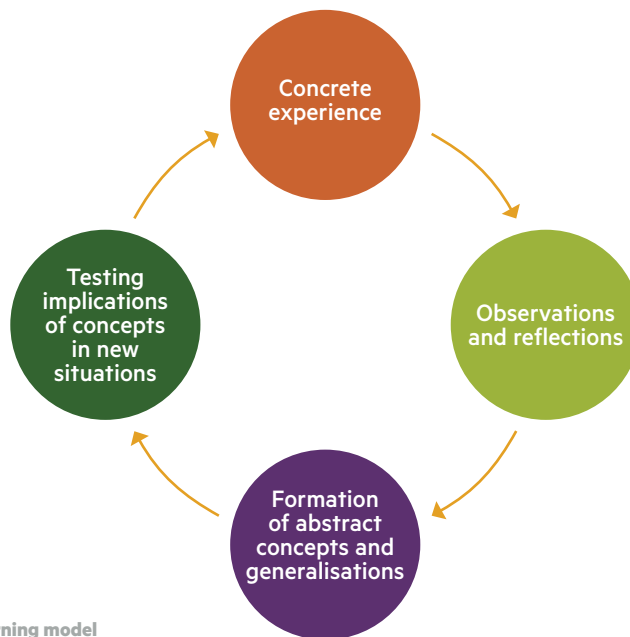
Figure 1: The Lewinian experiential learning model
(Source: Kolb, 1984, p. 21)

The difference in management skills

For the active experimentation and concrete experience, Cook drew upon the thinking of Bigelow (1995) of how management skills differ from the way skills are normally defined. This included:

1.
"Managerial skills are interactive, nonroutine, and unfolding in expression";

2.
"Managerial skills involve multiple, possibly conflicting goals";

3.
"Managerial skills are often unprompted…. Often the manager's biggest challenge is to sort out the issues in an ambiguous and unprecedented situation";

4.
"Managerial situations often must be defined by the manager"; and

5.
"Skillful behaviour may be manifested in creative or unprecedented action" (Bigelow (pp. 314–316).

J. Cook (personal communication, 22 February 2025) believed that the implication of the above points was:

The manager needs to be flexible and ready to adopt alternative approaches in any situation. Learning is not just something that happens before action, but a way to approach action. The act of management creates new opportunities to learn continually and requires a learning attitude.

Active experimentation and concrete experience

Given literature's focus on learning through interactive experiences and the need for managers to be able to navigate and interpret situations, Cook thought that the LAC needed to do exactly that: create opportunities and experiences that were interactive and offered structured practices to learn. After brainstorming with colleagues, different activities were designed around realistic management simulations. These included group tasks, business simulations, and role plays based on complex management situations and decision-making. Over time, these tasks were updated and refined, following feedback and reflection on the impact of the tasks from previous LAC facilitations.

For activities in the LAC, Cook drew on established assessment centre techniques. Each took substantially longer than they would in an assessment centre, as time had to be allowed for the participants to review their performance, drawing on their own insights and peer feedback.

The activities were selected and adapted according to the needs of the participant group. A good activity had to allow for self-observation and to cover several of the dimensions considered important for the group. As is the case for an assessment centre, a matrix was constructed covering what competencies should be assessed on one axis, and the activities on the other axis, to ensure that each competence was covered by at least two distinct activities.

The activities were selected to cover different sources of insight. There was at least one self-reflection activity on values and/or career anchors to help participants identify their own ideals for their development. An in-basket exercise enabled them to address their own responses against a template with recommended responses, providing a relatively objective standard. Video-based activities, such as a negotiation role-play or leadership presentation, provided an opportunity for participants to observe themselves and receive peer feedback in the workshop. A 360-degree report complemented those observations by providing feedback from colleagues at work, thus reducing the possibility that participants might receive feedback in the workshop that is inconsistent with how they come across at work. At least one self-report psychometric questionnaire offered insight into potential that might not be observed in current behaviour.

Participants were encouraged to integrate their observations from all sources, looking for consistent themes and checking inconsistencies with their fellow participants. The final output was a personal development plan comprising up to three learning objectives that included a statement of the objective in the form "I will be capable of doing [some behaviour] to [a specified standard]" – namely the evidence that led to it being identified as a need or opportunity; the evidence that would show it had been achieved; and a learning plan for how to achieve the objective, including who the participants might ask to assist in advising them and/or tracking their progress towards the objective.

Activities vary according to the ease with which participants can assess themselves. The most challenging is observation of actual behaviour in a group context. To address this, an approach was developed in which group activities were videotaped and played back in the group. Various features reduced the potentially threatening nature of this exercise. They included having a coach facilitate the feedback, pre-training in giving and receiving feedback, having each person begin the feedback on themselves so others knew what they had noticed, and continually encouraging participants to observe and comment on observable behaviour, not inferences, and to ensure they commented on effective behaviour at least as much as ineffective. The video feedback turned out to be the heart of the LAC. It proved to be highly engaging and provided realistic evidence participants needed, allowed peers to be supportive and share their experience, and led to understanding practically what needed to be done to be effective.
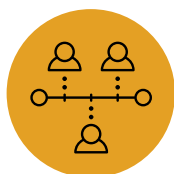
Structure to the Leadership Assessment Centre experience

The overall LAC structure needed to fit into a realistic amount of time that would suit both the learning experience as well as the time that Cook thought managers could commit to being out of the office. A two-to-three-day experience (with overall time varying upon needs of participants) was created, with some principles associated with the "how" of the structure, as outlined in the subsections that follow.

Positioning of the Leadership Assessment Centre experience and composition of the group

The positioning of the LAC to managers and learning and development specialists was particularly important. While the word "assessment" is part of LAC's title, the assessment referred to individuals' perspective and learning identification, and not an assessment by experts or for an organisation as to whether a manager was ready for a promotion. The composition of a group was important: some LAC groups were from different industries, and others from one organisation. In the latter, it was important that individuals were not part of an intact team as the experience was designed not to be competitive, but deeply self-reflective.
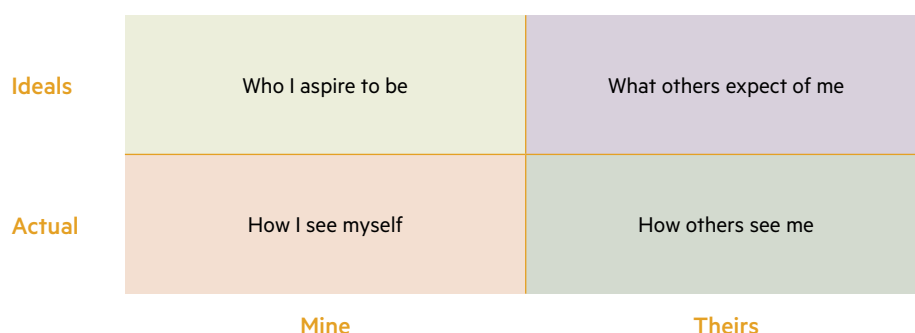
Contracting and starting with confidentiality

Cook acted as the lead facilitator to the LAC process, starting out each new LAC by emphasising the importance of confidentiality (not sharing anyone else's learning needs or insights, in particular). After a short listening exercise, a conversation around mental models was facilitated, especially as Cook believed each individual's mental model had a significant ability to impact the success of the workshop. He often said:

> Be prepared to discover something about yourself that you never knew – and that could open doors you haven't even dreamt about. Be prepared to help other people discover something about themselves that they never knew – and that could open doors they haven't even dreamt about. Open your mind to new possibilities in your profession.

Cook also shared the four mental models of the self, which included different quadrants, as outlined in Figure 2.

	Mine	**Theirs**
Ideals	Who I aspire to be	What others expect of me
Actual	How I see myself	How others see me

Figure 2: Four mental models of the self
Source: J. Cook, personal communication, 22 February 2025

While each of the four quadrants might be accurate and legitimately different from each other, Cook believes that ultimate happiness and productivity require that the four areas do not differ too much. While there might be some areas of "stretch", there should not be too much. The LAC's goal was to help create awareness around greater alignment between all quadrants.

Lead facilitator and coaches to help facilitate learning

GIBS coaches were trained to help debrief the smaller group tasks. Coaches were selected for their level of professional training and for their ability to work with groups of individuals. Cook's role-play debriefing orientation and training was based on the Bigelow (1995) situational role-play assessment, which encouraged reflection (on individual and group basis) and facilitation of conversations on the points below:

1.
Was the person able to orientate to the situation as a manager? That is, did the person address important task, human, ethical, and larger or longer-term issues inherent in the situation?

2.
During the interaction, was the person able to elicit and respond to information influencing his/her appraisal of critical issues and tactics?

3.
Did the person handle the immediate situation effectively? That is, did the person deal with critical issues as effectively as possible within the constraints of the situation? Did the person establish a "win-win" context, promote a supportive relation, involve the other in problem-solving, and engender ownership of the problem and solutions implementation by the other?

4.
Did the person handle the larger or longer-term situation effectively? This might involve dealing explicitly with others in the situation or describing a feasible action plan for dealing with aspects of the situation outside the immediate interaction.

In facilitation of reflective feedback, coaches often used the SIBIF model for conversations. Refer to Table 2.

S	What was the *situation* (in terms of the group task)? What was the role that each manager had?
I	What was the *intent* or goal of the individual?
B	What was the *behaviour*? What happened?
I	What was the *impact* of the individual and his/her behaviours?
F	In the *future*, what should the individual start, stop or continue?

Table 2: SIBIF model

Source: J. Cook (personal communication, 22 February 2025)

## Observational training for the managers

While the output of the LAC was orientated towards self-reflection and identification of future individual learning objectives, the whole process was grounded in reflection and feedback on an individual and group basis. Therefore, Cook spent time speaking at the start of a programme about what is considered good feedback (especially feedback based on specific information and data points).

Several elements in the design created safety for the participants. First, participants were asked to observe themselves first and to initiate the feedback on themselves. Second, participants were trained to note observable behaviours, not inferences about personality or motive, and to note actual examples from the video. Third, they were encouraged to report more positive behaviours to be continued, rather than suggested improvements and, where an unhelpful behaviour was noted, to add a "positive alternative behaviour" that the person could adopt in its place. Fourth, as the intent is to open doors to growth, they were encouraged to focus on feedback the person receiving it could do something practical about.

Then, when receiving feedback, participants were instructed to listen carefully and ask questions if they wished, to show appreciation for the gift of constructive feedback, to realise that no one person's feedback is necessarily what others see, and to review the feedback and decide what to do about it. For most people, viewing oneself on video is uncomfortable. Cook reported that as the video usually led to participants seeing quite enough in themselves to be improved, the other participants could be supportive and offer practical ideas without being received negatively.

"Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"

(Rheinhold Niebuhr, 1932)
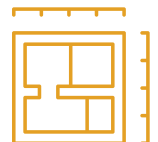
Space and technology

To create an environment for learning, Cook was aware that the LAC process needed a larger room for the group plenary as well as smaller breakout rooms for the smaller facilitated role-play. The essential component in the LAC to enable self-observation and reflection was videotaping a group exercise in the smaller breakout rooms. The recordings were used to supplement reflective feedback and coaches promoted managers with questions, including:

What were you expecting to see?	Having seen the video, what are you seeing now?
What surprises you? Confirms what you know?	How can you use this information in future for your management style?

Potential benefits of the Leadership Assessment Centre

Feedback from managers who have experienced the LAC is that it helps to provide:

1.
A clearer sense of direction and purpose at work;

2.
A personal profile of strengths and development areas with learning objectives, which helps to give self-insight into what is needed to be competent;

3.
Enhancement to the skill of giving and receiving feedback; and

4.
A reinforced ability of managing self-development.

Learnings through the years

When Cook reflects on the learnings of the LAC through the years, there have been many. GIBS now has a robust additional learning offering for managers and organisations interested in building their management development – an offering that has been tested and adapted over time. LAC material has been modified specifically for corporate clients in different industries, with information customised depending on the learning and management need.

Several components have linked to LAC's success. The "setting up" of the process and the importance of self-reflection has been an important component, as the role of trained coaches to facilitate the smaller debriefs – coaches who are certified coaches as well as trained in the specific LAC process. However, Cook believes the biggest learning has been on the impact of the LAC.

Feedback from participants has been that the LAC can build their self-awareness on a variety of different areas, ranging from their belief systems to how their behaviours (linked to beliefs and abilities) show up in a context and influence others. Combining all these learnings (see Figure 3), the LAC can be a useful learning launch pad for management development.
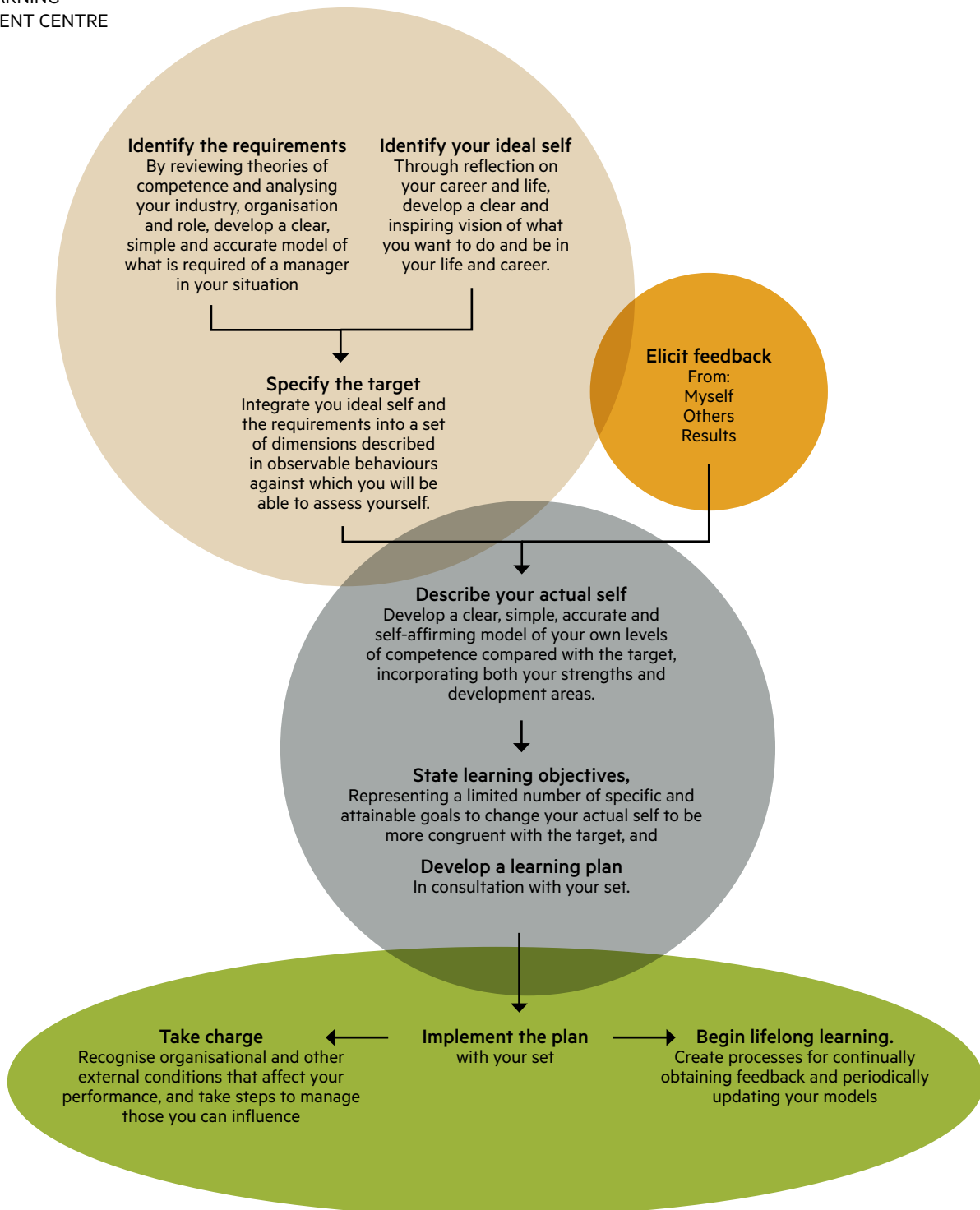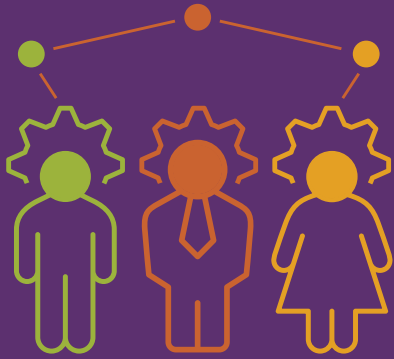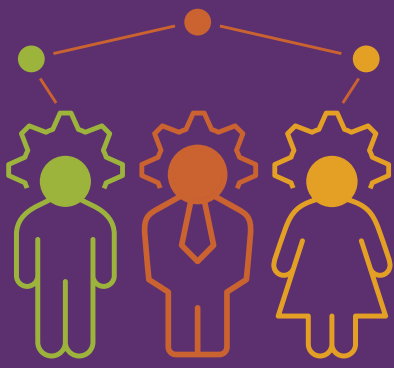
THE LEARNING
ASESSMENT CENTRE

Identify the requirements
By reviewing theories of competence and analysing your industry, organisation and role, develop a clear, simple and accurate model of what is required of a manager in your situation

Identify your ideal self
Through reflection on your career and life, develop a clear and inspiring vision of what you want to do and be in your life and career.

Specify the target
Integrate you ideal self and the requirements into a set of dimensions described in observable behaviours against which you will be able to assess yourself.

Elicit feedback
From:
Myself
Others
Results

Describe your actual self
Develop a clear, simple, accurate and self-affirming model of your own levels of competence compared with the target, incorporating both your strengths and development areas.

State learning objectives,
Representing a limited number of specific and attainable goals to change your actual self to be more congruent with the target, and

Develop a learning plan
In consultation with your set.

Take charge
Recognise organisational and other external conditions that affect your performance, and take steps to manage those you can influence

Implement the plan
with your set

Begin lifelong learning.
Create processes for continually obtaining feedback and periodically updating your models

Figure 3: The overall LAC learning process
Source: J. Cook, personal communication, 22 February 2025

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