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Promotional Process: More Than a Written Exam



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ABSTRACT

Despite the high levels of training required to become a police officer, along with continuing education and training that comes from many years of service, not every officer possess the necessary qualifications to be promoted. Selecting the most competent personnel at any level is of the utmost importance. Every department is expected to provide their community with the most efficient and professional police department possible. To ensure this, supervisors must be chosen based on their ability to perform the functions of their assignment. When the wrong person is promoted to a level of authority, the entire department may inadvertently be negatively impacted. In the same respect, when mistakes are made due to inadequate leadership, the impacts are low morale among subordinates, as well as unnecessary legal issues and costs. Furthermore, the reputation of poor and inadequate service creates a lack of trust between the community and the department. Through the use of journals, periodicals and other research, this paper will demonstrate that a multi-dimensional evaluation provided by assessment centers will likely serve as the best process to promote the most qualified candidate.

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of law enforcement, little or no training was required to become a police officer. Many newly appointed police officers were simply given a badge and a gun and sent out to enforce the laws and apprehend offenders. In some situations, the appointments were given to friends or family members. However, citizens today expect and demand a professional organization from the top ranking executive to the officer on the street. Proper evaluation and testing of candidates at each phase of employment and promotions will help build a professional agency. One method to ensure this is by using a multi-dimensional evaluation. These evaluations provide the best form of testing, promote good leadership, and increase the probability of the right person being promoted. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that utilizing an assessment center will promote a more qualified employee and assist in building a more professional agency.

While research focuses mainly on the promotional process, it is important to note that initial hiring and recruiting utilizes multi-dimensional evaluations. Most police agencies require a written exam, physical exam, oral interview, and some even have some type of practical or scenario evaluation. The recruit then goes to an academy for formal training for several hundred hours followed by several weeks of field training. Through this process, the recruit's knowledge and skills are constantly monitored and evaluated to ensure that they are qualified. It is interesting to note that some departments never require anything more from the officer than the state mandated firearms qualification and annual training to continue employment or to be promoted up the ranks.

Unlike the initial evaluation of recruits, the promotional process is likely to be unregulated. The process may include evaluations that consist of material determined by the head of the department or they may simply appoint a person. Hughes (2006) maintained that, "One of the many challenges facing law enforcement administrators in the 21st century is to identify qualified individuals for selection and promotion" (p. 3). Without requirements for promotions, professionalism of the department can be questioned. The ability of the promoted person to perform the tasks of the job may be limited or nonexistent. The person who does possess the qualification to perform the duties best may not be selected, causing the department to suffer and have ineffective people leading the organization. Having ineffective leaders causes many issues such as morale and liability concerns. The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) set some of the minimum standards that are required for hiring and advancement in training and education; however, no standards exist for promotions. The Texas Occupational Code, Chapter 143 (1987) sets minimal standards for both hiring and promotions for police agencies that are required to follow these rules by referendum.

Law enforcement agency leaders have a great responsibility to both the organization as well as the citizens. Incorporating evaluations of a multi-dimensional nature in the promotional process will ensure that the candidate selected is more likely to succeed and perform the duties and job functions most effectively. An assessment center is intended to be an evaluation tool that will consider many different skill sets that an employee in the job might use on a daily basis. These skills include, but are not limited to, leadership, decisiveness, customer service, scheduling, and planning. The

research of Best (2004) suggested that, “there is no one perfect way or process that fits every agency to determine who gets a promotion, an alternate process or a variation from a simple written test will yield advantages to the department and the employee” (p.10.) Without regard to the agency size, the promotional process is in itself stressful. In many cases, only one candidate is promoted and several co-workers compete for the one position. According to Kurz (2006), promotions in smaller agencies are so rare and infrequent that arriving at a proven, validated, fair, and relevant process is often a significant challenge. When such significant interest is placed on the promotion and the process, the eventual promoted candidate results in acute organizational stress across the board. Many chiefs know their officers well and that knowledge could hamper a process if a personal bias is allowed to interfere. A fair and objective process, such as an assessment center evaluation is the most practical fair way to conduct promotions. Ultimately, a multi-dimensional evaluation provided by assessment centers should be used as the best process to promote the most qualified candidate.

POSITION

One benefit of a multi-dimensional evaluation is that it is likely to assist in promoting the right individual for the position. Police employees are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional evaluations will more completely assess the abilities and knowledge of candidates. Viewing candidates and how they may fit in the big picture of the agency can assist in placing them in the right job. Hale (2005b) stated, “Experience has shown that people who do well in an assessment center generally prove capable of performing the duties of the position for which they are being considered” (p.86). There needs to be a logical connection between the duties of the position for which the candidates are

being evaluated, the tasks performed by the person in that position, the exercise created for the assessment, and the actual process or evaluation used by the assessors in evaluating the performance of the candidates.

Hale (2005b) also maintained that “there is typically a link between how well the candidate performed and how well he or she will perform if eventually promoted to the position tested for” (p. 2). He goes on to state that, “in this format of evaluating, the evaluators must use a standardized and logical method of ranking, scoring and evaluating the candidates. This requirement can be met by evaluating the candidates on objective, job related and clearly defined criteria” (para. 2). It is important that the job description match the types of criteria the prospective employee is evaluated for. This method depends “on the department head, human resources, or the rules of the local or state civil service and police associations” (para. 2). If the candidate is truly evaluated on the criteria in the manner prescribed with skills that are based on performance and ability, the most capable person will be selected for the promotion.

Secondly, a multi-dimensional evaluation of candidates is unbiased as it evaluates the candidate in a less subjective way. One of the unique characteristic of the multi-dimensional type of testing is that it ensures that all candidates will be evaluated impartially, fairly and objectively according to the demonstrated proficiency as they perform the evaluations of the potential new position (Hale, 2005b). McLaurin (2005) stated, “Deciding who should be hired to a high-ranking position at a law enforcement agency is a difficult job, no question. The last thing any law enforcement agency wants is for such decisions to be viewed as arbitrary or unfair” (p. 1). It is likely that when an agency head implements this type of evaluation it will level the playing

field for those being evaluated; while relieving some of the undue stress from the administration. Many police departments and sheriff offices have recognized and implemented these assessment centers as a process and way to identify strengths and weaknesses of an agency and its employees. McLaurin (2005) stated, "When properly planned and implemented, an assessment center will be viewed as a fair and objective process for making sure that the best officer is promoted" (p. 1). Assessment centers are not intended to be a stand-alone evaluation. They should be a part of an entire process including a written test and other criteria that is required by mandate of the department head or other rule or law.

Additionally, fairness in the process is one of the most significant aspects judged by the participants. The fairness of a multi-dimensional exercise process allows candidates who may or may not perform well in all areas to be evaluated comprehensively. This makes the process more objective because it does not base the scoring on one particular aspect. This fairness will not lend itself to a particular type of employee or candidate to the exclusion of others who could potentially do as well or better based on all the facts (McLauren, 2005).

Finally, a multi-dimensional promotional process should promote a person who is capable of not only supervising but leading the agency in a professional direction. Agencies with professional leadership may achieve greater community support due to the level of trust built between the agency and the community. Professional leadership in the agency can reinforce the trust of the community by reducing liability and producing efficiency throughout the agency.

Today, many organizations, in addition to law enforcement, view the assessment center as a widely accepted tool for a process that can reveal and select the most appropriate candidate. With the process being so widely accepted in the public workforce and the current trend in community oriented policing, citizens could be available to provide input to the assessors from their perspective or serve as an assessor opening doors and relationships. In addition to the citizens learning about the duties of the employees and how they interact in the department, the community members can obtain a better understanding of the environment that officers work in lending the department to an aspect of transparency and positive interaction with the citizens (Cosner & Baumgart, 2000).

Assessment center results are easy to defend if challenged. A successful challenge is rare if the process included a thorough inspection and analysis of the potential position being sought by the candidates. When the proper guidelines are followed by the administrators of the evaluation and during its design, a challenge is not likely to be successful. This cannot be said for other types of testing programs (Hale, 2005a). Given the involvement of the citizens as well as an ability to positively defend the process, it is a win/win for the department and the citizens.

In many law enforcement agencies, candidates, both selected and those who are not selected for promotion or new assignment, are never informed of the results or their performance other than a score. With an assessment center evaluation, the deficiencies that are identified in the process can and should be shared with the candidates. The sharing of this information will provide the candidate with a specific recommendation on how he or she can improve, in addition to outlining the specific

areas where improvement is recommended. Using the process as a developmental tool for the candidates will prepare them better for future evaluations and the identified areas of improvement can be an area of training for the entire department.

COUNTER POSITION

Although there are many benefits to a multi-dimensional evaluation, some might argue that it is cost prohibitive to use. According to Hale (2005a), “an assessment center costs much more than a traditional testing program; you can plan an average up to \$2000 for each test to administer an assessment center” (p. 1). Additionally, Hedgpeth (2011) stated, “The cost on a per-candidate or per-promotion scale is substantially higher than a multiple-choice written examination. Wyman and associates charged the Mesquite Texas Police Department \$10,360 for a three-day captain’s assessment center in May 2008” (p. 6). In this assessment there were five participants with two promoted at a cost of \$5,180 each (Hedgpeth, 2011). Hedgpeth (2011) found that “In the same year, the Mesquite Police Department utilized a multiple-choice written examination for promotion to lieutenant at a cost of \$875 for each of the four promoted to the new rank” (p. 6).

Another cost factor includes assessors, which can be difficult and expensive to provide for a test. The cost to provide assessors is considerably more than traditional techniques due to the need for multiple assessors as opposed to a single proctor. Furthermore, training the assessors and formulating the ratings from the assessment of the candidates can take many hours and be costly. A cost consideration of using in house assessors would include the cost of time away from work to perform the assessment as well as the time to prepare for the assessment. If an agency makes a

choice due to cost to not have internal assessors, the need for a costly consultant firm will be necessary (Hughes, 2010).

In addition to cost, another issue could be a lack of trust in the process. Some officers may not trust the entire concept because they have no specific study material which may create anxiety about their abilities. Hedgpeth (2011) maintained that “officers have claimed that the assessment centers are too subjective or that the entire evaluation system is flawed and skewed because the answers are not selected from a list of possible solutions; unlike a standard multiple-choice” (p. 6) Written tests or evaluations can determine if a test taker has a reasonable working knowledge of rules and regulations along with basic principles (Hedgpeth, 2011). Utilizing a simple written test may not prevent the promotion of a candidate who has an excellent memory but no true leadership abilities.

Ford (2011) reiterated, “It is argued that it is increasingly important to explore alternatives to traditional promotional systems in order to tap into otherwise unrecognized talent and attributes which could be of value in a police department” (p. 2.) Candidates of an assessment center promotional process have been selected for promotion due to their abilities demonstrated in the multi-dimensional assessment as opposed to being promoted from a standard test. The multi-dimensional assessment evaluates many areas that test what the candidate can do. The standard multiple-choice test will evaluate what candidates know and is nothing more than a test of their ability to study prepared documents or books and recall and regurgitate the memorized material at a specific time.

While the cost of an assessment center may be more expensive than a written examination, some benefits may exist to increase the value of the dollars spent.

An agency can prepare the information for the evaluation process in house and utilize its own personnel to perform the duties of the assessors. In many cases, agencies have used officers from other agencies to perform the assessor duties at no cost other than the reciprocation. With proper training, citizens and leaders of the community could be utilized as assessors. This is a cost reduction and a great value in community policing. The candidate can be observed in their interactions with the community, and the community leaders can get a new perspective on the importance placed on promoting the right person for the job. The goal is to promote the candidate based on how the candidate will perform in the role and not how popular a candidate may be. Rutherford (2010) stated, "The study of the use of assessment centers in law enforcement today is necessary as law enforcement must continue to be vigilant in ensuring that a candidate is not promoted based upon his personality and popularity." (p. 8).

Expense should not be the only factor evaluated when selecting the type of methodology for a promotional process in law enforcement agencies, according to Hughes (2006). Future and long-term savings may not be considered if expense is the only factor considered. The entire agency will suffer costly repercussions if the wrong candidate is unable to demonstrate the appropriate skills, knowledge and abilities to effectively perform as a supervisor if promoted. This will be especially problematic in areas where a promoted person is required to provide leadership and direction to subordinates. The cost of an irresponsible promotion can be far reaching. It may range

from the very minor issues such as overtime to correct mistakes, to the extreme costs such as litigation due to more serious mistakes. Another major cost that is difficult to measure is the cost of poor morale of the subordinate employees, or what it cost to replace the unhappy employees that leave the agency

RECOMMENDATION

One of the most difficult decisions a police administrator has to make is who should be promoted and by what method. Police administrators should choose to utilize a multi-dimensional assessment process for promotions in their department. The utilization of an assessment center type evaluation that evaluates multiple dimensions of the candidate will provide for the promotion of the most qualified candidate.

Promoting the most qualified candidate will reduce agency costs and raise the professionalism of the agency. Law enforcement leaders have a responsibility to their organization and the citizens they serve to do all they can to have the most professional agency possible. To rely solely on a single dimension evaluation, such as a pencil and paper test, should be deemed unacceptable by any law enforcement leader.

Law enforcement leaders have to consider the fact that the economy is difficult and budgets are leaner now than they have ever been; making it even more important to ensure the most qualified candidate is promoted. Agencies cannot afford costly litigation for mistakes made by an officer who was promoted without possessing the abilities to perform the duties of the job. An unfair or biased evaluation can overlook a more qualified candidate, which may lead to undesired litigation.

A fair and unbiased assessment does not have to be provided by a consultant, nor does it have to be expensive. An agency can provide a fair and unbiased

evaluation of candidates by utilizing personnel. Officers ranking higher than the position being promoted or people from other outside sources may be used as assessors. Outside sources from other police agencies can be used without a cost other than assisting that department if they need help. Community leaders can be used as assessors if they are properly trained in the ways of an assessment center. Using community leaders along with sworn officers will likely build a strong relationship with the community. Using citizens as part of the assessment process may provide further insight as to how the candidate might interact with the public in the future.

In conclusion, anything more than an old style pen and paper test is a step in the right direction. A proper assessment can and should be performed for any promotion. An assessment center will promote a more professional employee and build a professional department. A few relatively easy steps can save money and provide the department with the best possible person who can provide appropriate service to the citizens the community.

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