

What's Keeping Your Personnel from Promoting?

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In the last issue of *On Scene*, Steve looked at why more and more departments are looking outside for their next fire chiefs and what this means for departments. In this follow-up article, he considers why firefighters and company officers aren't looking to promote.

More and more departments have to conduct nationwide searches for the executive-level chief officers. Is this a bad thing or a good thing?

It depends on your perspective and how your department is doing overall. Does your department need a radical culture change because of current or past problems? Or is your department healthy and headed in the right direction?

Most fire departments don't have a problem recruiting their personnel to step up for engineer or company-officer positions, but going for a gold badge is where the problem seems to begin.

Is it a problem?

It may be a problem; a fire department that has to continually look outside for executive-level chief officers probably isn't doing as much as it can to ensure it has homegrown leaders who know the department and are in tune with what's going on.

When personnel discuss recruiting from outside, some will argue that someone from outside can't do as good as someone from within because they don't have history or institutional knowledge and will have to learn everything from scratch. They also don't have the relationships with the personnel that someone would have from the inside.

But, is that always a bad thing? Someone from outside the department may come up with fresh ideas not part of the status quo. They may not have any preexisting ties or be put in a bad position from knowing everyone intimately, as someone would coming up the ranks.

There's no right or wrong; I know great people who have successfully promoted up the ranks from within and I know great people who have come from other departments and taken new leadership positions very successfully.

There are great people outside who are very qualified—maybe even more qualified than personnel within your department. An agency must do its homework.

A fire department may be forced to choose between someone from outside who's very qualified and someone from within who isn't but who wants the position or is the last person standing with a raised hand to take a shot at being the next chief. This is where the tough decisions must be made, after extensive research, consideration, evaluation and gut-checking.

Why aren't there more candidates from within?

Let's take a look at two reasons why fire departments aren't getting sufficient numbers of qualified candidates from within for chief or executive-level chief officer ranks.

We have made it too good to leave the fire station and the shift schedule. Face it, ask most firefighters why they got into the fire service and what their eventual career aspirations are, and I bet their answer is not to become a fire chief, a deputy chief or an assistant chief.

Many may say they would eventually like to be a company officer; fewer may say battalion chief. I doubt many will say above the rank of battalion chief.

Take it a step further: I bet the most will say they just want to be a firefighter or may say they would like to be an engineer at some time.

As for the why they got into the fire service, it was probably to fight fire and save lives or something similar. I guarantee it wasn't to drive a desk and deal with personnel, budgets, or labor related issues.

Now add on the overwhelming benefits that go with being a firefighter, engineer or even company officer: You get to work at the firehouse with your buddies, not in the administrative offices. You get to work a shift schedule, not Monday through Friday. (And sometimes a 7-days-a-week schedule, because we truly never get nights and weekends off, given we're always on call).

You get to have union representation in most departments, as opposed to being employed at will in most departments. You still get to work overtime, not just work the extra hours to get your work done without compensation.

You get to do the fun stuff, not the un-fun stuff. (I know; fun is what you make of it, right?) And you pretty much have minimal responsibility, especially if you remain a firefighter or engineer.

Now let me be clear: I don't mean any disrespect to anyone who has no desire to promote beyond firefighter; that's not my intention whatsoever. I completely respect someone's decision to not promote, and we need great people in all ranks, not just the upper ranks.

I also realize that firefighter and engineers do have responsibilities, just as company officers are responsible for the health and safety of their crews, among other things.

However, in the bigger picture, someone in the rank of fire chief or even slightly below has significant responsibility; they're responsible for all personnel in the department or within their assigned division and for all the duties and responsibilities that go along with their assigned divisions or programs.

What are the tradeoffs inherent in promoting?

I do miss working at a fire station and no longer getting the opportunity to have the many benefits mentioned above. But I still believe the positives outweigh the negatives of my current position in my department, based on what I know about those two higher up positions in our chain of command (assistant and fire chief).

The positions of fire chief and executive-level chief officers have drastically changed over the years. Talk to any chief officer who has been in the fire service for over 20 years; I bet they'll confirm that the jobs have changed, and probably not for the better. Consider increased liability, responsibility, accountability, public expectations, elected official expectations, personnel expectations, labor relations, shrinking budgets, public scrutiny, and more.

In today's world, being at the top of the food chain can be a very lonely and stressful position, causing many to question why they took the job in the first place (after their honeymoon period is over) or why they didn't stay a captain, engineer or even firefighter.

However, if everyone has that attitude, the fire service and your fire department will never get the opportunity to get quality leadership from within. Nobody said the job was going to be easy. If it were, everyone would be doing it, right?

Ask the questions.

Regardless of the reasons you may hear, it's worth asking your personnel why they don't want to promote. You may learn some interesting things by asking the question. Some you may be able to change; some you may not be able to change.

There may be some things your department can do to encourage personnel to step up; there may be some things that are just unrealistic, such as lowering promotional requirements.

At the end of the day, it may be that you gave it your best shot you could, encouraging your personnel to step up, but insufficient numbers of interested and qualified personnel did so. If that's the case, you may have no other choice but to go to the outside.

However, before your department gets to the point of assuming nobody from within wants to move upwards, get your personnel's input on how to encourage more of them to step up the ranks.

You may find some shining stars who'll rise to the occasion and carry the torch!

[Steve Prziborowski](#), CFO, CTO, is a deputy chief for the Santa Clara County (Calif.) Fire Department and a past president of the Northern California Training Officers Association. He's a member of the IAFC Program Planning Committee and the IAFC On Scene advisory board.

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