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**The Effectiveness of the Oral Interview
in the Promotional Process for Sergeants and Lieutenant**

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ABSTRACT

Promotional practices in law enforcement should be fair and impartial with a focus on improving the professionalism of the supervisory staff. All too often, there are deficiencies in the promotional process that lead to poor leadership, no confidence in the process, and poor morale. In order to investigate the problem, a written and oral survey was conducted with representatives from different venues of law enforcement. The findings resulted in the determination that due to the varied needs or limitations of law enforcement agencies, there is no absolute perfect method to conduct a promotional process. It was determined that a focal point for law enforcement officers, seeking to promote, was the requirement that a promotional assessment be fair and just for all candidates. In order to provide this, departments must be progressive and implement standards that require all officers to display leadership and professionalism, both as an assessor and as a candidate for promotion.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies nationwide have struggled to become truly professional organizations. The demands on the departments have changed over the years; therefore, the qualifications for law enforcement officers have changed as well. Throughout the history of the state of Texas, the role, responsibility, accountability, and physical makeup of law enforcement has changed. Law enforcement can no longer be satisfied using marginal requirements for recruiting or substandard and ill-prepared promotional practices. There is a duty for departments to respond to the demands of society and to look internally and evaluate whether they are providing the best possible service to the citizens and employees.

The hiring and promotional process is an integral part of the success and development of all agencies. The diversity of governmental agencies and the different applicable laws to each one makes it very difficult to establish one standard method of promotion for the ranks of Sergeant and Lieutenant. In addressing this issue, it requires four issues to be studied.

First, a study should be conducted to identify the methods most commonly used by law enforcement today that evaluates candidates for the positions of Sergeants and Lieutenants. Secondly, in respect to the overall score given to a candidate seeking promotion, the investigation should see if the written and oral test methods are the best way to conduct evaluations. Once the first two issues are addressed, a determination should be made to suggest what percentages of the final score the written and oral tests should be. Lastly, the study should

determine the most suitable method of scoring the tests in order to promote confidence and fairness within the ranks of law enforcement.

Inquiry into these issues are made by investigating the promotional practices of different departments and surveying the officers that have participated in the process or those that plan to participate in the promotional process. Civil courts at the state and federal level must also be reviewed for any past and current rulings on this matter. This must be done to insure that the departments are operating within the current boundaries established by law.

The anticipated findings are that there is little confidence among law enforcement officers in the promotional process that puts a majority of the value on the “oral” portion of the promotional process. It is also anticipated that the findings will show that the subjective nature of the oral interview makes it imperative that progressive departments take the necessary steps to dispel controversy and maintain equality for all.

This research proposes that law enforcement departments, in order to maintain their integrity and build an effective and competent supervisory staff, need to be proactive in evaluating their promotional process, need to determine the effectiveness and equality of that process, and need to make adjustments accordingly. In order to accomplish this, the methods most commonly used by law enforcement today to evaluate candidates for the supervisory positions should be investigated.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A decision that every officer eventually has to make is whether or not they are ready to move to a supervisory position. A professional officer who chooses to attempt to be promoted must be willing to present his qualifications for a higher position. Those officers wanting to promote should be able to show that they have the job knowledge, management skills, and leadership ability to carry out a supervisory position. Most departments require a prospective supervisor to show their ability through the application of a written test of knowledge, a practical skills test, and an oral interview. Some departments set up testing centers internally, while others choose to use assessment centers.

These methods of evaluating an individual are commonly accepted in law enforcement as adequate practices. If applied equally and fairly to every applicant, these examination methods are a valid way of conducting evaluations. In a dispute over the score, a written test is easy to challenge if the candidate for promotion feels that the test was graded incorrectly. The oral board and skills test is much more subjective and difficult to challenge. An oral interview panel is obligated by moral ethics to give a just and honest evaluation of the person in front of them. A member serving on that interview panel must have the integrity and professionalism to be unbiased in carrying out the evaluation.

Officers going through the promotional process must count on these individuals to do the right thing and to do things right. Nothing demoralizes personnel more than seeing evidence that not only do they encounter biases in the public arena, but also within their departments.

An oral interview panel may be affected by both external factors and internal factors. External factors might involve “loading” the panel with persons inclined to think a certain way. Examples of this could be an all male or female panel or a panel made completely of members of private social or civic clubs. Panels could even be comprised solely of persons with similar heritage, ethnicity, or age group. In addition, lifestyle preference, geographic area of origin, and duty station could also all be considered external factors.

Internal factors could include personal ethical beliefs or lack thereof, religious beliefs, and sexist or racist philosophies. Personal knowledge of the applicant or a previous conflict with the applicant as well as just having listened to hearsay about this individual can also be considered internal factors. These internal factors can be referred to as the “human factor.” The internal and external factors do not necessarily disqualify the oral assessment, but it certainly puts the respective department in a position where they have to be prepared to defend the panel's integrity.

This is not to say that promotions that have been gained through a successful oral assessment are all invalid. However, it must be acknowledged that oral interviews can be easily manipulated. Realizing this, it becomes necessary to question whether the system in place is the best that can be provided for employees. In weighing the merits of the oral interview itself, it can be concluded that it is an integral part of the evaluation. However, it must be given the appropriate percentage of value in the overall assessment. Limiting the weight that is placed on the oral portion of the assessment would reduce the risk

of it simply being a contest between who can be a better public speaker. While communicating effectively is an absolute necessity in modern law enforcement, the substance of the words is more important than mere volumes of empty rhetoric. If it is agreed that oral interviews are necessary, then there are a few more questions to ask.

The oral assessment requires an agency to evaluate how much worth to place on it and weigh it against how it will be perceived amongst officers within it. It is important to note that this portion of an assessment is the most subjective on the part of the interviewer and, therefore, can be the part that affects morale the most.

Waldron (1973) created a survey of law enforcement agencies', which revealed that requirements for promotion were determined in the following manner: 56.20% were established by civil service, 25.96% were established by the respective police agency, and the rest were established by a combination of the two.

It is evident that each and every part of the administration and supervisory ranks of those agencies must give considerable thought to this matter. Some departments have to adhere to contractual obligations with their employees in the promotional process. Others must obey civil service requirements. Texas state agencies, being "at will" entities, must adhere to legal obligations in order for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), requirements to be met. Conant (1973) stated, "As the companies representative, managers are required

to measure a man's performance along specified dimensions; if they fail to do so, they are derelict in their duties" (p. 73).

Even though supervisors are sometimes overwhelmed with numerous tasks, as managers and leaders, they need to help subordinate employees develop their management and leadership skills. The complex and technical nature of law enforcement today also demands that appropriate measures are taken to insure that the present supervisors and future supervisors all have the necessary skills to lead in a progressive manner.

Any agency seeking specific qualities in their management staff should clearly state that to all employees. This allows anyone wanting to compete for a specified position the opportunity to hone his or her leadership skills and prepare for that possible promotion. Encouraging an individual to learn supervisory skills will have long-term benefits for the agency. An educated or trained individual who is promoted to the supervisory ranks will most likely make a smooth transition into that position. At worst, if this candidate for promotion is not selected, then an agency will still have a qualified, trained officer who will continue his service with the department in a more competent manner. Allowing someone to promote to a position for which they are not prepared or qualified for will have long term negative consequences. It is difficult to have dedicated followers if one does not possess the necessary skills to lead.

The oral portion of the promotional test, being the most subjective, must be administered by a competent panel. Those persons serving on interview panels must have the integrity, confidence, and ability to make an accurate

evaluation of the candidates. They should also be prepared and capable of defending their decisions or ratings. Cosner (2000) claimed, "Most candidates have an interest in the assessment procedure, the evaluation process, and the assessors' experience" (p. 3). Having confidence in the assessors' qualifications and the ability to use sound judgment are crucial for maintaining the candidates' confidence in the system. Cosner (2000) concluded that assessors must work together, using clearly defined standards and must provide opportunities for candidates to ask questions and receive feedback. This practice would allow those candidate not promoted to identify their weaknesses and capitalize on strengths during future promotional exams.

METHODOLOGY

The effectiveness of the promotional process within departments must be constantly re-evaluated. This is necessary to ensure that departments are applying unbiased procedures in promoting the most qualified candidates. If done correctly, the process will serve the best interest of the agency, the personnel in that agency, and the community that it serves. Law enforcement agencies cannot fail to consider all of these factors if they truly desire improving the caliber of personnel and the quality of service provided to the citizens of this state.

The hypothesis proposes that the promotional testing process that will be most appropriate and accepted is one that gives lesser value to an oral interview or at least equal value to the written test. It will also properly evaluate leadership as well as job knowledge skills. Any variable additional points that might be

earned by the candidate will be reasonable points for longevity with the department, education, or training. The method of inquiry will be composed of a written survey. There will be 24 officers attending the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, who represent different agencies and will participate in the written survey. The 24 officers to be surveyed will be chosen because they represent a variety of different police agencies from across the state of Texas.

The survey will consist of 18 different questions, all designed towards identifying the type of promotional tests used by different departments, how tests are scored, and how it affects confidence and morale. Because the 24 officers to be surveyed will represent law enforcement from all parts of Texas, it is anticipated that geographically, the entire state will be represented. The officers will include male and female officers and will include all age groups, social, and economic statuses. No regard was given to any factor other than that the persons surveyed be current law enforcement officers.

The response rate was 100 percent. The response to the questions in the survey will be reviewed and analyzed to identify the promotional process most widely used, how it is perceived by the rank and file, and how it affects morale and a sense of fairness within a department. All questions will be reduced to percentages in order to try to identify patterns within the promotional process that could identify a flaw or shortcoming that can be addressed and corrected.

FINDINGS

One hundred percent of the officers from 24 agencies, from all levels of state and municipal governments, responded to the survey. The results of the blind survey of officers from the 24 different departments established that the officers surveyed represented departments with a broad range of manpower strengths within the peace officer and correctional officer groups. They broke down as follows: of the survey responders, 29.1% represented departments with 50 or less officers; 24.9% represented departments with 50 to 100 officers; 24.9% represented departments with 100 to 300 officers; 8.3% represented departments with 300 to 500 officers; 4.1% percent represented departments with 500 to 1000 officers; and 8.3% represented departments with over 1000 officers. The results also showed that of the participants, 66.5% represented municipal departments, 24.9% represented county departments, and 8.3% represented state agencies.

The survey revealed that 95.6% of the officers believe that a promotional process must not be a written test only. When asked if the oral interview was a necessary part of the promotional process, 95.6% of officers replied in the affirmative. This question was then broken down further, and the officers were asked to assess what percentages the oral interview should count towards the total of promotional candidate's score. The response was the following: 58.2% responded that the oral score should count less than 40.0%; 24.9% responded that the oral score should count 50%; 24.9% stated that the oral score should count for 60% of the overall score, and 16.6% believed that the oral score should

count for 70% or more. It was also determined that 58.2% of officers believe that all candidates should have an opportunity to see their test results, both written and oral after the assessment.

Knowing what instructions were given to the assessment panel prior to the testing was of great importance to 70.7% of those surveyed. These officers also reported that 79.0% their departments do not allow the candidates the opportunity to see the scores given by the panel members. Of these officers, 70.7% of them believe that morale is affected because of a lack of confidence in the promotional process. To try to identify reason for the lack of confidence in the process, the officers were asked if they believed that favoritism or biased attitudes exist within their departments; 54.0% believe that promotions are the result of popularity instead of qualifications.

The survey asked who should serve on an oral interview panel. The results were that 12% preferred persons within their departments, 21% preferred outsiders, and 67% agreed on a combination of the two. Additionally, the survey revealed that 70.7% of the officers believe that the current promotional process within their departments is not the result civil, and 29.1% did not know.

DISCUSSIONS/CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to analyze the promotional process with respect to the oral interview. In a promotional assessment, the oral interview being a subjective process is typically the one most criticized and most suspect of being biased. The process of one or more persons interviewing a candidate for promotion creates it's own set of potential problems. The interviewer could

bring his or her own biased thoughts into the evaluation process, and this could, in fact, bring about a result that would promote not the best qualified person but the one most aligned with the same thought process or similar ideas as the interviewer. This would not necessarily be a bad thing if the interviewer were a true professional that was knowledgeable in the requirements of the job and one who could keep from being influenced by biased internal or external factors.

If the promotional process and oral interview is to have any credibility, it must be able to stand up to the scrutiny of anyone. In order to identify any deficiencies, the oral interview must first be studied to see if it is trusted by the persons seeking promotion and if it affects the fiber and strength of the personnel working within a department.

The main findings from this survey were that there is a lack of confidence in any promotional process that puts a high value on an oral interview. The interview, by its very nature, is subjective because the score is the result of a personal opinion. This factor is something that can be manipulated and affected by internal and external factors. The high interest and concern expressed by those surveyed confirms the findings of the literature review, which suggests that officers have an interest in the promotional process being a fair and open process. The survey results suggest that in departments of any size, if they keep the oral process veiled in secrecy and withhold information from officers trying to promote, it will bring about poor morale and distrust in the administration.

Most departments have held on to old methods of promotion that have been established through years of trial and error. In some cases, the changes

implemented were the result of challenges to the process made in civil courts. In many cases, the lack of progressive changes within a department resulted in movement by employees to seek representation through civil suits, civil service, collective bargaining, and developing associations. While most changes made this way were necessary, the results have not always been equitable for either the department or the citizens it serves.

Because most law enforcement agencies use internal staff to serve as reviewers or assessors in a promotional test, it is imperative that they be properly trained and prepared to serve on those panels. The assessor on a promotional board must possess valued leadership qualities. Being a leader implies that the person is capable of evaluating a candidate fairly, without regard for external or internal factors clouding their judgment. Departments that promote this practice can expect a fair promotional panel that will choose the best qualified person for the promotion and not just the most popular or the one with higher academic success. A promotional process that is fair and comprised of leaders can withstand the scrutiny of the courts and promote positive morale.

History has shown that governments, big and small, can only stay strong if they build on a strong foundation of proper ethics and sound leadership. Law enforcement administration can ensure sound promotional practices by reviewing its procedures and demanding that oral assessment interviewers be of the character that promotes professionalism, integrity, and sound judgment. In order to do this, administrators must give careful consideration to who can, or who should be able to, serve on an interview panel. Failing to do this could bring

about a domino effect that would deteriorate the fabric of the caliber of present and future leaders.

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