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DISTRICT

Succession Planning for the Woodstock Fire/Rescue District

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

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### Abstract

The Woodstock Fire/Rescue District (Illinois) has never had a succession plan for the development of key personnel or the enhancement/replacement of future leadership. In addition, past promotional practices have left many employees with a feeling of disconnection, miss-trust, and with advancement opportunities and the selection process. These issues put WFRD employees, firefighters, and the community at risk, as ineffective succession planning and the lack of professional development at the officer level can have a significant emotional and operational impact on the fire district and the residents. Without planning and corrective action, the result could be a lack of confidence in the Fire District Board and current leadership, as well as, create hardship among the employees. These factors may decrease the ability to adequately serve the employees of the district and community on a day-to-day and longer term basis. The purpose of this research is to identify and develop an implementation strategy to establish a succession plan for the district. The plan will assist in effectively developing, through the use of individual professional development plans, a coordinated approach to improving officers and their current jobs, while at the same time, preparing for future advancement. The research method used was action, and procedures included a literature review, questionnaires, and extensive personal interviews. Results help define what succession planning is and show what training is required of future leaders, the steps needed to develop and implement a plan, and the criteria used for identify those with leadership potential. Recommendations include getting commitment from important stakeholders, selecting educational and other training requirements, identifying senior officer candidates and selecting same, development of over and individual plans, initiation of training and education, and evaluation.

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## Succession Planning for the Woodstock Fire/Rescue District

### Introduction

Over the past several years, there has been no official process for the placement of any chief officer within the Woodstock Fire/Rescue District, including the position of the current Chief. The current Chief was simply selected by the Board of Trustees based on the assumption of knowledge that was needed at the time, fueled by a desire to fill the Chief position from within. The current Deputy Chief was promoted in 2005 from the part-time ranks in which he had previously served as Deputy Chief. The current Division Chief of Training was also promoted from the part-time ranks after an internal search produced only one candidate. While there was a request made to all members to submit a letter of interest for each of these positions, the absence of a formal search and selection process left many members with the impression that decisions had already been made. Prior to the appointment of current employees, and prior to a 1993 consolidation of departments, chief officers were generally selected by vote of the membership. However, during the late 1980's, a trend began to emerge that saw the elected officials transitioning some of the voted positions into appointments by the Board of Trustees and/or City Manager. The appointments only included the Chief of the department. Some Chief positions were also converted from Paid-On-Call status into full-time positions. While some recent promotions have been conducted using a formal testing process, for the most part, the selection and placement of Chief Officers has been random.

Woodstock Fire/Rescue District (WFRD) currently does not have a formal succession plan in place to handle the selection of Chief Officers, which leaves the organization at risk should any of the top three positions suddenly need to be filled. The purpose of this research is to formulate a detailed process to implement a succession plan within WFRD. Research questions

to be addressed will include, (a) What is succession planning; (b) what training is required for future leaders; (c) what steps need to be taken to implement a succession plan; and, (d) what criteria should be used to identify participants for the succession planning process?

The action research method will be used for this project. This research approach is a reflective process which allows for inquiry and discussion to determine what others are doing in terms of implementation, specifically focusing on the subject areas outlined in the research questions. The research will be conducted through feedback and personal interviews. Questionnaires will be distributed to determine what others are doing to address this problem. In addition, a review of printed materials will be used to help provide insight into the practices of other communities. And finally, literature review will be used to determine what other departments and businesses have developed in terms of best practices and strategies. The project will conclude with recommendations on how to implement the succession plan within WFRD.

### Background and Significance

Prior to 1993, WFRD was comprised of three separate departments made up of approximately 30 members each. The three departments, each independent of the other, included the Woodstock City Fire Department, the Woodstock Rescue Squad (a.k.a. the Woodstock Ambulance Department), and the Woodstock Rural Fire Protection District. All three departments were almost completely reliant on Paid-On-Call (POC) personnel for call response, with some unique distinctions. Woodstock City Fire Department (WCFD) served approximately 15,000 residents out of one station, covered approximately 20 square miles, averaged 350 calls per year, and had a Fire Chief that was a paid employee of the City. Woodstock Rescue Squad (WRS) provided ambulance response and transport to Woodstock's residents and contractually

to the rural fire protection district, served approximately 20,000 residents out of one station, covered approximately 85 square miles, averaged 1,000 calls per year, and had a Paid-on-Premises (POP) Program that was used to cover daytime hours. Woodstock Rural Fire Protection District (WRFPD) served approximately 5,000 residents out of one station, covered approximately 65 square miles, averaged approximately 200 calls per year, and also had a fully-paid chief.

All three departments were unique in terms of operating guidelines, policies and procedures, and department make-up. In addition, the departments differed in how Officers were selected. WCFD and WRS were somewhat similar in terms of selection. Most of the Officers were voted in by the membership; however, the WCFD Fire Chief was appointed by the City Manager, and served full-time. The WRS Chief was a part-time employee and elected by the members. Officers for the WRFPD were selected by the Fire Chief and recommended to the Board of Trustees. The Trustees had ultimate approval of the Officers, which differed distinctly from the other two agencies; the City had no involvement in a majority of the officer positions. The City first became involved with the selection of WCFD officers when the first full-time Chief was selected in 1988. Prior to this appointment, the members still voted in the Chief, and were not in agreement that the City should take on this responsibility. The dissention created by this appointment was one of the factors that initiated an effort to change how fire and emergency medical services would be provided within the city limits. That effort led to the consolidation of the three departments in 1993.

This consolidation resulted in the current Woodstock Fire/Rescue District (WFRD). From a technical standpoint, the consolidation was the result of WRFPD annexing the City of Woodstock, therefore assuming responsibility for fire and ambulance services. Functionally, the

three departments combined their operations, including personnel, vehicles, equipment and stations. The consolidation also created the need for organizational and operational changes, which would take place over the following 10 years or more. One of the most significant changes was the reassignment of responsibilities at the chief officer level. The WFRD Board of Trustees immediately addressed the fact that there were now three Chiefs. Two of the Chiefs had been employed full-time by their respective organizations; this obviously complicated matters. While those involved understood the need to identify a single leader, personnel from the original three organizations naturally looked to 'their' Chief as the one in charge. Some of those involved in the consolidation felt strongly that a search should be conducted to find a Chief from outside the organization. Former members of the department, who had left due to the demands of working as career fire officers elsewhere, were being considered as candidates to run the new organization. Of course, the three seated Chiefs from the former departments also had an interest in keeping their positions, full or part-time. Feelings were mixed as to whether or not one of the three former Chiefs should be given the position or if someone outside the organization should be brought in. What was ultimately decided was to appoint an interim Chief Administrator to oversee day-to-day operations for six months or until the Board of Trustees could make a final decision. Under this arrangement, the WRS Chief would oversee emergency medical services, the WFRPD Chief would oversee fire suppression as the Chief of Fireground Operations, and the WCFD Chief would oversee fire prevention and public education, with no role in regards to responding to emergencies. The three Chiefs would report to the Chief Administrator, a position that was filled by the WRS Chief. This person was therefore going to serve two roles.

This arrangement worked as planned for the first six months as the newly consolidated department began operating and training together. To support operations, the Chief

Administrator began work on development of the first combined budget and mid-range plan with regards to personnel, equipment and stations. At the end of the six-month period, a report was presented to the Board of Trustees outlining recommendations over the next two to three years, one of these being that a Chief of the Department be named. Though no specifications were indicated as to how this person should be selected, options of hiring from within or hiring from the outside were both presented. Ultimately, the Board would have the final decision on the process and candidate selection. Though the report was requested by the Board, it did create some tension regarding the future positions of each of the three Chiefs. The Board did decide that they would not be going to the outside for a Chief, which led to positioning by individual candidates and the members of their former organizations. After a lengthy time of deliberation, the Board of Trustees essentially affirmed the temporary structure and granted contracts to the three Chiefs for the temporary positions they held immediately following consolidation. While this at least gave direction to the department, it also allowed the Chief of Fireground Operations to view himself as the Fire Chief or top ranking member of the department, while the organizational structure listed the Chief Administrator as the highest ranking member. Another consequence of this decision was that the former Chief of the WCFD, a 30+ year veteran of the fire service, would now not be allowed to serve in a ranking capacity on a fire or EMS incident. This particular issue was resolved by granting the Director of Fire Prevention and Public Education the rank of Assistant Chief, therefore activating him for response to calls at that rank. Limitations of the current structure began to present themselves almost immediately. When personnel would disagree with the decision of one Chief, they would consult another Chief for a different decision. In addition, the respect of the Chief's was constantly being brought into question because there was no process for determining who was going to run the department.

Even with the most capable person in any position, the quality of the job was tainted due to the absence of any testing or examination process. Personnel did not fail to exploit this fact. Though the three Chiefs did their best to work together, it was difficult to remove all of the tension that had been created during the decision making process.

Addressing the problem faced by WFRD will create leadership challenges with no easy solutions immediately available. The National Fire Academy's Executive Development (ED) and Executive Leadership (EL) course will help the current WFRD leadership in this regard. The ED course highlighted the works of Heifetz and Linsky (2002) who would describe the current situation as an 'adaptive challenge' because it will "require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization..." In order for WFRD to be successful in implementing the necessary changes, employees will have to adopt new attitudes, values, and behaviors. Approaching and leading the change, a major theme of the ED course, will be made easier with the information presented in the course, and through the required reading. The EL course explored succession planning as a key component of the course and provided the author with useful information in terms of justifying the need for action. The EL student manual described succession planning as a "critical element in organizational strategy," and stated that public safety organizations can achieve excellence through a well-trained and competitive workforce. The competitive nature of a workforce is enhanced by well-developed employee development programs. Finally, with regards to significance, succession planning for WFRD will help the organization address the United States Fire Administration's Operational Objectives of reducing the loss of life of firefighters from fires by providing a better trained and capable senior staff, and to respond appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues, by addressing a current and real problem in the fire service and WFRD.

## Literature Review

The literature review was useful in terms of providing supportive information when comparing what fire service agencies and other industries are doing to address succession planning. In addition, though not intended to answer the research questions, the literature review revealed information pertaining to the primary research questions.

Most of the literature that was used for research indicated a need for succession planning based on the aging of workers and the potential absence of an acceptable talent pool to replace the management and leadership that will be retiring over the next several years. However, the problem with WFRD is not due to people leaving the company, but rather due to the immaturity with regards to the seniority of those most likely to fill future senior officer positions. While this difference does occur, the importance of succession planning is still applicable, even if it is for other reasons. Schooner (2010) identifies succession planning as one of the most critical endeavors that organizations undertake, but acknowledges that its use is done for a variety of different purposes, such as development and replacement of key leaders, generation of a talent pipeline, providing learning and development experiences, development of leadership success criteria, and the creation of programs to manage the leadership talent pool. Schooner (2010) describes it as an initiative that focuses on developing critical leadership talent and that best-in-class companies “structure and communicate clear principles, apply specific criteria, and implement a structured, sustained process.” By taking these steps, he feels that companies realize a significant competitive advantage that retains key talent and establishes a list of leaders that help the company fulfill its long-term goals.

With regards to the specific questions for this research, the information analyzed during the literature review supported the areas, or issues, that the questions are based on, including helping to define what succession planning is. Before looking at succession planning specifically, it is important to understand that the process of planning involves taking a look into the future. A typical fire service planning process has three cycles, including a year-to-year plan, a three to five year plan, and a longer-range plan. The year-to-year plan is generally seen in the form of a budget document and supporting detail, the three to five year plan is usually used for capital development, and the longer-range plan is typically a master plan or strategic plan. With regards to succession planning, the annual plan may outline what specific training and educational initiatives are being undertaken and funded, while the three to five year plan will outline the programs that last two or more years, and finally, the master or strategic plan would forecast retirements and the process to fill openings (Coleman, 2003).

In terms of what succession planning is, for years, planning for the succession of top leadership positions was seen as a necessary function due to the eventuality that a senior executive would leave his/her position due to death or retirement. The succession plan was more of an insurance policy to provide for the continuation of business without interruption. More recently, succession planning is seen as a strategic advantage that is necessary to develop and retain key leaders (Fulmer & Conger 2004). The United States Fire Administration (USFA) defines succession planning as “an organized and systemic way to ensure that employees in a particular organization are capable, competent, and willing to replace and/or succeed to strategic roles within the organization. Former United States Fire Administrator Kelvin J. Cochran supports the USFA definition and views succession planning as “The continual process of monitoring and developing internal talent to assure that employees have the knowledge, skills,

and abilities necessary to succeed in future leadership roles.” Cochran (2010) links succession planning directly to professional development, which he describes as the establishment of core competencies, followed by the systematic provision of training and education to meet those requirements. Essentially, effective succession planning must have a professional development component. Daft (1994) believes that succession planning can also be viewed as a process used to move people into higher levels of the organization. The plan can apply to specific individuals that have the potential to become top-level managers, or, those positions two to four levels below the CEO. The succession plan should identify current and future requirements for the top-level positions, determine what employees are available for advancement and their state of readiness in terms of moving into those top positions.

The literature review revealed training concepts that included the need for broad based training that includes formal education (Associate and Bachelor degree programs), fire service leadership classes (Executive Fire Officer Program, Fire Officer III), additional technical training for incident scene management, and other training opportunities such as mentoring and shadowing. While the specific programs may be different, the literature review from non-fire service sources supported the general concept of formal education, industry specific leadership programs, and enhanced technical training. In addition to education, training, and mentoring, the benefit of on-the-job experience cannot be understated. In their Organizational and Professional Development in the Fire Service program Building the Bench Strength of Fire Agencies, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) outlines what works for development as being a mix of ten percent education, twenty percent mentoring, and seventy percent experience. With specific regards to experience, the IAFC discusses the importance of assigning jobs that involve new challenges for individuals as that is where most of the difficult jobs skills are learned

(strategy, planning). The IAFC also describes the jobs that are least likely to teach as straight upward promotions, repetitive assignments, and jobs that do not include true challenges (IAFC, 2010). In an article for HR Strategy magazine, Fulmer (2005), supports the job assignment experience concept and lists it as one of the four major common factors that best practice organizations use for succession planning activities. “They (the best practice organizations) believe that the most important developmental activity is job assignments or work experience, so they spend considerable time balancing the organization’s need to fill vacant positions with assignments that will help key people grow and develop their potential.” In a series on how organizations select and develop future leaders, Building Your “Bench Strength,” Koning (2010) describes the approach that best practice organizations use to develop their managers and leaders as needing to emphasize on-the-job development, create progressive work assignments, carefully design assignments, individualize development, and help managers make crucial connections. In a series on business concepts for fire departments, Altawil (2010), a Human Resource leader, discussed succession planning and training for fire departments. He acknowledges the need for excellent technical skill, but advises that it is not enough and that managers must be able to lead, organize, strategize, and communicate well. In addition, though different from corporate business leaders, fire department leaders are forced to take on tasks such as budgeting, staffing, organizational development, training, and general administration, and other activities that are generally done by specialists in the corporate setting. In order to be successful at accomplishing these tasks, fire department managers and leaders must have knowledge in these areas. The need for this knowledge must be factored in when considering the professional development needs of a senior officer.

Implementation steps for a succession plan begin with buy-in from the organization at many levels. In addition, planning should be undertaken by a committee that has representatives from the various levels of the organization. Fulmer and Conger (2004) recommend six traits of a successful system. First is to keep the process simple and easy to use; second, make the system developmentally oriented rather than replacement oriented; third, actively involve the top players of the organization; fourth, make sure the plan identifies gaps in talent and “linchpin” positions; fifth, have the plan monitor the process and enable the company to ensure that the right people are moving into the right jobs at the right time and that gaps are spotted early; and, finally, build in continual reinvention (Fulmer & Conger, 2004). Cochran (2010) believes that succession planning starts at the top, and it should drive professional development. He identifies common attributes of succession planning as the following: not a stand-alone ad hoc committee; embedded with professional development activities; chief officer deeply involved; chief officer and company officers evaluated on their contributions to the organization-wide efforts. Other aspects that the plan should include are opportunities for job rotation and visibility, and that each rank should be the training officer for the rank below. Rothwell, et al (2005), in the book, *Career Planning and Succession Management*, write that an effective organizational succession planning process can be used as a road map for action and outline the process as follows: 1) Clarify the CEO’s expectations; 2) establish competency models and value models; 3) conduct multi-rater, full-circle assessment; 4) establish a performance management system; 5) establish potential assessment; 6) establish a means of ongoing individual development planning; 7) implement individual development plans; 8) establish a competency inventory; 9) establish individual and organizational accountability; and, 10) evaluate results. This 10-step process is

meant to be a long-term, systemic, approach to developing a talent pool for future leadership positions.

Criteria for identifying future leaders is different than training as it relates to the criteria that will be used to identify leadership potential to help determine employees that will be supported with regards to completing the training needed to serve in a senior officer position. The selection criteria will depend greatly on what the union members and board of trustees want to see with regards to future leaders of the district. To aid in arriving at a consensus between the two parties, information discovered in the literature review will be presented that can be used to initiate dialogue. For example, the IAFC, in a presentation *Organizational and Professional Development in the Fire Service*, *Building the Bench Strength of Fire Agencies*, states that, when considering how to identify future leaders, most competencies are the same about eighty-five percent of the time and that strategic thinking is strategic thinking, perseverance is perseverance, and so on. What generally changes is how much each competency matters, which can vary for each particular job, level, function, and organization. CPS Human Resource Services recommends that it is important to involve those employees that have a real chance at serving in leadership positions, as the professional development that accompanies succession planning is a costly proposition. Though this may not include all employees, CPS states that the process must ensure that “every employee with leadership potential is fairly and thoroughly considered for participation.” In addition, CPS acknowledges that the selection process results in a diverse group of potential leaders, and that in a public agency, it may be necessary to conform to certain merit system standards that make the process fair and open. The Red Ribbon Report, *Leading the Transition in Volunteer and Combination Departments*, states that “officer promotions should be based on certification, tenure, experience, and proficiencies in technical skills as well as soft

skills, such as interpersonal communications” (IFCA, 2005). Charan (2008) suggests that people think they know how to spot a leader, or leadership qualities, but feels that the focus is generally on the highly visible attributes and skills, such as charisma, public speaking ability, and the motivation to succeed. He recommends that to identify true leadership potential, one should consider a person’s actions, decisions, and behaviors. Areas that can be applicable to the fire service include: ambition, is it for personal gain or the betterment of the organization; is success viewed from a personal standpoint, i.e., what was the person’s contribution, or related to bringing a team together to accomplish a goal; is there curiosity about areas outside of the person’s expertise; can the person articulate how to do the job of the level above them, two levels above them; is learning continuous; is the person passionate about leading, or is it just talk? Rothwell (1994) outlines a variety of ways to assess individual potential, which he describes as determining if someone “has what it takes” to serve in positions of leadership. Identifying potential should be linked with professional development activities that can ultimately lead to advancement for an individual employee. Rothwell contends that it is important to identify the employees with high potential and that currently serve as high performers to help create an inventory of future leaders and offers a couple of ways to conduct a process. First is *global assessment*, which involves the current senior executives identifying people under them that they feel, have potential as future leaders. Though this approach can be done quickly and easily, it can also be ineffective due to bias, and or an unfamiliarity with the employee due to a lack of quality time together, i.e., the boss and employee do not really work together. Another is *success factor analysis*, which can be done by the employee’s boss, in cooperation between boss and employee, or by the employee themselves. Through evaluation of the organizations critical needs, which can be determined by the senior leadership, and/or through involvement of line personnel, a list

of factors needed to be successful at a leadership position, are developed. Potential future leaders are then evaluated based on the list of success factors and scored to determine if they (the employee) have high or low potential of success.

The literature review supported the validity of the research questions. Further, the review of written material suggested the need to determine what implementation steps need to be taken to develop a succession plan for WFRD. In addition, the literature review provided general oversight/insight into what training should be required for a candidate to be considered for a senior officer position; what types of competencies or criteria might be used when identifying the employees that will be included in professional development activities. Therefore, it is prudent to proceed with the research using methods such as further analysis of the literature; specifically the information pertaining to how other departments and/or other entities (public and private) are handling succession, and their implementation strategies. Additionally, survey(s) instruments, and personal interviews will be employed.

### Procedures

The procedures include a review of written materials from private industry and the fire service; internal and external surveys; and personal interviews. To identify applicable written sources, an internet search was conducted using key words and phrases such as 'succession planning', 'succession planning in the fire service', 'professional development', and 'officer development'. The specific key words for were used to try and identify information sources on succession planning within private industry and the fire service. The same process was used for searches completed at the local public library and the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center. Obtaining written material and policies and procedures from other departments began by

identifying fire departments that were comparable to WFRD. The information was either downloaded or the department was contacted with the request for information. The information was beneficial in assessing how other departments fill senior officer positions, what their specific training requirements are, what specific attributes are desired of employees that lend themselves to being good senior officers, and what types of development processes were utilized within the fire service and private industry.

A survey (Appendix A) of senior fire officers from within the State of Illinois and across the nation was conducted. Data was collected on: whether or not departments had a succession plan in place, the training experience desired of employees interested in advancement, and whether respondents felt senior officers should come from within or the outside. A review of applied research projects and fire service literature assisted in the development of survey questions. For example, if multiple sources mentioned the importance of a particular educational program, a survey question would be developed to ask respondents to rank the importance of that program when compared to others. Once the questions were developed in draft form, they were presented to a select group of WFRD officers for review. The questions were acceptable as presented with minor changes made for clarity. The survey questions were entered into Survey Monkey and a link emailed out through various groups and associations. In total, 560 surveys were completed. In addition to the external survey, an internal survey (Appendix B) was presented to WFRD employees. The development of questions, validation of questions, and distribution were the same as for the external survey, with some of the questions being specific to WFRD employees. 57 WFRD employees responded to the survey, which is equivalent to approximately 60% of the employees.

Individual meetings were held with select WFRD employees to elicit information regarding how they would like to see senior officer positions filled in the future. The primary focus group consisted of current WFRD career officers. They are part of the union, and as such, will likely be the only employees eligible for promotion. Sessions were scheduled at convenient times for the employees involved, and all were asked three open-ended questions: (1) What qualifications should a senior officer have, (2) would you be interested in being promoted to a senior officer position, if yes, when; and, (3) what types of other support activities should be offered? When responding to question 3, a prompt was provided if the employee had limited knowledge of other support activities, such as mentoring or job shadowing.

Additional personal interviews were held with senior officers of other fire departments, senior officials from other governmental entities, and senior management personnel from private industry. Senior officers from other fire departments were selected from those that responded to the survey, and by contacting departments from the general region, and through established relationships with senior managers from the surrounding area. Once a list was compiled, an email was sent to identify a convenient date and time, and the interview was conducted over the phone. The final list of interviewees included: Retired Chief Patrick Kenny, Hinsdale (IL) Fire Department; Retired Chief Robert Buhs, Orland Park Fire Protection District (IL); Assistant Chief Joseph Krueger, McHenry Township Fire Protection District (IL); Fire Chief Mike Falese, Bartlett Fire Protection District (IL); Fire Chief Tim Sashko, Mundelein Fire Department (IL); City Manager Tim Clifton, City of Woodstock; Michael Eesley, President, Centegra Health System (IL). Some questions were sent to interviewees prior to the actual interview, while others were delivered during the interview. The questions included: (a) Do you use succession planning within your organization? (b) What types of professional development do you use? (c) What

formal education is required for senior management (officer) positions? (d) Do you feel that your successor will come from within?

## Results

The results section will be presented according to the research questions, beginning with what succession planning is. Highlighted for each question will be specific information found in the analysis of requirements by other agencies, responses to survey questions from internal (within WFRD) and from external sources, and the opinions expressed during personal interviews. With regards to what succession planning is, it can be defined as, “a process for identifying and developing internal people with the potential to fill key leadership positions in the company (Wikipedia, 2010).”

Training for future leaders can come from a variety of sources, including, but not limited to, formal education, fire service programs (i.e., Executive Fire Officer Program), certification programs (i.e., Fire Officer III or IV), on-the-job experience, shadowing, and mentoring. It is important to understand what job aspects are viewed as most important before determining what type of training is best for future leaders. For example, 561 fire service professionals were surveyed about the most important aspect of a senior officer’s job. A significant number of respondents indicated that human resources management and technical capabilities, such as incident scene management, were most important and the strategic planning and budgeting and financing were least important. A breakdown of the 561 respondents is as follows: Human resource management 31.5% (170); incident scene management 30.0% (162); strategic planning 22.3% (122); and, budgeting and financing 18.6% (99). Interestingly though, a side-by-side comparison for all results found that 191 (35/4%) felt that technical capabilities was the least

important skill for a senior officer. The external survey also found, as it relates to training for future leaders, that formal education, such as a bachelors or master's degree, is most desirable when preparing future leaders. 262 respondents, 46.1%, indicated formal education as most important, with the Executive Fire Officer Program seen as very beneficial as well (40.6%). Respondents strongly felt it least important for a senior officer candidate to have the Chief Fire Officer Designation.

Internally, 100 members of WFRD were asked to complete the survey with 57 responses. When considering the question of training for future leaders with regards to the job(s) viewed as most important for a senior officer, technical capabilities, such as incident scene management, was the number one choice for 27 (48.2%) of those responding. Strategic planning (33.9%) and human resource management (30.4%) were viewed as the next most important aspects. Budgeting and financing was viewed as the least important skill. The internal survey found no clear number one choice as it relates to training for future leaders. The Executive Fire Officer Program and Fire Officer III were seen as most beneficial, tying as the number one choice of all respondents. Formal education, such as a bachelor's or master's program was not seen as desirable for preparing future leaders, and in fact, was viewed as one of the least important preparatory steps in senior officer development. Respondents to the internal survey also felt strongly that Chief Fire Officer Designation was the not important for a senior officer.

With regards to the technical aspects of the senior officer's job, the survey results showed that fire service personnel *outside* of WFRD feel that technical capabilities was the least important attribute for a senior officer, while those *within* WFRD saw it as the most important. Progressive fire service experience would allow a fire officer to gain these technical capabilities

as they served in various ranks of a fire department. When considering this question, 95.0% of respondents, internally and externally, feel that a senior officer must come up through the ranks.

When considering the steps needed to implement a succession plan, the opinions of fire service personnel with regards to whether or not a successor should come from within or from outside of the organization should be considered. Although this research is done in the context that the successor will come from within, the steps taken to accomplish this goal will be influenced by the opinions of those affected. For example, 83.0% of the WFRD employees felt that the successor should come from within, and that the department should have a succession plan (either written or unwritten). Externally, 68.8% felt that senior officers should come from within, and a similar number (68.2%) felt that this will actually occur. In addition, an overwhelming number of internal and external respondents (98.2 % and 98.4% respectively) feel that there should be a process that prepares personnel to succeed senior officer positions, which should be considered as a step in the process. Within that preparation, 46.4% of WFRD employees feel that a bachelor's degree should be required. Considering the level of importance placed on formal education, it should be included in the preparation of personnel for senior officer positions.

Based on input from survey respondents, the criteria for identifying future leaders should include time served in the ranks below senior officer positions. Over 90% of respondents, internally and externally, feel that a future leader should have progressive fire service experience or should have come up through the ranks. In terms of specificity, while WFRD employees feel that future leaders should come up through the ranks, more than 80% feel that it should not simply be from the rank below. In addition to the fire service experience, the majority of

respondents (83.0% internally and 68.8% externally) feel that future senior officers should come from within the department.

The personal interviews offered invaluable information pertaining to the research. , While the interviewees from non-fire service organizations indicated a high use of succession planning, those working within the fire service reported that it is not as prevalent. Those currently employed discussed the absence of any formal succession planning, and the retired chiefs indicated that although their replacements did come from within the department, this was not due to a succession plan (Buhs, Falese, Sashko, Kenny, 2010). The fire service responses were supported by the external survey in that the majority felt that their successor would come from within, but that no firm direction had been established to ensure that would happen. Most departments had no succession plan and if there was a plan, it was informal and unwritten. According to the interviewees, the types of professional development used in the private sector versus that used in the public sector should be very similar. For instance, all interviewees discussed the importance of having mentoring relationships, using job shadowing, having personnel fill a variety of positions within the organization, and the assignment of projects as a means of development. With regards to including formal education, all interviewees agreed that it must coincide with, or be a part of, succession planning. At the very least, a senior officer would need a bachelor's degree, with a master's degree preferred for the position of deputy chief and above. When discussing the positions with non-fire service professionals, it was agreed that positions such as Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and Chief Operating Officer (COO) correlated with the position of deputy chief and above, so the term chief officer was synonymous. The survey results indicated that the majority of respondents, both within (83.0%) and outside (68.2%) of WFRD, feel that senior officer positions will be filled from within. The personal

interviews suggested somewhat different opinions. While many thought that this was plausible and did in fact agree with the need for succession planning, there was no absolute agreement that it is always appropriate to fill senior officer positions from within the department. Some felt that succession planning was important so that personnel could move up within the organization, and to make them better at their current positions. There was also a strong opinion that sometimes it is best to bring a person in from the outside. For example, Woodstock City Manager Timothy Clifton (2010), who was brought in from the outside, felt that his replacement should also be brought in from the outside to help avoid status quo. While Woodstock does develop employees to assume a higher level in the organization, it is done to enhance their personal capabilities, which can provide the employees with opportunities inside and outside of the organization. In addition, Mr. Mike Eesley (2010), President of Centegra Health Systems, discussed the presence of a negative feeling towards succession planning within hospital systems as it sometimes results in the development of personnel that end up getting recruited by other agencies.

These results will be useful in terms of identifying specific actions that need to take place to implement a succession plan for WFRD. The next step is to discuss the results and then formalize recommendations for creation of the plan.

### Discussion

This section will be used to evaluate the information obtained through the Literature Review, Procedures, and as presented in Results. Information presented in this section will be organized and presented according to the research questions, beginning with what succession planning is. Although the term succession plan implies that a plan is in place to allow the smooth replacement of vacant positions, it is more than just determining who will take the place of a

senior officer when they choose to move on. While succession planning in a fire department can span all levels, including entry level positions, it is the professional development part of succession planning that must receive the greatest attention. In order to have an effective plan in place and acknowledge the reality that anyone, at any point in time, may take on a new role, the planning must have a more broad focus and prepare more than one individual to take on a certain position. By taking this approach, it creates healthy competition for positions within any organization. At the same time, it can raise the level of knowledge, skill, and ability of all positions within an organization, making the entire organization more productive. Though the term “succession planning” can be defined, it is the actual process of employee or professional development within succession planning that is most important. Ultimately, succession planning for WFRD will be the process of identifying key individuals within the organization that have the greatest leadership potential, and developing those employees to take on a greater role with regards to leading and managing the District.

Training for the future leaders of the department must be broad-based and include more than just formal education. The training must start the first day of employment and all employees must be continuously challenged to improve their level of training and education. One thought with regards to training, as it relates to formal education, is to consider providing additional preference points in the career hiring process for formal education. While it may not be realistic to require an associate’s degree, it is certainly plausible to grant points for educational credit hours above and beyond those earned for fire service certifications. The next step could be to require an associate’s degree, in addition to Fire Officer I certification, to be promoted to the rank of lieutenant. Though a challenge, raising the required level of education for lower ranks inherently raises the level of education for the upper ranks. The rank of captain can be equally

adjusted to include a bachelor's degree, in addition to Fire Officer II. Raising education requirements will also allow for professional development to be phased in throughout the employee's career. Finally, in addition to Fire Officer III, a senior officer should be required to complete the Executive Fire Officer Program. This worthwhile program is something that could be completed after promotion to the senior officer position to allow a person time to accomplish this time-intensive class.

The training process should also include time spent at lower ranks, which can be accomplished simultaneously with the formal education and certification outlined previously. While moving through the ranks, each identified aspiring senior officer should also be assigned a mentor, be given shadowing opportunities, and also acquire experience in management roles. Mentoring can be accomplished within or from outside of the organization and would be focused on professional development and guidance for handling new challenges faced with greater responsibility. Shadowing can be done for project or position management, such as a captain being shadowed by a lieutenant for the process of buying a new ladder truck. Shadowing can also be carried out during scene management; a captain may ride-along with the shift commander from a busier community or work with an Incident Management Team. Opportunities for management experience can be on a specific project such as remodeling a station, program management such as EMS Officer, or overseeing the operations at a specific station.

The steps needed to implement a succession plan include getting support from current employees, which has essentially occurred. More than eighty percent feel that a succession plan is needed. There is, however, the opinion of the career firefighters union to consider. While the majority of union members feel that a succession plan is needed, the board has some concerns about having future senior officers come from within. This issue will most likely be resolved,

however, there will be many stipulations placed on the process that could make it difficult to identify prospective senior officers in a manageable number. The problem that will result is the lack of funding to be able to provide legitimate development opportunities. For example, if all union members are given money for professional development, there may not be enough to fund a bachelor's degree program for all. If this is the case, a lower seniority prospect that could have been a legitimate senior officer candidate may not be given an opportunity for professional development. Should this issue be adequately addressed, the next step would be to identify the educational and certification requirements desired for a senior officer. Following this, a process has to be undertaken that identifies key employees that are eligible to be a part of the development program. The reason for outlining the educational and certification requirements first is so that potential candidates would have an understanding of what they are committing themselves to complete. Once the candidates are identified, a professional development plan would be developed for each individual, followed by the employee beginning to gain the education and/or certification. Simultaneously, each individual would be assigned a mentor, be scheduled for shadowing opportunities, and be assigned additional management activities.

Relative to the criteria used for consideration in the process, it is important to fully understand the required input of the collective bargaining unit (union). Should the union be in agreement, it is important to have a process in place whereby all interested employees would be given an opportunity to participate. It is not realistic to send every employee to every class that would be required of a senior officer; it is important that they all be given the opportunity to be selected into a professional development program. Attributes that would be tested include leadership, problem solving, critical thinking, interpersonal communication, group dynamics, and written/oral communications capabilities. One criterion that could be a little contentious

within WFRD is the current employee classification of senior officer candidates. Because WFRD operates as a combination model, there are career and part-time employees. Some of the part-time employees have served as officers within WFRD, have served as career officers in other departments, or have a combination of experience in these areas. Though the majority of employees feel that future senior officers should come from within, they are divided with regards to the question of employee classification. While 54.5% of employees feel that senior officers should be a career employee, 45.5% feel that both employee groups should be given the opportunity. It is the author's opinion that senior officers should be a career employee, and that the candidates should come up through the ranks.

The information obtained at this point provides the basis for making recommendations as to how a succession plan can be created for WFRD. It outlines the levels of education and certification required by senior officers, provides when and how candidates for a professional development process will be identified, and utilizes information provided by the succession planning process that will make WFRD more effective and better able to serve its residents.

### Recommendations

WFRD employees agree that a succession plan is needed for the department. Exactly what the plan looks like and the intended purpose is an area of debate within WFRD, and also within the fire service at large and within private industry. Doing nothing and leaving it to chance is clearly not a viable option for any organization. To that end, it is important to develop and implement a plan that seeks to ensure a positive future for WFRD. Based on the belief that the process of succession planning would be beneficial and that further officer development would have distinct advantages even in the absence of a succession plan, it is logical to conclude

that the development of a plan is right for WFRD. This conclusion is supported by the literature review and research conducted for this project, and by current senior officers that have been involved in similar processes. For example, Mr. Mike Eesley, President and CEO of Centegra Health Systems summarized the succession planning process as more of an employee development process than a plan to place a certain individual into top management positions. With the concept of developing a succession plan being fundamentally sound, the following recommendations are proposed.

Implementation steps include: commitment from the union board/membership; selection of educational/certification components; development of components to identify potential senior officer candidates; identification of potential senior officer candidates; complete process to identify senior officer candidates; initiation of training; sustained mentoring, shadowing, and management opportunities; and evaluation. *Commitment from the union board/membership* was initiated as a part of the research project, because the union will have to be a major partner in this effort. However, it is important to revisit the issue with the union, and gain a Memorandum of Understanding on how the process will be completed. *Selection of educational/certification components* will be done in accordance with the specific requirements outlined later in this section. *Development of components to identify potential senior officer candidates* will be done in conjunction with the union, and will include a review of assessment center components used for senior officer promotional processes. *Identification of potential senior officer candidates* will also be done in conjunction with the union, and will likely be very similar to a senior officer promotional process. One primary difference will be to use senior officers from within the general geographic region in order to keep cost at a minimum. *Complete process to identify senior officer candidates* will be done in a relatively timely manner so that training can be

initiated as soon as is reasonably possible. This is due to the time it will take for the candidates to complete the education and certification. *Initiation of training* will, as indicated in connection with the last component, be initiated as soon as possible due to the length of time it will take to get personnel through the education and certifications. *Sustained mentoring, shadowing, and management opportunities* will require the identification of mentors, the advisors that the candidates will shadow, and management projects. Mentors will be considered from both within and from outside the organization, while advisors will likely come from the outside only. Management projects can come from within and outside of the organization. For example, if a candidate wanted to be involved in overseeing a community service project that would certainly be considered. *Evaluation* will be ongoing, but must at the very least, include regular feedback from the mentors, advisors, and/or partners involved with the management projects.

*Selection of educational/certification components* will be completed with regard to the opinions expressed from internal and external sources, and by the private industry partners that were interviewed during the research process. Formal education requirements will be a bachelor's degree for any person interested in working in a senior officer position. In terms of the specific program, there are a few available that are accessible to WFRD employees. The Southern Illinois University program is the most popular, in part, because classes are held in neighboring Lake County, Illinois, and offers a schedule that recognizes the uniqueness of a 24/48-hour shift employee. The State of Illinois Fire Officer (FO) III program is also available to WFRD employees, but will require a little more travel as it is only held in one location, which is about 90 minutes from Woodstock. The FO III program runs over a two-year period, with a new class starting in January of odd numbered years. Though this program was selected as the second most important with regards to officer preparation by WFRD employees, it will also be difficult

to enroll personnel due to the manner in which the program is offered. Because a new class starts every other year, it would take at least four years to have six candidates complete the program. The Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) is being recommended for those that are actually promoted into a senior officer position. Though it was selected by WFRD employees as the most important with regards to preparing a senior officer, it will be extremely challenging to have all candidates complete the program prior to WFRD completing a senior officer selection process. Though the department may be successful in enrolling candidates, the inclusion in the program would make it very difficult for a person to complete any other training or education. Identified as most important by external survey respondents, senior officer candidates would instead first complete a bachelor's degree program, followed by the FO III program, before moving on to the EFOP. An exception to this would be a candidate that had already completed a bachelor's program, that candidate would be sent through the FO III program and then considered for EFOP.

Though not an educational component, it is important to expand on the recommendation of mentoring and job shadowing. While there are capable personnel within WFRD to act as mentors for aspiring senior officers, it is important to understand that these personnel may be competing for the same positions. In addition, the mentoring role being filled from the outside provides an opportunity for a WFRD employee to gain a perspective that may not be consistent with current operations and philosophies. The same philosophy must also be used for shadowing partners. Shadowing opportunities should come from both within and from outside of the organization. Though valuable opportunities may come from the inside, it is important to seek out other fire departments to partner with, as well as non-fire service organizations.

The recommendations in this section, along with the action plan developed in conjunction with the union (Appendix C) will aid in the development of a succession plan for WFRD. The absence of this effort leaves to chance the ultimate selection of some of the most important positions within the department. By following through on the recommended action, WFRD will demonstrate a willingness to do what it takes to prepare the department and the employees for the future. At the very least, the training, planning, and interaction between the union and WFRD administration will better prepare career employees to handle every-day incidents and any future challenges that the department will face. The more capable WFRD is with regards to day-to-day operations and future challenges will help to ensure better service for the residents.

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Appendix A: External Survey

1. Rank the importance of the following in preparing individuals for senior officer positions, with 1 being most important and 4 being least important. You may use each number only once.

	1	2	3	4
Formal Education (Bachelors/Masters)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Executive Fire Officer Program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fire Officer III	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chief Fire Officer Designation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. Do you feel that a senior officer should have progressive fire service experience (i.e., "come up through the ranks")?

Yes

No

3. Do you feel that senior officer positions should be filled from within?

Yes

No

4. Do you feel that your successor will come from within?

Yes

No

Unknown

5. Has the decision already been made that your successor will come from the inside?

Yes

No

Unknown

6. Has the decision already been made that your successor will come from the outside?

Yes

No

Unknown

7. Does your department have a succession plan?

- Yes, a formal written plan
- Yes, but in concept only (no formal written plan)
- No, but a successor has already been identified
- No

8. Are senior officers in your department required to have formal education?

- No
- Yes, an Associate 's Degree
- Yes, a Bachelor 's Degree
- Yes, a Master 's Degree

9. Do you feel that it is important for the department to prepare personnel to take senior officer positions?

- Yes
- No

10. Rank the following in order of importance as it relates to senior officer positions with 1 being the most important and 4 being the least important (use each number only once).

	1	2	3	4
Budget and Financing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Human Resource Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Technical Capabilities (incident scene management)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Strategic Planning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix B: Internal Survey

1. Rank the importance of the following in preparing individuals for senior officer positions, with 1 being most important and 4 being least important. You may use each number only once.

	1	2	3	4
Formal Education (Bachelors/Masters)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Executive Fire Officer Program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fire Officer III Chief Fire Officer Designation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. Do you feel that a senior officer should have progressive fire service experience (i.e., "come up through the ranks")?

- Yes
- No

3. Do you feel that senior officer positions should be filled from within?

- Yes
- No

4. Do you feel that senior officer positions should be filled from:

- Part-time Ranks
- Career Personnel
- Both

5. Should senior officer positions be simply filled from the rank below?

- Yes
- No

6. Do you feel that a decision has already been made with regards to who will fill future senior officer positions?

- Yes
- No

7. Should the department have a succession plan?

- Yes, a formal written plan
- Yes, but in concept only (no formal written plan)
- No, but a successor has already been identified
- No

8. Should senior officers be required to have formal education?

- No
- Yes, an Associate 's Degree
- Yes, a Bachelor 's Degree
- Yes, a Master 's Degree

9. Do you feel that it is important for the department to prepare personnel to take senior officer positions?

- Yes
- No

10. Rank the following in order of importance as it relates to senior officer positions with 1 being the most important and 4 being the least important (use each number only once).

	1	2	3	4
Budget and Financing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Human Resource Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Technical Capabilities (incident scene management)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Strategic Planning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix C

**Action Plan**

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>COMPLETION</b>
<b>Commitment from the union board/membership</b>	Gaining the support of the union board and membership with regards to process and criteria	February 1, 2011
<b>Selection of educational and certification components</b>	Work with the union and the board of trustees to reach an agreement on what senior officers will be required to obtain prior to and after promotion	March 1, 2011
<b>Development of components to identify potential senior officers</b>	Work with the union to develop criteria that will be used to identify those employees that will participate in an accelerated professional development process	April 1, 2011
<b>Identification of potential senior officer candidates</b>	Conduct an application process, or something similar, that will identify those employees that are interested in future senior officer positions	May 1, 2011
<b>Complete process to identify senior officer candidates</b>	Conduct an assessment center like process, using agreed upon assessors, to identify four to six employees that will	June 1, 2011

	participate in the accelerated professional development	
<b>Initiation of training</b>	Develop individual education and certification plans for each employee, and initiate training as soon as possible	July 1, 2011 and ongoing
<b>Sustained mentoring, shadowing, and management opportunities</b>	Assign a mentor to each senior officer candidate; identify shadowing and management opportunities; assign opportunities to each candidate  <b>Will be done in conjunction with other items.</b>	July 1, 2011 and ongoing
<b>Evaluation</b>	Review and reporting (at least annually) to union and board of trustees.	January 1, 2012

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