

Paving the Road for New Company Officers

By Deputy Chief Brad Goudie, Roanoke Fire Department

Most Fire Chiefs began their career path traveling through a fire academy lasting anywhere from 400-1000 contact hours. We gained knowledge, skills, and abilities and found ourselves on a smooth road to the career of a lifetime, right? Just how smooth it was depended on the navigator. Many found a mentor who coached them to slay the dragon. Our strategies and tactics were honed, rescue skills perfected, trade journals studied and the road was found to be smooth and wide with very few potholes and speed bumps. We train our firefighters for all aspects of technical rescue, hazardous materials, forcible entry, command and control, incident command, etc. but how well do we prepare them for the daily administration of our operations and the challenges presented? Many of those will someday aspire to advance in the ranks. Will they be ready for the crossroads?

As a chief executive of the department, do you desire a company officer who will handle your day to day operations successfully? Or do you have the time to rescue them from the potholes they wander off into and lead others?

The Crossroads

Historically we approached the crossroads with the decision - shall it be the high road or the low road? The ambition burned and the desire to advance was committed into our destiny. We quickly found ourselves on a road riddled with potholes, speed bumps and hairpin curves. We became the navigator and found ourselves traveling this road alone. Many officers even found themselves venturing off into a sinkhole they were unable to rescue themselves from. We were offered no formal guidance, no mentor, or road signs to deliver us safely.

As a new company officer we found ourselves enrolled into the *Academy of Hard Knocks*. For many years this has been the company officer development program we have known. This has been the route we have traveled to the bugles. The continued promotion of this development method has perpetuated the cycle and built a career thoroughfare filled with hazards.

The success of a department is highly dependent on the infrastructure we pave for those to follow. We must find the navigator to lead the new company officer around the potholes, bypass the speed bumps, and evade the routes filled with hazards. When these hazards cannot be avoided, they must be provided with the tools and skills to patch the hole for safe passage.

As a Chief Officer, we must have clear paths of travel for all of our leaders. If we leave bridges out, roads in disrepair, detour

signs down, and no direction, we set ourselves, our leaders, and our department up for failure.

Road Map to Success

The map to success and smooth travels is complex and expansive. The Officer must have those hazards mapped out and a route to success made known. This must be a comprehensive, structured plan, inclusive of both formal and informal guidance. Typically, a great job is done of educating officers on incident command, strategies and tactics, and emergency response. However, we fall short on training them in systems and budget management, customer service, human resources, conflict management, communications and other road hazards presented to the new supervisor.

Orienting the New Company Officer

The engineering of a successful career path must start at the top of our agencies. A new officer must know and understand the expectations of the Fire Chief. Success depends on their understanding, support, and promotion of the departmental mission. The bridge to new supervisor responsibilities should begin with a solid foundation. This begins with an orientation to their new role.

Our organization has developed a partnership with Strategic Government Resources Inc.(SGR). SGR offers development programs focused on transitioning new supervisors in the municipal arena. Great value has been found in SGR's New Supervisor Academy. The Supervisor Series begins with a "Now that I am a Supervisor" workshop, providing this foundation. This program assists them in the transition from peer to supervisor. Additionally, consideration should be given to Fire Officer I and Fire Officer II credentials in the foundation development.

Knowing and Understanding Departmental Systems and Processes.

Education of Internal systems must be formulated to guarantee knowledge of:

City Policy
Standard Operating Procedures/Guidelines
Reporting systems

- Payroll
- Fire
- EMS
- Exposure Guidelines
- Post Accident investigating, documentation, and drug testing

- Workers' Comp Guidelines and Paperwork
- Injury Reports
- Daily Responsibilities
- Training resources and guidelines
- Computer Systems
- Mobile Data Computers
- CAD
- Spread sheets
- Word Processors
- Specialized agency systems

A substantial amount of the required knowledge to be part of this program is specific to the internal operations of each agency and should be tailored to the organization. Many of the challenging and frustrating moments, failures, and stumbles can be alleviated thru a more structured training program.

Team Building

The cohesion of a workgroup presents the most problems to the new company officer. The success of his or her leadership is dependent on how well the team is united. The art of "Leading Teams" is also offered from SGR to assist in understanding the dynamics of leading a team. Operational efficiency and productivity will be greatly enhanced with their "Organizing and Delegating" workshop to reach goals. Company officers must also be educated on training resources available to promote and develop their teams. Human resource management skills will be enhanced with their "Understanding and Managing Generations in the Workplace" and "Pruning Negativity" workshops. Many

problems evolve from not understanding what motivates the different generations. The company officer must be able to adapt leadership skills to effectively motivate different generations. We must understand the negativity presented before us, how it was created, and how to eliminate the negativity. Without understanding generational differences and having the skills to deal with negativity an organization is bound to travel a rough road.

Communication skills

How many times have you found yourself correcting issues which developed as a result of poor communications? SGR offers an "Effective Communication Process" course to develop those interpersonal communication skills. Many of the communication pot holes may be avoided thru effective communication skills. Good communication skills lead to operational efficiency and increased productivity.

Legal Requirements

Many of the headaches presented to the Fire Chief are a result of the company officer's lack of knowledge of legal requirements and regulations placed on our industry. SGR addresses this in their "Employment Law and Supervisory Practices" module which offers guidance and education to those laws which may affect new supervisors. By educating them on these laws, we will reduce time and finances expended on investigations, costly law suits and fines.

Summary

Organizational success is highly reliant on the leadership structure established. A structured program should be in place to develop those officers we trust to manage our organization. The program should consider both internal and external elements which impact operations. Whether developed internally or partnered with an external organization, consideration should be given to the following but not limited to:

- New Supervisor Orientation
- Organizational Structure
- Legal Requirements
- Communication skills
- Personnel dynamics
- Team Building
- Dispute resolution and Problem solving
- Budget Management

Strategic Government Resources helps local governments work better by helping them work together. SGR facilitates regional training alliances throughout the states of Texas and Oklahoma. This is just a sampling of the structured programs SGR has to offer. Additional information may be found at www.governmentresource.com.

The success of our company officers, departmental productivity, and reduction in headaches for the Fire Chief will be reflective of the road we have placed them on and the navigation we provide. Will you provide the guide and the map to success or lead to a route filled with hazards, detours, and speed bumps? Not only does the company officer rely on the Chief to succeed, the Chief is reliant on the company officer for mission success.

So what path will you and your team travel?





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