The following is a list of thoughts from a student I coached that were written shortly after the exam. I have their permission to share this with you in hopes that it will help you better prepare. Best of luck to you on your exam – Paul Lepore

Summary Captain's test (and how to prepare better)

SIMULATION

Given 15 minutes of prep time and a pad of paper. Given dispatch units, address, and directions that you are going to be second in, and you must take command.

Working fire, heavy smoke and fire from the middle unit, on the second floor of a two story apartment complex, 12 units total, with a common attic. You are second in, following an engine company who has a brand new captain. In route to the fire you hear that there are victims trapped, and then the first in engine goes on scene, gives a partial size up, goes up for a rescue, doesn't take command and doesn't take a water supply.
During the simulation there are two rescues, one is an 1144, and the fire gets into the attic. The truck companies arrive out of order. Must tell your companies to check the attic for extension, otherwise they don't.
Questions after simulation:

1. What are your tactical priorities
2. What are the most critical factors?
3. What would you do differently?

How to improve:
I should have worked on being second, (or maybe even 3rd, or maybe even RIC officer on a Mayday), so that was a natural process. And, challenged myself with more things going wrong. I worked on one exposure, or one rescue, or a fire in the attic, but not all these things happening at the same time. Another thing to challenge would be to change up the engine order numbers, don't always go 1, 2, 3, 4, but mix them up.

I should have worked on my simulations with a plot map. Evidently there was a plot map. It was on the back side of the last sheet, and I didn't turn the page over, so I never saw it.

To improve my responses to the after questions, do them under time constraints because I over answered the 2nd question and didn't get the 3rd.

As a teaching progression:

- Obviously have to start with basics, first alarm residential with no issues
- Throw in a rescue with a residential
- Move to strip malls
- Move to multi story (2-3) apartment (garden, center hall, common attic, because each one offers a little different focus)
- Add in problems: rescue, second in/first in on fast attack, second in/first in screwed it up, occupants at rear balconies, occupants trapped at roof access, fire extension, FF down/missing…)
- Change up the dispatch order, arrival order
- Add in time constraints as a stressor

STATIC SIMULATION

The static simulation was a tanker on the freeway, holding something like 30,000 gallons, and had already leaked out 500. It was leaking off the freeway and into a creek.
Questions to be answered in response to seeing picture:

1. What are your initial actions?
2. What is your response request?
3. What are the three most important resources of your request?

How to improve my preparation:

- Throw in static pictures between simulations and just run through an initial radio report, resource request, initial actions, and concerns…quick, in 4 minutes.

Had I been clever, I would have worked on the other big 4… hazmat, MCI, high rise, and boat fires, mixed in with the simulations, by simply using static pictures and then verbalizing all the steps, concerns, actions, etc. I really focused on vegetation fires and not so much on the others, as I was guessing they would be interview questions. I've never been a good gambler, and this test proved why, because I bet that the simulations would be the same as the last test, and they weren't.

SUBORDINATE COUNSELING

You are temporary at the station as a new captain, you know the crew, and the engineer complains that the public is out to get "us", and he is angry with how things are going with the department. The situation is that you just finished taking a shower after physical fitness, and walk into the day room to find your engineer (in PT gear) arguing loudly with someone (not a firefighter). The guy he is arguing with is someone from the public (a "civie") who walked in one of the open doors to the station after not getting someone to answer the door when he knocked. He is looking for a DVD (which is sitting on the table), and then begins asking questions (angrily) about the engineer hanging around in shorts, and the playing cards that are on the table.
He believes that because he pays taxes that he has the right to come into the station whenever he wants. He calls the engineer "goon" twice and something else totally inappropriate (I can't remember what he said, but it was wrong).
I ended up giving him the DVD, getting his phone number, escorting him out, and counseling the engineer on his behavior and treatment of the civilian.
The civilian was a knucklehead.

Policy violations: wearing of PT gear, station security, civilian threatening FD employee, improper treatment of public.

After counseling questions:

1. What is your PT uniform policy?
2. What else would you do after completing the counseling?

To better prepare:
I was not prepared for the violence of the situation. I was really uncomfortable stepping between two men, larger than me, arguing loudly. I was also unprepared for dealing with the public who was acting so aggressively toward my Engineer in my own station. I kept expecting him to respect my requests that he stop yelling at my Engineer and calling him names (goon). And when he wouldn't I found myself

getting frustrated with him. I even threatened to call the PD if he continued to call my Engineer names. I admit to a feeling of trying to protect my Engineer from the civilian, yet also acknowledging that his behavior was inappropriate. This simulation also required that I determine the level of discipline and which policy infraction I was going to deal with right there on the spot, rather than giving me time to prepare and ponder the policy and methods. This required a little more thinking on my feet. The saving grace was that I was pretty confident with my policy knowledge and discipline process.
My counseling of the Engineer was spot on; once I got past the confrontation. I was able to offer him EAP and was very happy about getting there.
There were so many policy violations (uniform, station security, public treatment, threats by the public toward FD employee). I eliminated station security by putting the onus on the firefighters, not the Engineer.
I had a real disconnect with the fact that the Engineer was in shorts. I just figured that he was the actor and he just happened to be wearing shorts (not really my fire engineer in shorts), that skipped by me completely until the after action questions. Oops, nothing like missing the completely obvious.
Being under the 15 minute timer was extremely stressful.

Some ways to improve my abilities:

1. On the spot explanation of policy violation, under unreasonable time constraints, and the steps taken to mitigate issues.
2. Practice violent confrontation mitigation, and how to deal with people who are not your FF (public, PD, other city workers, irate union members, former FF?)
3. But you can't get to this until you've worked through the 8 step process.

WRITING ASSESSMENT

The writing task was to let the chief know about Subordinate Counseling incident. What happened, and what you did. Use station computers, the appropriate forms were already on the desktop, and three copies in 30 minutes.

To get better:
Writing isn't hard, but it is when you have to have it done in a given amount of time.
A quick drill would be to intersperse writing drills between subordinate counseling of 10 minutes. The goal in 10 minutes would be to provide a simple outline of policy and steps taken…then, if I can write an outline in 10 minutes, I can write a more complete memo in 30.
Could also do a 10 minute writing drill in between simulations: who, what, where, when, how? Just to help develop the ability to get facts down in order under pressure.

INTERVIEW

You were given 15 minutes of prep time and a pad of paper. You know that you have 5 minutes to give a presentation of your structured resume.
Once you get in the room, you start off immediately with the structured resume presentation, and then are given 15 to complete the next 4 questions.

1. You are a new captain in a station and you notice that the station captain has not assigned the inspections and they are late. Additionally, your crew feels as though they do more work around the station and the crew of the station captain is not getting their work done.
2. Regarding bulletin (company evaluations) how would you as a company officer use the information in this bulletin for your training.
3. There are lots of resources available to make yourself a better officer. Which ones have you used, how did it work and why?

4. There are policies, mandates, etc., how can you as an officer ensure compliance, and why is it important to comply?

The questions were written out on a piece of paper that you had in front of you. This made it really easy to follow.
I still had a little time left over (1:30) and was asked if there was anything else I wanted to share and I had a little 30 second closing.

<u>To get better:</u>
It was really good to go over my opening with you a couple times before the test. This gave me confidence in what I was saying and that it was on the right track. I said it way too fast, so I'm sure that they missed stuff because I ripped through it.

All the questions that you have listed as practice are perfect. There is no substitute for running through answers verbally. One of your questions was on the interview (slightly modified, but the point was the same: new captain, other captain not assigning fire prevention inspectionc and they are overdue, crew complaining that they do all the work)…I missed a couple points on the steps, and maybe got it half right.

One of the things I did while I was studying for the written was keep a running list of policies, procedures, rules and regulations, concepts, issues. Later, when prepping for the interview, I ran down the list and tried to articulate everything I knew about that topic. I believe this to be a great technique and will definitely use it again. It was a 3 page list of items, and I guess I could have expanded it to 5.

One of the huge benefits (for me) was that I could reference back to some of the "general" conversations that we had. For example, the question regarding policy, mandates and how to enforce compliance as an officer. I started off talking about policy and mandates being set for our safety and efficiency of performance (something that we talked about a lot), and then talked about the HVV policy and why compliance was important. Of course, when I think back to my answer, I am not sure I answered the whole question…

Finally, the question on what the department offers to engineers to assist with their preparation for captain, what have you used, and how did it help? I screwed up the first part of the answer because I was so anxious to get the second and third points because it was so important to me (the leadership classes, the skills I learned, and the example of how I learned how to better motivate those who have different personalities and characteristics than me, including generational issues, and how I have used the techniques and they worked with my FF and FFPM). So, maybe I got that question 2/3rds right.

The common themes:

- Negativity of crew
- What have you done to prepare yourself

- Are you up on current communications/policy
- New captain, interacting with other/older captains
- Policies, how enforced
- How you as a new captain are going to operate (expectations, enforcing policy)
- How you can support, help your crew and ensure their success
- Training philosophies/ideas/importance

Some summary thoughts

You can never know yourself too much.

One of the biggest benefits to this testing process for me was the time spent reflecting on my own personal goals and philosophies. This may not necessarily have translated to success with the exam, but I already know it has made me more successful as member of this fire department.

The ability to get together every couple weeks gave me the ability to "process" concepts. This is how I learn best.

It may be useful to set out a series of questions, pre-questions, if you will, to people who are starting the promotional process. I had months of "processing" to do this. Questions on personality, motivation, interests, useful experience that will help be a better captain.

Some people are good at taking in and memorizing information, understanding that they have to repeat this to be successful, but don't internalize it as truly a trait that they need to be successful. Some assimilate information for test success, but then completely revert back to their same non-leader selves as soon as they get the position.

I'm not good at memorizing, and can't repeat info back if it doesn't resonate with me…that makes me a slow learner, and means I have to spend way more time to "get" stuff and require more background info for my decisions. I know I'm not alone, and I wonder if there is a way to facilitate this process.

Some ideas for those visiting only a few times before their assessment center

The basics are most important.

- Size ups
- Fire attack process…overall goals/processes, methods of attack.
- Review of the big policies/procedures: current safety mandates/policies, training, interpersonal relations, new programs, FF bill of rights, harassment, discrimination.
- Review of the big SOPs, smaller operations if have time
- The 8 step process, of course.
- Encourage these people to work through the interview questions on your site before they see you and then work down the list in a question and answer format
- Prepare a written essay on all their training-education-experience, and then work through it with them…even if the test doesn't require it, it gives a good overview and provides the candidate with a reminder of examples that can be used during the testing process to give examples and credibility to answers
- Homework?

I can't emphasize enough the value of reflection and the process of developing your own personal philosophies: on discipline, on enforcing safety policy/procedures, on dealing with low morale/negativity, on dealing with BCs, on how you intend to support your crew and give them the tools

they need to be successful, on training, on education, on leading, on day-to-day organization (what are your tasks after the 8 o'clock meeting, before lunch, before dinner, after dinner), your thoughts and how will you deal with mistakes, do you understand what micromanaging is and that there are many way to complete a task (not just the way you did it as a firefighter), are you able to see what your FF needs for success, do you have a defined idea of boundaries of acceptable behavior/actions, have you thought about exactly how you will handle a FF who comes in drunk? Do you know what BCs expect, what they are concerned about right now relative to captain performance. Really, how will you enforce every single policy?

Of course this reflection and developing of your own philosophies is about becoming a better captain, and preparing for the position. I am not sure this will help you necessarily pass the test. I'm not totally sure about this point, though.