

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Performance-Based Promotion in Law Enforcement:  
The Abilene Police Model**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Identifying and promoting quality leadership is one of the central issues facing modern law enforcement. In depth academy training, strong field training programs, routine policy revisions, and thorough in-service programs are all methods law enforcement agencies utilize to keep front line officers informed, trained, and learned. Yet police agencies typically do not invest the time and effort required to identify those officers that will lead the front line troops. The efforts placed in teaching and training new police officers are undermined significantly when the same enthusiasm is not placed in identifying the leaders of those officers. Law enforcement agencies allocate large amounts of manpower and money into conducting thorough background investigations of applicants, yet typically do not engage in comparable efforts as it relates to identifying and promoting excellent leaders.

The Abilene Police Model for promotional systems upgrades the most common current system by seeking out and promoting the most qualified candidates into positions of leadership after conducting internal training, a performance review, and an assessment center. A review of literature, articles, and web sites was utilized to conduct the research. As a result of that research, the author has concluded that performance based promotion will identify and promote the most qualified leaders from the pool of officers that desire to promote.

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## INTRODUCTION

Police officers hold a unique position in society. Using the powers granted by law, peace officers have the authority to legally deprive citizens of constitutionally protected rights. That action exposes the officer and the department for which he works to glaring scrutiny. This oversight comes in many forms such as grand jury, the criminal trial process, media scrutiny, potential criminal and civil liability, and the list goes on. Given the immense nature of the law enforcement task, agencies must invest in the leadership of the department. Performance based promotion is a critical component of law enforcement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The primary method for promotion within law enforcement agencies across Texas is still a test/assessment center model or a derivative. This method originated in Civil Service law adopted by the federal government in 1883. Relatively similar testing techniques were used throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Steward, 1993) and continue to this day.

The Texas Local Government Code dictates that promotional examinations shall be written without an oral component ("Promotional," 2005). Alternative promotional systems may be developed upon the recommendation of the head of the department and with a majority vote the sworn officers within the department ("Alternate," 1993). While the test/assessment center model has stood the test of time, it does not dependably advance careers of the good leaders in and of itself. Law enforcement agencies cannot create a dependable promotional system in which the most qualified officers are identified and promoted without considering past performance.

Over time many promotional methods have been used from the “good ole’ boy” system, to written test processes, to test/assessment centers. Only a small percentage of agencies in Texas utilize performance appraisals as a part of the promotional process (Fulton, 1996). Performance appraisals can also be easily attacked in court if efforts are not made to combat subjective dimensional ratings. To further compound the problem, very little effort is put into conducting a thorough background investigation of promotional candidates.

Police agencies typically invest a lot of time and manpower in investigating the background of police applicants. The State of Texas offers guidelines for that investigation into the background of applicants. No such background investigation requirement exists for promotional candidates. A redesign of the promotional process will benefit the department, the officers within, and the community as a whole. Law enforcement agencies should consider adopting the Abilene Police Model for promotional systems because the system incorporates leadership training prior to promotion, tests the candidates over instructed material, utilizes a performance review or background investigation, and culminates with an assessment center.

## **POSITION**

Officers that desire to promote should be given leadership training prior to promotion. In the most common current promotional model, candidates rarely are given the opportunity to attend any leadership training prior to the exam and assessment center. Leadership training enables the organization to train future leaders according to the standards and expectations set forth by the specific

agency. Most successful organizations in today's environment use tools like vision and/or mission statements. Very little formal effort is expended in teaching those statements and testing candidates over the content. Hoyle (2007) stated, "A vision statement...must inspire others to strive for their highest spiritual and professional ideal, and it must capture the imagination...A mission statement explains to external individuals...what the organization does and how it carries out its tasks" (p. 29-31). In order for agencies to enable future leaders to succeed, the vision for and the mission of the organization must be ingrained in employees from hire date. Baker (2009) posited, "Mission success depends on leadership's ability to communicate and forecast the future" (p. 123). The future leaders of that organization should be tested on those values and that mission as a part of promotion.

Leadership training prior to promotion also enables the agency to move toward achieving accountability. Accountability applies to current leaders, future leaders, and employees. One definition of accountability is "Acknowledged ownership of the choices we make, and the consequences of those choices" (Bearden, 2007, p. 32). Employees of an organization should be held accountable for their decisions and actions. It is especially important then for those who lead and those who hold employees accountable to be held to the same standards. Training future leaders on this concept assists in changing culture and is a clear message from leadership about the priorities of the organization.

Many people assign a negative meaning to the word “accountability”.

While discipline and corrective action are a part of accountability, so is delegated responsibility. Responsibility is an often missed component of accountability. If the leaders of an organization are to hold their employees accountable for tasks, those employees must have the training, authority, and responsibility to make the necessary decisions. Regarding accountability, Baker (2006) stated “Effective leadership assigns responsibility and accountability to a subordinate and then encourages her to execute the functions of her office. The authority to make and execute decisions is delegated to the lowest levels of the organization” (p. 49).

Law enforcement agencies must begin leadership training with officers prior to promotion. This type of training enables agencies to communicate the vision and mission of the organization in an effective manner. Not every officer who desires to promote will, but those employees can carry the message learned to others. Leadership training will also communicate a culture of accountability, responsibility, and delegation. This presents a much clearer method of communicating expectations as opposed to a written exam which does not provide the opportunity for interaction between promotional candidates and the leaders of the organization. After adequate training and testing has occurred, the candidate moves forward in the process to the performance review or background investigation.

Police agencies should conduct performance reviews on candidates prior to promotion. Furthermore, the results of that performance review should be incorporated into the assessment center phase of the promotional process.

Police agencies typically invest a lot of time and manpower in investigating the background of police applicants. The State of Texas offers guidelines for that investigation into the background of applicants. No such background investigation requirement exists for promotional candidates. Law enforcement agencies should be investing equal if not more effort, time, and resources into investigating the past performance of promotional candidates. Performance reviews on promotional candidates should quantify past performance and the leadership potential of candidates. Ritch (1997) stated "Past behavior and performance have been proven time and again to be clear indicators of what future behavior and performance will be" (p. 6). The TCLEOSE background investigation manual lists several categories that should be investigated for a police applicant: Work history, unemployment record, military record, educational history, criminal records, traffic records, personal history statement, financial history, emotional problems, personal references, and general reputation are all areas that should be investigated for any police applicant (TCLEOSE, 2012). Similar background investigations (referred to as performance reviews for differentiation) should be conducted on those promotional candidates who will lead the very cadets that are so thoroughly investigated as applicants.

No organization can reach its full potential without promoting those who not only perform the best, but also demonstrate leadership. Leadership potential must be quantified in promotional candidates. Police leaders often look at citations written, cases filed, self-initiated activity, interviews conducted, etc. as a



measure of performance. While those categories can give a picture of performance, they only provide a partial view of the promotional candidate.

Dr. Jack E. Enter in his book, *Challenging the Law Enforcement Organization* (2006), lists seven laws of leadership: integrity and honor, servanthood, mentorship, professionalism, positive attitude, reinforcement and accountability, and proactive communication. If it is assumed those are the desired qualities police leaders want within law enforcement organizations, they must be measured and incorporated into the promotional process. Whatever qualities and traits are chosen by the agency as consistent with the values and mission statements, they must be identified and incorporated in to the promotional process.

Police agencies recognize hiring a police officer represents a large investment of time, money, and extensive training. Once a cadet graduates from an academy, he then becomes the custodian of a large amount of valuable police resources. The new officer also possesses an extraordinary amount of authority. That authority can expose the department civil liability, criminal conduct, and media attention. To minimize this risk and find the best potential officers, departments must investigate additional areas such as dependability, initiative, interpersonal skills, integrity, oral communication skills, self-control, situational reasoning ability, reading skills, writing skills, and physical ability (Wollack, n.d.). While not every one of those areas needs to be investigated on a promotional candidate, some certainly do. The categories of integrity, dependability, initiative, and interpersonal abilities are critical skill sets for any leader, yet agencies

devote little effort toward finding those people. A proper performance review will provide insight into the candidate and produce numerous benefits. The performance review should identify those who have been good leaders. In addition, agencies may find skill sets in candidates outside law enforcement that can be utilized to benefit the agency. For example, a promotional candidate may have information technology skills that can be useful to the department.

Selection of personnel who will perform the performance review is crucial to the process. A performance reviewer is simply a background investigator utilizing another name to remove confusion. The personnel chosen to perform the performance review must exhibit the same characteristics as any good investigator. He or she must have good interview skills, remain unbiased, and demonstrate the ability to assemble an overall picture of the promotional candidate. Ritch (1997) emphasized "It is imperative that the chief or sheriff of the department put a strong emphasis on the importance of good background investigations" (p. 22). While this quote is aimed at background investigations of police applicants, it certainly applies to the performance review of police promotional candidates as well. Upon completion, the reviewer will present the findings of the performance review in the next phase of the promotional process, the assessment center.

The assessment center model was originally developed by the German military during World War I and first used by United States law enforcement in 1971 (Novak, 1999). The process was refined over the years, but essentially remains very similar to the original design. Assessment centers

provide the best overall method of testing for promotion (Hedgpeth, 2011). The traditional graded dimensions in an assessment center include but are not limited to the subordinate interview, in-basket exercise, group discussion/leaderless group, etc. Assessment centers should also incorporate past performance of the promotional candidate into the grading system. To include the past performance into the grading equation, the past performance must be tied to a job description for the position sought. Becton (2005) defined the link by stating, "Behavioral observations by assessors must be classified into some meaningful and relevant categories, such as dimensions, attributes, characteristics, aptitudes, qualities, knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs), or tasks" (p. 9). In other words, if law enforcement agencies use information from the performance review of the candidate, that information must be linked to a KSA for the position being sought. If the department chose to use the candidate's ability to get along with co-workers as a factor in promotion, there must be a corresponding gradable dimension in the assessment center such as "interpersonal skills" that applies to the sought after position.

### **COUNTER POSITION**

An issue raised often on the subject of assessment centers is they are not an accurate measurement of leadership. Assessment centers can measure the candidates' ability to perform job related tasks. Hughes (2010) claimed "The testing/assessment center model does not accurately measure performance and leadership potential of candidates" (p. 13). While this statement is only partially true, it does raise the issue of the ability of assessment centers to accurately

measure leadership potential. Assessment centers tend to focus on situational leadership and decision making as opposed to an overall assessment of the candidate's leadership potential. Decision making ability and situational leadership are important qualities in a leader, but so are interpersonal skills, self-initiative, and organizational talents are. Both sides of this equation must be merged for the promotion of the best leaders. Utilizing a proper performance review of the candidate with a strong assessment center will address this issue.

Also at issue is the deviance of APD's promotional process from Texas Civil Service Law. Texas adopted the Fireman's and Policemen's Civil Service Act in 1947 (Fireman's and Policeman's Civil Service Act, 1963). This Act was adopted for the noble purpose of protecting the rights of police officers and firefighters in the State of Texas. As stated above, civil service originated in 1883. The promotional system detailed in the Texas Local Government Code only provides for a written promotional exam. The law also provides for an alternative promotional process that can be adopted after due process. The APD process does not deviate from the spirit of Texas Civil Service Law. The rights of officers are still protected. APD took the existing civil service law promotional process and legally modified it using the vehicle of Meet and Confer. If agencies will adopt meet and confer or collective bargaining, each agency can design a promotional process that protects the rights of police officers while creating a promotional process that addresses the needs of the individual agency.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Law enforcement agencies should consider adopting the Abilene Police Model for promotional systems because the system incorporates leadership training prior to promotion, tests the candidates over that material, utilizes a performance review or background investigation, and culminates with an assessment center. Leadership training prior to promotion provides an avenue for administrators to fully communicate the department's expectations of those who desire to promote. The written exams administered to candidates can then be tailored to the content of the leadership training. Written exams are a reliable method of testing promotional candidates' ability to retain information. An emphasis should be placed on the material candidates are tested over during leadership training. That material should be relevant to the job of a police supervisor and consistent with the department's values and mission. The establishment of a local leadership academy is an excellent vehicle for teaching and testing agency specific material to a promotional candidate.

Promotional systems cannot identify and promote quality leaders without considering past performance. In order to quantify performance, a proper performance review must be conducted and linked to gradable dimensions in the assessment center. Agencies should be investing time and effort in identifying the past performance of officers who desire to promote. Past performance is a predictor of future performance.

Assessment centers remain the best method of identifying promotional candidates. While their accuracy has been called into question from time to time, assessment centers provide an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate job related

skills. The assessment center should be altered to incorporate past performance of the candidate as a consideration.

Agencies can adopt promotional systems such as the method described in this paper. Texas Civil Service Law provides a path for adopting alternative promotional systems. In order to accomplish such a task, an agency must obtain a majority vote from its sworn personnel. Meet and Confer or Collective bargaining provides an excellent vehicle for such negotiations.

In 2012, the Abilene Police Department eliminated the conventional promotional exam in lieu of an alternative process regarding testing (City of Abilene, 2012). APD initiated its own leadership academy. The design of the APD Leadership Academy incorporates five modules over the course of five weeks. At the end of each day, candidates are tested over that day's material. If the respective module's test is passed at 80%, the candidate moves on to the next module. This process enabled APD to test candidates over material specifically tailored to meet the needs of the local agency as opposed to material regurgitated from a leadership book. This process also enabled APD to utilize material that is rank specific and reflective of the job the candidate will be expected to perform.

The candidate becomes eligible to promote upon successful completion of the respective leadership academy. Potential sergeants are tested over material such as leadership, policies and procedures, penal code, search and seizure, etc. The sergeant's leadership academy also complies with TCLEOSE course #3737-The New Supervisor's Course (TCLEOSE, 2010). This gives APD the

ability to teach and promote the expectations and standards to which APD sergeants will be held. A separate yet similar course was designed for lieutenants. Potential lieutenants are also tested over subjects such as leadership, supervision, and operating procedures. The APD Administrative Leadership Academy also incorporates administrative training such as fiscal and budgetary courses, civil liability, and purchasing. After the candidates successfully complete the respective leadership academy modules, they move onto the next phase, the background investigation or the performance review.

The Abilene Police Department's promotional model incorporates two parts after the candidate has completed APD's Leadership Academy: the candidate's performance review and the assessment center. The Abilene Police Model performance review is designed to provide information about the candidate's conduct, leadership potential, motivation, ethics, decision making skills, communication skills, and job knowledge. It is important to note that APD chose to examine documentation on performance that existed for the previous 24 months period prior to the beginning of the assessment center. The performance reviewer should conduct the investigation by first examining the candidate's personnel file looking for evidence of disciplinary action, commendations, internal affairs investigations (sustained allegations only), etc. The reviewer should also inspect the candidate's mid-year and end of year performance evaluations for the previous 24 months.

The performance reviewer also examined the personnel conduct tracking software that was in use at the time of the performance review. The candidate

then provided five references to the performance reviewer. The performance reviewer conducted a face to face interview or utilized a questionnaire with all five references. The performance reviewer also conducted interviews with all direct supervisors of the candidate during the previous 24 months, all command level supervisors of the candidates within the previous 24 months, and any co-worker of the candidate not originally supplied as a reference by the candidate as needed to reach a cumulative total of six additional references. All information obtained from interviews conducted with peers of the candidate are available to the candidate; however, the identity of the source is kept confidential. For sergeants desiring to promote to lieutenant, the performance reviewer next examined mid-year and end of year subordinate performance reviews completed by the candidate for the previous three years.

The administration of assessment centers to candidates should continue. Many have expressed concern over the reliability of assessment centers to accurately promote the most qualified. Previous studies have shown that assessment centers do not accurately measure intelligence, aptitude, personality, common sense, judgment or leadership (Hughes, 2010). Despite that fact, over 60% of police and fire chiefs in a recent survey purported to utilize assessment centers in promotional processes (Hughes, 2010). In the Abilene Police model, the assessment center is conducted in a very similar fashion to the traditional model with a few exceptions. APD uses the information gathered during the performance review as contributing factors to grades obtained during the assessment. APD also utilizes internal assessors as opposed to personnel



from outside agencies. Internal assessors are randomly drawn and are comprised of the Chief of Police, and Assistant Chief of Police, Lieutenants, and those who hold the rank of Sergeant II. No more than two assessors will hold the rank of assistant chief or higher. The number of assessors will be equal to half the number of applicants but not less than six ("Abilene Police Meet and Confer contract," 2012, p. A-APD4, B-APD-4 & 5).

Law enforcement agencies should begin to truly invest in seeking out and promoting the most qualified leaders within the ranks. In a future where policing becomes more and more complex, along with the potential for generational conflict looming, the future of professional policing depends upon the paradigm of locating and promoting high quality leaders, not just good test takers. While civil service law is necessary to insulate law enforcement officers from political pressure, there should be a strong measure of the candidate's past performance included in the equation.

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