

Journey to Assessment Excellence:

Using the Assessor's Maturity Curve Model as a Guide

David Cornell, CAE



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Journey to Assessment Excellence:

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David Cornell, CAE

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The assessment profession is rapidly experiencing monumental challenges: changing technology, more work with fewer staff, a continuous need to find greater efficiencies, increased expectations from all stakeholders, and the risk of losing institutional knowledge due to retirement. In working with assessors at all levels (town, city, county, and state), I appreciate how daunting these challenges are. However, I propose a roadmap for assessment offices and the profession to assist in navigating this challenging Journey to assessment excellence.

Does the office have a cohesive mission, vision, plan, and culture? Is there a strategic plan for accomplishing the goals of the office's mission and vision?

Imagine you are a soccer coach leading your team into the World Cup. It's the biggest game of your life. You've prepared for this mission for years; it has been a difficult journey requiring blood, sweat, and tears, but you and your team are ready for this moment. Through training, every player's strengths have been maximized and their weaknesses minimized. A deep trust between players and coaches is readily visible. Every player understands his role. You have a vision of how the game will play out. The game plan is finely tuned; everyone on the team knows the plan and understands how their contribution fits into the plan; and everyone believes in and is committed to executing the plan.

Compare this soccer team to an assessment office. Does the office have a cohesive mission, vision, plan, and culture? Is there a strategic plan for accomplishing the goals of the office's mission and vision? Has the plan been effectively communicated and do employees believe in the plan? This article describes a path to guide assessment offices and individual assessors on their journey to greater excellence using the Assessor's Maturity Curve Model (AMCM).

The AMCM concept has been widely applied to numerous industries as a model for improving everything from information technology (IT) development, to product delivery, to organizational leadership, but until now it has not been developed for assessment offices. I have had the privilege of working in city assessment offices, in a county assessment office, in a state assessment oversight agency, and as an assessment consultant. I have worked with more than 100 assessment offices in some capacity. My experiences in working with a wide range of offices were instrumental in developing the AMCM.

Foundational Concepts

The foundation of the AMCM is creating a culture of trust. Without a culture of trust, an assessment office can never be truly successful. Trust is paramount in any organization (Lencioni 2012) but exceedingly essential in an assessment office. Members of a World Cup winning soccer team would almost certainly attest that genuine trust is an indispensable ingredient to success.

An office lacking trust is at a great disadvantage and will never reach its maximum potential. This is why many strategic plans, even those that are well designed, often fail. At the end of the day, the best systems and planning cannot overcome an organization with a significant trust deficit. After a culture of trust has been established, there are four elements that are required for a successful assessment office: leadership, people, training and professional development, and systems and processes.

Leadership

Everything rises and falls on leadership.

—John Maxwell (2007)

Leadership matters. Take a moment to think about a great leader and then consider the qualities this leader possesses. Undoubtedly, a few of the qualities that come to mind are the following:

- Strong character and honesty
- Integrity, which promotes a culture of trust
- Courage to do the right thing when politically unpopular
- Ability to motivate employees to buy into the mission
- Ability to motivate decision makers to fund the mission
- Empathic listening, which builds trust and encourages cooperation
- Selflessness, which builds a cohesive team
- High emotional intelligence, which fosters leadership success (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee 2002).

These leadership qualities are universal and essential to an effective assessor. Unlike IQ, which is relatively fixed, emotional intelligence can be increased. Self-awareness and empathy are important components in promoting a culture of trust. Everyone can increase these qualities in their own lives and become better leaders (Dweck 2006).

People

Great assessment offices realize the importance of attracting and retaining great people. Attracting great people starts with the basics, such as market rate compensation, safe and comfortable offices, and so on, but goes much deeper, such as tapping into people's inherent desire to make a positive difference. Attracting the right people and ensuring they are in the best position to maximize their gifts and talents is a fundamental building block on the journey to excellence.

After a culture of trust has been established, there are four elements that are required for a successful assessment office: leadership, people, training and professional development, and systems and processes.

This concept is highlighted in Collins' book, *Good to Great*, in which he stresses the need for organizations to get the right people on the bus (attracting the right people), to ensure that everyone is in the correct seat (assigned work is aligned with assessors' gifts and talents), and to get the wrong people off the bus (e.g., a corrupt individual has no place in an assessment office) (Collins 2001). Who are the right people?

Assessment officials from across the country indicate their most successful people for all positions possess the characteristics of integrity, team orientation, passion, teachability, dependability, empathy, and high social intelligence. Other characteristics are more job specific; for example, successful customer service agents should naturally enjoy speaking with customers, while data analysts should intrinsically enjoy examining data.

Training and Professional Development

Does the office have the knowledge and technical ability to meet today's challenges? Great offices understand the need for continuous training and professional development because the world is changing so quickly. The largest expense in assessment offices is employee compensation. In fact, it is not uncommon for personnel costs to exceed 90 percent of the total budget. High-performing offices understand their greatest assets are their people. Through training and development, the value of this asset (i.e., the people) grows and produces a tremendous return on investment.

Unfortunately, when budgets are tight, training and professional development budgets are often the first to be reduced. Great assessment offices understand that cutting this line item is shortsighted and, over the long run, is extremely costly due to inefficiencies, mistakes, incorrect and/or inconsistent assessed values, abatements and appeals, and the public's lack of confidence in the office. The true worth of an assessment office is the intangible value of the office's employees (see sidebar on Knowledge Transfer on page 9). Invest, cultivate, protect, and grow this asset.

Systems and Processes

Assessment offices collect, analyze, and distribute huge amounts of data. Assessment is a data-driven analytical process but also includes customer service and public relations demands. Computer-assisted mass appraisal (CAMA) systems serve as the primary workhorse for storing, analyzing, and valuing properties. These systems should be up-to-date, and all staff should be trained in how to use the software.

Occasionally, a revaluation *blows up*. In the vast majority of these cases, the blowup was due to a lack of understanding of the operation of the CAMA

system. Processes are the steps an office repeatedly takes to accomplish a task. For example, property data are collected through property inspections. The details on what data to collect and how to collect the data should be described in an up-to-date comprehensive data collection manual. A good CAMA system and processes set the foundation for the operational excellence discussed later in this article.

The AMCM Journey

Like any good journey, the first step is knowing the location. The AMCM, like a good global positioning system (GPS), identifies the stage that best matches the office's current level of performance. Then the AMCM guides the office to an understanding of what is necessary to move beyond the current location toward the desired destination.

The four stages of the AMCM, as shown in figure 1, are

1. Lack of purpose
2. Potential for excellence
3. Habits of excellence
4. Innovative anticipation.

These four stages and what they look like in an assessment office and in the individuals in that office are described in the following paragraphs.

Stage 1. Lack of Purpose

The first rule of holes: When you're in one, stop digging.

—Molly Ivins, columnist

The Assessment Office

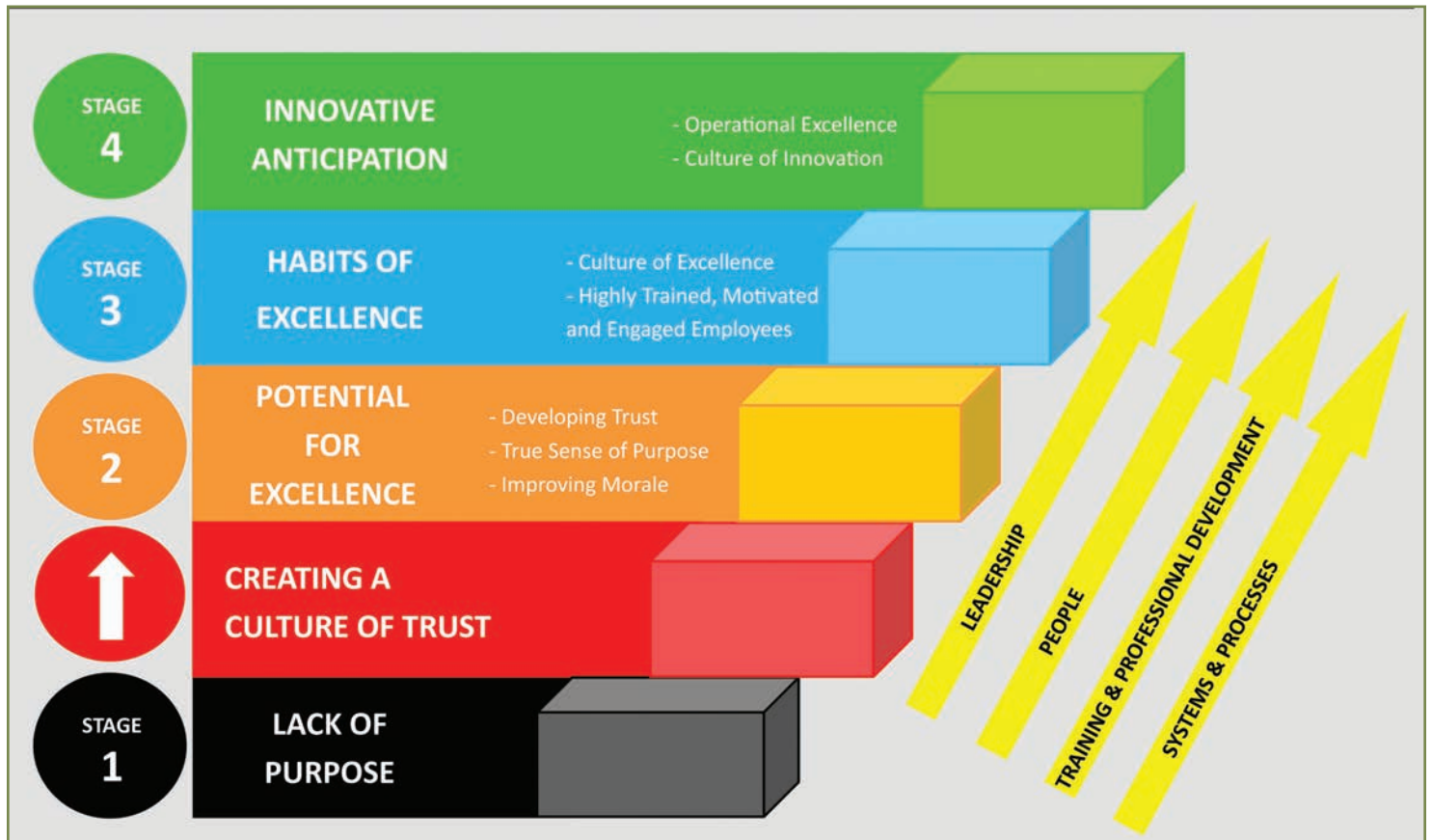
Dysfunctional working groups, inefficiencies, ever-changing working priorities, and ad hoc working procedures are readily present in assessment offices in stage 1. Minimal services are delivered.

Assessed values are set but lack consistency; bills are sent in accordance with state laws, but appeals and mistakes are pervasive; and exemptions and credits are processed but often lack proper documentation. There are often glaring trust and leadership deficits present in these offices. In addition, the mission, vision, and expected culture of the office are typically unclear. Large structural issues remain unaddressed for years.

As a result, assessment offices in stage 1 encounter a host of assessment-based execution issues. A clear path marking the journey to excellence is nonexistent. The following are the organizational traits of assessment offices in stage 1:

- The office lacks a true sense of purpose.
- Communication is poor, with the grapevine serving as the primary source of office communication.

Figure 1. The Assessor's Maturity Curve Model



- There are inconsistencies among appraisers in what data are collected and analyzed, and how properties are assessed.
- The activities that are performed are only those legally mandated.
- Guidelines, manuals, and procedures are usually outdated and primarily focused on staying out of legal trouble.
- Systems are minimal and/or outdated.
- Employees are given little, or no, work-based goals and expectations.
- Employees are not well trained.
- Work is performed because, “We have always done it this way,” with little, or no, aspirations on how to improve processes or to even understand why they are performed.

The outcomes of these deficits typically include the following:

- Low trust and low morale
- Difficulty retaining talent, especially highly motivated, goal-seeking employee
- Inconsistent assessed values—some taxpayers are overpaying and others are underpaying
- High number of appeals
- Disengaged workforce
- High absenteeism
- Very unstable working conditions in which priorities often shift and *crisis mode* is the norm.

Assessment offices in stage 1 tend to have a stagnant work environment in which efficiency, as well as creative output on the part of employees, is lacking. At best, minimal performance can be expected, and at worst, stage 1 functioning is characterized by sporadic, dysfunctional, and haphazard processes resulting in low morale, disproportionate assessed values, and ever-changing priorities. This can naturally lead to a sense of employees feeling whipsawed,

as if everyone in the assessment office is on a journey—but an uncomfortable journey to nowhere. Offices seeking to leave stage 1 should immediately begin to implement the characteristics of the higher stages. This journey will not occur overnight, but it is important to move in the right direction.

The Individual

If you're not sure where you are going, you're liable to end up someplace else.

—Robert F. Mager

Each individual assessor (everyone in an assessment office, not only the leadership) is on a journey. This article also describes a road map for those individuals who want to join the journey toward assessment excellence.

Much like assessment offices in stage 1, individuals in stage 1 lack true direction and purpose. The following are the common characteristics exhibited by stage 1 employees:

- Lack of professional initiative
- A professional development focus only on what is necessary to maintain credentials
- Stagnation in current role and no motivation or clear plan for advancement
- Disinterest in professional collaboration
- Problems viewed as someone else's concern
- *Punching the clock* without any aspiration or positive sentiment.

Unsurprisingly, stage 1 assessment offices tend to be well-stocked with stage 1 employees. Although very few individuals are truly content residing in stage 1, many have resigned themselves to it because the organization has entrenched itself in stage 1. Organizational research has shown that the norms and culture of an organization have a major impact on employee performance, initiative, and job satisfaction.

Nevertheless, employees performing at stage 1 working in a stage 1 assessment office must proactively rechart their journey. As stage 1 employees begin to move along the maturity curve, they create the possibility of their colleagues choosing the same path. Also, managers of assessment offices need to ask themselves whether they are cultivating the conditions (e.g., trust and clear definitions of expectations, goals, and culture) that move employees along the AMCM.

Stage 2. Potential for Excellence

Leadership is lifting a person's vision to high sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard...

—Peter F. Drucker (2012)

The Assessment Office

The beginning process for assessment offices looking to move from stage 1 to stage 2 is a recognition and desire to change direction. The intended new destination is labeled the *future state*. Stage 2 begins with building a foundation of genuine trust. Writes Covey (1989), “Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best in people.” Trust takes time, especially if an office has been operating in a low-trust, stage 1 environment. Trust is not often binary, meaning either there is trust in someone or there is not. Rather, trust is a continuum that is strengthened by the truthful, honest, and respectful manner in which people are treated. Unfortunately, trust can be destroyed by one event. The culture of trust starts at the top but quickly spreads through the organization. Managers seek to gain their employees' trust, and then managers gain greater trust in their teams.

Once the paramount issue of trust has become a top priority and the building of trust has started, the assessment office can begin to envision a *future state*. The future state should be a shared understanding that represents the collective aspirations of everyone in the assessment office, from top to bottom.

The vision of the office's future state is established, and operational strategies are developed.

The following are the characteristics of an office in stage 2:

- The office seeks to find its true sense of purpose.
- Communication, while not perfect, is open, honest, and transparent.
- Organizational processes seek to improve consistency and efficiency.
- Data collection and assessed valuations are consistent.
- Measurement tests (coefficient of dispersion, price-related differential, and overall ratios) of assessed valuations consistently outperform the statutory minimum guidelines.
- Manuals are up-to-date.
- Systems are updated but incomplete.
- Employees are given work-based goals and expectations.
- Adequate training is provided for employees
- Employees are beginning to ask the *why* questions (e.g., Why is this procedure necessary?).

The outcomes of stage 2 are as follows:

- Increased public trust due to more accurate and consistent values
- Improved employee morale
- Improved operational and administrative systems
- Increased employee understanding of performance expectations
- Increased teamwork across divisions or work groups
- Increased focus on how each employee's work connects to a larger purpose.

The Individual

One key characteristic of individuals in stage 2 is proactive initiative. Other

important characteristics include the following:

- Seeking opportunities for professional growth, such as taking IAAO courses, workshops, webinars
- Going beyond what is minimally required
- Creating personal career goals, such as an IAAO designation
- Increasing engagement with their role and collaboration with colleagues
- Increasing level of work output as well as overall quality.

In most journeys, the first steps are often the most difficult, but without them the journey cannot begin. In stage 2, the assessment office begins to move beyond dysfunction, venturing toward a future state that can move the office out of subpar or mediocre performance. The stage 2 assessment office has not yet arrived at its *future state* but is heading in the right direction. Systems, while not perfect, are functional, seeds of trust are growing, and those working in the assessment office have a clearer picture of the purpose of their work and how it serves the mission of the office. This creates momentum, which can foster professional growth, and deeper levels of change. Employees have demonstrated buy-in, but leadership is critical in creating the kind of wholesale buy-in that is required in the transition to stage 3.

Stage 3. Habits of Excellence

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

—Aristotle

The Assessment Office

Assessment offices in stage 3 are characterized by a deep sense of respect, trust, and shared sense of purpose, and they demonstrate organizational habits of excellence. Importantly, they understand that the majority of actions are

not intentional decisions, they are habits (Duhigg 2012). Stage 3 offices utilize the power of habit by proactively instilling habits of excellence and working to undo unproductive or negative habits.

In addition, these offices are typically led by transformational leaders who promote a culture in which self-interest is exchanged for the mission and vision of the organization, which drives a forward-looking mindset (Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osburn 1998). The team is promoted over individual players. Peter F. Drucker, one of the world's most notable experts on management, once said,

The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say 'I'. And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say 'I'. They don't think 'I'. They think 'we'; they think 'team.' (Drucker and Drucker 2004)

As a result of this deeply engrained trust, habits of excellence, and a sense of purpose, the creative energies of employees are maximized to create innovation and produce optimal efficiency.

The following are the characteristics of a stage 3 assessment office:

- A culture of excellence exists in which excellence habits are the norm.
- There is a clear understanding of the mission and vision.
- A clear strategic plan has been developed.
- Employees are trained through formal programs.
- Employees are encouraged to seek "stretch goals," such as completing an IAAO designation.
- Everyone understands how their role fits in with the mission and vision of the assessment office.
- Management has clearly shared expectations with employees, and employees have complete clarity on what those expectations entail.

- Knowledge transfer is pursued proactively, thus reducing institutional risk when key employees exit the organization.
- The transfer of culture, mission, and vision is supported by intentional mentorship of new employees guiding them on their individual journey along the AMCM.

The outcomes of stage 3 are as follows:

- High levels of trust exist.
- People are committed to change.
- Communication is optimally efficient and systematic.
- Work processes are optimized.
- High collaboration and coordination exist among all divisions and other stakeholders (e.g., business groups, police, fire, and other municipal agencies).
- Assessed values are accurate and consistent.
- Appeals are reduced, and litigation is successful.
- Greater consistency with property data and analysis leads to greater valuation reliability.
- Job satisfaction improves; turnover is lower, and absenteeism is reduced.
- There is a greater level of respect with other stakeholders (e.g., taxpayers, business groups, and municipalities).

Assessment offices in stage 3 create a win-win culture in which the office is more productive and employees are motivated, empowered, and solution-centric and collectively work toward a common purpose. Not only are stage 3 assessment offices more work-efficient, but also employees experience the residual benefit of personally identifying with the work they perform. Essentially, the best way to envision a stage 3 assessment office is to picture a car heading to the correct

destination, on the most efficient route possible, with employees intrinsically enjoying their journey.

The Individual

The reason most people never reach their goals is that they don't define them, or ever seriously consider them as believable or achievable. Winners can tell you where they are going, what they plan to do along the way, and who will be sharing the adventure with them.

—Denis Waitley

The key characteristic of individuals who have entered stage 3 is an all-out pursuit of excellence. Other important characteristics include the following:

- Producing high volumes of work at a level of quality that is consistently excellent.
- Taking the lead in promoting a collaborative environment within their department as well as across departments.
- Understanding and seeking to honor the high level of public trust afforded to those working within their assessment office.
- Demonstrating excellence by obtaining rigorous designations, such as an IAAO designations.
- Embracing and cultivating a high level of trust among their colleagues.
- Being totally committed to the attainment of their professional goals.

Stage 4. Innovative Anticipation

To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.

—Albert Einstein

The Assessment Office

The world is changing at an unbelievable rate. Technology is making many

business models obsolete, sometimes very rapidly (consider Uber's impact on taxi companies, or how Amazon is changing shopping). The assessment industry is not immune to drastic changes in technology. In assessment offices in stage 4, these changes are not perceived as a threat, but rather as an opportunity—they are the innovative anticipators making the changes. While stage 4 assessment offices possess all the executional excellence of stage 3 offices, they devote time, energy, and resources focusing on new innovations. As Wayne Gretzky once said,

A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.

The following are the characteristics of stage 4 assessment offices:

- All the characteristics of stage 3
- Continuous learning (attending classes and conferences, reading, and following thought leaders)
- Development of a culture of truly innovative thinking
- Continuous pursuit of improvement
- Systems that ensure knowledge transfer occurs seamlessly (see sidebar)
- Continual updating of all key performance indicators (often through real-time dashboards), immediate identification of deviations from the well-defined plans, and an understanding of the reasons for the shortfall.

The outcomes of stage 4 are as follows:

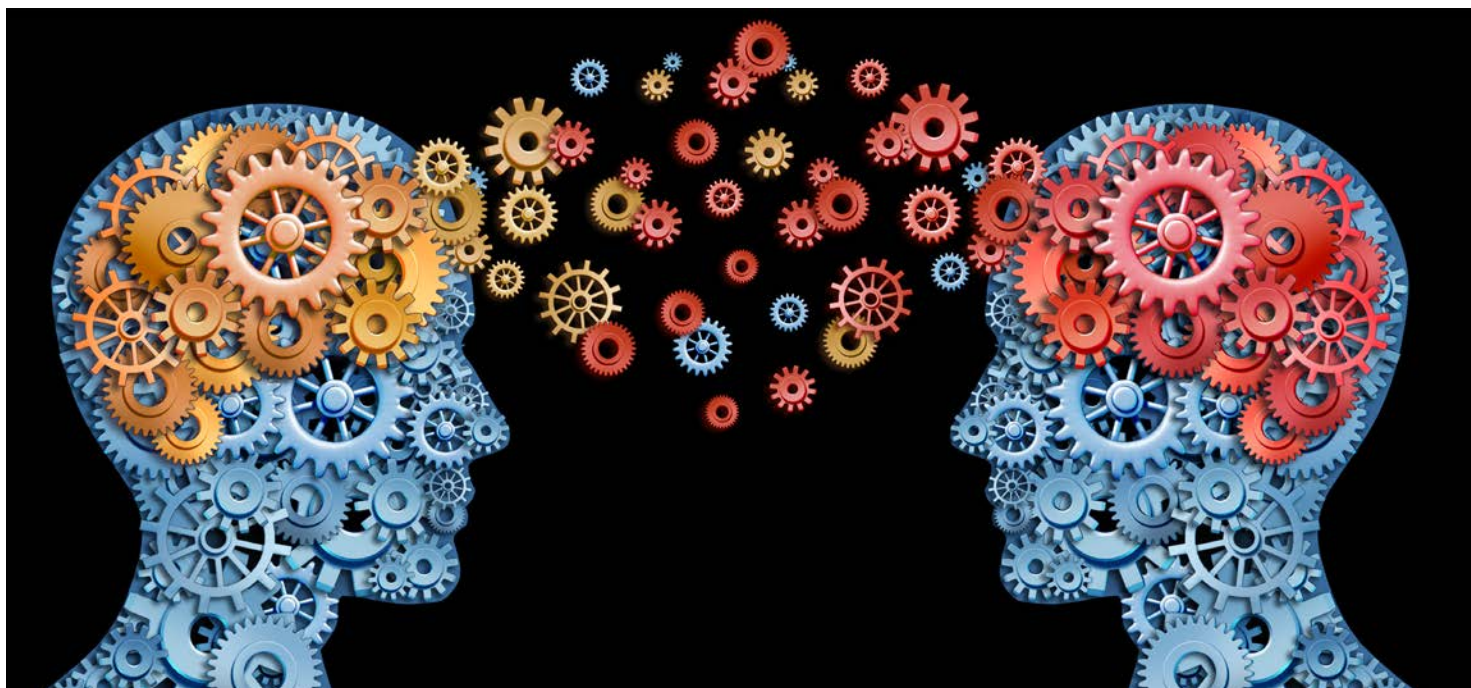
- Employees are highly engaged in their work and find it personally meaningful.
- Revaluation and IT projects are on time and on budget.
- Institutional risk is reduced because of the proactive knowledge transfer.

Stage 4 assessment offices create a cul-

ture in which innovation is woven into the fabric of the office. They produce creative thinking because the office's culture provides an environment in which new ideas are expected and encouraged. Almost all meaningful new ideas arise only after many other seed ideas have been

rejected. Accordingly, assessment offices seeking to create cultures in which true innovation freely flows should praise employees for presenting new ideas, (even if the ideas seem outlandish). This kind of creative freedom sends a strong message to everyone in the assessment office that

thinking *outside the box* is simply an expectation. Great companies assign their best people to the biggest opportunities, not the biggest problems (Collins 2001). In today's fast-changing world, stage 4 offices embrace this concept.



Knowledge Transfer

What would happen if the top five most valuable employees in the assessment office won the lottery and instant retirement suddenly became very appealing? Is the knowledge they possess gone forever? How would this affect the office's ability to successfully function and maintain continuity of operations?

A proactive system for knowledge transfer is critically important, especially in light of a workforce that is rapidly approaching retirement age; some have referred to this as the impending "silver tsunami." The current demographics of the assessment field make this an even larger concern.

A hallmark of assessment offices in stages 3 and 4 of the Assessor's Maturity Curve Model is the recognition that robust knowledge transfer processes must be ingrained into the fabric of the office. Such processes greatly mitigate the institutional risk of losing this critical intangible asset. In addition, effective knowledge transfer significantly reduces onboarding time, so that new employees are integrated seamlessly into their new roles and work responsibilities.

The *must haves* of knowledge transfer are as follows:

- A systematic, proactive process of knowledge transfer (e.g., best practices, work procedures, and so on)
- Knowledge transfer goals that are specific and measurable
- Digitization of this knowledge base so it can be readily accessed
- Ongoing cross-training
- Flexible work arrangements to limit attrition among retirement-age employees (e.g., job-sharing, sabbaticals, and the like).

The Individual

The key characteristic of individuals who have transitioned into stage 4 is transformational leadership. These individuals realize that true leadership is about influencing others toward excellence and not about a title. Other essential qualities of stage 4 include the following:

- Embracing the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf and Spears 1998)
- Having the ability and desire to create other leaders of excellence
- Actively serving as a mentor
- Modeling habits of excellence for others to follow
- Always focusing on the true essentials (mission, overarching purpose)
- Being in demand by colleagues, stakeholders, and professionals in the industry.

Conclusion

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbor, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

—H. Jackson Brown
(Note: often mistakenly attributed to Mark Twain)

If the assessment office is operating at stage 1, the journey to stage 4 may seem somewhat daunting. But since we are all on a journey, it is imperative to redirect it immediately in the direction of excellence. The goal for assessment offices in stages 1–3 is to progress to the next stage. The journey along the AMCM for an assessment office will likely not be accomplished quickly but will resemble a journey with a number of milestones that mark the path.

Creating the change necessary to travel through each stage of the maturity curve

is a progression. Among the most important resources are patience and commitment. Perhaps the most essential first step is to develop a culture of trust. Strengthening relational capital through building genuine trust expedites the journey toward excellence significantly. With these steps taken, the foundation to increase leadership capacity, to strengthen systems and processes for greater efficiency, and to move toward innovation through training and personal development can take root. Like the coach leading his team to the World Cup, the journey to excellence for an assessment office requires tremendous sacrifice, but the benefits far outweigh the sacrifice. Map the journey. Visualize it. Enjoy the journey to excellence.

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