RISING TO THE TOP:
IDENTIFYING AND PREPARING THE CREAM TO LEAD

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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Appendix Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at http://www.lrc.dhs.gov/ to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.

ABSTRACT

The Anne Arundel County Fire Department (AACoFD), like many other fire departments across the nation, has been experiencing problems in filling key leadership positions. When personnel retired or were promoted, there was often a lack of qualified personnel to fill the vacated role. This was particularly true when the position was in a specialty area, such as prevention, training, or communications. In addition, a trend was identified indicating that fewer personnel were interested in seeking higher levels of responsibility. A need was identified to provide a systematic method to develop personnel to fill key roles when vacancies occurred and to improve participation in the promotional opportunities.

A research project was undertaken that involved a literature review of both fire service and business practices in preparing personnel for leadership roles. In addition, a survey instrument was sent to 127 fire officers in the AACoFD. The survey instrument sought to identify why fewer personnel were seeking promotion and what could be done to reverse this trend. In addition, the research sought to identify strategies that would better prepare personnel to fill key roles in the department, particularly those roles currently seen as undesirable.

Several areas of concern were identified in the research that inhibits personnel from seeking promotional opportunities. Most of these concerns can be addressed and should improve the pool of candidates. The research identified the need to develop a formal succession plan for the Anne Arundel County Fire Department. The plan needs to include a rotation policy for officers, providing experience in different segments of the

Department. The plan should also include the reinstitution of an officer candidate school, pay incentives for staff assignments, and improved feedback on the promotional process.

The evaluative research method was used to answer the following questions.

1. What factors are contributing to a reduction in the number of personnel applying for and competing for promotional opportunities in the Anne Arundel County Fire Department?
2. What methods or strategies can be developed to prepare personnel to assume key leadership roles in the Department?
3. Would a formal succession program be beneficial to the Anne Arundel County Fire Department?

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INTRODUCTION

Starting on January 1, 1997, the Anne Arundel County Fire Department changed the requirements for promotion to all officer ranks. In addition to changing the level of college education required for some of the ranks, the Department also inserted requirements to meet National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Fire Officer certifications. Personnel were given eighteen months notice, prior to January 1, 1997, that they would need to meet the certification requirements to maintain their current rank. Anyone wishing to compete for promotions after that date would have to meet the certification requirement for the rank they were trying to achieve.

It was about this time that the number of personnel applying for promotions began to dwindle. This was somewhat expected, as it was assumed that some personnel would not meet the certification requirements. However, there appeared to be other factors involved as well. This was evidenced by the fact that some personnel who did have higher level certifications were not applying for promotion.

A smaller pools of candidates means there are fewer choices in whom to promote. Fewer choices equates to difficulty in filling certain key positions, particularly staff positions, with qualified candidates. Most staff positions are specialty areas. These include fire prevention, fire investigation, communications, apparatus maintenance and training. Discussions among command staff personnel expressed a concern for the future of the Department, if we continue to have problems filling these key roles with qualified personnel. The problem is exacerbated as the position moves farther up the chain of command. Succession plans are often thought of as preparing someone to take over the top job. However, succession planning is important throughout the Department for all key

roles. Buzzotta and Lefton (1997) make this point in their article on succession planning. They point out that,

> An organization that wishes to maintain leadership continuity and preserve its level of performance must have a comprehensive succession plan in place - “comprehensive” meaning that it must extend well beyond the CEO and top management level to include anyone whose contribution is essential to the organization. (p. 13)

Promoting fire fighters to lieutenants, and training them to be instructors, prevention inspectors, or communications shift supervisors, while having its problems, is not insurmountable. However, when it is a Captain or Chief’s position that needs to be filled, the difficulties are compounded when none of the candidates has any experience outside of suppression or emergency medical services (EMS). This was a problem identified by Rohr (2000) in his research paper. He noted that the problem of filling key positions as being impacted when senior members of the department retire and younger, less experienced personnel do not have the experience to move into various management positions (p. 6). Placing officers, especially chief officers, in positions of leadership, in areas where they lack the knowledge and expertise in the tasks performed by that unit, does not promote successful programs.

In looking at the problems we were having in finding qualified candidates for promotion, the author focused on the factors that might be in play. These factors included, personnel not wanting a day work assignment, personnel not believing there is enough difference in pay for higher ranks, and personnel who are frustrated with the promotional process. Each of the factors is based on comments from department

personnel over the years, but none are supported by evidence. To determine if these factors were contributing and to what degree, a survey was developed and distributed to 127 career officers between the rank of lieutenant and division chief in the Anne Arundel County Fire Department.

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2. What methods or strategies can be developed to prepare personnel to assume key leadership roles in the Department?
3. Would a formal succession program be beneficial to the Anne Arundel County Fire Department?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The AACoFD is a combination department with 621 uniformed career personnel and approximately 600 volunteers. The Department's chain of command structure for career personnel is Fire Fighter II, Fire Fighter III (apparatus driver/operator), Fire Fighter IV (Cardiac Rescue Technician), Fire Fighter V (Paramedic), Lieutenant, Captain, Battalion Chief, Division Chief, Deputy Chief, and Chief of the Department. The Chief of the Department is a politically appointed position reporting directly to the elected County Executive. All other ranks report to the Chief of the Department through the above noted chain of command.

The Department has four deputy chiefs, each in charge of a Department bureau. These bureaus are Administration, Fire Operations, EMS/Special Operations, and Services. The author commands the Services Bureau which is comprised of the Fire Marshal Division, Communications Division, and the Training and Research Division. These three divisions comprise the majority of staff assignments in the Department. In addition, personnel in each of these divisions must have knowledge, skills, and abilities not typically acquired working in suppression or EMS positions. As such, the author has a direct interest in ensuring that we maintain adequate pools of qualified personnel to lead both the Department and particularly the specialty service divisions.

Filling management and leadership positions in areas outside fire suppression and EMS has increased in importance. Perhaps the importance has increased the difficulty. As Baker (1995) points out,

> Today's environment provides more challenges and complexities for the fire service than ever before. Traditional functions from past years, such as fire suppression and emergency medical services, have been dramatically augmented by other services. Public education, hazardous materials mitigation, technical rescue, increased fire prevention activities, and other community outreach efforts are but a few of the new fire service responsibilities. (p. 2)

This research is relevant to the AACoFD. The problems being encountered were a topic of discussion at a Department staff meeting on October 26, 2000. During this meeting, Chief Simonds, Chief of the Department discussed his concerns regarding problems filling officer positions when personnel retire. He specifically mentioned the

problem of filling officer positions in staff jobs that require special or technical knowledge. This is not a problem that is exclusive to the AACoFD. As Baker (1995) notes, “unfortunately, there is a lack of successive planning for fire service officers. Therefore, many officers are ill-prepared to effectively perform the tasks of their new positions” (p.1). To effectively deal with this problem the Department needs to begin preparing its personnel to fill these rolls. This research was completed as part of the National Fire Academy’s Executive Fire officer Program and is relevant to the *Executive Leadership* course. Unit 6 in the Executive Leadership Course is titled “Succession/Replacement Planning.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review for this topic was conducted to find existing research and information related to the topic of succession planning and personnel development. The literature review encompassed fire service and management journals, books, and research papers. Relevant information from each source was compiled and sorted according to the research questions.

The literature review revealed that the problem of diminishing interest in promotions is not unique to Anne Arundel County, but rather seems to be a national trend. Coleman (2001) points out that, he has “seen hard evidence that fewer and fewer people want to move up in the hierarchy. This directly contradicts the huge hiring pool at the fire service’s entry level, as evidenced in almost any newspaper” (p.24). The fire service is a labor-intensive organization and as such, requires a management team to ensure proficiency. As Kramer (1989) notes, “for a fire department which is labor

intensive, the “heart” of the inputs is the personnel component” (9-4). In an organization that relies so heavily on personnel, it would seem to make sense to plan for management needs at least as much as we plan for apparatus, station, and expendable item needs. Buzzotta and Lefton (1997) agree. In their article on *Successful Succession* they ask, “why do organizations so meticulously plan their capital requirements, product development, distribution systems, advertising and so forth, yet fail to deal with their current and future ’people requirements’ ” (p. 13)?

On the topic of factors that contribute to the lack of interest in promotions, Laurich (1995) discusses the 24-hour shift to which fire personnel become accustomed. He notes that, “once the line lifestyle is ingrained in firefighters, they are often reluctant to exchange their present work hours for a conventional 40-hour week” (p. 5). In his paper on a succession planning, Rohr (2000) suggests that personnel forced into staff assignments, which are typically 40-hour a week assignments, failed to perform as well as in their previous assignment (p. 21).

Several suggestions were found in the material reviewed to improve interest in promotions. Among these is a mentoring program recommended by Lytle (2001), as a method to address weaknesses and develop strengths in prospective company officers (pp. 52-53). Ross (1998) believes that recognizing effective performance, of personnel in staff positions, in meaningful ways is part of the solution (p.18). Coleman (2000) suggests that, “keeping your subordinates adequately informed and sharing information on an open basis is one of the best ways to handle transition management” (p. 40).

On developing personnel to fill key roles, Gallagher and Golant (2000) note that, getting a broad range of experience, early in a career, is important to avoid being a one-

discipline person (p. 135). This strategy seems to have proven successful in private industry, as exemplified in an article on the succession at General Electric (GE) Corporation. In an article in *The Sun*, on Jeffrey Immelt's succession to the top of GE points out that Immelt held several positions in a variety of the company's divisions (p 8d). Coleman (1988) stresses that, "opportunity is the ultimate equalizer when it comes to motivation" (p. 25). Coleman points out that opportunity does not meaning forcing people, but rather making opportunities available to those who are motivated and inspired to seek them.

Succession planning is a method used by private industry to prepare people to lead. The research on this topic provides evidence that succession planning would be beneficial to the fire service. Sample (1996) notes that, succession planning programs take one of two forms, a "relay race" or a "horse race" (p. 29). The fire service typically uses the "horse race" method, where a pool of candidates competes for a position. Baker points out that proper preparation of fire officer candidates provides increased organizational effectiveness (p. 3). These two points seem to be summed up by Vouglas (1998) who states that, "ideally, succession planning will help you avoid a god awful administrative nightmare" (p. 11).

Summary

In conclusion, the literature review provided strong evidence that a well thought-out succession plan can both improve personnel interested in pursuing promotion and in preparing personnel for promotion. It also establishes evidence that succession planning in the fire service should take place at all officer ranks, not just for the chief of the department.

PROCEDURES

The research procedure used in this paper started with a literature review at the Learning Resource Center (LRC) at the National Emergency Training Center (NETC) in Emmitsburg, Maryland in September 2000. Additional resources were requested from the LRC and were obtained through inter-library loan. A literature review was also conducted at the Anne Arundel County Public Library, and the author's personal library.

Two specific areas were targeted in conducting the literature review. First, a search was made for credible sources on fire service management, particularly related to succession planning. The intention of this search was to find information relative to preparing personnel to assume positions of leadership. Second, a search was conducted of articles and books in the area of general management for information related to the topic of succession planning.

Problems and trends in the American fire service regarding promotional processes and attitudes were identified during the review. The review also identified strategies in private industry that might prove useful in the fire service. In addition, methods being used in both the public and private sector, to foster improvements in leadership and the selection processes and being used to identify, groom, and promote the leaders of tomorrow, were revealed.

Using the information found in the literature review, a survey instrument was developed and sent out to 127 officers in the Anne Arundel County Fire Department. The survey was sent to officers holding the ranks of lieutenant, captain, battalion chief and division chief. The results of the survey identified trends in the Anne Arundel County

Fire Department that are similar to those identified for the American fire service in general.

The survey asked twenty-two questions. The first four questions were intended only to gather background information on each respondent. Question five only asks about participation in promotional opportunities within the last three years. The three-year time limit was included because; promotional lists in Anne Arundel County are good for two years. The three-year time frame included anyone who had participated in the last promotional process for all the surveyed ranks. In addition, it avoided including personnel who may have participated in previous promotional exams, but not the most recent. The remainder of the questions were intended to gather information about each respondent's qualifications, desires, and deterrents to promotion. A copy of the survey instrument, with a summary of the responses, and the accompanying letter are found in the Appendix. Of the 127 survey instruments sent out, 104 were returned. Those taking the survey were instructed to return the instrument anonymously. Anonymity was encouraged to help ensure that respondents felt comfortable in answering the questions honestly.

Essentially there were two reasons for limiting the survey to the ranks of lieutenant, captain, battalion chief, and division chief. First, since the research was focused on the problem of having qualified candidates to fill the higher ranking officer positions, the author excluded anyone who was not already an officer. In the Anne Arundel County Fire Department, a person must hold the previous rank for a specified time before becoming eligible for promotion to the next rank.

Second, the only rank not surveyed, below the rank of Chief of the Department, was deputy chief. The Chief of the Department is a politically appointed position, so those personnel holding the rank of deputy chief are at the highest rank to which one can be promoted.

Limitations

This research paper was subject to a number of limitations. The first limitation was the six-month time limit to complete the research. As such, the literature review and the survey had to be completed within this window of time.

The author's research was limited by a lack of information specific to fire service succession planning. Much of the material on this subject came from the private sector. The private sector operates differently than the public sector and is not subject to the civil service requirements typically applied to public employees. Private sector employees can be promoted and moved at the will of the company, in most cases providing greater flexibility in preparing people to move to higher levels. Employees in the AACoFD must take and pass an exam before being eligible for promotion. In addition, the employee must typically score high enough to beat out other candidates for a chance to get promoted. These differences require making some assumptions in transferring succession planning strategies from the private sector and applying them to public fire department employees.

Another limitation was the survey instrument. While the author intended respondents to provide only one answer to each question, some chose more than one. This occurred several times in questions eight, nine, ten, eleven, and thirteen. Since the author had no way to determine the respondents' primary reason, all responses were

recorded. In addition, question nineteen should have been worded so that only those who responded YES to question eighteen needed to respond. Since it was not, several respondents who answered NO to question eighteen provided an answer to question nineteen on pay differential.

RESULTS

1. What factors are contributing to a reduction in the number of personnel applying for and competing for promotional opportunities in the Anne Arundel County Fire Department?

Several years ago it was common for nearly every eligible employee to compete for promotional opportunities in the Department. While there were always a few eligible personnel who chose not to compete, they were the exception. Recent promotional processes have appeared to have fewer personnel participating. The Chief of the Department has expressed concern about this trend on more than one occasion. Questions five and six of the survey sought to determine the number of personnel who have participated in recent promotional opportunities and those who intend to participate in the future.

The trend in fewer personnel being interested in promotions is not limited to the AACoFD. Coleman (2001) makes note of this trend in his article "*Are our rank and file cut out for the rise to the top.*" He states that, "a few years ago, I started hearing a lot of people complain about a curious phenomenon: Absolutely nobody wants to move up to the higher ranks in the fire service" (p.24). The trend seems to be more predominant at the higher ranks in the service. Coleman confirms this trend as well. He notes that, many personnel want promotions, but are content once they reach company officer levels. He

points out that, “even the number of people interested in becoming battalion chiefs is dropping” (p.24).

This trend, mentioned by Coleman, is confirmed by the survey results. In question six only 69%, of the 104 respondents, indicated they had any intention of competing for a promotion in the future. These numbers represent a slight increase from those who indicated that they had participated in a promotional process within the past three-years, when only 61% of respondents had participated in a promotional process. These numbers reflect personnel interested in promotion at all levels. The real problem is seen in the low percentage of personnel interested in promotion to the higher ranks.

The survey asked personnel to identify the highest level of promotion to which they aspire. The trend of fewer people being interested in to promotion to the higher ranks is confirmed by the survey results. Above the rank of captain, the number of personnel interested in promotion drops to 52%. Above battalion chief, the percentage drops to 27%, and those interested in deputy chief or above drops to 21%. It should also be noted that one division chief indicated an interest in demoting to captain. The drop-off above company officer level is significant. The following table represents the officers interested in promoting to each rank (see Table 1).

Table 1

Personnel Interested in Promoting to Various Ranks

RANK	Number	Percentage
Captain or Above	68	65%
Battalion Chief or Above	54	52%
Division Chief or Above	28	27%
Deputy Chief	22	21%

Obviously the survey confirms that fewer people are interested in promoting to the higher ranks. Armed with that knowledge, the question is why. Survey question eight asks respondents who are not interested in promotion, to choose among several options to identify why they are not interested. Most of the respondents indicated that they enjoy what they do in their current position. Fifteen people chose this response. Two choices are close behind, with twelve votes each. These choices are not enough difference in pay and frustration with the promotional process. The fourth most popular choice, with eleven selections, is not interested in additional challenges (see Table 2).

Table 2

Reasons for Not Wanting Promotion

Day Work Risk	5
Enjoy Current Position	15
Education/Certification	5
Pay	12
Challenges	11
Frustrated	12
Part-time job	1
Loss of Overtime	3
Other	7

Survey question nine asks the same question as eight, but only for those personnel who are interested in a promotion, but whose aspirations stop below the rank of deputy chief. This is an important distinction, because all deputy chiefs are day work assignments and require a four-year college degree. It should be noted that the rank of division chief also brings a much greater chance of a day work assignment than do any of the positions below that rank. The Department has eleven division chiefs and seven of those positions are staff assignments. This is in comparison to only two of eighteen battalion chief positions being staff jobs that require day work.

Interestingly, in answering question nine the risk of day work was not among the most frequently chosen responses. One possibility is that the almost certainty of getting a day work assignment impacted the responses. The most frequent reason chosen was that personnel enjoy what they do in their current position, followed closely by those who indicated that they are frustrated with the promotional process. No other response came close to the twenty-eight and twenty-seven responses received by these two choices (see Table 3).

Table 3

Reasons Personnel Not Interested in Promotion to at Least Deputy Chief

Day Work Risk	10
Enjoy Current Position	28
Education/Certification	10
Pay	8
Challenges	14
Frustrated	27
Part-time job	1
Loss of Overtime	8
Not Applicable	20
Other	15

Beyond the level of battalion chief the duties become much more administrative. Responses to multiple alarm fires are rotated among the staff officers. Staff division chiefs usually do not respond until an incident goes to a second alarm. At the deputy chief level an incident must go to three alarms before the duty deputy chief typically responds.

The author is not surprised by the indicated frustration with the promotional process. Several years ago, the Department changed the promotional process. In past years, the promotional process consisted of a written test, an oral interview panel, or

some combination of the two. The Department now uses a matchmaker process for all ranks above lieutenant. Personnel have expressed frustration due to not understanding how the matchmaker system is scored. In addition, these same people indicated a frustration with not being able to review the results to know where they fell short. Several officers have requested to review their results, but were denied the opportunity by the Office of Personnel.

2. What methods or strategies can be developed to prepare personnel to assume key leadership roles in the Department?

To address the problem of fewer people wanting promotions, it is important to gain an understanding why people choose not to strive for levels of higher responsibility. The survey information highlighted several areas.

Fire service personnel enjoy what they do working in field positions. In addition, the benefits of shift work can make promotion and particularly the risk of day work unattractive. As Laurich (1995) notes, “the number one reason that personnel did not want a staff assignment was because of the change from twenty-four hour shifts to eight-hour days” (p.12). It is the author’s experience that many personnel view staff assignments as less desirable, because they see the job as less satisfying than responding to emergencies. Several respondents commented on the survey that they joined the fire service to work in the field, not behind a desk. Laurich also found in his research that, many members view staff assignments as “Job Jail” (p. ii). This is a term used by members of the Colorado Springs Fire Department when senior personnel are forced into staff positions. However, the author’s experience is that many personnel who end up

working in staff jobs, either through promotion or light-duty assignments, find that they enjoy them and do get job satisfaction. A number of personnel in the AACoFD currently in staff jobs requested the positions after being temporarily assigned on light-duty. This is a haphazard method of developing interest in staff assignments.

Some departments have developed formal programs to introduce members to staff duties. Laurich (1995) points out that, “many departments are now working toward modeling support for staff divisions. They are also emphasizing the importance of staff experience for career progression, and improving the quality and consistency of the training and orientation for staff positions” (pp. 13-14). Training and orientation are critically important. One method that has gained considerable favor in developing new talent is a mentoring program. Lytle (2001) makes the point that mentoring helps develop self-confidence by giving a prospective officer a safe environment to test new skills (p. 52). Mentoring programs would also provide opportunities for personnel to get a taste of various functions in the department. As Gallagher and Golant (2000) note, people need to know what a job is going to entail and what their personal capacities are before they know if they want to get into it (p. 117).

Personnel also expressed that there was not enough difference in pay to make promotion worthwhile. Without additional information it is difficult to respond to this concern. There was not a clear level chosen in the survey to stop promoting due to pay differences. People choosing this option stopped at every rank above lieutenant. However, some respondents did comment that the possibility of day work was the major factor in not making it worth the pay difference. Other departments have implemented pay differentials for staff assignments, with a varied degree of success. Question eighteen

in the survey asked if respondents believe a pay differential should be provided for staff assignments. Only 41% indicated that working in a staff assignment was deserving of a pay differential. In his study, Laurich (1995) found that more than half the jurisdictions he surveyed offer a pay differential for staff assignments (p. 18). A pay differential may be part of a larger solution, but needs further study. It is certainly not the complete answer, as Ross (1998) found out in his research. In his study Ross found that the City of Tucson offers a $10,000 per year incentive to those in staff positions. He goes on to note that, "clearly pay was not an issue, or if it was . . . $10,000 annually was not enough to work a staff assignment" (p. 15). Pay alone apparently will not solve the problem of finding personnel to willingly assume staff positions.

Another reason identified in the survey was that people did not want the additional challenges of a higher rank. Again, without further study it is difficult to understand why. It could be that the challenges of day work, or the lack of enough difference in pay do not make it worth the extra challenges. These issues are addressed above. Another possibility is that personnel may not feel they have what it takes to meet these challenges. This concern can also be met by using mentoring and educational programs.

Lytle (2001) states in is his article, that mentoring programs give people them an opportunity to live leadership experiences they might otherwise only get to read about in a training manual (p. 53). Mentoring programs offer a chance to gain experience with a low level of risk; your mentor is there to help guide you through the experience, releasing control and authority as you gain knowledge and experience. Laurich (1995) also points out that, people need to be trained and educated in a variety of experiences if we expect

them to become more versatile as their career unfolds (p. 20). In their book, *A Road Map for Success from America's Leading Women Executives*, Gallagher and Golant (2000) interviewed several top female executives. In one such interview, with Sue Swenson of Leap Wireless International, Ms. Swenson states that,

> People are looking for your breadth of experience. To be a senior executive you don't really have to be an expert in every part of the field, but have you been close to it? Have you worked with people who are connected to all parts of the business, so that you at least have some working knowledge of that part of the business? (p. 435)

To meet this need in the fire service people need to work in a variety of divisions to gain an understanding of the department's mission as a whole and how each division meets its part of that mission.

One way to develop the breadth of experience is a rotation policy, where personnel would systematically be rotated between field and staff assignments. Rohr (2000) supports such a move, noting that, "… both the public and the private sector realize the benefits of placing current and future leaders in positions that require new skills and abilities. Both sectors stress the need to identify potential leaders early in an organization." (p. 20) In fact, the mission of the fire service has changed, and I expect will continue to change, over the years. Sample (1996) makes a good point, noting that, "today the new department realizes it was courting disaster by ignoring changing times, including the increased demand for new and varied services…" (p.2). The fire service cannot expect its future leaders to be prepared to deal with the variety of services we

provide if we do not give them some experience in these areas. In his research Rohr (2000) points out that,

> The private and the public sector have realized the benefits of identifying potential future leaders within an organization. A well-planned rotation policy provides an organizational overview, encourages interdepartmental cooperation, brings fresh viewpoints to otherwise stagnant sections of the organization, and promotes flexibility. (Pp. 2-3)

The Orange County Fire Authority has several programs in place to provide education and experience to its future leaders. Rohr comments on these programs, noting that they "include mentoring, officer core classes, and field and staff rotation. …Personnel must work in staff assignments, as well as operations positions, prior to being considered for promotion above the rank of battalion chief" (p. 20). In the survey 55% of the respondents answered that a staff assignment should not be a prerequisite to promotion beyond lieutenant. Similarly, 59% do not believe that staff assignments should automatically be rotated. However, when asked if they would accept a staff assignment to be eligible for future promotions, 59% responded that they would. Clearly, when staff assignments are tied to promotions, the willingness to accept them increases. A rotation policy provides a method to systematically provide a breadth of experience to the officer core. In addition, such a policy might institutionalize staff assignments as a part of the organizational culture. If everyone knew they would have to take their turn in staff assignments, eventually it might be more readily accepted.

Frustration with the promotional process also received a significant number of responses. The matchmaker process is a mystery to most members of the Department. Personnel may have a general understanding of the process, but do not fully understand how the system works. In the past, officer candidates took a written test and were given an opportunity to review it afterwards. This provided them with feedback on the areas where they needed improvement. Personnel who have requested to review the scoring sheets from the matchmaker process have been denied that opportunity. This creates frustration, because candidates do not know where they need to improve. Feedback is necessary to help personnel develop those areas in which they are weak. Gallagher and Golant (2000) make this same point in their book on *Going To The Top.* They state that, "if you've been denied a promotion, ask for more feedback on why. The response will tell you exactly what areas you need to develop" (p.283). We cannot expect personnel to develop their areas of weakness, if we do not give them the feedback they need to identify those areas.

3. Would a formal succession program be beneficial to the Anne Arundel County Fire Department?

Based on the information collected, it appears that a formal succession plan is needed to address many of the reasons personnel choose to not participate in promotional opportunities. The AACoFd would benefit from a program that systematically develops personnel to assume greater responsibility. Baker (1995) makes this point for the fire service in general in his paper on succession planning. He comments that,

> Past practices which involve crisis replacement of critical fire officials must be replaced with careful planning and preparation. Crucial to

> resolving the dilemma of today's fire officers is recognition that preliminary and ongoing officer development is necessary. The responsibility for this development activity must be shared between fire service management and officer incumbents. (pp. 2-3)

Those who wish to be officers must take responsibility for being prepared to lead in the changing role of the fire service. The survey provides evidence that the majority of offices in the AACoFD are willing to share in that responsibility. As noted above, 59% of the respondents expressed a willingness to accept a staff assignment if necessary to be eligible for future promotions. Now management must accept its responsibility and develop a formal plan to develop those officers who want to be a part of the Department's future.

Despite the recognition that officer development is critical, many department's, including the AACoFD have not yet taken steps to address this void. As Baker (1995) notes, "unfortunately, there is a lack of successive planning for fire service officers. Therefore, many fire officers are ill-prepared to effectively perform the tasks of their new positions when promoted" (p. 1). This is true in great part because of the changing role of the fire service manager. In years past, a fire officer's value was determined in his abilities in fire suppression. Today a fire officer must be, first and foremost, a manager of people. Kramer (1989) emphasizes this point noting that, "for a fire department which is labor intensive the 'heart' of the inputs is the personnel component" (p.9-4). Rohr also supports the concept that a fire service manager's role has changed. In his research, Rohr (2000) states, that

> There has been great importance placed on one's technical competence without regard to one's leadership ability. Tomorrow's managers must learn about human relations. In many cases, this can only come from experience dealing with these types of issues. Technical experience is critical, but not at the expense of wisdom and creativity. p. 29

In addition, fire service officers today must also be planners, looking ahead and preparing the department for future service needs. Rohr (2000) makes a point in his research that the success of an organization can be tied to its programs that provide challenges and insight into the future needs of the organization (p. 8). Baker (1995) also reflects this need, noting that, "preparing today's fire officers to effectively manage in an ever-changing and complex environment is fast becoming, or has become, crucial for survival" (p. 2). It is clear that the fire service must change its focus in choosing its officer core. While we still need strong fire ground skills, planning and personnel management skills have become the most critical.

The fire service needs to follow the lead of the private sector and incorporate succession planning into our culture. Much of the private sector recognizes the importance of being prepared to replace key personnel. As Vouglas (1998) points out,

> If succession plans are in place and employee development has been identified as a corporate priority, a void won't exist for long. But without appropriate planning, a vacancy can result in a corporate shakeup as bad as any earthquake and blow through an organization with hurricane force. (p. 10)

The AACoFD has dealt with voids and will be faced with them again if changes are not made to better prepare personnel to fill key leadership roles. As was pointed out earlier, the fire service is a very labor-intensive organization and has taken on new roles. As such, we must take steps to ensure that officers are prepared to lead in a variety of segments of the fire service. As Kramer (1989) states,

> A fire department is composed of component parts, the principle one of which is personnel. A change in personnel may result in a series of chain reactions in other components that could neutralize or negate the intended change or lead to unanticipated consequences in other parts of the organization and impact negatively on the intended programs. (p. 9-4)

The AACoFD needs a systematic approach to preparing its personnel to be the leaders and managers of the future. A formal succession plan seems to be the answer.

DISCUSSION

The AACoFD, like many other departments has used the same civil service system for promotions since its inception. Personnel interested in promotion compete in an examination process and are then placed on a list for promotion based upon their relative score. Unfortunately, in the more complex fire service of today, this system does not seem to be meeting the needs of the Department. In many cases, personnel are no longer interested in promotion. The Department needs to address both personnel qualifications and the interest of personnel in planning for succession.

The retirement or promotion of personnel in key staff positions has often left the Department without a replacement skilled in the particular area in which the void is

created. This is not limited to the AACoFD, but is reflected in many departments, as demonstrated by the information uncovered in this research.

Succession plans are often viewed as a method to prepare someone to fill the top position in an organization. However, the research indicates that the need to plan for replacements occurs throughout the organization. The broader use of a succession plan is supported by Vouglas (1998) in her article *Who's Next.* The article makes the point that succession planning should not just be for CEO's, because the pace of change has accelerated dramatically (p. 11). While the article is written from a business perspective, the research provides a correlation with the fire service in the dramatic pace of change. The same point is made by Buzzotta and Lefton (1997) who remark that, "to maintain leadership continuity an organization must have a comprehensive succession plan. They describe a comprehensive plan as one that "extends well beyond the CEO and top management level to include anyone whose contribution is essential to the organization" (p. 13). Kramer (1989) further supports this point by stating that,

> Management is one of the most urgent professional needs of both the present and the future, … Personnel planning must be aimed not only at junior or subordinate levels in a fire department but also at management levels. … The increasing shortage of management and technical personnel, together with their high cost, has forced many organizations to recognize that qualified personnel must be considered a resource as important as capital. Therefore, an effective personnel planning policy is required to ensure maximum value will be obtained for personnel expenditures in fire departments. (p. 9-12)

As the research pointed out, the fire service is a labor-intensive organization. The largest expenditure in the AACoFD's budget is for personnel costs. To effectively utilize the Department's personnel, we must have a good management team and system in place.

Even with a succession plan in place, we must ensure that personnel are interested in seeking promotions. The decline in interested personnel has been attributed to a number of factors. However, as Coleman (1988) pointed out several years ago that, it is important for a fire department to create an environment that prepares personnel to assume leadership roles (p. 23). Twelve years later, Coleman is still espousing this philosophy. In his later article, Coleman (2000) notes that one of the most important jobs of the chief is to keep the department prepared for transition (p. 40).

Obviously, the research supports having a comprehensive succession plan in the AACoFD. The key is to identify what encompasses a "comprehensive plan" for the Department. Buzzotta and Lefton (1997) do a good job of defining succession planning. As they state, "succession planning is simply a highly specialized form of employee development" (p. 13). The need to develop employees has long been recognized by the fire service. In fact, we spend a great deal of time training and educating our personnel. But, we spend almost all of that time on technical skills training, not personnel management. As Baker (1995) notes, "the fire service is much better at technical training, such as ladder, hose and fire ground techniques, than in the critical skills… such as, judgement, leadership, decision making, and oral communications" (p.20). A greater emphasis needs to be placed on management skills if we expect to improve in the management of our most expensive resource, our people.

The time to start preparing personnel to fill leadership positions is at the outset of their career. The fire service needs to emphasize the importance of all the components of the department in meeting the mission. In addition, fire fighters need to know how they can achieve these leadership roles. As Coleman (1988) states, “recruit firefighters need to be told what the career formula in the fire service looks like when they first enter” (p. 23). It is important to provide a roadmap to success for these new employees. The roadmap must include education and a variety of assignments, both field and staff. In this way we emphasize the need for an employee to be well rounded. Gallagher and Golant (2000) point out that it is imperative to work in all parts of a business to get ahead, as it helps a person gain a good feel for how the company functions. However, they also stress that, “it’s also important to stick with a position long enough to prove yourself and make a difference in the company” (p. 135). In other words, while a diverse background is important, it is also important that the diversity not be garnered simply by position hopping.

Many successful corporations take succession planning very seriously. General Electric (GE), on of the most successful companies, over the long haul, exhibits a propensity for careful succession planning. The latest successor to the CEO position at GE has been being groomed for the position for many years. This grooming included working in a series of positions in various segments of GE’s business. In *The Sun* (2000) article on the succession of Jeffrey Immelt to lead GE, it is clear that his experience in many segments of the business was an important part of the planning process. It is obvious from the article that one of the keys to GE’s success is its careful succession

planning. The future success of the fire service may very well depend on the implementation of comprehensive succession planning.

An important part of the succession plan must address getting personnel interested in assuming staff positions. The answer to this problem seems to be a systematic rotation policy. A systematic rotation policy is needed to develop an organizational culture that makes staff assignments a part of working in the organization. In his research Rohr (2000) points out that,

> A rotation policy for managers is one of the keys to providing managers with a broad base of knowledge and experience as they move into senior level jobs. This is equally true for operations and staff assignments. An organization that does not plan for this will place managers with little overall organizational knowledge in high level positions. p. 23

The rotation policy needs to provide a systematic turnover of personnel at specified time intervals. The rotation needs to be staggered, to avoid removing all the experienced managers simultaneously, and it needs to be based on job complexity. Some staff positions might be suited to rotation after two years, while other more complex or technical positions, might warrant a three-year rotation.

Many departments have attempted to address the problem of interest in staff positions through incentives. Incentives have included differential pay, flex scheduling, and take home cars. These incentive programs have met with limited success. As Laurich (1995) notes, “the effectiveness of the incentives and suggestions can be questioned because the staff assignment problem still continues in the fire service” (p. 15). He then goes on to state that there are other incentives to explore. Specifically, he prefers an

incentive that gives preference toward promotion for those personnel who have staff experience (p. 20). The author believes that the research supports making staff experience a requirement, not just an incentive, for promotion beyond the rank of lieutenant. There is a risk, however, in a forced rotation policy. Most fire departments, including the AACoFD already have personnel forced into staff positions. These generally occur when a vacancy exists in a staff assignment and the next person on the promotion list is forced into the position to get the promotion. In his research Rohr (2000) notes that, "personnel forced into staff positions due to vacancies failed to perform at their previous levels" (p. 21). This has often been the experience in the AACoFD when personnel are forced into a staff assignment.

A systematic rotation policy may also be difficult for some personnel who have long held staff positions. Often they view themselves as irreplaceable because of their unique experience. But as Gallagher and Golant (2000) point out, "if you can't be replaced, you won't be—which means you will never get that promotion. You have to encourage and develop your replacement; you must make it easy for others to improve to move you along" (p. 281). Regardless of whether people are being forced into or out of staff assignments it is important that support, guidance, and recognition is provided. Furthermore, Ross (1998) remarks, recognition and rewards, in terms that are meaningful to the individual, must be provided to personnel whose performance is effective (p. 24). When personnel recognize that the department is willing to support their transition and provides recognition when they meet performance objectives, they will strive to meet those expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The AACoFD needs to implement a formal succession plan that incorporates staff assignment rotation. The changing face of the fire service necessitates a change in the way we develop and promote personnel to the officer ranks. As Baker (1995) notes,

> The missing vital component to having an effective fire officer development program is a formal succession planning model to provide direction to the organization and its aspiring fire officers. This direction would include expectations, processes, and minimum requirements for fire officer candidates. The model must be reasonable, cost effective, include flexibility, and be readily available to potential fire officer candidates. p. 3

The rotation policy should be implemented in conjunction with pay incentives for staff assignments. Providing additional pay could help to ease the transition into a policy requiring personnel to take their turn in these positions.

Providing such a model in the AACoFD will not be without challenges. The reluctance of personnel to endorse a rotation policy and work to make it successful is only one hurdle to overcome. Personnel on light-duty, due to injuries or medical conditions currently occupy many of the Department's staff assignments. Some of these light-duty personnel will never be able to return to a field assignment. This creates a dilemma in that it freezes some of the staff assignments needed to give aspiring officers the breadth of experience needed to meet the goals of a comprehensive succession plan. Anne Arundel County is in the process of reviewing the cases of many of the long-term light-duty personnel and may retire those who have no chance of ever returning to full

duty. While this would open staff assignments for a rotation policy, it will also create a void while inexperienced managers learn to function in their new positions.

Another problem is that there are far fewer staff assignments than there are field positions. In addition, those officers assigned to the emergency medical service bureau, as paramedics, cannot be replaced by just anyone. These positions require certification as a paramedic. A rotation policy that required or gave preference for personnel with staff experience could become discriminatory. Personnel who strive to be promoted could be denied only because they did not get an opportunity to serve in a staff job, due to limited positions or the inability to transfer a qualified person to their position.

One answer to the problem might be an organized mentoring program. Officer candidates, or those who aspire to be officers, could choose to work with a mentor in a staff assignment. The department could support this program in much the same way we do with the paramedic preceptor program. Personnel would work along with their mentor and gradually assume the responsibility in the position. As Lytle (2001) points out in discussing a preceptor program, “the program allows an intern an opportunity to live the leadership experience they might only read about in training manuals” (p. 53). In this program the preceptor need not necessarily replace the mentor, especially those on light-duty, but could be used to fill the vacancy during times of absence for leave or training. An important aspect of this program would be defining a minimum amount of experience to qualify for promotion consideration. Coleman (1988) further states that, “the opportunity should be there for anyone to achieve the higher level of responsibility in the fire service. However, the responsibility to prepare them for those positions is shared between the organization and the individual” (p. 23). The Department needs to create a

balance where those who are interested in higher ranks are afforded opportunities to achieve the balanced experience being sought.

Another important aspect, in the author's opinion, is to make the experience curve required for promotion progressive. In other words, one might not need staff experience for a lieutenant's position. However, they would need at least one staff assignment, or preceptor program, for the position of captain and battalion chief, and least two such experiences for promotion above the rank of battalion chief. A similar process is already in place for education and certification requirements. At each rank the required education and certification level increases.

The development of such a program will require cooperation from not only those already in positions of leadership, but also from the union. The development of a specific program is not possible within the framework of this research project. However, its development is necessary to address many of the problems being faced in the AACoFD. The Department has already taken an important step in this process in requiring that all officers meet the applicable NFPA Fire Officer Certification for the position they desire to hold. The next step is requiring the breadth of experience needed to meet the challenges of today's fire service.

Another component of the succession plan should be the reinstatement of an officer candidate school. At one time the department had a training program specifically designed for officers and those desiring to become officers. Re-instituting this program will go a long way toward demonstrating the Department's commitment to supporting the development of its officers.

In addition to a formal succession plan, the Department must also address the problem of personnel being frustrated with the promotional process. We must find a way to provide feedback to those people who are not successful in the process, or who do not do as well as they expected, so that they can improve. The Department must share the responsibility for improvement by providing personnel with the information they need to make gains in their areas of weakness. The Department needs to work with the Office of Personnel to develop methods that provide needed feedback to promotional candidates. Providing this feedback should help relieve a great deal of the frustration being expressed with the promotional process.

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