

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



**Choosing the Best Candidate for Promotion in a Police Department.**



**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**



**By  
Geoffrey Lewis**

**Texarkana Texas Police Dept.  
Texarkana, Texas  
June 2021**

## **ABSTRACT**

The profession of law enforcement has come under more and more scrutiny. Departments across the State of Texas have invested time and money into improving their hiring processes. However, the same cannot be said about the promotional processes within the same organizations. Promotions range from appointments, written test assessments, oral boards, and assessment centers. While it is impossible to say one system is better than the rest, law enforcement agencies must move toward methods that place an emphasis on selecting the most qualified candidate. Law enforcement agencies should implement a standard promotional style that would evaluate a candidate's leadership ability.

Law enforcement agencies should look at the varying methods of promotions and formulate a system that utilizes the strengths from each one. The position should be to promote the most qualified candidates with strong leadership abilities, improve retention of employees, and introduce a method viewed as fair. Some would argue written tests work, oral interviews are subjective and only gives a snapshot of the employee, and the cost and time to establish an assessment is too great for smaller agencies. However, the need for quality supervisors with knowledge and leadership abilities outweighs these arguments.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction . . . . .	1
Position . . . . .	2
Counter Arguments . . . . .	6
Recommendation . . . . .	9
References . . . . .	12
Appendix	

## INTRODUCTION

The State of Texas has thousands of police departments within its territorial borders; however, it does not have a standard for how leaders within those police departments are promoted. Citizens would believe law enforcement agencies always promote the most qualified candidates for leadership roles (i.e. police sergeant and police lieutenant). Unfortunately, there are wide ranges of systems in which police officers are promoted. In some agencies, officers are simply promoted by who they know, sometimes referred to as the “good ole boy system”. In civil service organizations, one often finds officers are promoted based solely on a written test. In other agencies, you will find interview boards where the police officers are questioned by either supervisors within their department, neighboring department supervisors, or a combination of both. This paper will address the strengths and weaknesses of these different promotional styles and provide a model in which departments should be using to promote future leaders within organizations. Some would argue police department leaders are different from private business leaders; however, according to a California personality study, all organizations at the core have the same principals concerning who should be running the company (Hughes, 2010). Tulgan’s work (as cited in Hogan, et al., 2011) stated, “given that many of these officers will have had prior work experience, and thus exposure to management practices in private and/or other public sector organizations, it seems unlikely they will be unaware of poor management practices or deficient supervision in their new workplace” (p. 102). Line level workers should be evaluated in a fair job-related style to show if they can perform in a leadership role. Law

enforcement agencies should implement a standard promotional style that would evaluate a candidate's leadership ability.

## **POSITION**

Police organizations must strive to promote the best candidates to the many leadership roles within the department. The roles vary depending on the rank the officer is attempting to obtain and the size of the organization. For example, a police officer is generally attempting to obtain the rank of corporal or sergeant, often referred to as a first line supervisor. The next level of promotion is often referred to as the midlevel manager and can be a lieutenant or captain depending on the size of the organization. The last level in a police organization is often referred to as management and consists of assistant chiefs and chiefs. Even though all these ranks have a different role, one must remember the person serving must have knowledge and leadership abilities to be effective. According to Jelley and McCarthy (2014), "the processes that are used to select which police officers will be promoted to the next rank generate much discussion and consume considerable resources in police agencies" (p. 68).

Generally, the three different methods for promotions within a department are a written examination, appointment, and oral board. A written examination is usually a 100-question test, over source material, ranging from case law, Texas criminal statute, and leadership books. The intent of the written test is to bring fairness and equality to those taking the examination and to measure a person's skill or personality (Hughes, 2010). Organizations hope the candidates will learn and apply the knowledge from the source material into their practices once in a leadership role. This method of promotion has its drawbacks as it does not test the candidate's ability to apply this knowledge in

an operational setting. Goldstein's work (as cited in Camp, 1999, p. 28) stated, "this method may result in the promotion of the best test-takers, and not necessarily the best leaders." The next method of promotion is the seniority/evaluation based or appointment style. The department head, chief or sheriff, can reward an officer with a promotion based simply on his/her years of service, the performance and yearly evaluations, or how well he/she is liked in the department. This method of promotions has several drawbacks and, in some cases, interjects favoritism into the process. Work experience is an asset to candidates in both the private sector and police sector when promoting; however, experience does not always translate to the next higher role. An employee can be a great police officer but a terrible sergeant for reasons such as lack of communication skills, poor organizational skills, and lack of time management. A five-year officer may have more leadership ability than a fifteen-year officer.

Performance evaluations are a good indicator of work ability but often do not evaluate leadership or management ability. According to Camp (1999), performance evaluations often are a worse indicator of abilities due to their unreliability and bias. Finally, the candidate is promoted simply because of how well he/she is liked by the chief or sheriff. In some cases, the candidate can be promoted from a line-level position to a mid-level manager position with no supervisory experience. This could cause problems with morale and negativity toward the upper management. This method does little to assess leadership abilities and often is referred to as the "good ole boy system" (Camp, 1999).

Finally, oral boards have been used as a method to promote candidates within an organization. Camp (1999) referred to oral boards as unreliable and considered to be the least valid of the above-mentioned methods. Administrators like the oral board

because of its low cost and comfort between the board members and candidates; however, it does little more than assess the candidate's oral communication skills.

All three of the above methods have issues within them making a standardized testing method ideal among police agencies. The position should be to promote the most qualified candidates and with strong leadership abilities, improve retention of employees, and introduce a method viewed as fair.

First, a promotional method should promote the most qualified candidate. Hughes (2010) asked this question: "If the current promotional process truly choosing candidates with the wanted leadership styles, and if not, what improvements can be made" (para. 9). Any good organization should want the most qualified candidates leading and mentoring its employees. Officers and administrators could design a task-specific assessment within the organization to get more buy in at the officer level. If the tasks included an assignment as a group leader with an issue to address, some situational leadership skills could emerge during the exercise (Hughes, 2010). Leadership is a subjective word with different traits or behaviors based on whom one might ask. A good model for any organization would be to list a set of behaviors viewed by line-level and management as leadership behaviors. During the task-specific assessment, the candidate could be rated on a predetermined scale in each of those behaviors. R. Smith (as cited in Hughes, 2010) stated that "leadership is a behavioral quality which has to be demonstrated in everyday context" (para. 12). This statement supports the use of task-specific assessments in a promotional test. In both the private and law enforcement sector, one can find instances of employees who can do a great job but do not have the ability to translate that into a group setting or leadership role.

When a police agency uses a written test or oral board only, it isn't until the employee is put in a leadership role that the deficiencies are noticed.

Next, the promotional method should increase retention of employees.

Pozzobon (as cited in Hogan, 2011) stated, "Likewise, has found that those in the middle management role can actually have an impact on how long front-line officers choose to remain within the police service, and whether or not they remain motivated to adopt the police services' vision and values" (p. 101). In every organization, one has heard the motto "people don't leave bad jobs they leave bad bosses." Police organizations across the nation are facing the dilemma of not having adequate staffing. According to an ABC study of medium-sized agencies from 45 states across the U.S., there has been a 63% decrease in applying to become a police officer (Barr, 2019). The problems in hiring are attributed to the lack of interest in the profession and the stringent hiring standards in both small and large police agencies. Law enforcement agencies must not contribute to this loss of personnel through promotion of bad candidates. Stuart and Nordstrom (2018) advised that "a Harvard Business Review survey reveals 58 percent of people say they trust strangers more than their own boss" (para. 6). A task-specific assessment built by officers and management within the department could help reduce the chance of bad managers reaching higher-level positions.

Finally, the promotional method should promote fairness when viewed by employees at all levels in the organization. According to Jelley and McCarthy (2014), "Candidate perceptions of test fairness have significant consequences for organizations. However, little attention has been directed toward interventions that may promote



favorable reactions, despite recognition that the identification of such management practices is important” (p. 68). If employees do not feel that the system is fair, the chance of “buy-in” is reduced. A task-specific assessment with input from the line-level officers could mitigate this. Officers, like managers, know what they want in a boss. Though most would agree you could not build a promotional method based on all employee’s needs, input from them is needed. Managers sometime find themselves overlooking tasks that a line-level officer may feel is important. A department could organize a board that consisted of line-level and mid-level officers to help formulate a method beneficial to the organization’s needs. Allowing line-level officers into the process should give a sense of empowerment and assist in creating a method viewed as fair by all the employees within the organization.

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

A promotional method that is standardized across the state leads to several counter arguments. These arguments center on the belief that written tests work, the belief that a quick oral interview is subjective and only gives a snapshot of the employee, and finally the cost and time to establish an assessment is too great for smaller agencies.

In civil service agencies, such as the Texarkana Texas Police Department, a passing score on a written examination is all that is necessary to promote within the organization. Many officers would say the process works and promotes those willing to put in the time to study the subject material. Line-level officers and administrators could predict those that will be at the top of the eligibility list due to the intense motivation the promotional candidates have, studying for a year or more (Topp, 2010). Line-level

officers perceive written examinations as objective and fair. Coutts wrote (as cited in Jelly and McCarty 2014), “Enhanced objectivity in assessment may help explain why many police agencies have, for years, incorporated standardized testing as one component of the promotional process” (pg. 68).

This argument simply does not address the profession as a whole. A written examination does little to evaluate the candidate’s applicability of the knowledge to the real world. Most written examinations are a multiple-choice format. The answer is always in front of the candidate and can be a simple process of elimination if they have a basic knowledge base of the subject material (Terpak, 2008). Further, a candidate can take the same written examination multiple times, allowing memory to be a factor over preparation.

Another argument against assessment evaluations is assessment interviews can be subjective and only briefly introduces the candidate. Law enforcement agencies have instituted alternate promotional methods and found them hard to defend in federal court. Litigators argue that common standards between groups of assessors are hard to establish and interject subjectivity into the process (Camp, 1999). Most assessment interviews consist of an oral interview that lasts 30-45 minutes. Oral interviews have been viewed as cost effective and comfortable with both the candidate and assessors, but its validity has never been proven (Camp, 1999).

However, this argument can be overcome with the introduction of task-specific assessments and input from officers at the line-level. An oral interview that includes tasks specific for the position the candidate is attempting to obtain would allow the assessor to evaluate the candidate’s abilities. Both the candidate and the assessors

would be provided a copy of the position's job responsibilities prior to testing. The assessors would be of the same rank as the position the candidate is attempting to obtain. The El Paso County Sheriff's Office has a similar process for the rank of police lieutenant during the oral board portion of the test. The oral portion would consist of a basket exercise (task-specific) and four assessors: one from the department, two from an outside agency, and one civilian (El Paso County Sheriff's Office, 2019). Having task-specific criteria in a testing measure would allow the candidate to apply leadership and time management skills to the promotional process.

The final argument against assessment evaluations is smaller agencies are limited in the number of officers available for assessment evaluations and budgets to fund the assessment center. An assessment panel usually would consist of 4-6 assessors to evaluate a candidate and can include internal/external sworn officers and civilians. Bannon and Associates (2012) provide assessment centers for law enforcement and fire services. According to Bannon and Associates (2012), the cost per test is \$275.00 for the first 10 tests and \$3000.00 for a 12-month lease with the company. Smaller agencies have small budgets that only cover operation expenses and leave no room for promotional testing.

However, this cost could be reduced with an agreement of surrounding agencies. The agencies would provide a supervisor for the assessment panel at the rank the promoting agency is testing. The agreement would provide assessors at no cost and each assessor would train together to understand the scoring matrix in the assessment portion of the test. The El Paso County Sheriff's Office (2019) has a system similar to

this that has proven to help reduce costs of assessors. Further, each agency could have a task-specific assessment that benefited their organization.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

In both the private sector and law enforcement, supervisors and managers are a pivotal part in the success of the organization. Most line-level and management officers would agree it is important to evaluate the potential candidates in a fair and consistent way. However, both large and small agencies have varying methods to promote their candidates. It is rare to find a police officer that believes the method used by his/her agencies is the best practice. Law enforcement agencies should implement a standard promotional style that would evaluate a candidate's leadership ability. A combination of promotional methods using the strengths for each could result in a favorable promotional style that could be a model for agencies to use for promotions. The assessment center is often viewed as a more reliable method for police promotions. Hale (2005) stated the advantage of an assessment center as, "one of the unique characteristics of the assessment is that it ensures that all candidates will be evaluated impartially, fairly, and objectively based upon their demonstrated ability to perform the tasks necessary to succeed in their potential new positions" (pg. 86). A good model for police agencies to follow should be to implement a combination of a written test and a task-specific assessment. The task-specific assessment would consist of a panel of outside agency officers of the rank the candidate is attempting to obtain. The tasks would be specific for the rank the officer is attempting to obtain and would test the candidate's oral communication skills, organizational skills, and time management.

The model should be to incorporate a written examination to establish an eligibility list. The candidates who pass the written examination would move on to the next phase of the promotional process. To allow for officer “buy-in” and to try to reduce the subjectivity of the next phase, a committee would be formed within each department. The committee, consisting of line-level, mid-level, and management positions, would come up with task-specific assessments for each of the promotable positions. Ideally, the candidate would come into a room and have a task box to work through, testing his organization, time management, delegation ability, and oral skills. These tasks could include a mock roll call, scheduling scenarios, mock administrative memos with tasks to delegate, etc. The tasks would be specific to each organization’s needs. The agencies then could enter into an agreement with neighboring agencies to provide assessors for the task-specific scenarios. The assessment portion of the test would have only assessors from outside agencies sitting on the panel. This would allow for reduced costs associated with assessment centers. Having outside agency assessors also removes the bias from the process due to only knowing the candidate as a number or last name. A combination of both the written examination and task-specific assessment should properly evaluate the candidates seeking promotion within an organization.

Any promotional method should, at its core, want one thing: to promote the best candidate to a position of influence. Law enforcement agencies and the citizens they serve should want a promotional system that evaluates a candidate’s leadership abilities. Across the state, most agencies include an oral board or oral interview in the hiring process to become a police officer. Even in the private sector, a person must

complete an interview to obtain a job. If this were fact, why would any agency want a method for promoting supervisors and managers to be easier than a new hire.

Incorporating outside assessors and promoting the most qualified applicants could also increase employee retention and be viewed as fair by employees within the organization.

With any new idea there will always be those that point out flaws. In civil service organizations some would say written tests work, however these written examinations do little to address professional policing's needs. Others argue an oral interview is subjective, but when utilizing task-specific assessments one can properly evaluate a candidate's ability to do the job. Finally, the biggest obstacle in the proposed promotional process is the cost and time to establish an assessment center. This can be offset by using an agreement with local agencies at no cost to the agency setting up the promotional test.

Today, law enforcement must strive for excellence and prove that as organizations police place a high emphasis on supervisory positions. Research supports the need for a task-specific assessment that truly puts the most qualified candidates in positions of leadership within a police department.

## REFERENCES

- Bannon and Associates. (2012). *Memorandum*. Retrieved from <https://bannonandassociates.com/2013-PRICING.pdf>
- Barr, L. (2019, September 17). U.S. police agencies having trouble hiring, keeping officers, according to a new survey. *ABC News*. Retrieved from: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-police-agencies-trouble-hiring-keeping-officers-survey/story?id=65643752>
- Camp, D. D. (1999). Linking training and promotion in a police agency. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 29*(3-4), 25-55.
- El Paso County Sheriff's Office. (2019, March 5). *Policy and Procedure Manual*. 623-625.
- Hale, C. (2005). Candidate evaluation and scoring. *Law and Order, 53*(12), 86.
- Hogan, J., Bennell, C., & Taylor, A. (2011). The challenges of moving into middle management: Responses from police officers. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 26*(2), 100-111.
- Hughes, P. J. (2010). Increasing organizational leadership through the police promotional process. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 79*, 10.
- Jelley, R. B., & McCarthy, J. M. (2014). Examining a strategy for improving candidate perceptions of test fairness. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 29*(2), 68-74.
- Stuart, D., & Nordstrom, T. (2018, March 8). 10 shocking workplace stats you need to know. *Forbes*. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidsturt/2018/03/08/10-shocking-workplace-stats-you-need-to-know/#28b0e241f3af>
- Topp, B. W. (2011). An exploratory study of two decades of promotional testing in a metropolitan police department. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 26*(2), 143-151.
- Terpak, M. A. (2008). *Assessment center strategy and tactics*. Fire Engineering Books.