



What to Do When Internal Candidates Don't Get the Promotion

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In December's [Ensuring Qualified Candidates for Your Next Vacancy](#), we explored challenges with ensuring there are at least three internal candidates to compete for the next fire chief's vacancy. What happens when a department is fortunate enough to have three internal candidates to compete for fire chief, or any chief officer position for that matter? When there ends up being one happy candidate—the one who was selected—and potentially a number of disappointed candidates?

You may think it's great to have a number of internal candidates to select from, but when more than one person puts their heart and soul into a promotional process, there's a risk of backlash, major frustration and even bitterness for those who didn't get the position!

Think about it; when you threw your hat into the ring, you did countless hours of research and soul-searching, not to mention preparation and paperwork, as well as showing up to interviews and meet-and-greets (if you were fortunate to make it that far in the hiring process).

When someone puts that much time and effort into a process, they expect a positive outcome. Why shouldn't they? They believed they were good enough to get the position, so they put some blood, sweat and tears into getting the position—and then they didn't get it.

For most personnel, the process of getting hired and then getting promoted has hopefully prepared them for rejection, denial and disappointment, given how often they probably had to apply for that entry-level position as well as the promoted positions. Very few people I know got hired by the first department they applied to. Very few that I know got promoted the first time they applied.

To become a full-time firefighter, it took me about 4½ years of testing. During that time, I applied to well over 40 fire departments both within and outside California. I applied to all sizes of departments because I wanted to be a firefighter.

Before we go any further, some may say, "40 plus tests? What a loser!" In the early 1990s, it was very competitive and many departments were using random lotteries to determine who continued through the hiring process. I was 0 for 20 on random lotteries; I got it and I didn't hold grudges. I just kept using those rejection letters as inspiration to keep plugging away.

I honestly believe rejection and disappointment can help reveal one's true character. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? Right? Or as some may say, the true test of character is how you handle adversity.

Thankfully, my promotional pursuits were a little better. I was promoted to captain on the first promotional exam I took. I was promoted to battalion chief on the second promotional exam I took. I was promoted to deputy chief on the third promotional exam I took.

I was fortunate to apply for the last fire chief vacancy back in 2011, along with three other internal candidates, but unfortunately I didn't make the cut to proceed throughout the process because I was only at the rank of battalion chief. My competition included three other chief officers from within, as well as many other chief officers from outside.

I was told the reason I didn't get to continue to at least an interview was because I didn't have any experience at the deputy, assistant or fire chief level, something the other three candidates had. While I was disappointed I didn't have the chance to compete for the position, I knew I couldn't let my disappointment get the best of me. I had to move on, continue heading in the right direction. I focused on getting promoted to deputy chief so I could be the best I could be in that position and then compete for future fire chief vacancies here and be even more prepared when that time arose.

While I could have easily been bitter, disappointed and rejected, I took some advice from one of my mentors, who wisely told me early in my career that life will have its ups and downs, and that when I am given lemons, I need to make lemonade. When I'm thrown the curve ball for the first time and horrifically swing and miss, I need to dust myself off and learn how to hit that curve ball so it doesn't get the best of me and handicap me for the

rest of my life.

More importantly, that wise mentor advised me I have 24 hours to get over the rejection and move on with life; don't show your disappointment to anyone but your significant other, which can be risky in itself. I say risky because I've heard of some significant others who heard of the disappointment by their partner and then decided to take matters into their own hands to show their disapproval of the original decision.

I recently read a story about an NFL player whose wife wasn't happy with the team's quarterback (one of her husband's teammates—yes, I said teammate, not even the management or coaching staff), and decided to Tweet out the fact of how the quarterback is the problem and needs to go. Wow, what a way to build and maintain quality, working relationships with your teammates! I can only imagine what the locker-room interaction is like, not to mention the most important interaction—on the field when they have to play nicely together to win the game.

Sadly, this is only one example of a significant other sharing negative opinions on social media for the entire world to see. There are many similar situations that only hurt the reputation and credibility of the individual and their significant other, not to mention that it casts a negative light on the team/work group and industry he or she is involved with. If your significant other has a problem holding their emotions in check, you may want to rethink sharing your disappointment with them.

Obviously you'll share the rejection to others of not getting a promotion, but what you do from there is what counts. When you put your heart and soul into a process, of course you'll be disappointed.

So you're told you didn't get the promotion or appointment to the position you wanted so badly. Everything is now going through your head. It was yours. It should have gone to you. You're more qualified than the one who was selected. It was a political appointment. It was rigged. He or she was the chosen one. What could I have done differently? The list goes on: we have heard all these excuses and more.

Regardless of the reasons, you didn't get the spot. You can throw temper tantrums and convince the powers that be that they made the right choice, or you can suck it up and focus on the future. If you truly want that position the next time it comes available, you need to stay focused on the future, demonstrating that you can handle adversity and that your true character won't let this temporary setback get the best of you. Take a look in any organization at those who went through a promotional process and didn't get the position, and I bet you'll see more who are still bitter about not getting the spot than those who have gotten over it and moved on and are focusing on the future, awaiting their next opportunity.

If you're a fire chief or part of a command staff working for a chief, when you have internal candidates who aren't selected for a position, be aware that some of these situations above may arise. Use them as teachable moments and mentoring opportunities for not just those individuals not selected but others who may be considering participating in future promotional processes.

I'm very up front with candidates well before a promotional process begins, letting them know they need to put their heart and soul into the process, but they also need to be prepared for disappointment. I'm not being negative; I'm being realistic, because I've seen so many who never thought failure was possible.

So, you put your heart and soul into the promotional process, but for whatever reason (which may be out of your control), it just isn't the right time. I'm not saying go into a process expecting failure—that would be negative. The key is to be prepared for the possibility so you're not caught off guard if it occurs.

If we truly care about our personnel, as fire service leaders, we'll do what we can to prepare our personnel for career opportunities, but we'll also do what we can to help those who don't get the position they are applying for. We'll do our best to reach out to them to let them know it's OK, it's not the end of the world and that we still value them and what they do for the organization. Try to keep them positive, letting them know the next promotional process will be here before they know it, and keep them in mind for future career development opportunities that should arise, related to training, education and experience. Let them know you're there for them as a resource.

In the end, those who have the solid character traits needed to be successful in leadership will tough it out and the cream will eventually rise to the top. Yes, there may be some casualties in the process; some personnel may become bitter and choose to retire or be sour for the rest of their careers, but hopefully those are far and few.

As fire service leaders, keeping our fingers on the pulse of what's going on in our organizations and more importantly with our personnel is critical so we can keep providing the highest level of service possible to the communities we serve!

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