

Informal Roles of Assessors in Internal Assessment Centers

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Abstract

This study's core contribution is the identification of five informal assessor roles (Procedural Gatekeeper, Developmental Talent Scout, Strategic Diplomat, Assertive Challenger, and Analytical Moderator) and the development of a contextual grounded model explaining how these roles emerge and shape decision-making in internal assessment centers. While assessment center research has predominantly emphasized psychometric validity and procedural standardization, the informal social dynamics among assessors during consensus discussions remain underexplored. Drawing on role theory and group dynamics, this study conceptualizes assessor panels as micro-social systems in which informal roles influence interaction patterns, participation, and outcome legitimacy.

Empirically, the study is based on a two-stage qualitative research design conducted within a single large German utilities company. Study 1 analyzes 85 observation protocols from internal assessment centers over a 36-month period using Gioia methodology to inductively derive the role typology. Study 2 triangulates and refines these findings through two focus group workshops with 20 assessors, identifying key contextual conditions, such as weak rule enforcement, hierarchical asymmetries, and limited HR moderation, that facilitate or constrain informal role emergence. The findings further show that balanced role constellations foster inclusive deliberation and perceived fairness, whereas dominant constellations lead to participation imbalances and reduced legitimacy.

Theoretically, the study extends assessment center research by integrating social role theory and demonstrating that assessor panels operate as dynamic systems of social influence rather than neutral aggregation mechanisms. Practically, it offers implications for assessor training, panel composition, and facilitation. As the study is based on internal assessment centers within a single organization, the transferability of the role typology and model to other organizational contexts and assessment center designs is theoretically informed but empirically limited, warranting further comparative research.

Categories: Strategic Human Resource Management, Sustainable Human Resource, Organisational Behavior

Keywords: assessment center, informal roles, role theory, group dynamics, gioia methodology

Introduction

Assessment centers (ACs) have been one of the most widely used methods in personnel selection and development for decades, particularly for identifying leadership potential and high potentials. They are especially established in large organizations and multinational corporations (Krause and Thornton III, 2009) (Thornton III and Rupp, 2006). An AC typically consists of multiple standardized exercises in which candidates demonstrate their behavior in simulated, job-related situations. Assessors evaluate the observed behavior against predefined dimensions and criteria (Lievens, 2001). The assessor panel usually comprises a mix of HR representatives and line managers, often supplemented by external AC experts (Obermann, 2018).

Research on ACs has historically focused on issues such as validity, construct-relatedness, and assessor training (Krause and Gebert, 2003). By contrast, the behavior and interaction patterns of assessors themselves have received considerably less attention. This is particularly relevant for internally conducted ACs, for instance in succession planning or high-potential programs, where assessors are organizational members who bring in pre-existing relationships, hierarchies, and role expectations. As a result, their behavior is not always limited to their formally prescribed roles (Sackett and Dreher, 1982). While assessor training programs aim to standardize evaluation processes and reduce biases (Lievens, 2001) (Thornton III and Rupp, 2006), informal dynamics and social influences can never be fully eliminated.

A critical phase emerges during the so-called 'assessor panels' or 'wash-up meetings', where the individual ratings are collectively consolidated into final decisions. Empirical observations suggest that assessors adopt different social roles in this process: some act as dominant opinion leaders, others as mediators, silent observers, or advocates for individual candidates. These interactional patterns resemble informal

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role differentiation in team discussions and group decision-making contexts (Isomura, 2020). While the social role structure of teams is well documented in organizational psychology (Morgeson et al., 2009), the transfer of such perspectives to the AC context is still underdeveloped.

Some recent studies point to this gap. For example, (Chen et al., 2018) show that assessors not only apply formal rating logic but also develop implicit structures and priorities that can shape decision-making. Similarly, (Berendonk et al., 2013) emphasize the role of subjective expertise and social interaction in performance assessment, highlighting the socially constructed nature of evaluations. Nevertheless, the role of assessors as social actors in collective judgment processes has not yet been systematically theorized or empirically investigated.

Against this background, the present qualitative study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What informal roles do assessors adopt in assessor panels of internal ACs?

RQ2: Which contextual conditions increase or decrease the likelihood that specific informal assessor roles emerge during assessor panels?

RQ3: If informal assessor roles emerge, how do they shape group dynamics and influence final candidate outcomes in ACs?

To address the research questions, a multi-stage qualitative research design was employed. Study 1 is based on the qualitative analysis of 85 written observation protocols collected over a three-year period during internal ACs of a large corporation aimed at identifying high-potential employees. These protocols contain detailed accounts of assessor observations, evaluation practices, and group discussions, thereby offering rich empirical material for reconstructing implicit role enactment and its influence on judgment processes. On this basis, an inductive typology of informal assessor roles was developed.

Study 2 builds on these findings through two practitioner workshops comprising eight and twelve assessors, respectively. The workshops pursued a dual objective: first, to validate and refine the emerging typology of informal assessor roles; and second, to examine the contextual conditions under which these roles emerge during panel deliberations and to elucidate how they influence collective decision-making dynamics.

The expected contribution of this research is twofold. From a theoretical perspective, the study advances AC research by integrating role theory from social and organizational psychology, thereby illuminating how informal social dynamics shape evaluative outcomes. From a practical perspective, the findings offer implications for assessor training, panel composition, and the facilitation of assessor discussions. By sensitizing assessors to the influence of informal role dynamics, the study aims to enhance the fairness, validity, and overall quality of decision-making in ACs.

In sum, the study conceptualizes ACs not only as psychometric instruments but also as social interaction systems, where assessors themselves enact roles, negotiate outcomes, and thus - intentionally or not - shape decision-making. Exploring these hidden dynamics is a necessary step toward making personnel selection processes fairer, more reflective, and evidence-based.

Literature review

Teams do not develop their performance capacity solely through formal job and role descriptions, but to a large extent through informal roles that arise in ongoing interaction, are attributed by other members, and become stabilized through repeated claim-and-grant processes. Theoretically, these processes of emergence can be understood as the interplay of individual dispositions, interactional patterns, network positions, and contextual conditions: certain members claim tasks or interpretive authority; others grant them visibility, affiliation, and followership. Thus, unofficial functions such as coordinator, knowledge broker, harmonizer, or informal leader are gradually established (Badura et al., 2022) (Hanna et al., 2020). Empirical studies show, for example, that early, frequent, and task-oriented contributions as well as communication style promote the attribution of leadership roles in newly composed or virtual teams (Rennie et al., 2023). At the same time, status research explains why influence can be distributed unequally even when formal positions are identical: according to 'status characteristics theory,' widely shared status markers and situationally perceived competence shape the order of interaction, increasing the likelihood of being heard and prevailing in discussions (Knottnerus and Greenstein, 1981). Complementary social psychological work shows that individuals perceived as dominant gain influence by signaling competence, even when their actual competence is no greater (Anderson and Kilduff, 2009).

The emergence of informal roles leads to several consequences. On the positive side, they enhance adaptability and coordination by densifying information flows, shortening decision-making paths, and temporarily anchoring expertise or leadership functions where they are situationally needed. In dynamic

work contexts, such as multi-team systems, this kind of self-organization is a central driver of effectiveness (Zaccaro et al., 2020). Longitudinal evidence further demonstrates that emergent states such as cohesion and coordination are reciprocally linked with performance and evolve over time; an indication that informal roles act as flexible coupling mechanisms between processes and states (Braun et al., 2020). On the negative side, informal roles can generate role ambiguity, power conflicts or distortions of information, for instance through gatekeeping, gossip, or exclusive networks (Sun et al., 2023) or clash with formal lines of authority (Ma et al., 2022). Whether informal roles promote or hinder team success is thus a matter of fit between the emergent influence structure, task demands, and organizational culture.

The application of status characteristics theory (Simpson and Walker, 2002) provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding interpersonal dynamics within AC panels. While the formal design of ACs prescribes role equivalence among assessors, mandating independent observation of candidate behavior followed by a structured consensus discussion (Obermann, 2018) (Thornton III and Rupp, 2006), real-world experience suggests that implementations often diverge from this ideal. Despite procedural efforts to ensure impartiality, informal status hierarchies and asymmetries of influence commonly emerge during consensus discussions. Higher-ranking assessors, by virtue of their organizational seniority or professional standing, carry external markers of status that are likely implicitly interpreted by peers as indicators of greater competence. These cues might elicit deferential behavior, often unconsciously, leading to disproportionate influence over the group's evaluative conclusions, even though all assessors formally possess equal authority.

A useful complementary lens comes from human factors research: the concept of the authority gradient (Cosby and Croskerry, 2004) (Helmreich and Davies, 2004). This idea, first developed in aviation safety studies, refers to the perceived slope of authority and status differences within a team. The steeper the gradient, i.e. the more pronounced the perceived gap between higher- and lower-ranking members, the less likely subordinates are to question, challenge, or correct their superiors. While a moderate gradient can provide clarity and structure, an excessively steep one tends to suppress open communication, foster conformity pressures, and reduce the likelihood that errors or flawed decisions will be detected and corrected in time. Transposed to the AC context, this helps explain why higher-ranking assessors may disproportionately shape evaluation outcomes - not through formal authority, but via implicit social inhibition mechanisms that deter lower-status assessors from offering divergent viewpoints during consensus discussions.

Such dynamics underscore the need for structural safeguards in AC design to uphold both construct validity and procedural fairness. Researchers and professional bodies have recommended several interventions to mitigate social influence biases. These include delineating distinct phases for behavioral observation and evaluative integration, enforcing structured argumentation protocols, prohibiting informal score negotiation or "score trading," and appointing neutral moderators to ensure balanced participation (Lievens, 2001). In addition, assessor training can help standardize interpretive schemas, foster shared norms for behavior description, and enhance inter-rater reliability (Woehr and Arthur, 2003). Together, these design elements function not merely as administrative formalities, but as critical mechanisms to protect the epistemic integrity and equity of the assessment process.

In sum, informal roles are not peripheral phenomena but constitutive elements of teamwork in general, even in highly formalized contexts such as ACs. They can enhance performance and the quality of judgments if they are made visible, channeled, and aligned with formal structures (e.g., psychological safety in discussion, explicit speaking and reasoning rules, structured consensus procedures). However, informal roles may also prove detrimental when status and authority gradients remain unacknowledged, as this can give rise to dominance patterns that encourage selective use of evidence, inhibit open dialogue, and promote premature consensus. The central challenge, therefore, is not the elimination of informality, but the deliberate design of the interface between the formal equality of assigned roles and the informal structures of influence that naturally emerge. At this very interface lies the decisive factor for whether teams - and AC panels in particular - are able to harness the shared expertise of their members, or whether unregulated power asymmetries instead generate distortion, inefficiency, and suboptimal decision outcomes.

Research Method

Overall research design

This research employs a two-stage qualitative design to explore the emergence, configuration, and influence of informal assessor roles in ACs. Grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, the study assumes that assessor judgments are not merely the outcome of pre-determined formal criteria but are socially constructed through interaction, negotiation, and collective sensemaking within assessor panels. The research therefore adopts a processual and constructivist perspective, focusing on how meaning and evaluation are co-created in real organizational settings.

The empirical context is a Germany-based company in the utilities sector that regularly conducts internal

ACs for the identification and development of high-potential employees. These ACs combine structured behavioral observation with focused group discussions involving both HR professionals and line managers, who regularly evaluate candidates' performance and potential. This dual involvement creates a rich social environment for studying informal influence and role formation.

To capture these dynamics, the research design consists of two interlinked qualitative studies:

(1) The goal of study 1 is to develop a typology of informal assessor roles. Drawing on observation protocols collected over a three-year period from internal ACs, this study tries to reconstruct the implicit behavioral patterns that shape collective evaluation and decision-making.

(2) Study 2 builds upon these insights through two practitioner workshops, which serve a dual purpose: to triangulate and validate the role typology derived from study 1, and to explore how specific role constellations influence group interaction and final judgments.

This multi-method, interpretive design aims at strengthening the credibility, depth, and transferability of the findings by integrating multiple perspectives on assessor behavior and judgment formation.

To ensure methodological quality, the quality criteria of (Lincoln, 1995) and (Lincoln et al., 1985) for qualitative research were applied wherever possible and appropriate.

Study 1: Inductive development of informal assessor roles

Data Collection

Study 1 draws on 85 observation protocols collected over a 36-month period (January 2022-December 2024) during internal ACs conducted by a Germany-based utilities company. Each protocol averaged 2.3 pages (SD = 0.6; range = 1.5-4.0), yielding approximately 195 pages of observational data in total. The protocols included timestamped observations of assessor interactions during wash-up meetings, verbatim quotations where feasible, and interpretive notes on emergent role dynamics. An example of an observation protocol is shown in Appendix 1.

All protocols were completed within 24 hours of each AC by the author, who served as the external assessor and AC moderator. The author's background as a management assessment consultant with over 15 years of professional experience enabled a nuanced understanding of assessor behavior and facilitated access to the organization. This insider perspective enhanced the contextual validity of the data but simultaneously required attentiveness to potential confirmation bias, i.e. the risk of interpreting observations through the lens of prior professional experience. To mitigate this risk, random subsets of protocols were subjected to member checking with other assessors whenever feasible and to peer debriefing sessions with other researchers. These procedures supported the credibility and interpretive rigor of the data.

Data Analysis

Study 1 adopted the Gioia methodology (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) (Gioia et al., 2012) (Gioia et al., 2022). This qualitative, inductive approach is particularly well-suited for exploring under-theorized or emerging phenomena, where the goal is to derive conceptually rich insights grounded in informant-centric data. It involves a systematic, multi-stage coding process. This analytical process commenced with the identification of first-order concepts, which remained closely grounded in the empirical material. These concepts were derived directly from the written observation protocols and captured verbatim expressions and behavioral descriptions of the assessors, including their statements, evaluative comments, and interactional cues. In the next step, these first-order concepts were abstracted into second-order themes, reflecting the researchers' interpretive engagement with the data. This stage involved clustering conceptually related observations and identifying emerging patterns, relationships, and underlying mechanisms that explained assessor behavior and interaction dynamics.

Subsequently, the second-order themes were integrated into overarching aggregate dimensions that represented higher-order theoretical constructs. These dimensions provide a structured framework for understanding how informal assessor roles are configured across different levels of analysis - from observable actions to interpretive meanings and conceptual abstraction. This multi-level coding process, which moves iteratively between empirical material and theoretical interpretation, ensures both analytic depth and transparency. The overall procedure is summarized in Table 1, which visually illustrates the data structure and the progression from empirical observations to theoretical dimensions.

Examples of First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimension
"If we start making exceptions, we lose all comparability." (Protocol 07)	Norm-Oriented Gatekeeper	Evaluation Logics and Decision Orientation
"She wasn't perfect, but she improved significantly." (Protocol 34)	Potential-Oriented Talent Scout	Evaluation Logics and Decision Orientation
"Let's wait until all assessments are in before we decide." (Protocol 12)	Risk-Averse Safeguarder	Evaluation Logics and Decision Orientation
"For me it's clear – that wasn't confident leadership." (Protocol 09)	Opinion Leader and Narrative Setter	Influence and Interaction Behavior within the Assessor Team
"Let's briefly consider both perspectives side by side." (Protocol 18)	Moderating Bridge Builder	Influence and Interaction Behavior within the Assessor Team
"I'll listen to the others first before I say something." (Protocol 05)	Reserved Observer	Influence and Interaction Behavior within the Assessor Team
"I liked how you explained that — it makes sense." (Protocol 14)	Empathic-Supportive Collaborator	Interaction Style and Impact on Group Dynamics
"Sorry, but I think that's a misinterpretation." (Protocol 36)	Confrontational-Critical Challenger	Interaction Style and Impact on Group Dynamics
"Maybe one could also see it differently..." (Protocol 23)	Strategically Neutral Diplomat	Interaction Style and Impact on Group Dynamics

TABLE 1: Data structure based on observation protocols

Note: Observation protocol references are anonymized identifiers used to illustrate the empirical grounding of each role. Quotes have been lightly paraphrased for clarity while preserving their original meaning and tone.

Accordingly, the application of Gioia methodology led to the identification of three core dimensions, which form the basis for the typology:

(1) *Evaluation Logic and Decision Orientation (rule-based vs. interpretive)*: This dimension captures the underlying rationale guiding assessors' evaluative judgments. A rule-based orientation denotes a strong adherence to formal assessment criteria, standardized rubrics, and procedural consistency - emphasizing comparability and fairness. Conversely, an interpretive orientation reflects a more flexible and context-sensitive approach, where assessors rely on experiential judgment, holistic impressions, and perceived developmental potential. The polarity between these orientations reveals how assessors oscillate between compliance with institutional standards and the exercise of professional discretion.

(2) *Influence and Interaction Behavior Within the Assessor Team (directive vs. integrative)*: This dimension describes the way assessors assert, negotiate, and reconcile perspectives during deliberation. A directive interaction style is characterized by early framing, assertive argumentation, and agenda-setting behaviors, often observed among dominant "narrative setters." In contrast, an integrative interaction style emphasizes collaboration, bridge-building, and consensus-oriented dialogue. The variation along this dimension determines the balance of power and the degree of inclusiveness in group decision-making processes.

(3) *Interaction Style and Impact on Group Dynamics (confrontational vs. affiliative)*: This dimension reflects the interpersonal tone and socio-emotional strategies assessors employ during evaluation exchanges. A confrontational style involves direct challenge, critical questioning, and cognitive tension intended to test the robustness of others' arguments. By contrast, an affiliative style prioritizes empathy, validation, and social harmony, aiming to maintain a constructive group climate. These contrasting approaches influence not only the emotional tenor of discussions but also the likelihood of conflict escalation or resolution within panels.

Study 2: Collective reflection and theoretical expansion

Data Collection

Two focus group workshops were conducted, comprising eight and twelve participants, respectively. The workshops pursued two primary objectives: first, to triangulate and thereby validate the informal assessor roles identified in the analysis of observation protocols; second, to address RQ2 and RQ3 through in-depth

discussion and collective reflection.

Participant selection followed a maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) to ensure heterogeneity across key dimensions relevant to role enactment: AC experience (veteran vs. novice assessors), organizational role (HR specialists, line managers, external consultants), and hierarchical level (professionals vs. managers). Detailed participant characteristics are presented in Table 2. This sampling approach enabled the inclusion of diverse perspectives while maintaining relevance to the study's focus on informal assessor roles. Given the specific research scope, the clearly defined context of internal ACs, and the theoretically grounded framework in social role theory, a total sample of n = 20 was deemed sufficient to provide adequate information power (Malterud et al., 2016).

Participant ID	Role	Years of AC Experience
FG1-01	Senior HR Business Partner	12
FG1-02	Line Manager Operations	9
FG1-03	Talent Development Specialist	10
FG1-04	Regional Sales Director	8
FG1-05	Senior HR Business Partner	14
FG1-06	Team Lead Controlling	3
FG1-07	Plant Manager	11
FG1-08	Head of HR Development	15
FG2-01	Senior Sales Manager	10
FG2-02	Area Manager Supply Chain Management	8
FG2-03	Management Assessment Consultant	13
FG2-04	HR Project Manager	5
FG2-05	Department Head Finance	9
FG2-06	Management Assessment Consultant	11
FG2-07	Talent Program Lead	7
FG2-08	Business Unit Director Engineering	10
FG2-09	Senior Recruiter	6
FG2-10	Department Head Finance	8
FG2-11	Team Lead IT	9
FG2-12	Head of Compliance	8

TABLE 2: Composition of focus group workshops

AC, Assessment Center; HR, Human Resources; IT, Information Technology

Each focus group workshop lasted approximately 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured discussion guide designed to balance open-ended exploration with targeted reflection on emerging themes (Appendix 2).

Rapport was established through initial informal conversation about AC experiences, assurance of confidentiality, and emphasis on research (not evaluation) purpose. Participants appeared comfortable discussing sensitive topics, though some line managers initially provided socially desirable responses before offering more candid reflections as trust developed.

Data Analysis

All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently anonymized. Data analysis was supported by MAXQDA software. Consistent with the recommendations of (Tong et al., 2007), the use of

such software in qualitative research serves to enhance analytical rigor, promote transparency in the reporting of findings, and contribute to the overall validity of the study. Transcripts were returned to participants for review and confirmation prior to analysis, thereby ensuring the credibility of the data through member checking; three participants requested minor clarifications, which were incorporated. Transcripts were analyzed following the same Gioia methodology logic as outlined in study 1. In line with this, three iterative phases were conducted: Phase 1 included initial open coding leading to first-order concepts and their subsequent aggregation to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions respectively. The results are shown in Table 3.

Examples of First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimension
"Honestly, most of us never really learned how to apply the observation sheet. Everyone does it differently." (Workshop 1, Participant 5)	Insufficient communication and enforcement of observation and evaluation rules	Contextual Conditions
"When a senior manager is in the room, their opinion basically sets the tone. It's hard to disagree." (W1, P2)	Hierarchical power asymmetry	Contextual Conditions
"HR is supposed to guide the process, but often they stay in the background." (W1, P6)	Weak role of the HR function	Contextual Conditions
"Once someone takes the Gatekeeper role, others adapt. The discussion narrows quickly." (W1, P3)	Amplification or suppression of roles through group dynamics	Consequences
"Strong personalities dominate the process; quieter ones give in." (W1, P1)	Imbalance in participation and perceived fairness	Consequences
"When the roles are balanced, for example, a Diplomat counters a Gatekeeper, we get much better discussions and fairer results." (W1, P7)	Impact of role constellations on decision quality and outcome legitimacy	Consequences

TABLE 3: Data structure based on focus group workshops

Note: Workshop participants quotes are anonymized identifiers used to illustrate the empirical grounding of each role. Quotes have been lightly paraphrased for clarity while preserving their original meaning and tone.

HR, Human Resources

Accordingly, the application of the Gioia methodology in study 2 resulted in the identification of two additional aggregate dimensions. The first dimension captures the contextual conditions that make the emergence of informal assessor roles more or less likely, illuminating the organizational and situational factors that either facilitate or constrain their development. The second dimension addresses the consequences associated with the emergence of such roles, providing insights into how they shape group interaction patterns and influence the quality and legitimacy of collective evaluation outcomes. More detailed information on each dimension is presented below:

(1) *Contextual Conditions*: Encompasses the organizational and procedural factors that influence the likelihood of such roles emerging. Informal role enactment was found to arise particularly in situations characterized by unclear or inconsistently applied assessment rules, hierarchical asymmetries that privilege senior assessors' voices, and a weak moderating function of the HR department. Together, these factors create structural ambiguity and open interactional space in which informal role dynamics develop as adaptive responses to insufficient procedural control.

(2) *Consequences*: Captures the effects of informal roles on group interaction and decision outcomes. Once enacted, certain roles tend to amplify or neutralize one another through group dynamics, shaping participation patterns and perceptions of fairness. Panels dominated by directive roles often display imbalanced participation, whereas more balanced constellations foster richer deliberation and higher perceived legitimacy of outcomes. Informal assessor roles therefore function as active social mechanisms that influence both the process quality and the perceived fairness of collective decision-making in ACs.

In Phase 2, the preliminary role typology was systematically refined. The initial classification of informal assessor roles was tested against the focus group data, which led to the modification of role definitions and the identification of additional contextual conditions that moderated role emergence.

In Phase 3, a negative case analysis was conducted to identify instances that challenged or contradicted the emerging typology. This process revealed seven observation protocols in which assessors exhibited characteristics of multiple roles simultaneously. These cases prompted a conceptual shift from viewing roles as fixed categories to understanding them as fluid and situationally adaptive, with assessors moving

between roles depending on the discussion phase and the characteristics of the candidate being evaluated.

Throughout the analytic process, regular peer debriefing sessions were held with two qualitative research experts external to the project. These experts provided critical feedback and alternative interpretations by reviewing randomly selected observation protocols, excerpts from workshop transcripts, the evolving codebook, analytic memos, and preliminary findings. Their assessments confirmed that the interpretations were well-grounded in the data and that competing explanations had been adequately considered. However, they recommended a stronger analytical focus on contextual boundary conditions, which was subsequently incorporated into the analysis.

Furthermore, the peer debriefing sessions critically examined whether the observed interaction patterns might alternatively be explained by assessor personality traits, formal organizational positions, or specific AC design features. While these factors appeared to exert some influence, the empirical evidence more strongly supported a social role interpretation: the same assessors enacted different roles across separate ACs; role emergence occurred independently of formal hierarchy; and similar patterns appeared across varying AC designs. Nonetheless, personality influences cannot be definitively excluded, representing an acknowledged limitation and an avenue for future research

Results And Discussion

Results

Typology of Informal Assessor Roles

The following typology represents an answer to RQ1 based on the empirical data from the observation protocols. It is important to clarify that the role labels presented in Table 4 (e.g., Procedural Gatekeeper, Developmental Talent Scout, Strategic Diplomat) were not terms used by workshop participants but were researcher-imposed abstractions designed to synthesize recurring patterns across first- and second-order codes. Consistent with the Gioia methodology, these labels reflect an interpretive step by the researcher while remaining firmly grounded in participants' verbatim accounts.

Role	Evaluation Logic	Influence Behavior	Interaction Style	Illustrative Quotes From Observation Protocols
Procedural Gatekeeper	Rule-based — strict adherence to formal criteria and rating procedures	Directive — steers discussions, corrects deviations	Confrontational — asserts authority, enforces structure	"We can't base our decision on gut feeling. Everything must align with the rating form." (P07); "Let's not overcomplicate this. The criterion says 'influencing others,' not 'being friendly.'" (P12)
Developmental Talent Scout	Interpretive — focuses on potential, growth, and learning capacity	Integrative — invites multiple views, builds on others' input	Affiliative — empathetic, supportive tone	"She wasn't perfect, but you could really see her growing into the role." (P34); "He struggled in the beginning, but his openness to feedback impressed me." (P60)
Strategic Diplomat	Rule-based — upholds fairness while allowing flexibility in interpretation	Integrative — mediates between opposing viewpoints	Affiliative — seeks harmony and consensus	"Both interpretations are valid. The challenge is to find a common denominator." (P49); "I think we're closer in opinion than it seems. We just emphasize different aspects." (P51)
Assertive Challenger	Interpretive — emphasizes experiential judgment and professional intuition	Directive — questions others, pushes for justification	Confrontational — critical, testing, challenging tone	"I'm not convinced by that example. It shows compliance, not leadership." (P36); "Let's stop sugarcoating it. He clearly avoided the conflict during the role play." (P68)
Analytical Moderator	Hybrid — balances formal criteria with contextual interpretation	Integrative — structures discussion, clarifies points	Neutral–Affiliative — calm, reflective, summarizing	"We seem to agree on the facts but not on the interpretation. Could that be our real disagreement?" (P66); "Maybe we can first collect the examples and then discuss how to weigh them." (P41)

TABLE 4: Typology of informal assessor roles

Note: Observation protocol references are anonymized identifiers used to illustrate the empirical grounding of each role. Quotes have been lightly paraphrased for clarity while preserving their original meaning and tone.

To enhance our understanding each role shall be explained further:

(1) The *Procedural Gatekeeper* represents a role configuration defined by a rule-based evaluation logic, directive influence behavior, and a confrontational interaction style. This role is grounded in the conviction that fairness and validity can only be achieved through consistent adherence to formalized assessment criteria. Gatekeepers often act as self-appointed custodians of methodological rigor, invoking standardized rating scales, behavioral anchors, and procedural rules whenever discussions drift toward subjectivity (e.g. “We can’t base our decision on gut feeling. Everything must align with the rating form.” [Protocol 07]).

These assessors typically assume a directive stance, intervening early to structure debates or correct perceived procedural deviations. Their interventions often use assertive or even corrective phrasing (e.g. “The exercise is designed to test decision-making under pressure, so personal sympathy shouldn’t matter.” [Protocol 46]).

The Gatekeeper’s confrontational tone can at times polarize discussions, yet their presence provides procedural stability and a shared evaluative reference point.

(2) The *Developmental Talent Scout* contrasts sharply with the Gatekeeper by relying on an interpretive evaluation logic, an integrative influence style, and an affiliative interpersonal orientation. This role emphasizes potential over performance, focusing on what candidates could become rather than what they have already demonstrated.

Talent Scouts approach AC discussions as developmental conversations rather than judgmental exercises (e.g. “She wasn’t perfect, but you could really see her growing into the role.” [Protocol 34]). Their integrative behavior often manifests in the way they invite alternative perspectives and soften evaluative rigidity (e.g. “He struggled in the beginning, but his openness to feedback impressed me.” [Protocol 60]).

The affiliative tone of the Talent Scout builds rapport and psychological safety in the group, facilitating open discussion even when disagreements arise (e.g. “I think your point makes sense, but maybe we should also value her progress.” [Protocol 52]).

(3) The *Strategic Diplomat* combines a rule-based evaluation logic with an integrative influence behavior and an affiliative interaction style. Assessors adopting this informal role typically act as mediators who strive to preserve both methodological integrity and social harmony in group deliberations.

Strategic Diplomats often emerge when assessor discussions become polarized between formalist and interpretive viewpoints, serving as bridging figures who translate between competing evaluative logics (e.g. “Both interpretations are valid. The challenge is to find a common denominator.” [Protocol 49]).

Their integrative communication style is marked by paraphrasing, perspective-taking, and reframing (e.g. “Maybe we can rephrase this: her behavior was assertive, but perhaps not yet confident leadership.” [Protocol 27]). Through their affiliative demeanor, Strategic Diplomats can help to lower the emotional temperature in heated discussions (e.g. “I think we’re closer in opinion than it seems. We just emphasize different aspects.” [Protocol 51]).

(4) The *Assertive Challenger* is characterized by an interpretive evaluation logic, directive influence behavior, and a distinctly confrontational interaction style. They see themselves as guardians of analytical rigor and intellectual honesty, challenging unexamined assumptions and consensus-driven shortcuts. They quite likely adopt a devil’s advocate stance, using critical questioning to uncover inconsistencies or blind spots in others’ arguments (“I’m not convinced by that example. It shows compliance, not leadership.” [Protocol 36]). Their interventions often cut through politeness, exposing latent disagreements (e.g. “I know this sounds harsh, but the behavior simply doesn’t match the rating.” [Protocol 72]).

Despite their confrontational tone, Challengers can play a crucial role by forcing the group to re-examine assumptions and justify claims with evidence. Their assertiveness can, however, generate tension in panels where affiliative norms dominate (e.g. “He was probably right, but the way he said it made everyone defensive.” [Protocol 76]).

(5) The *Analytical Moderator* reflects a hybrid evaluation logic, an integrative influence style, and a neutral to affiliative interaction tone. Moderators serve as balancing figures who seem to combine procedural awareness with interpretive flexibility, aiming to keep discussions structured yet inclusive. They frequently seem to intervene to clarify, summarize, and maintain conceptual focus when conversations become fragmented or emotionally charged (e.g. “Let’s take a step back and see how both views align with the competency model.” [Protocol 55]).

Their communication is usually calm and reflective, often employing metacommunicative phrases to regulate the discussion process (e.g. “Before we decide, let’s clarify what we mean by ‘strategic thinking.’”

[Protocol 19]). They exhibit an integrative behavior which fosters deliberative quality and mutual respect, allowing diverse viewpoints to coexist productively. As a result, participants may turn to them for synthesis or closure (e.g. “Can you summarize where we stand?” [Protocol 44]).

Across these five configurations, the identified assessor roles highlight that AC deliberations and candidate evaluations do not necessarily unfold as formally rational or rule-bound procedures. Rather, they represent socially and interactively constructed processes shaped by the situational dynamics, relational constellations, and interpretive negotiations among assessors.

Each role constitutes a distinct configuration of cognitive orientation, influence behavior, and emotional expression, illustrating that assessor behavior is inherently adaptive and contingent upon the evolving group context.

The evidence from the observation protocols demonstrates that assessor conferences function less as mechanical applications of predefined criteria and more as collective sensemaking arenas, in which fairness, credibility, and legitimacy are continuously co-produced through the fluid interplay of informal roles and group dynamics.

Grounded theory model: Contextual conditions, informal assessor roles, and consequences in assessment center decision-making

To answer RQ2 and RQ3, an integrated GT model is presented in Figure 1 that links the dimensions ‘Contextual Conditions’ and ‘Consequences’ identified in study 2 with the informal roles derived from study 1. The GT model demonstrates that assessor behavior in AC panels is not necessarily a procedural enactment of formal evaluation criteria but rather a socially adaptive process that emerges in response to contextual ambiguity.

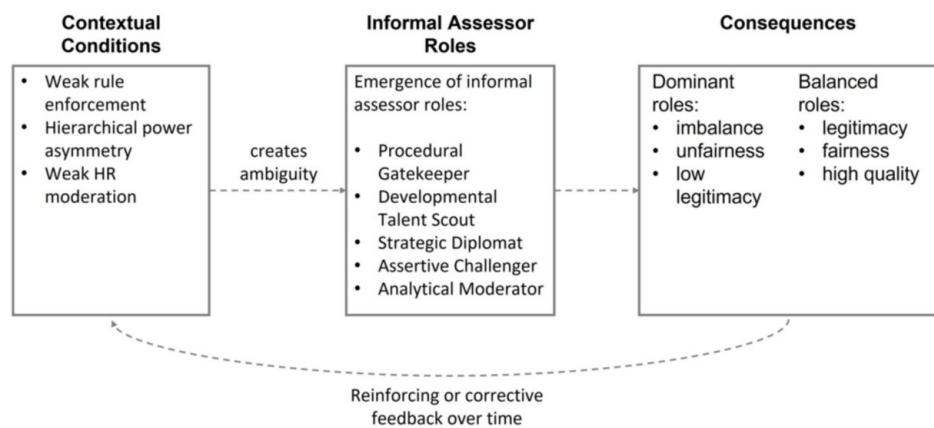


FIGURE 1: Grounded theory model of contextual conditions, informal role emergence, and consequences in internal assessment center panels

The following workshop results strengthen the above GT model:

(1) Contextual conditions: The data show that ambiguity in communicating observation and evaluation standards creates interpretive space in which assessors begin to improvise, rely on personal heuristics, or adopt stabilizing behaviors. As one workshop participant remarked: “The rules exist, but in practice, everyone applies them differently. It depends on who speaks first.” (Workshop 1, Participant 5) Hierarchical configurations further amplify this tendency. Senior line managers often dominate discussions, implicitly setting the evaluative frame and prompting others to assume complementary or compensatory positions (e.g. “When a senior manager is in the room, their opinion shapes everything.” (Workshop 2, Participant 4) Finally, the weak procedural role of HR was seen as a missing stabilizer that otherwise might counterbalance informal hierarchies (e.g. “HR should guide the process, but they often stay silent and then the discussion becomes political.” (Workshop 1, Participant 6) These conditions collectively form a structural vacuum that invites the spontaneous differentiation of roles such as Gatekeeper, Diplomat, or Challenger, each serving as an adaptive response to contextual uncertainty.

(2) Informal Assessor Roles: The identified roles operate not as fixed traits but as situationally enacted functions that stabilize the evaluation process under conditions of procedural and social uncertainty.

Their enactment reflects adaptive responses to contextual ambiguity. As one participant noted: “When the process feels unclear, someone automatically takes the lead” (Workshop 1, Participant 4). These roles seem to compensate for procedural gaps and unequal influence, functioning as emergent mechanisms that sustain productive discussion: “Without those informal roles, we’d get stuck. Someone has to bring structure, someone else keeps the tone balanced” (Workshop 2, Participant 8).

Together, these enactments transform the AC from a rule-driven forum into a dynamic arena of sensemaking, where meaning is co-constructed rather than mechanically applied. Assessors engage in interpretive coordination, balancing procedural compliance with intuitive and interpersonal judgment. Accordingly, this dynamic underscores that AC decisions can emerge through the interplay of roles, relationships, and collective interpretation, rather than from the linear application of predefined criteria.

(3) Consequences: This dimension reveals how the interplay of informal roles affects the interactional climate, group participation, and decision quality. Workshop data highlight that once a dominant role emerges, others tend to position themselves reactively, creating self-reinforcing configurations: “If one person plays the strict role, others automatically compensate: someone becomes the bridge-builder, someone else the challenger” (Workshop 1, Participant 3). Such role interplay can either enhance or erode group inclusiveness. Directive or dominant configurations (e.g., a strong Gatekeeper-Challenger dyad) often reduce participation among more cautious members: “At some point you just stop speaking. The outcome feels already decided” (Workshop 2, Participant 10). Conversely, balanced constellations that combine directive and integrative roles (e.g., Challenger paired with Diplomat or Moderator) tend to produce more deliberative, legitimate, and fair outcomes: “When we had both a critical voice and someone who could mediate, the discussion felt more productive, and the decision made more sense” (Workshop 1, Participant 7).

Ultimately, the GT model conceptualizes assessor panels as dynamic systems of interdependent roles embedded in contextual constraints and oriented toward collective sensemaking. By linking the dimensions of ‘Contextual Conditions’ and ‘Consequences’ to the identified informal assessor roles, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how informal social processes underpin and at times perhaps even override formal assessment logic.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances theoretical understanding in AC research, role theory, group dynamics, and organizational psychology. By addressing three research questions systematically, it reconceptualizes assessor panels as socially embedded systems in which informal roles, contextual conditions, and interactional dynamics jointly shape evaluation outcomes.

Specifically, the first research question explored which informal roles assessors may adopt within internal AC panels. The analysis identified five distinct roles that emerged dynamically during panel interactions. These roles signify a conceptual shift from viewing ACs primarily as formalized evaluation mechanisms toward understanding them as micro-social systems where meaning, power, and influence are continuously negotiated.

While earlier studies (Herriot et al., 1985) recognized group-based decision-making, they did not theorize systematic role differentiation among assessors. The identified roles fill this gap, illustrating that when certain conditions exist, it is likely that assessors adopt certain informal roles that shape group dynamics and decision-making. These roles parallel, but also diverge from, established team role models. For instance, ‘The Gatekeeper’ resembles Belbin’s ‘Shaper’ role in directing group focus, while ‘The Diplomat’ reflects the ‘Team Worker’ function of mediation (Belbin, 2010). However, unlike enduring team roles, these assessor roles are situational and transient, forming rapidly within a single panel session in response to contextual cues rather than stable personality traits.

This finding extends role theory by demonstrating that in temporary, task-focused groups, role enactment is fluid, adaptive, and interactionally constructed. It also contributes to research on emergent leadership (Hanna et al., 2020) (Rennie et al., 2023) by showing that influence in assessor panels arises from communication patterns and social positioning rather than formal authority. In theoretical terms, the typology supports three propositions: (1) assessment is a socially constructed process (Berendonk et al., 2013); (2) informal role behavior extends beyond formal prescriptions (Isomura, 2020); and (3) role differentiation can develop instantaneously within high-stakes, structured environments.

The second research question investigated which contextual factors shape the emergence of informal roles. Three critical conditions were identified: (1) weak communication and enforcement of evaluation rules, (2) hierarchical power asymmetry, and (3) limited HR involvement. These findings demonstrate that formal procedures alone do not guarantee behavioral standardization; rather, their consistent

enforcement and the structural configuration of panels determine whether informal dynamics unfold constructively or disruptively.

Theoretically, these insights introduce a contingency perspective on assessment quality, highlighting that validity and fairness depend not only on assessor competence and exercise design but also on social and structural context. They also contribute to the literature on organizational politics in assessment (Chen et al., 2018) by revealing how informal power reproduces formal hierarchies within evaluative processes. Finally, they define boundary conditions for standardization, showing that even well-trained assessors are susceptible to informal dynamics when structural asymmetries and unclear procedural norms persist.

The third research question explored how informal roles shape interaction processes and candidate outcomes. Three mechanisms were identified: (1) the amplification or suppression of roles through group dynamics, (2) imbalanced participation and perceived fairness, and (3) the influence of role constellations on decision quality and legitimacy. Dominant Gatekeepers, for instance, can restrict debate and bias outcomes, whereas balanced constellations, such as the presence of both a Gatekeeper and a Diplomat, likely promote more inclusive and deliberative judgments.

These results expand the theoretical foundation of AC research, which has traditionally prioritized psychometric validity (Krause and Gebert, 2003) over social interaction processes. The findings also connect to organizational justice theory by showing that participation imbalances undermine procedural fairness and perceived legitimacy. Moreover, they extend team composition theory (Ma et al., 2022) by demonstrating that informal role diversity enhances group decision quality beyond demographic or functional diversity alone.

Beyond the specific research questions, the study advances broader theoretical perspectives in organizational psychology. It empirically supports Isomura's theory of informal organization (Isomura, 2020) by demonstrating that informal structures are intrinsic even to highly formalized assessment settings. It also reinforces social constructionist perspectives, showing that assessment outcomes could be co-constructed through discourse, negotiation, and power relations. Finally, by framing assessor panels as temporary multiteam systems (Zaccaro et al., 2020), the study contributes to understanding rapid coordination and decision-making across functional and hierarchical boundaries.

Practical Contributions

This study offers practical implications for organizations conducting internal ACs. Its findings demonstrate that assessment quality, fairness, and legitimacy depend not necessarily only on formal procedures but also on the social processes unfolding within assessor panels. Informal role dynamics can significantly shape decision outcomes and must therefore be actively managed through targeted training, thoughtful panel design, structured facilitation, and systematic quality assurance.

An implication concerns assessor training and development. Traditional training focuses on observation accuracy and rating consistency (Lievens, 2001), but this study shows the need to address interpersonal and power dynamics. Training should include role awareness, helping assessors recognize and regulate informal roles; group dynamics literacy, enabling them to identify and counteract dominance or groupthink; and facilitative communication skills, fostering balanced participation. Additionally, power and status awareness is crucial: senior assessors must learn to moderate their authority, while junior assessors should be empowered to voice divergent opinions. Experiential formats, such as simulations, video analyses, and peer feedback, could be effective in promoting reflection and behavioral change in this context.

The findings also highlight the importance of strategic assessor panel composition and design. Panels should ensure hierarchical balance and functional diversity. Furthermore, assigning trained facilitators from HR or externally could help to stabilize group processes and uphold procedural fairness. Panel size should remain rather small (three to four assessors) to ensure active engagement and prevent passive withdrawal.

Ensuring sustainable quality requires systematic monitoring and feedback. Organizations should document not only final ratings but also the reasoning behind them. Where permissible, recorded discussions and participation tracking can help identify unbalanced dynamics. Decision audit trails enhance accountability, while self-reflection and peer feedback promote learning among assessors. Candidate perception surveys can serve as indirect indicators of fairness and legitimacy, signaling when procedural adjustments are needed.

Finally, the findings carry implications for organizational culture and HR strategy. Hierarchical cultures require safeguards to counteract power asymmetries, including training for senior assessors and stronger facilitation mechanisms. HR should assume a proactive role as process guardian, ensuring integrity and balance in assessment discussions rather than acting merely as an administrator. Moreover, transparency

in decision-making through clear communication about assessment procedures, fairness safeguards, and quality control could strengthen trust and legitimacy among all stakeholders.

In sum, effective AC practice requires managing social interaction as carefully as technical accuracy. By integrating role awareness, balanced panel composition, structured facilitation, and ongoing quality assurance, organizations can reduce bias, enhance fairness, and ensure credible, evidence-based decision-making.

Conclusions

This study investigated informal social dynamics in internal assessment centers through a two-stage qualitative research design conducted within a single organization. Drawing on 85 observation protocols from internal ACs and two focus group workshops with assessors, the study adopted an interpretive perspective to examine how assessor interactions unfold during consensus discussions and how informal roles shape collective judgments. The findings make two central contributions. First, the study identifies five informal assessor roles (Procedural Gatekeeper, Developmental Talent Scout, Strategic Diplomat, Assertive Challenger, and Analytical Moderator) that systematically differ in evaluation logic, influence behavior, and interaction style. Second, it advances a grounded theoretical model linking contextual conditions (e.g., weak rule enforcement, hierarchical asymmetries, limited HR moderation) to informal role emergence and downstream consequences for participation, perceived fairness, and decision legitimacy. Together, these insights reconceptualize assessor panels as dynamic systems of social influence rather than neutral aggregation mechanisms.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Empirically, the study is based on one organization, which constrains transferability to other industries, national contexts, and AC designs. Methodologically, the findings rely on qualitative data and interpretive analysis, precluding causal inference or statistical generalization. Substantively, the analysis focuses on the assessor and observer perspective, leaving candidate perceptions and objective outcome measures outside the scope of the present study. These limitations point to clear directions for future research. First, multi-organization and cross-context studies are needed to examine the robustness and boundary conditions of the identified role typology. Second, quantitative and mixed-methods research could test the proposed model, for example by linking role constellations to decision consistency, interrater reliability, or bias indicators. Third, future studies should incorporate candidate perspectives and fairness outcomes, exploring how informal assessor dynamics affect perceived procedural justice, acceptance of decisions, and downstream career consequences. Overall, the study contributes to a more socially informed understanding of assessment centers by showing that evaluation quality and fairness depend not only on formal design and psychometric rigor, but also on how informal roles and influence processes are enacted and managed in practice.

Appendices

Appendix 1

<p>Date: XXX March 2024 Company: XXX (internal high-potential AC) Assessor panel: 4 members (1 HR, 2 line managers, 1 external consultant) Assessed candidates: 2 Duration of wash-up meeting: 60 minutes Observer: external consultant and moderator (researcher) Setting: conference room, XXX headquarters</p> <p>00:00 – 00:10 (Opening Phase) Observations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The HR representative starts the discussion by summarizing each candidate's scores, strictly adhering to the competency framework. Line manager 1 immediately questions one rating, stating, "I don't think she showed strategic thinking at all. She was just improvising." HR representative appears irritated <p>00:11 – 00:25 (First Candidate Discussion) Observations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Line manager 2 redirects the conversation from numerical ratings to behavioral evidence: "Let's look at what she actually did during the group task. Her intervention calmed the conflict." HR representative insists on referring to the official scoring guide. Line manager 1 agrees with line manager 2, adding: "She might not fit the analytical profile, but she connects people." 	<p>00:26 – 00:35 (Second Candidate Discussion) Observations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Line Manager 1 dominates the exchange: "He's clearly ready for the next step. I'd promote him tomorrow." HR representative cautions: "Let's not conflate performance with potential; the exercises didn't show readiness." Line manager 2 remains silent for almost ten minutes, avoiding eye contact with rest of assessor panel. <p>00:36 – 00:45 (Final Integration Phase) Observations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion becomes more consensus-oriented. External consultant asks: "Can we align on evidence rather than impressions?" HR representative nods and summarizes shared points on a whiteboard. Line manager 1 agrees but adds: "We're overcomplicating this. We know who's better." Group reaches consensus after brief negotiation. <p>Post-Session Reflections (by Observer)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Session demonstrates the interaction between formal and informal structures within the AC. Despite standardized procedures, informal role dynamics heavily shaped discourse flow and perceived fairness. Line manager 1 dominated discussion, whereas HR representative tried to ensure procedural control
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FIGURE 2: Example of observation protocol

Appendix 2

<p>Date: XXX March 2024 Duration: ~90 minutes Participants: 8 assessors Facilitator: Researcher</p> <p>1 Introduction Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome participants and explain the study's aim: to explore how assessors interact and adopt informal roles during AC discussions. Emphasize confidentiality, voluntary participation, and open dialogue. Clarify that there are no right or wrong answers; focus is on shared reflection and experience. <p>2 Warm-up: Experience Mapping Purpose: To situate participants' experience with ACs and build rapport.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How long have you been involved in AC in general and as an assessor in your company's internal AC in particular? How would you describe a "typical" assessor discussion in internal ACs in your organization? When do you feel discussions go well or less well? 	<p>3 Informal Roles in Assessor Panels Purpose: To validate, refine, and expand the preliminary typology of informal roles identified from observation protocols.</p> <p>Guiding questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> During assessor discussions, do you notice people taking on recurring "roles" (e.g., structuring, mediating, challenging, staying silent)? Can you describe examples from your own experience? Do these roles emerge consciously or unconsciously? What effects do they have on the quality and fairness of decisions? Do certain roles dominate or disappear in particular settings? <p>[Researcher then presents draft of informal roles within the group.]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do you think about these descriptions? Do they reflect your experiences in the internal AC observer conferences? Take a critical stance. Are there aspects that you would change or see completely differently? <p>4 Contextual Influences Purpose: To explore which situational factors facilitate or inhibit specific role behaviors.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What situational or organizational factors influence how discussions unfold? How do hierarchy, experience level, or role (HR vs. line manager) affect participation? [...]
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FIGURE 3: Excerpt from the semi-structured workshop discussion guide

Additional Information

Author Contributions

All authors have reviewed the final version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Concept and design: Stephan Weinert

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: Stephan Weinert

Drafting of the manuscript: Stephan Weinert

Critical review of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Stephan Weinert

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Data are available on reasonable request. The data are stored as de-identified participant data which are available on request to stephan.weinert@hwg-lu.de.

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