Assessment Centers

The term “Assessment Center” often sends promotional candidates into frenzy. It is unfamiliar to many people and as a result their already increased anxiety over the promotional process is heightened. The purpose of this article is to shed some light on the process. No department wants to have quality candidates get lost in the testing process, rather it’s an opportunity for those who have prepared for the position be rewarded for their efforts.

Assessment Center is a fancy way to refer to a series of examinations. Some common components of an assessment center are a tactical scenario (often called a job simulation exercise), an oral interview, an employee counseling session, an oral presentation, and an in-basket exercise. Of course, your promotional examination may include all, or some, of the events listed above. Each fire agency has the choice of what they want to include in their testing process.

Many departments elect to use an outside consultant to administer their exam and have their candidates evaluated by outside fire department raters. The purpose of external evaluators is to lessen the chance of favoritism, which in turn lessens the chance the exam, will be protested by an unhappy candidate. Many agencies do not allow the candidates to interact with the raters. Some agencies allow the candidates to greet the evaluators, but require them to introduce only by using their assigned candidate number. Whichever the case, the consultant’s goal is to reduce the chance of biased rating.

The fire chief usually greets the raters. He or she will provide some background about the department and answer any department-related questions. He will share any particular challenges currently being experienced by the department and share his vision for the future. The fire chief will always make one thing clear to the raters: if the candidate is not ready to assume the position tomorrow, they are to be scored in a way that reflects this. I often hear, “I do not want a project. If you don’t want the candidate as an officer on your department, either do I.”

I have evaluated Battalion Chief, Captain, and Lieutenant’s exam across the country and have sat with fellow chief officers whom I have never met and scored candidates from a department I knew very little about. The bottom line is that a primary search is a primary search, regardless if you are in Los Angeles, Chicago, or Buffalo. A prepared candidate stands above the crowd, no matter where you are from.

Many candidates spend an inordinate amount of time researching the private consultant who is administering the exam. While it’s nice to have some background on your opponent, the consultant is not your biggest hurdle. Performing on game day is your biggest challenge. I encourage each candidate to take the time he or she would have invested in researching the exam and put it into studying his or her own department’s policies and procedures.

I don’t believe in “having a bad day.” I believe that those who have not prepared for the position are identified during the testing process. It’s not that they had a bad day, rather it’s that their lack of preparation was apparent on test day. I do not advocate studying for the exam. I believe in studying for the position. I’ve noticed a strange phenomenon that occurs when you study for the position. You also perform well on the day of the exam.

Whether it is a private consultant or an in-house person who is assigned to write the promotional exam, the process is usually the same. A committee is formed and they meet with the fire chief. The fire chief will explain what he is looking for in the group to be promoted. This will include any current events in the fire service as well as political and/or social events that may be impacting the fire service. For example, if the department has had a challenge with racial relations a wise candidate would have a plan on how he or she could improve them. If the department had a fire that did not go as planned I would expect to see a similar event on the tactical portion of the exam. If the department has a problem with firefighters following the proper procedures when returning to work following an injury, I would expect an interview question regarding the injury procedures.

One of the most common scenarios that come to mind is with the Rapid Intervention Crew (RIC). I understand that in different parts of the country it is called Rapid Intervention Team. For the purpose of this article I will refer to it as RIC. We will give you a scenario that requires a lot of resources be committed early in the incident. The OSHA policy states that anytime firefighters are committed in an environment that is determined to have immediate danger to life and/or health (IDLH) a RIC team must be established. Of course, the only exception is with a KNOWN rescue problem. Cars in the driveway of a home, or the potential of a night watchman do not constitute a known rescue. Candidates struggle with the idea of not putting enough hose lines into effect quickly enough. To compensate for this they elect to forego RIC and assign a company to put in an additional hose line. As a chief officer who has managed a few fires, I understand the desire to get water on the fire. I also believe that the RIC policy was written for a reason. Committing firefighters to an IDLH without a rescue problem is a clear violation of the policy. More importantly, it completely goes against our number one rule, firefighter safety! This is an automatic failure of the tactical.

The most common complaint I hear when coaching students who are looking to promote is, “But that’s not the way we do it on our department.” True, it may be common practice for your department to commit resources in an IDLH well before the IC establishes a RIC. You are not alone. Many departments do. It’s just a matter of time before a department has a serious firefighter injury, or death and OSHA hands out a hefty fine. Worse yet, I would not want to be the IC of a firefighter that had to defend why I didn’t take care of my firefighter. Lastly, a landmark case in California is now in the court system. According to court records, the driver of a fire engine failed to remove the “Jake” brake while driving in the rain. I would reason that many drivers have driven with the Jake brake on in the rain. He applied the brakes and the rig flipped ejecting and killing a firefighter. The driver was charged with vehicular manslaughter. Regardless of the decision, the driver of the fire engine will never be the same.

Tactical Scene Scenarios

The tactical scene scenario can be one major event, a series of smaller events, or a combination of all of the above. It can be interactive or non-interactive. In an interactive scenario a candidate is given a radio and is expected to give on scene report (size up), assume command, name the location of the command post, request resources, and make assignments as he or she would on the fire ground. The candidate is expected to react to information that is provided during the exam. It is common to have “developments” that

occur during the course of the incident. The candidate is expected to take appropriate actions when a development occurs. An example of his would be:

Development – *"IC from Interior Division, we have located a victim"*

Expected action – *IC, I understand that you have located a victim. Bring him out the front door and I will have a medical group standing by.*

Engine 1, IC, You are Medical Group supervisor. Interior is bringing a victim to the front door. Your objective is to receive and treat the victim. I am assigning you squad 3.

Squad 3, IC, I am assigning you to Medical Group. Set up in front of the building. You have a victim coming your way.

Interactive tacticals are becoming less common because of the potential for a lack of consistency. The person on the other end of the radio has a script he or she is expected to follow. Since you cannot possibly predict everything that the candidate will say, it is impossible to maintain consistency.

Non-interactive tactical scenarios are much more common. These enable the raters the opportunity to see the candidate in greater detail. I believe non-interactive tactical favors the prepared candidate since there is so much more down time. The prepared candidate takes this opportunity to showcase his or her knowledge. Here is an example:

Candidate – I would assign engine 1 as division two and give him benchmarks of what I wanted accomplished. It would sound like this:

Engine 1, IC, lay a supply line. I am assigning you to Division 2. Give me an All Clear on Primary Search and knock down the fire on the second floor. My expectations are that the officer on Engine 1 would lay in from a hydrant, stretch a line to the 2nd floor and begin a primary search. He would extinguish any fire, but again he knows his number one objective is to give me an "All Clear" on the primary search.

As you can see the non-interactive tactical gives the prepared candidate an opportunity to express his or her thoughts.

Mini-tacticals

Another component of the tactical scene exercise are the mini-tacticals. While the major tactical scenario may last from beginning to culmination of an incident, these are a series of relatively short, quick hitting, job-related exercises. These could be related to operational issues or a current policy or procedure.

Here is an example:

You are a captain of an engine company who has been dispatched to a structure with numerous calls and a report of people trapped. It's in your first due. As your engineer pulls out of the station he strikes a car. What would you do and why?

Here is a checklist of what the evaluators expect:

- I would immediately notify dispatch that we have been involved in a traffic accident and have them replace us with another engine. I would ensure that the Battalion Chief knew we were no longer responding (this is particularly true if your department dispatches on one channel and has a separate tactical frequency).
- I would check the condition of my firefighters and the condition of the people in the other vehicle.
- I would request PD for traffic control and fire and EMS units for the injured.
- I would ensure my uninjured firefighters or I were treating any victims.
- I would have my firefighters place out road cones or flares to prevent a second accident.
- After the injured were treated, I would remind my firefighters not to admit fault or make statements to anyone.
- I would get names and contact information of any witnesses.
- I would make sure the appropriate vehicle accident and injury paperwork was completed.
- I would make sure the fire chief and city attorney were notified.
- I would make sure that the families of any injured firefighters were notified.
- If necessary, I would facilitate critical incident stress debriefing
- I would log it in the station logbook.

Oral Presentations

The oral presentations are probably the most overlooked part of the promotional exam. This is ironic because studies show that our greatest fear is to speak in front of a group. From the department's perspective it is important to promote people who can speak in front of a group. The higher the rank, the more public speaking you will be expected to do. I was recently involved in a Battalion Chiefs exam where five out of 12 candidates failed the oral presentation. It was very unfortunate because several of them would have been excellent fire ground commanders. While commanding an incident is a extremely important, as a chief officer I find myself in front of a group as often as I run a major incident.

Candidates will be expected to follow the rules of speaking in front of a group. These include introducing yourself, explaining the reason for the meeting, motivating the audience as to why it is important for them to embrace what you have to say, delivering the sustenance of your presentation, summarizing your presentation, and leaving time at the end for questions. Most oral presentation exercises are timed. It is up to the candidate to manage his or her time. The candidate should note the time the exercise culminates so he can allow enough time to complete it. Once the time has expired, the candidates will be asked to stop speaking regardless of where they is in their presentation.

The most common mistake in an oral presentation is trying to write everything in paragraph form. It's painful to watch a candidate try to read the entire presentation to the

raters. Candidates who are able to speak to bullet points will fare much better than those who try to read what they have written. Teachers and people who have previous experience speaking in public usually excel in this area. The best way to prepare for this exercise is to practice with a topic, have a set amount of time to prepare a lecture, and present the topic to an audience. Using a video camera is the best way to critique oneself. You will be amazed at what you see.

In-basket exercise

The in-basket exercise has been around forever and is one of my favorites. A candidate is given a list of items that must be addressed within a certain time frame. He or she is asked to prioritize the items and justify his reasons to the panel. It's up to the candidate to determine what is important, and what is urgent. The exercise gives the department a snapshot of the candidate's ability to perform the administrative functions of the position. While the Operational portion of the Battalion Chief, Captain, or Lieutenant's position is very important, so too is the administrative component. This exercise outlines time management, writing, and setting priorities.

Here is an example of a simple in-basket exercise:

You will have 30 minutes to address the following items and explain your reasoning to the panel. Please place them in order of importance and be prepared to discuss your rationale with your raters.

It is 0800. Official shift change occurs at 0745.

1. You have battalion inspection at 11AM today.
2. The firefighter assigned to your crew approaches you and informs you that he cannot locate his gloves.
3. The Battalion Chief calls you to say there has been a complaint about the way your paramedics were driving.
4. There is a message from Mr. Robert Jones regarding a recent fire prevention inspection.
5. The engineer approaches you and says there is a nail in one of the inside rear dual tires.
6. A paramedic assigned to your crew approaches you and says he is too hung over to work and asks to be placed off duty on sick leave.
7. You have a message to call Mrs. Smith about speaking to her group about fire safety.
8. The paramedics are scheduled to have a ride along from 0800 to 1700.
9. A school tour is scheduled at 1115.

Here is an example of how to prioritize and justify the above list:

1. The engineer approaches you and says there is a nail in one of the inside rear dual tires.

I would prioritize this as number one as it affects our operational readiness. Just because there is a nail in the tire does not mean that I would take the engine out of service. It may be a short nail and may not have punctured the tire. I want to know if the air pressure is low. Is it leaking? I would instruct him to use a soap and water solution and determine it is leaking. If the tire pressure is low, I will ask him if he is comfortable driving the rig to the shop. If not, I will instruct him to call the mobile mechanic. He will provide the correct tire size to ensure the mechanic brings the proper size tire. I f the tire is low, and the rig is unable to respond, I will call dispatch and advise them of the situation. I will ask them to notify the Battalion Chief.

2. A paramedic assigned to your crew approaches you and says he is too hung over to work and asks to be placed off duty on sick leave.

   I would advise the paramedic to stay put and I would attempt to catch one of the off-going paramedics to temporarily ensure my staffing. Once I have staffed the rig, I would notify the staffing pool of my need for a paramedic. I would not allow the off-going paramedic to leave the station, as I am concerned that if he is too impaired to work, he is too impaired to drive home in his private vehicle. This would be a liability to the fire department.
   I would evaluate the paramedic to see if he is still under the influence. At minimum he will be counseled for showing up to work unfit for duty. This has impacted our operational readiness.

3. The firefighter assigned to your crew approaches you and informs you that he cannot locate his gloves.

   I would instruct the firefighter to borrow a pair of gloves from another firefighter. He is to leave a note on the firefighter's turnouts so the other firefighter is not caught without his gloves. In addition, he is to fill out a lost property report and order a new pair of gloves. Lastly, I will coach and mentor him to take the initiative to do all of the above before coming to me to solve his problem.

4. The paramedics are scheduled to have a ride along from 0800 to 1700.
   I would call the paramedics to the office and notify them of the ride along and make certain that they have the proper forms filled out.

5. I would call the Battalion Chief and ask permission to reschedule the inspection for the afternoon informing him that I had a school tour set up for the same time. While I was no the phone with the BC, I would let him know that I had several pending issues. First and foremost the engine may have to be put out of service (pending the answer from the engineer), I would get the information regarding the citizen complaint about the paramedics driving.

6. I would inform the crew that the station inspection had been rescheduled for the afternoon and that we had a school tour at 1115.

7. I would call the person who had a complaint about the Paramedic's driving and get the facts of when and where the issue had occurred. I would assure him that I would look into the issue and would call him back after I speak to the paramedic. I would not give him the results of my investigation, as personnel issues are confidential. I would then conduct a fact-finding interview with the paramedics.

8. I would review the fire prevention record regarding 1234 Main Street. I would review the codes relating to the infraction he was given and return Mr. Jones' call.

9. I would return Mrs. Smith's call regarding the fire safety lecture and set a time we could speak to her group.

Employee Counseling

One of the most challenging parts of any supervisor's job is dealing with employees. In the fire service we are particularly poor at imposing discipline on our members. Since we live, eat, sleep and work together for long periods of time, supervisors are reluctant to address poor performance. It is important to remember that the fire department is held to the same city policies as gas, water and police departments. These departments are very thorough when it comes to addressing an employee who is lacking in his or her performance. We on the other hand are not.

It is important to know you audience (raters). Regardless where they are from, chief officers expect aspiring officers to coach, counsel, and document substandard performance. It is imperative that you use the 8-step process to handle a troubled employee.