

Examination of the Promotional Process within the Fire Service

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to empirically determine if the current assessments that fire departments use to promote its members to management positions is the most effective and efficient method possible. A thorough review of policies, procedures, and administrative functions that surround the promotional process within the fire service will be conducted. The need to have a better prepared management team ready for the increasingly complex and demanding profession has been made progressively more apparent. Research and interviews were conducted in order to survey current assessment processes and promotional testing. Through research it was determined that few departments take the time to perform the due diligence on the tests, guidelines, and development programs that will play a major role in determining who will be selected for positions within their organizations. The recommendations include the creation and implementation of mandatory officer development training prior to being eligible for assessment and an increase in educational and training requirements in steps for company officers through the rank of fire chief.

Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Table of Contents 3

Introduction..... 4

Background..... 5

Literature Review..... 6

Methods 10

Results 11

Discussion 15

Recommendations..... 17

Reference List 19

Appendix A... ..21

Introduction

The fire service has changed drastically since bucket brigades of the 1700's. Beginning with the first fire department within the United States, criteria was established to select who would be in charge of manpower, equipment, and the station. Historically, tenure or the length of time and a common vote was the deciding factor; these individuals were thought to have the most experience and knowledge which qualified them above any other to lead a fire company, station, or department. This, like many things, has changed considerably; departments no longer seek out those that have been around the longest or choose the most popular person for supervisory positions. There is a definite revolution sweeping the country as the new leaders of the modern fire service must now be able to adapt and evolve to the increasing demands for service. This all being done while responding to a larger and more diverse response matrix with decreasing budgets for training, apparatus, equipment, and manpower. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), there are over 1.15 million firefighters within the United States; of those approximately thirty percent are career while the remaining seventy percent is made up of volunteers. Currently, there are just over thirty thousand fire departments throughout the United States of America. Each of these departments can be recognized as its own individual jurisdiction, with a staff of firefighters and their respective chief or equivalent. (NFPA, The US Fire Service, 2009) Each department establishes its own specific rank structure from firefighters, middle management, all the way up to a fire chief. Further, all departments have created their own benchmarks and requirements for promotions of their respective members to a higher level of rank.

There are a broad range of perspectives on whom, what, and how individuals should be chosen to lead others during tedious day to day undertakings such as station chores, maintaining

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

equipment, apparatus, and making decisions that place others in harm's way, such as mitigating an Immediately Dangerous to Life or Health (IDLH) atmosphere. It is evident that the chosen individuals must be prepared to handle and perform above and beyond their normal job description and position requirements in order to be successful as a fire officer.

The promotional process (assessment) in the fire service is quite unique; nearly every one of the thirty thousand departments use their own methods and techniques of promoting to the next rank. With an exorbitant number of ideals, opinions, guidelines, and criteria on what and how a person must do in order to get to the management level within the fire department, the service has created numerous standards that can be followed. Tools such as amount of time in grade, certificates acquired, college education, amount of training hours, in house classes, among others are used by many organizations, however, there is no state or national guideline for the promotional assessment. This provides for a plethora of options when an organization decides to create and develop criteria to advance personnel.

Background

The fire service has often been characterized as a paramilitary organization, with structure and rank not unlike the U.S. Armed Forces. The structure consists of firefighters, which are at the lowest point of rank, then driver/engineer, lieutenant, captain, battalion chief, and assistant chief, with the fire chief being the top-ranking individual within the fire department. A "company" consists of a single unit such as an engine or truck that is made up of one crew (generally 3-4 people), while a battalion is generally made up of around three to five stations including the apparatus and manpower within those stations. Not all departments

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

implement the entire rank structure; some have developed smaller versions because it is not feasible for their smaller districts.

Every state in the US requires a certification for firefighters. Without this certificate, employment in a fire suppression capacity would not be possible. Once an approved training course is completed, the holder a firefighter certificate of compliance can officially be hired and work in a volunteer or paid capacity by one of many local municipal fire departments or on a state or federal team.

Traditionally, the fire officers' promotional assessment center consists of a multiple choice written test, a practical scenario, conflict resolution/HR scenario, teaching portion, and a chiefs' interview. An assessment center is designed to simulate situations common to the rank being tested. Each exercise is designed to measure the knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics of the candidate in a given situation. Traditionally, firefighters with the most tenure have been leaders in this process due to their experiences, which are thought to allow for a larger knowledge base of the department, call-handling, surrounding area, and management concepts. Changes in traditional standards are revealing that tenure no longer necessarily means more experience. However, even today a large part of the departmental guidelines for promotional processes, assessments, and advancements can be greatly influenced by seniority.

Literature Review

A fire officer, in short, must be a skilled communicator, manager, supervisor, motivator, mentor, arbitrator, organizer, decision maker, and instructor—to name a few roles. They must be knowledgeable in all aspects of fire suppression, hazmat, wild-land firefighting, EMS, and fire prevention. If a firefighter needs to be a jack of all trades, then a fire officer needs to be a master

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

of all trades. (Prziborowski, 2008) The fire officer has an enormous role to fill; he/she is responsible for the safety and security of units and crews that are supervised along with being tasked with mitigating all hazards encountered. Without an understanding of this responsibility and a fire departments' focus to prepare, train, and educate how to adapt, evolve, and overcome emergency incidents and station management issues, failure is imminent for a fire officer.

The National Fire Academy (NFA) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) have both made it clear that higher education is an important ingredient in the career advancement of fire personnel and that higher education is critical to managing the complexities of the fire service. No longer confined to strictly fire suppression duties, fire departments must respond to incidents such as those involving hazardous materials and terrorism and play a greater role in fire prevention through plans review, fire inspections, educational programs, and code enforcement. (McCall & Rivenbark, 2000) As the fire department evolves, so does the needs of the organization. Today's fire officer must be affluent in the operations of mitigating a structure fire or extricating a patient from a vehicle, he/she will have a greater responsibility to the organization in regards to not only the "all-hazards" incident response but station management as well as logistical coordination of equipment and apparatus.

The same type of scenario has played out in the promotional processes within the fire service. For many years, we have operated under the assumption that seniority, a written test, and assessment exercises identified and measured the key components required to be a fire officer. (Wenzel & Keeton, 2006) According to the International Association of Fire Chiefs' Professional Development Committee "Education without training is inert, and training without education is transient." In 2001, the U.S. Fire Administration hosted a conference about the need for higher education in the U.S. fire service. The bottom line: You must hire and retain quality

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

people, and those people must be nurtured along a continuum of training and education commensurate with their current and anticipated future roles in your organization. (Johnson, 2004) There is a fundamental difference between training and developing personnel in task-related competencies and developing leadership and management skills to effectively direct an organization into the future. Think about how many people you know who were promoted because they were good fire-ground officers but who had no formal preparation in management skills, let alone leadership skills. Another important element to consider is the 80/20 rule, which states:

20% of your people will produce 80% of the work;

20% of your people will demand 80% of your time; and

20% of your people will embrace change and the concept that leadership is an important individual attribute. (Johnson, 2004)

Choose your candidates to groom for succession/promotion from the 20% who embrace leadership, change, risk-taking and organizational excellence as a way of life, not as a means to an end. The fire service is ever-changing; the most vital portion of the organization is that of your middle management. The proverbial battle of morale, trust, confidence and organizational buy-in is won or lost within this area of the department. The question that a department should ask itself is will this promotional candidate lead, follow, or coast if given the chance to manage at the next level?

Always an interesting topic within the fire service is that of time in grade/seniority/tenure. We assume that a firefighter with ten years of service is more knowledgeable than a firefighter with five years of service, usually without doing any research into background, education, or history. We choose to circumvent whether or not this individual

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

is a positive influence around the station or if they complete their assignments on time prior to a promotional interview. Many organizations leave the interview in the hands of outside assessors, people who are not aware if a candidate never completes their work on time or is a poor leader. Outside assessors only meet the candidates one time, they then make a decision that will effect the entire organization for years to come, a poor choice will have a detrimental effect on both leadership and the crews. Anyone familiar with the basics of fire behavior and combustion should be familiar with the fire tetrahedron. For decades, the fire triangle, comprising of heat, fuel, and oxygen -was used to describe the chemical structure of fire. Then a fourth component, chemical chain reaction, was added, and the fire tetrahedron was created. Well, the same scenario has taken place with the “leadership” tetrahedron; it started out with desire, ability, and courage; then after realizing that those three characteristics were ideal, but something was missing. Experts believe that a seasoned firefighter or fire officer promoted to the next level will find great difficulty in managing and leading without the predisposition of strong interpersonal skills. According to Wenzel and Keeton, the most vital aspect of the fire officer is that of well developed interpersonal and human relations skills. Seniority does not fit anywhere within the leadership tetrahedron. Seniority, while easy to calculate, only tells us how long a person has been on the job, not how good of a job that person has been doing during that time. It is a very poor indicator of who is the best candidate for promotion and should not be used in the promotional process. (Boyd & Cannon, 2008) General Colin Powell once said, “Ultimately, it is people—not plans, systems, structures, or budgets—who make the difference between organizational success and organizational failure.

Methods

The research question that is being asked is, “What are the best measures that administration can take throughout the promotional process to ensure that the finest candidate for a management position is promoted?” The purpose of this research is to understand how current promotional assessments are carried out and to determine the most appropriate style of promotional process in order to achieve the most appropriate candidates for leadership positions. Appendix A contains a sample survey of the promotional process and characteristics of promotional standards that was used in an attempt to understand assessments statewide. The survey was distributed through the Florida Fire Chiefs Association (FFCA) via e-mail by Paul Dezzi, Fire Chief of Longboat Key Fire Rescue (LKFR). Respondents were given one month to reply, with approximately 25 responses, 80% of responses returned were completed by chief officers who were directly involved with the promotional assessment within their respective departments, 15% of responses were completed by training captains, final 5% completed by lieutenants. Multiple interviews were conducted with Chief Dezzi, formerly Assistant Chief of Sarasota County Fire Rescue with over 27 years in the fire service. Promotional Standard Operating Procedures (SOP’s) from surrounding departments were reviewed for further understanding of local assessments. The goal of this applied research project is to outline a promotional assessment that evaluated candidates for not only advancement, but succession and positive “organizational” development (i.e. a benefit to the department), information collected through interview, survey, observation, and research of fire service journals.

In gathering information from peers, mentors, evaluators, assessors, and assessment developers, simple baselines were developed in order to efficiently process additional information. Responses were received statewide as a result of the survey, Kissimmee Fire Dept.,

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

Oldsmar Fire Dept., Palm Beach County Fire Rescue, and City of Stuart Fire Rescue responded, to name a few. The baselines established the specific criterion that each organization recognized as a standard for pre-promotional assessment requirements and certifications. Information was gathered on actual current promotional assessments and testing centers throughout departments state-wide. Respondents were asked to elaborate on what strengths, weaknesses, and other factors in the determination of not only a top candidate, but a successful fire officer. Also, a critique of their own individual departments' process, what characteristics, skills, and abilities were confirmed throughout the assessment, and how it could be improved was inquired.

Results

Beginning with rank, years of service, and structure of the organization the majority respondents were Fire Chiefs, with an average tenure of 21 years. Rank structure was analogous, with smaller organizations unable to have the capacity for certain middle management positions, i.e. Captain, Assistant Chief. The basic structure found was as follows, Firefighter/EMT, Firefighter/Paramedic, Driver/Engineer, Lieutenant, Captain, Battalion Chief, Division Chief, Deputy/Assistant Chief, and Fire Chief.

An interesting finding was that the majority of departments have no guidelines on pre-promotional officer development. Few have pilot programs in the infancy stages, the mainstream provides that training and additional skills development will be acquired through “acting up” into a position or by a supervisor when available. Unfortunately, many organizations rely on years of service with a department and the Fire Officer I certificate, FOI. The colleges or specialized training centers which teach the FOI have been noted to commonly fail in recognizing the nuances of each individual department.

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

Requirements prior to promotional assessment for Lieutenant varied minimally; in order to be eligible a firefighter must have an average minimum of five years of consecutive fire service on with the organization being the standard. In addition to years of service, all departments have required the state standard of FOI. Furthermore, a number of organizations required supplementary certificates such as Paramedic, Fire Inspector I, Instructor I, and an Associates Degree to be eligible for promotional assessment. It is worth noting that there were no correlations between the size, response area, or call volume of a department and the requirements prior to promotion, however, when a Labor Union was absent the requirements to promote were higher. In order to be eligible for the position of Captain, most departments required little more than the Lieutenants requirements with progressive management experience (no set minimums noted). Eligibility for Battalion Chief requires many of the previous standards noted, with only two of the responding departments requiring a four-year degree.

Promotional testing for supervisory positions up to and including Battalion Chiefs had similarities across the board. The common approach that many fire departments take is that of an Assessment Center to determine top candidates. An Assessment Center generally consists of one or more tactical exercise such as mitigating a fire or hazmat incident, one or more conflict resolution/human resources scenario, a teaching session, and an interview; some organizations still rely on a written test as well to score candidates. In all of the promotional policies and guidelines; all criteria was created by the Training Officer or equivalent, Fire Chief, and an administrative role such as Human Resources, with only one organization using an outside company for assistance. For instance, the City of Stuart Fire Rescues' Administration collaborates with a professional testing company to come up with the testing material. The testing is done completely separate of the fire department, and results are published to

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

administration. While similar, each department has different techniques of how and what is to be tested.

After discovering that nearly all departments use a variation of the Assessment Center with minor differences, no departments were found through research that continued to use traditional methods of a single interview and written test for position advancement. Reasoning behind the change in fire service promotions to the assessment center format is that candidates cannot hide deficiencies in assessment centers as they can in interviews. It is easy to say you have people skills and can perform under pressure. Assessment centers make you prove it. You must actually showcase your skills and preparation (or lack thereof).

Department surveys, interviews and research point in one obvious direction, every organization wants to promote someone who has the knowledge, skills, and ability. They want someone who is honest, hard-working, and dedicated and who is willing to learn and grow with the department. The common weaknesses that were seen in the assessment takers were a lack of preparation, shortage of self-confidence, and trouble with the counseling scenario and inability to show leadership. Common weaknesses within the departmental promotional process were a lack of qualified personnel to test, inability to eliminate people for poor performance evaluations, logistical issues which compromise the secrecy of the assessment center, and the concern that outside assessors have no prior knowledge of interpersonal skills and organizational buy-in that candidates may have.

Experience is thought of as a very important factor in regards to testing for the promotional process, which is why all departments have placed a minimum requirement on years of service prior to testing. However, it must be noted that there are individuals with more time in grade that do not have more experience or street smarts in the fire service. Additionally, age was

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

found to have no bearing how an individual would perform in an assessment center. Experience along with age is something that should be tested on a case by case basis.

Collectively, the most important aspect of the assessment center revealed by the survey was that of the oral interview or chief's interview. Nearly all respondents felt that the interview is where the best information regarding the candidate's background, experience level, leadership ability, additional skills, and "fit" into a management role. It is important to clarify that the interview is only as good as the assessor grading; using outside assessors with no previous knowledge of candidates will not be able to gather all pertinent insight when completing the assessment. About 75% of the responses received felt that the entire assessment center was vital in testing the entire candidate, while the others felt that the table top scenarios are extremely difficult to "talk out" and have incorporated computer generated pictures or fire simulation software in an attempt to provide "realism."

Once the Assessment Center is created and assembled, eligible applicants are accepted and tested, in all cases a list is developed and ranked from highest points to lowest. Normally, departments create a new list every two years unless it becomes exhausted or organizational needs arise. Interestingly enough, of the organizations that responded to the survey, not one has a developed and implemented plan for continual officer development or follow up other than a yearly evaluation after a new officer is promoted.

Discussion

Through review of surveys, observation, interviews, and research it was found that nearly every department has their own unique way of handling promotional assessments. The intention

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

of all organizations is to seek out the most qualified candidate who will benefit the department and follow in succession when a ranking officer retires.

1. Are the requirements in place by fire departments prior to an individual being eligible appropriate for the fire officer promotional assessment?

The requirements were found to fit the needs of each department, all were appropriate and did not require an excess amount of irrelevant courses or certificates. However, the Fire Service should begin to implement additional requirements; beyond the minimums of Fire Officer I and five years of fire service. We must proactively change the fire service as it continues to evolve around us. As the Fire Service continues to advance and move forward in technology, equipment, apparatus, tactics, and prevention; should we continue the progression of professional, educated, and distinguished service within our departments. With the proliferation of programs, which include not only fire administration programs but also ones in public administration, organizational leadership, emergency management and other related subjects, the fire service is and should become more highly educated.

2. What is being done to combat the weaknesses seen in individuals by management while administering a promotional assessment?

Few organizations have written guidelines regarding developmental programs for individuals who desire to be fire officers. Again, there needs to be a shift towards training firefighters in an officer capacity, this will allow complete understanding of orders and directions that their company officer may provide. If an organization has an officer that must be ordered to assist with mentoring or leadership development of prospective officers or firefighters, there is a problem. Everyone within the organization must be working

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

towards one common goal, the betterment of the department and its organizational service.

To combat weaknesses in prospective officers, you must first look at the examples of officers that they are looking up to.

3. How are departments weighting additional training certificates, time-in-grade, and higher education?

Many different departments around the state have implemented their promotional process with points attached to training certificates, higher education, and time in grade.

Why do we continue to give incentive for years of service? Granted, respect is earned and normally experience will be evident, however, an individual who has accrued numerous years of service should theoretically have acquired a significant number of certificates and training hours more than an individual with less time on. Do we think that time in grade is more valuable than preparation for a supervisory position? Changes to our process should place the emphasis on attaining a higher education, training, and knowledge base as opposed to rewarding individuals for being employed for their length of service.

4. What are departments doing in order to “groom” prospective leaders?

The methods that nearly all organizations use in order to mold, guide, and groom prospective candidates for management were discovered to be rather antiquated. Only 10% of the departments surveyed actually had any type of a guideline or Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) on record that outlined pre-officer developmental requirements. While others noted that programs were being planned and established, training and development of prospective candidates remained completely up to their immediate supervisor. When we bring a new firefighter on with our departments, do we not institute minimum requirements and step plans to attain the next level of competencies? These requirements are set in place

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

to ensure that new hires have learned their function within the organization as well as developing their capacity to deal with hazards under the direction of an officer. Would it not be safe to say that without these requirements and by simply relying on fellow firefighters and fire officers to teach the “ins and outs” of the department the individuals may not receive a complete and thorough review of what their job function encompasses. We need to further our organizational values and develop plans for current and future officers to grow as leaders and be mentors that know their position completely, rather than throwing them into a position with no additional training or support.

Recommendations

The next step for the Promotional Process within the Fire Service should not be taken lightly, it is evident that the fire service is changing and it is imperative that all organizations strive to keep up. The future leadership of the fire service needs to be better trained, higher educated and more flexible to change. Organizations spend countless man hours and extraordinary efforts developing standards, testing equipment, and improving fire-ground strategy and tactics. We form committees, determine specifications, and expend considerable time and effort to ensure our equipment meets or exceeds specifications. We have draft tests, drop tests, shaft tests, and stop tests. We test in “low vis” and high heat in the station and on the street. However, few departments take the time to perform the same due diligence on the tests and guidelines that will play a major role in determining who will be selected for positions within their organizations.

Nothing stays the same and the fire service is no exception. The general public expects more from their first responders today than in previous decades. We need to focus on

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

developing our future fire officers starting when they are hired as new firefighters and continue their development through every promotion attained. We place too much responsibility on mentors within the department and have relied a great deal on the state FOI program to prepare individuals for a management position. National, State, and Department specific criteria must be developed and implemented so that all individuals know what is expected of them throughout their careers as a firefighter and through the ranks of a fire officer and management. Building on the foundation of basic fire officer certification, every department must proactively engage their officers, ensuring that they are continually educating not only for EMS and fire training topics but also focus on building strong leaders who have organizational, administrative and human relation skills. Developing current and future leaders in the fire service is paramount to our organizational success. The National Fire Academy and Emergency Management Institute have already developed programs, as such many organizations would not have to “reinvent the wheel” as road maps have been developed to educate our future fire service leaders. As a fire service we must approach this at every level, and work towards the implementation of a clear, established, professional track of how to become a firefighter all the way up to the position of Fire Chief.

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Promotional Process within the Fire Service

Appendix A

1. What Fire Department are you employed with? How long?

2. What is your current rank?

3. What is the structure of rank within your organization?

4. Does your department incorporate any officer developmental training for firefighters prior to promotion? If yes, please explain.

5. Does your department incorporate any officer developmental training for officers prior to promotion to the next rank? If yes, please explain.

6. What requirements does your department necessitate prior for the testing to the level of Lieutenant or Station Officer?

7. What requirements does your department necessitate prior for the testing to the level of Captain?

8. What requirements does your department necessitate prior for the testing to the level of Battalion Chief?

9. What requirements does your department necessitate prior for the testing to the level of Deputy or Assistant Chief?

10. What requirements does your department necessitate prior for the testing to the level of Fire Chief?

11. Does your department institute any type of testing for promotion? If yes, please explain.

12. Who determines what that material will be?

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

13. Is there a written portion to your promotional test? If so, how many questions?

14. Is there a practical portion to your promotional test? If so, how many parts? What do they consist of?

15. Does your promotional test involve an interview? If so, with whom?

16. What is the minimum # of years required prior to promotion?

17. How important is college education to your department in regards to promotional opportunities?

18. What type of strengths in an Officer does your department desire to promote?

19. What are the weaknesses within your department's promotional process?

20. What are common weaknesses that you see when individuals take a promotional test?

21. How important is time in grade?

22. How important are additional certifications?

23. Do you feel that age has any bearing to how well someone will perform during a promotional test?

24. How often is your departments' promotional assessment given?

25. If you could change one thing to your departments' promotional process, what would it be?

Promotional Process within the Fire Service

26. Of the entire promotional process, what do you feel tests the abilities of prospective officer the best?

27. Of the entire promotional process, what do you feel is the least important aspect? Please elaborate.

28. When your department promotes an individual, is there any position specific training following promotion?

29. After the promotional assessment is a list assembled? How long does this list last?

30. Do you feel your departments' promotional assessment accurately draws out the best candidates for the position?

31. If there is any other pertinent information that you feel I should know about your departments' assessment, please elaborate.
