

## Ensuring Qualified Candidates for Your Next Vacancy

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*In the August issues of On Scene, you read about [where to find your next chief](#) and [what keeps your personnel from promoting](#). This article expands on those questions with career development and succession planning.*

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Why do we need suggestions on career development and succession planning? To allow our organizations to continue ensuring we have sufficient personnel who are interested, qualified and appropriate. Personnel the fire chief can select from to appoint to their command staff, or a city-county administrator or governing board can draw from to appoint the next fire chief.

One of my comments in the first article was, “If your department doesn’t have at least three candidates who are qualified and interested and would be a great fit as your next fire chief, then we as the fire service leadership have failed. Either we didn’t hire the right personnel in the first place or we didn’t do enough over the years to inspire and motivate our personnel to step up and lead.”

I need to clarify and build on that statement, especially after talking with some colleagues who reached out to discuss the article and offer some great advice and feedback.

Three may be a high number, especially if the department is a small agency that has one chief and four or fewer battalion chiefs and everyone else is a company officer, engineer or firefighter. This rank structure isn’t uncommon for departments with five or fewer stations.

In such a situation, expecting all battalion chiefs to be qualified, interested and a good fit for the position of fire chief—and expecting three of them to step up for consideration—is unrealistic. If you only have nine company officers spread over three shifts, the odds of at least three wanting to promote to battalion chief may be a stretch.

I didn’t even address the rank of company officer submitting for fire chief in this scenario. While I’ve known company officers to jump right to chief in small or even mediums-size agencies, this is really the exception rather than the norm. In typical situations in small agencies, it’s common to have a company officer function like a chief officer every day because there are no chief officers. That’s different from a company officer going right to fire chief when there are battalion, deputy, assistant or division chiefs.

So yes, if your department has four or fewer chief officers below the fire chief, it may be unrealistic to expect all to be ready, willing and able to jump to the rank of fire chief. For a department that has most battalion chiefs on a shift schedule, this may be a deciding factor for many choosing not to step up to fire chief, especially if they have to go on a Monday-through-Friday schedule and lose their overtime opportunities and maybe even their union representation or program-management responsibilities.

I get it, can’t blame them one bit. But, when a situation like that occurs in your agency, it forces the department—and the chief’s bosses—to either look to the outside for a new chief or lower the expectations and requirements for someone to step into the position. They may even need to dip into the company officer ranks, which may or may not be the best choice, depending on the individuals and what experience, education, credibility and relationships they’ve built and maintained in their careers.

So if your department doesn’t have at least three qualified and interested candidates who would be a great fit, is it the end of the world to go to the outside and look for a new fire chief? Not necessarily. Many great individuals from other agencies can come into a new department and do a great job, assuming the candidate from outside are fully vetted.

Don’t believe me? It happens all the time; many great personnel go from one department to another successfully.

Sadly, though, many departments don't do their homework and hire people from the outside who aren't good fits—as qualified as they claim to be on paper—or the best person for the position. It happens.

Does that mean a department shouldn't look to the outside? No, it doesn't. It can actually be a healthy thing for a nationwide recruitment to occur when a vacancy comes up. For those within who think they're capable and ready to step up, some may take your going outside as an insult when they shouldn't.

I've known city administrators to just appoint the number-two chief to be the next fire chief or go below the number-two chief to appoint another chief without conducting a nationwide search. However, most of the time, it seems that if internal candidates are ready to step into the position, they'll rise to the top and get the position.

What if you have only one or two—or even worse, no internal candidates? Then it's time to do some serious research to find out why nobody's wants to apply for fire chief.

Maybe they're not interested. See what can be done to motivate them to consider applying.

Maybe they're not qualified in terms of education. See how you can help them with career development planning and guidance.

Maybe they're not qualified in terms of experience. Look for opportunities to ensure they have a well-rounded experience in more than just the fun stuff (such as operations-related assignments), so they build an all-risk background to compete with others with experience.

Not everyone wants to or should be a fire chief or even a chief officer. Some chiefs have known they want to be a fire chief from childhood. Some didn't decide until early or well into their careers. For those who chose to become a fire chief halfway or more into their careers, chances are it was because someone inspired them, challenged them or let them know they have the potential to serve as chief. Someone took the time to nudge or push them in the right direction.

What does that mean for fire chiefs moving toward retirement? It means there may be great opportunities to nudge, inspire, encourage, mentor and help your current chief officers and your company officers—the future chief officers—to be ready when an advancement opportunity occurs.

Many will choose to stay at the ranks of company officer and battalion chief, but there's a great chance you'll find at least one and hopefully more individuals who note what you're sharing and take you up on the offer, realizing the path to fire chief may be a realistic opportunity they should strongly consider.

In closing, if you can have at least three internal candidates ready to jump into the next fire chief vacancy, there's also a potential drawback to the department: while one happy person will be—the one selected—others may now be unhappy and may retire, seeking other opportunities outside the department.

Or they may become negative and do what they can to disrupt the work of the new leader; this can be really toxic if not addressed early on.

Be aware of these possibilities and consider them in your succession planning.

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