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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Promotional Assessment Centers, Understanding the Promotional Process

By Michael Terpak

Fire service leaders throughout the country are continually challenging the promotional testing process in an attempt to produce the most qualified candidates to fill their ranks. Due to the increased responsibilities placed upon the fire service, test development agencies are being forced to pursue new and innovative methods for evaluating a potential company or chief officer. For many years, the only method used to evaluate a candidate's ability to become a fire officer consisted of reading a series of books and answering a lengthy written exam. As time, technology, and the demands of the fire officer increased, it became evident that we could no longer base a promotional testing process solely on a person's ability to comprehend written material; there needed to be more.

Over the last twenty years, oral assessment centers have become one of the most creditable methods for truly evaluating a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities. Formatted and delivered in various ways, the assessment center's ability to efficiently and effectively measure a candidate's readiness has been the justification for its increased use, as well as a potential fire officer's need to be better prepared.

So how does a potential fire officer prepare for this type of promotional testing? They prepare by understanding the process and its design. Let's take a look.

An assessment center is an examination process that is designed to simulate situations, which are common to the rank being tested. Each individual exercise is designed to measure the knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics of the individual candidate in a given situation. It is the belief of many within the promotional testing field, that the oral assessment center is the most efficient and effective means of testing the knowledge of the candidate. The thought behind this is that it is simply a true evaluation of the candidate's abilities. Specifically, either you know it or you don't.

As we have indicated early on, many testing agencies of the past have relied on the multiple-choice method as one of the common and often used forms of testing. Often perceived as one of the least measurable forms of testing, it is probably the easiest to develop and defend in the event of candidate appeals. With the answer already in the front of the candidate, it eliminates the student's need to prepare and retain for any usefulness. With a basic knowledge base of the subject area and the student's ability to perform a "process of elimination", the student has the increased ability to *choose* the correct response. When measuring whether a candidate possesses the responsibilities of a fire officer, the fire department should expect and require the most efficient and effective form of testing. Assessment centers are designed to meet these challenges.

## Oral Assessment types:

Exercises in an oral assessment can be designed in a *structured*, *evolving*, or *interactive* format.

*Structured* oral assessments will present a situation or incident with a series of questions that a candidate will need to answer in an allotted time frame. The questions are designed to elicit courses of action specific to the situation presented. There is generally little, to no interaction between the candidate and the assessor during the exercise, thus the name “structured.” In a structured oral assessment, candidates are required to answer the questions based on the available resources presented in the exercise, their responsibilities within the position/rank, and their own technical knowledge of the subject.

An *evolving* exercise will present a changing environment within an exercise by introducing specific questions that the candidate will need to recognize and respond to. The evolving exercise is a more commonly used design since it reflects similar challenges a fire officer will be confronted with. One of the more dynamic methods used in an evolving exercise is a deteriorating condition designed from a computer based fire simulation. In an attempt to introduce as much realism as possible, the exercises are designed to present visual challenges that the candidate will need to respond to. In some of the more advanced computer based exercises, fire conditions can improve or deteriorate depending upon the candidate’s responses.

In an *interactive* exercise, candidates may have to exchange thoughts, ideas and concerns with a role player(s) to achieve the desired outcome. In this of type exercise, role players are scripted to respond to the candidate’s comments and actions in an attempt to elicit measurable responses.

In another type of *inter-active* exercise, candidates may have to make an oral presentation describing a program or a training exercise where they will be asked questions from a group or role player. In many assessment exercises, the inter-active exercise is best reserved to measure the candidate’s supervisory and administrative skills.



## Where does it all start?

The design, implementation, and evaluation of an assessment center starts with the gathering of information from the specific areas of responsibility for the rank being tested. For the test development agency, this starts with a job analysis for the rank/position being evaluated. Through a careful and often tedious collection of information specifically designed to identify the roles and responsibilities of the company or chief officer, exercises and measurable courses of action are designed and developed to simulate an actual environment that a candidate may face as a fire officer. For the studier, this is a great place for a candidate to start his/her research. As a candidate, it is important that you understand the areas outlined in a job analysis and the importance of the individual subject areas that may be evaluated. Knowing the specific responsibilities of the position is the intent of a job analysis and where you should begin your research.

## Exercise design and format:

The exercise, or as it often referred, scenario, is the forum used for eliciting certain candidate behaviors needed to perform the job. A candidate’s performance during the exercise will determine if the candidate possesses the level of knowledge, skills and abilities to perform the job of a fire officer. Each exercise is designed to measure a number of behaviors. The behaviors or responses of the candidate are classified into categories referred to as performance dimensions. Dimensions are the tools assessors use to evaluate your performance.

Individual exercises will vary based on the assessment center design and the rank being tested. As an example, some of the commonly used situations or exercises will often focus around the responsibilities of the company and chief officer responding and operating at an emergency incident. In others, supervision principles and practices of a fire officer in a specific situation will be assessed, and in still yet another, administrative responsibilities associated with officer's rank will be evaluated depending upon the assignment and the task.

### How performance is measured and evaluated:

Having an understanding of what is being measured and evaluated by the assessors is the next step in your preparation efforts for an oral exam. For many, the anxiety of being in a testing environment that requires you to present your thoughts, concerns, and actions verbally is enough to unnerve even the most well-read student. Unlike a multiple choice exam where the correct answer is in front of the test taker, the oral assessment will require you to verbal demonstrate how you would handle a given situation or exercise. For the vast majority of people, public



speaking or speaking in front of a group is literally terrifying, to say nothing of the fact that your career is riding on your presentation. So how does someone attempt to tackle this personal challenge? There are a number of ways, one is by understanding what is being measured and how.

## Oral Assessment Performance Dimensions

Listed below are the performance dimensions that can be measured during an oral presentation. It is critical that you understand the meaning of these dimensions and not attempt to memorize them in verbatim. What is important is that you understand the behaviors associated with dimension and that you are able to exhibit these behaviors during the assessment center exercises.

- **Technical Knowledge:** In the technical knowledge dimension, assessors will measure if the candidate's responses represent an efficient, effective and safe course of action to the challenges being presented. Undoubtedly, in order to do well with the technical knowledge questions, you need to be well-versed in the tested subject areas. As many have said before, "knowledge is power". As simple in thought as this quote may seem, it is an individual and essential trait that must develop from two resources; the candidate's education and understanding of the subject matter, and two, his or her practical experience with the material. For many, this will come in the form of one's education through referencing and reading. Reading, studying and reviewing documented principles and practices will provide the candidate with a knowledge base of information to refer back to. Personally speaking, experience is an extremely valuable resource that I continue to foster and develop, but relying on your experiences alone is not enough when preparing for a promotional exam. As valuable as one's "street smarts" are on the fireground, it must be supplemented with academics. It is common practice for test developers to give the candidate a list of potential resources to study for their exam. Resources will often include specific textbooks, standard operating guidelines, training bulletins, and departmental policy and procedures to name the more common. What should be gathered from this thought is without a significant knowledge base of the tested subject matter; you will score poorly in this area.

- **Safety:** This is the extent to which you address any safety concerns related to your firefighters, incident scene occupants, other emergency service personnel and the general public. Safety is always an overriding concern in all-strategical and tactical exercises.
- **Incident Scene Management:** This is the extent to which the candidate shows their ability to assign, manage, and account for all individuals operating within or near the emergency incident. If any free-lancing is detected anytime throughout your presentation, your score will be adversely affected. You must be prepared to identify resource allocation and assignment through the common use of Divisions, Sectors and Groups.
- **Delegation:** This is the extent to which you assign tasks to subordinates in order to effectively, efficiently, and depending upon the exercise, safely accomplish individual and organizational goals.
- **Problem Solving/Decision Making skills:** Within this scoring dimension, assessors will be measuring the candidate's ability to exhibit problem solving and decision-making skills that is within their scope of responsibility as either a company or chief officer. The one thing you will notice in this performance dimension as well as in a few others, is the *multitude of behaviors* that can be measured. The number of behaviors that can be measured from this dimension will depend upon the exercise. Measurable behaviors within this dimension can include:
  - The candidate's ability to recognize problems or concerns within his/her scope of responsibility.
  - The candidate's ability to identify the source of problems or concerns.
  - The candidate's ability to develop logical solutions for eliminating and dealing with problems and concerns.
  - The candidate's ability to take organized action within his/her scope of responsibility.
- **Supervisory Skills:** Within this scoring dimension assessors will be measuring the candidate's ability to take command of a situation or assignment to achieve departmental goals. Depending upon the exercise, this area can also be measured from a number of different responsibilities. Measurable behaviors within this dimension can include:
  - The candidate's ability to identify tasks/assignments.
  - The candidate's ability to delegate responsibilities and assignments.
  - The candidate's ability to provide structure and guidance for carrying out those responsibilities.
  - The candidate's ability to follow-up to ensure completion of the task/assignment.
  - The candidate's ability to recognize acceptable and unacceptable behavior and/or performance.
  - The candidate's ability to interview, counsel and motivate subordinates.
  - The candidate's ability to take disciplinary actions within departmental guidelines.
- **Administrative skills:** Within this scoring dimension, assessors will be measuring the candidate's ability to effectively plan, organize, implement, manage and evaluate. This measurable skill is often reserved for those candidates seeking a higher rank. Job analysis often shows that these skills fall within the responsibility of a Chief officer. This is not to say that candidates studying for the rank of Captain will not be assessed in this area. Due to rank structure and the responsibilities of those ranks within a given fire department, many departments around the country will require a company commander to possess significant administrative responsibilities in order to perform his/her job. Again, this goes back to knowing the test subject areas for the rank being tested.
- **Attention to Detail and Directions:** This is the extent to which your oral presentation provides an adequate amount of information concerning the topic/subject area being presented. Your responses and objectives must be specific to the subject and its

questions, and it must follow outlined rules, regulations and guidelines. This dimension can be measured in any exercise.

- **Standards and Initiative:** This is the extent to which you possess an internal drive to excel or achieve personal and professional goals without being ordered, coerced, or motivated by others. This is one of my favorite dimensions. When an assessment center exercise is designed to measure this particular dimension, I firmly believe it starts to paint a vivid picture of the candidate's qualities and capabilities.
- **Interpersonal Skills:** This is the extent to which you are able to relate with a wide variety of individuals in a positive and effective manner. We find this dimension most notably measured within either a supervisory or administrative exercise.
- **Adaptability:** This is the extent to which you are able to effectively adapt to new situations you are confronted with.
- **Aggressiveness:** This is the extent to which you come across as overbearing or abrasive to a role player or to questions from the assessors.
- **Attitude toward Subordinates, Superiors and the Public:** This is the extent to which your manner toward any of the above positively or negatively affects your ability to effectively accomplish individual or organizational goals.
- **Political Sensitivity:** Since we are public agency that deals with the public on a daily basis, it should be obvious of our need to possess this quality. In this dimension assessors will determine the extent to which you are aware of the political ramifications of the content of your presentation. Specifically, does it negatively affect anyone?
- **Creativity, Energy and Enthusiasm:** This is the extent to which your presentation is stimulating, positive and motivating. This is an excellent and necessary quality to possess for every exercise. What is important to remember here is that you will do poorly within this dimension if you know little about the roles and responsibilities of the position being tested. Having a strong knowledge base of the material/subject matter being presented is the key to performing well within this dimension.
- **Composure:** This is the extent to which you appear calm and under control during your presentation. This dimension can be measured in a number of different exercises. Examples may include you reaction and response to questions from the assessor or role player, time pressure situations in a fire, collapse or hazardous materials scenario, or other pressured stimulus displayed during an oral exercise. It is a necessary quality of a fire officer, be prepared for it!
- **Decisiveness:** Just as composure is a necessary quality of a fire officer, so too is your ability to initiate action. Decisiveness is the extent to which you are able to initiate action when action indeed is necessary.
- **Organizing and Planning:** This is the extent to which your oral presentation is well thought out and delivered in an organized manner. This dimension is often reserved for a formal presentation that may involve a simulated training exercise, the possible development and presentation of a program or a procedure, or the delivering of a speech to a civic group on a specific subject.
- **Oral Communications Skills:** The ability to clearly and persuasively present information to a group or an individual can be a difficult area to master. We often see the most difficulty with those candidates who are studying for their first promotional exam. We state this primarily from the fact that the firefighter position and the responsibilities associated with that position are not required to possess many of the skills outlined in the oral communications dimension. They need to develop them for the company officer position. This, accompanied with the anxiety of taking their first promotional exam will often interfere with their ability to perform well in this area.

Regardless of the rank being evaluated, the ability of a candidate to organize and express their thoughts, ideas and concerns is a measurable skill and requirement of a company and chief officer. If you can express yourself well during the exercise, you will

not only score well within the oral communications dimension, but you will also make it easier for evaluators to identify whether or not you have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to carry out the responsibilities required by the position. This is a critical component of your promotional exam.

- **Time management:** Using your time wisely and efficiently is a measurable skill within an assessment center exercise. Your ability to organize and present your thoughts/responses in the allotted time frame of the exercise is a skill that will be cross-referenced and scored within your planning and oral communication dimensions.

To give you an example of what we mean by this, typically you are given a varied period of time to prepare your presentation. Preparation times will vary based on the design of the assessment center and the exercises you are preparing for. With a fire, structural collapse, and hazardous material scenario, the candidate will be given a minimal amount of time to prepare, generally five to ten minutes. The objective behind this approach is to force the candidate to act/respond quickly to the scenario presented, all in an attempt to simulate the rapid-decision making required in an actual emergency.

For the administrative and supervisory assessment exercises, candidates are typically given more preparation time, approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The added preparation time is given to simulate the additional time a fire officer would actually have in preparing for either an administrative or supervisory incident.

Presentation times for the exercises described above will generally range from any where from ten to thirty minutes depending design, dimensions measured, and the level/rank being tested. What is critical to note here is how the candidate manages and organizes his/her time.

### **Using Performance Dimensions to rate your presentation:**

Each exercise is capable of measuring a number of individual performance dimensions. The design and objective of an assessment center is that it allows assessors an opportunity to measure a variety of job/rank related performance dimensions. The number and type of dimensions to be measured is based on the assessment design, the individual exercise, and the responsibilities of the position. Don't forget, it all starts with the job analysis.

On an average, most assessment centers will use a rating scale that simply uses a numerical reference assigned to each behavior. Rating scales will vary, but the most common we have found is a simple rating of 1 to 5 or 1 to 7, with the number one being the poorer score. Additionally, assessors will use a check off sheet to indicate whether or not you exhibited behaviors specific to the exercise and its dimension. Some of the behavioral quotes will be generic to the dimension being evaluated, while others will contain required behaviors based on the individual exercise. As an added note, in many assessment designs, assessor scoring sheets will also allow the evaluator to make written comments about the candidate's performance. This is all in an attempt to eliminate any potential subjectivity in the scoring process, as well as to add clarity to individual scoring.

Attached is a sample-scoring sheet.

# Performance Dimension Score Sheet

Candidate ID # : \_\_\_\_\_ Assessor name: \_\_\_\_\_

Exercise: \_\_\_\_\_ Start time: \_\_\_\_\_ Finish time: \_\_\_\_\_ Time used: \_\_\_\_\_

## Problem Solving/Decision Making

Assessors are required to check specific behaviors exhibited. A behavior NOT checked indicates the candidate failed to exhibit the behavior.

Recognized problems/concerns \_\_\_\_\_  
presented in scenario

Presented his/her perception \_\_\_\_\_  
of the problem/concern

**Identified source of problems** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Or concerns**

**Solicited role player for any** \_\_\_\_\_  
**ideas in solving the problem**

Utilized scenario data to \_\_\_\_\_  
assist with solving problem

**Established organized action** \_\_\_\_\_  
**to deal with problem**

**Developed logical solutions** \_\_\_\_\_  
**for dealing with problems**

**Discussed effects of action** \_\_\_\_\_  
**with subordinate**

**Candidate stood within** \_\_\_\_\_  
**his/her scope of responsibility**

**Established follow-up with** \_\_\_\_\_  
**subordinate to evaluate action**

## Overall Dimension Rating

Candidates need all **BOLD** print behaviors checked to receive a minimum score of a three.

Scores of 4 or 5 require additional behaviors and assessor comments.

1..... 2..... 3..... 4..... 5

Assessor

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

At this point, it should be obvious that oral assessments will require a significant amount of preparation time. From understanding the responsibilities for the rank being tested, the potential exercises you can be involved with, and how an assessment team will measure your performance; preparing for oral assessment exam requires dedication, time and direction. Hopefully the enclosed will help you begin that process.

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