Douglas Bray (1918-2006)

Douglas Bray, resident of Tenafly, NJ, died on Tuesday, May 9, 2006. He is survived by wife Ann Howard and sons Gerald L. Bray and Christopher J. Bray.

Douglas Bray is the inventor of the modern day assessment center used by thousands of organizations around the world to identify the best leaders and employees for critical roles. Dr. Bray proved the effectiveness of the methodology in a landmark longitudinal research study he conducted at AT&T over a 25-year period. Begun in 1956, the study was entitled “The Management Progress Study” and is one of the most referenced research efforts in the field of industrial and organizational psychology.

An only child, Bray was born November 7, 1918 and grew up in Springfield, Massachusetts, the son of a purchasing agent for Frisk Rubber Company and his wife. The field of industrial psychology was just beginning when Dr. Bray earned a master’s degree in abnormal psychology at Clark University. Thinking that the World War II draft would call him up shortly, he went to work in a defense plant. When he was drafted in to the Army Air Corp in 1943, he was placed in the Medical and Psychological Examining Unit. Dr. Bray eventually landed work with Psychological Research where the behavioral evaluations and practical research studies he conducted led him to become an applied psychologist. In 1946, he was accepted at Yale University to study social psychology and earned his PhD in psychology.

Seven years later while a research associate with the Conservation of Human Resources program at Columbia University, Robert Greenleaf, then director of Management Development and Research at AT&T, asked Dr. Bray to join AT&T to conduct a research study that was to follow the careers of managers as they progressed up the ranks at AT&T, then the world’s largest company. Greenleaf wanted to see how the lives and careers of leaders developed over time and he thought a study would help to refine Bell hiring and leadership development programs. For the study, Bray put together the first assessment centers used in private industry and was the first to use exercises such as the in-basket and the assigned role group discussion exercise. The 3-day assessment center also used tests and interviews to assess personal attributes such as job motivation. Participants were assessed twice more—8 years and 20 years after the start. Interim activities included questionnaires and interviews with both the participants and others who observed their work performance.

After the early success of the Management Progress Study in predicting organizational achievement, it was decided that all supervisors within AT&T would be selected using the assessment center method and Bray had to adapt the method for mass use with nonpsychologists as assessors. Within relatively few years, more than 100,000 individuals at AT&T were assessed for supervisory jobs.
In addition to his pioneering work with assessment centers, Bray was also involved in many other areas of industrial psychology. In the early 1970s, his group at AT&T oversaw the development of the Bell Systems highly successful supervisor relations training program. He developed innovative test validation strategies and helped design AT&T’s response to charges by the EEOC regarding the promotion of women. He also played a key role in the early application and evaluation of behavior modeling training.

In 1968, William Byham started an assessment center at JC Penney with Bray’s help. After the successful application of the methodology at JC Penney, Byham wrote the first popular article about assessment centers for the Harvard Business Review. Organizations around the world became interested and asked Dr. Byham and Dr. Bray if they could help them put in assessment centers. To meet this need, Byham and Bray founded Development Dimensions International (DDI) to provide consulting on assessment centers and provide assessment center simulations. DDI now has offices around the world.

Even after DDI was established, Dr. Bray remained at AT&T and continued his work. He conducted a parallel longitudinal study of workers entering the Bell System in the 1970s, working with Ann Howard, who became his wife in 1983. Both studies are chronicled in the book, Managerial Lives in Transition: Advancing Age and Changing Times. He has written extensively, with more than 60 books and articles to his credit.

Dr. Bray has held many important professional offices. Among others, he has been president of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, chair of the Ethics Committee of the American Psychological Association, and president of the Board of Directors of the American Board of Professional Psychology. In 1959, Dr. Bray founded the Duke Ellington Society of New York. His awards include:

- 1977 Distinguished Professional Contributions Award, Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology
- 1980 Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions, Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology
- 1986 Outstanding Contribution to Psychology and Management Award, Society of Psychologists in Management
- 1988 Distinguished Service and Outstanding Contribution Award, American Board of Psychologists in Management
- 1991 Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Application of Psychology, American Psychological Foundation
- 2000 Lifetime Achievement in Assessment Center Methodology Award
- A member of the Task Force that established the guidelines and ethical consideration for assessment center operations, first published in 1975.
- Established the Douglas W. Bray and Ann Howard fund within the SIOP Foundation to support research on assessment centers and managerial or leadership development
The family has asked that donations be made to Douglas W. Bray and Ann Howard Award, SIOP Foundation, P.O. Box 1205, Bowling Green, OH 43402. Questions can be directed to DDI: Jennifer Pesci-Kelly; jennifer.pesci@ddiworld.com.