

A Promotional Process For The Smaller Police Agency

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Handling promotions is stressful for any agency, no matter what the size. Several coworkers compete for the same position, and only one, or a very small percentage, can be selected. In a small police agency with fewer than 25 employees where promotions are infrequent, a keen interest is focused upon this rare event, and the resulting organizational stress can be acute.

While a chief of a smaller police agency knows his or her employees well, these same traits may also hamper the process. Every member of the department thinks they know who should and should not be promoted. Unfortunately, these opinions often manifest themselves in personal bias, cliques, and possibly destructive competition.

Complicating the entire event is how unfamiliar most smaller agency police chiefs are with managing a promotional process using proven methods that guarantee fairness and successful outcomes for the staff and the organization as a whole. In most small agencies, promotional opportunities are so rare that arriving at a proven, validated, fair, and relevant process is often a significant and infrequent challenge. When the process is not properly constructed, the result of even the best intentions can be organizational turmoil, mistrust of the chief of police, and disheartened employees. All except for one of course—the newly promoted employee.



Legal Requirements

Most jurisdictions have a human resources (HR) department tasked with ensuring that personnel management practices and procedures conform to legal requirements including equal opportunity, racial and gender equality, affirmative action, and the fair labor and standards statutes. HR collects statistical data of the eligible pool of applicants, indicating race, gender, and age information to demonstrate that the department is observing the letter and the spirit of civil rights law.

While HR should act as the chief's partner during the promotional process, the process of selecting and promoting cannot be delegated. Assigning personnel is the chief's management right and a leadership responsibility.

As long as everyone knows how the process will be conducted, success is probable. Even if not everyone likes the result, everyone will at least respect the process.

Critical Steps

Developing a promotional process requires following several critical steps:

- Update or establish a promotional policy.

- Conduct a job analysis to determine the job description or task statements.
- Decide on the testing methodology-written test, oral interviews, assessment center.
- Publish a pretest study guide.
- Ensure that the study material is readily available and that candidates know where to obtain copies of the source material for the examination. Some agencies provide multiple copies of source materials and make these references available on loan from a departmental library system at no cost to the candidates.
- Ensure the validity of the testing and selection methodology. Either criterion-related validity or content validity must be established.¹ Above all, construct the methodology to accurately measure the needed knowledge and abilities for the position.
- Administer the selection process fairly, allowing all interested candidates the opportunity to participate, adjusting a candidate's work hours or administering the test at different times.

Adhering to these critical steps ensures that a fair and equitable process is under way in selecting the appropriate person

Establish a Promotional Policy

Before even starting the promotional the department should have policy that explains the process and makes it transparent, eliminating any perceptions of bias. The promotional policy answer the following questions:

- What are the threshold qualifications for the position? This needs to identify such qualifying factors as years of service, years within a certain rank, educational requirements, special training, specialized physical ability.
- Must the candidates be employees of the department or can lateral transfers outside the department be considered?
- Is the chief of police responsible for the ultimate decision, or is there a police commission, mayor, or city manager who has control over the final decision?
- Is the top candidate automatically selected for the position, or can the decision maker go to the second-or third-ranked employee (the rule of three).
- What steps are involved in the promotional process? Is there a written test, oral board, assessment center, or other exercises or procedures?
- How are the steps in process scored? Are numerical scores assigned to each component of the test?
- How are the candidates ranked on the eligibility list, and how long is the list effective?
- Are newly promoted employees on probation, and if so, for how long?
- Is there an appeal or review process, and if so, for what time period and how can a review or appeal be initiated?

The objective is to clearly establish a promotion policy that is fair and defensible in the event of challenge. The written policy provides the necessary guidance in fulfilling the steps of the selection process.

Advertise the Promotion

Inform the staff about the available position and how applications are accepted. This advertising process will describe who is eligible to participate, what methods of examination will be used, by what criteria individuals will be ranked, what is the timetable, and, finally, who will make the ultimate promotion decision. If these questions are answered in the promotional announcement, the entire agency can be assured of a fair and equitable process.

If there is not a central location, the promotional announcement should be posted prominently in several locations to ensure that all employees are informed: locker rooms, squad rooms, or even by agency e-mail or printed mail.

The announcement should include the following information.

What is the position?

The announcement should identify the specific rank and the role the position will occupy in the organization. A job description needs to be readily available and it should outline the duties, responsibilities, skills, knowledge,

abilities, and education or training requirements for the position. The salary of the position with adjustments, probationary period and anticipated work schedule should also be highlighted.

What is the timetable for the process?

The announcement should inform all potential candidates of each exercise that will be employed and the anticipated timeline necessary to complete the promotional process.

Who is eligible to participate?

Often agencies have established a minimum number of in-service years before eligibility exists. Predetermine if this eligibility includes a combination of service in other police agencies as well as the service with the hiring department. The eligibility description should answer questions such as does the applicant need to have obtained a minimum rank? Can a patrol officer apply for a lieutenant's position without first being a sergeant? Can a probationary sergeant apply for the lieutenant's position?

How do interested candidates apply?

The announcement must include a method for the candidates to notify the chief of their intent to participate. Usually a cover letter along with a resume is presented and becomes part of the official file.

How long does the promotion list remain current?

There should be a statement of how long the results of this process will remain viable and the candidates eligible for promotion. In some departments the list is maintained for two years before the process must be completed again.



Explain How the Process Works

The specific process needs to be explained to the employees. What will the promotional process consist of? Will there be a written test, oral boards, or an assessment center?

Following is a discussion of the most common elements of a promotional process. The local department need not employ every possible element; rather, using a selection of two to three elements is sufficient for a fair promotional process. For example, often a combination of the written test, oral boards and points awarded for seniority, education and previous two years of performance reviews provides sufficient criteria for a fair promotional process.

Written Test

Usually a written test is administered first for identifying the personnel to advance to the more intense aspects of the selection process.

Many organizations are available to assist the small agency chief to prepare the written promotional examination. For example, the IACP offers two options for written promotional tests: the comprehensive development of custom-designed examinations or the application of a tailored promotional examination system. This process is fairly consistent among the professional testing firms.

The custom-designed examination is written specifically for the department. The firm will conduct site visits and complete a comprehensive job analysis, then develop the test items based on agency-specific materials.

A tailored promotional examination is not based on agency-specific materials; however, the content of the exam will reflect the requirements of the job in terms of general law enforcement knowledge. In developing this examination, the department completes analysis forms provided by the firm that is used to determine the areas of knowledge to be tested and each area's relative importance.

The actual examination is prepared based on the department's job analysis by drawing from a pool of multiple-

choice test questions based on a short reading list. Once the appropriate reading list is identified, the firm will probably use computer-aided examination systems to select test items that are identified matching the needs of the position being tested. While the test is not agency specific, it is an economical means of acquiring proven and valid test questions for the position.

For both the custom and the tailored examination process, study guides are provided to candidates, which include sample test questions and instructions to help them prepare for the examination. The tests can be administered by the agency or by the contracting firm. Optical scanning of test responses is usually available.

Practical Exercise

Many agencies may decide to develop a promotional process that is designed to mirror a typical project that would logically be assigned to the successful candidate in the real position. This could include developing a memo explaining to the chief about a review of an agency's policy and procedure, or outlining a complaint from a citizen about a traffic stop. Maybe there is a topical issue facing the community or region that can be intertwined into the process that makes the entire exercise more relevant while obtaining a sample of the quality of work to expect from the person if promoted.

In-Basket Exercise

Some agencies consider an in-basket exercise relevant to the selection process since the exercise reflects the position's work. One in-basket exercise has the candidates respond to a number of e-mail messages within a set time period. These e-mails may involve topical issues that the candidate would or could expect to confront in the new role: handling a disgruntled employee, a sexual harassment complaint, or an invitation to play racquetball on a day the officer is scheduled to work. The e-mail responses, and who is included in the copies, will provide significant insight for the chief.

Oral Interview Board

The vast majority of promotional processes will include an oral examination. The written examinations and exercises measure how well a candidate knows certain facts and principles; the interview is used to assess other facets of the candidate's skills.

It is critical to announce who will be on the board and to predetermine potential conflicts. In small communities, practically everyone knows something about everyone else. If the chief is concerned about having sufficient local interviewers, the chief can turn to the state association for assistance and obtain the help of experienced interviewers.

Board members should be told the traits desired for this position-attitude, self-expression, judgment, leadership, education, and experience-as well as specific traits related to the position.

Predetermine no more than 10 relevant questions that will be asked of each candidate. These are structured or controlled questions used to evaluate each candidate on a specific element of the new position. Each question needs to have rating system, for example from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest score and 1 the lowest score. In this manner, the interviewer can circle the number appropriate for the quality of the candidate's response to the control question. The higher the number, the better the response.

In order to ensure the fairness of the interview process, several steps can be taken that will minimize bias during the interview:

- Maintain a consistent interview protocol for all candidates. Ask each candidate the structured control questions.
- Write out the minimum acceptable answers to the control questions prior to the interviews.
- Review with the interviewers the evaluation traits in terms of the position being filled.
- Ensure the whole board participates in the interview, not just one person on the board.
- Require any interviewer whose rating differs from those given by the other interviewers to justify the different rating.
- Have an independent person with no interest in the outcome calculate the scores. This is often a good time to ask the jurisdiction's HR organization to help out.

The interview process should not be so rigidly structured that the candidates are unable to express themselves.

Rather, the process should encourage the candidate to be open with the interview board, telling the board exactly what the candidate thinks. They are expected to be positive about their experiences and qualities. Good candidates provide complete answers to questions and avoid overly terse or brief answers. They engage the board in conversation.

Performance Evaluations

Previous job performance predicts future performance. Performance evaluations, when done correctly by the supervisor, can provide great details and insights about the candidate. Since a time element needs to be established for performance evaluations, usually a department will go back two to three years.

Using performance evaluations in the promotion process also makes an impact statement to non-participating officers. Officers who are not eligible to participate this time will quickly be aware of how previous performance can affect how they advance in their career.

Other Indicators

Other personal indicators that may be reviewed are sick leave usage, self-initiated patrol activity, and extra responsibilities undertaken that contribute to the welfare of the agency. The education level of the candidates, their training, and their leadership role in the community can be a part of the evaluation process.

Assessment Centers

The assessment center process is a powerful technique for promotional decisions. Observing candidates' behavior in simulations of on-the-job challenges offers in-depth information concerning candidate strengths and weaknesses. In an assessment center, each candidate participates in a series of exercises that simulate actual situations from the target job. Expert assessors evaluate the performance of candidates and administer exercises and evaluation procedures that reflect current issues in law enforcement. Because of their accurate simulation of the job and its duties, assessment centers have proven highly defensible as a selection strategy. However, an assessment center is often beyond a smaller agency's means.²

The Scoring System

It is critically important to explain the scoring system and how all of the individual exercises' scores will be added together for a final score. Identify what percent-age of the total score is awarded to each segment. Some examples are as follows:

- Written test, 35 percent
- In-basket exercise, 10 percent
- Oral board, 35 percent
- Previous performance appraisal reports, 10 percent
- Years of service, up to 5 percent
- Education and special training, up to 5 percent

While assigned percentages for the evaluation factors are left to the chief's discretion, it is critical that each candidate know the scoring system to eliminate any innuendo of prejudice or bias in the final decision.



Administering the Test

Whatever testing methodology is used, fairly applying the testing components to all persons is essential.

Today, consideration must be given to officers called up for military duty and how they will be afforded the opportunity to participate, especially if the promotion list is valid for few years.

Other factors needing consideration are how to handle personnel arriving late, say, for the written examination portion of the process. Generally, personnel arriving late because of duty-related emergency are given the full time to complete the examination. However, they will need to establish the duty emergency in writing for verification, and their score may be disqualified if the

tardiness is not justified by a duty emergency.

In contrast, personnel arriving late for non-duty reasons would only be allowed to complete the examination within the time remaining in the testing period.

The Eligibility List

The combined scores are used to establish the eligibility list. Once all of the evaluation steps have been finished- not every step discussed needs to be completed in every promotion effort-an eligibility list ranking each participant in order of final score is established.

At this critical point, acknowledge very clearly who will be considered further and by whom. If the chief or another official will choose only the highest-scoring candidate, or the top three will be deemed qualified for the position, state this clearly. Also, make it clear how long this eligibility list will be in effect. Chiefs who make the list effective for a specific length of time can spare themselves a repeat of the process in the immediate future.

Feedback to Candidates

The promotion process can be used to improve everyone who participated in the process.

Individual feedback should be provided to each candidate completing the promotion process after the promotion results are announced to provide constructive direction and to prepare the candidates for a future leadership role. This feedback may include recommending a course of study, suggesting participation in civic clubs to develop public speaking and communication skills, and undertaking additional assignments to develop organizational skills.

Review and Appeal Process

The agency will need a mechanism for a review and appeal of the process. At times parts of the written examination will be appealed.

Schedule a time to review the written examination with all interested participants. During the review stage, all candidates should be provided a copy of their written test answer sheet, a list of the written test questions they answered incorrectly, along with the correct answer to each question. The answer needs to be keyed to the reading source, including the page number containing the correct answer.

Candidates should be able to appeal a question or an answer when they can demonstrate that (a) no correct answer was listed; (b) the answer identified as correct was wrong; or (c) there are more than one correct answers.

When review of the appeal questions is finished, three possible actions can occur:

1. If there was not a correct answer listed, then all candidates will receive credit for that question.
2. If the wrong answer was identified, then the candidates selecting the right answer will receive credit, and all candidates who selected the identified wrong answer will not receive credit.
3. If there were two or more correct answers to the question listed, then the candidates selecting those answers will receive credit.

After the review session, the scores will be recalculated to reflect if any changes and then the results become final.



The Promotion

Now that the chief has selected a person to promote, the next step is a letter from the promoting authority offering the position and addressing critical factors to eliminate any confusion pertaining to expectations. This letter usually states a start date for the new position, outlines the new assignment, states the salary adjustments, and explains the probationary period, which is usually at least six months. To ensure that the newly promoted employee has the tools necessary, locate training commensurate with the responsibilities of the new duties as quickly as possible for the promoted employee to attend. Successful completion of this training can be a requirement for the promotion.

The Chief's Critique

Lastly, critique the entire process. As the chief of a smaller agency, you can only improve your experience by determining what worked and what did not, and then make the necessary adjustments. While all police managers will acknowledge that the promotional process can be stressful, following these steps can significantly reduce apprehension and mistrust while enhancing the career development of every participating employee. ■

¹ Criterion-related validity involves an empirical demonstration that those who do well on a promotion test are the same individuals who eventually perform well on the job upon being promoted. Content validity is established by proving that a test is a fair reflection of the content of the job. Content validity is built into a test by the job analysis of the task to be performed. See Donald J. Schroeder, Frank Lombardo, and Jerry Strollo, *Management and Supervision of Law Enforcement Personnel* (Binghamton, N.Y.: J.B.L. Publications, Inc., 1995), 388.

² Frank Hughes, "Using Assessment Centers in Selecting Middle Managers," *Police Chief* 73 (August 2006) 106-111.

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