

# SELECTION AND PREPARATION OF THE LINE SUPERVISOR

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## Abstract

The law enforcement line supervisor is one of the most crucial jobs in this field. The methods of selecting these supervisors have evolved over the years from the “good ole boy” systems to elaborate assessment centers and written exams. Many of these different methods are outlined herein. Several Law Enforcement agencies were surveyed to get a glimpse of how medium size Florida law enforcement agencies conduct their promotional process, outlining prerequisites and evaluation instruments as well as identifying obstacles to identifying willing and qualified participants in the process.

## Introduction

All across the country law enforcement agencies are experiencing the loss of their leadership ranks. The loss of each rank effect the one below it, the retirement of a Major will cause a Captain and Lieutenant vacancy as they each promote respectively. The problem is how you choose the best person for the job.

The most critical of these ranks would have to be the first line supervisor. This is because the line supervisor is responsible for the leadership and mentoring of the core of the agency. A supervisor must guide their officers, helping them to make the right decisions and assist with career development. The supervisor needs to have a clear understanding of the agency’s Strategic Plan and Mission Statement in order to guide his or her officers in the right direction. The sergeant is a direct link between the Chief’s view of the law enforcement mission and the way the officers do their jobs (Miller, 2009).

Supervisor selection is commonly steeped in tradition and can often be unsuccessful. Traditional methods are giving way to new ones and the idea of Succession Planning is catching on. My agency has recently moved towards an assessment center for selection of first line supervisors. Still we are struggling with lack of interest and a low passing rate on the assessment reducing the pool in which to choose from. It is my intent to discover how other agencies around Florida are battling these problems and identify ways to further the Agency’s program.

## Literature review

### *Eligibility*

Eligibility for promotion to a first line supervisor rank appears to be fairly consistent among agencies. A combination of a specified number of years of law enforcement experience, education, military and or prior supervisory experience is typically the norm. The criteria for eligibility should be clearly outlined in the Promotion Policy. (Kurz, 2006)

There is more than likely no right answer, however a policy with a mandatory service time of more than 3 years can adversely impact an agency experiencing a high turnover. Within the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, (FWC), there are over 200 officers who will not be eligible to enter the promotion process until 2012/2013.

### *Motivation*

The motivation of those who seek out promotion often varies. This is often caused by pay. Historically the pay for line level officers is well below that of supervisors and middle managers and often has caps. As a result of these factors, even individuals who are unsuited (or even uninterested in) promotion will pursue advancement. (Camp, 1999)

Anecdotal evidence from the FWC shows motivations against promoting often revolve around relocation. Chances are for officers to promote to first line supervisors it requires relocation to another part of the state. In rare cases a position will come available in your area that does not require a move, however the competition is fierce. Another deterrent to promotion within the FWC, once again financial, is to give up overtime once promoted and the loss of off duty employment, (if relocating). Some simply do not want the added responsibility. (B. Buckson, personal communication, February 19, 2010)

Finally it is common for officers to have little faith in the promotion process or having little knowledge or understanding. This may be the fault of the institution. Clear policy, advanced notice and a breakdown of the process can help to clear up the mystery and making all reasonable accommodations for officers to participate may help to dispel the conspiracy theories. (Murphy, 2005)

### *The Process*

Research on this topic revealed the following common instruments used in selection of supervisors:

- Politics
- Written test
- Oral review board

- Assessment centers
- Seniority/Performance evaluations

Many agencies continue to rely on a traditional written test followed by an interview with an oral review panel to determine leaders for the department. This process often includes little, if any, evaluation of the candidate's preparation or orientation toward leadership. (Michelson, 2006)

Politics or politically influenced promotions are most often referred to as the "good old boy" system. These promotions are usually the result of an individual who does the right things for the wrong reasons or allies him/herself with those who hold some relational and or institutional power. These types of promotion tend to wreck the confidence of the line officers and diminish the credibility of those in management that promote these practices. (Camp, 1999)

A written examination can be efficient but may result in the success of good test-takers who may not be the best leaders. Care should be taken to create exams that focus on leadership and supervisory tasks and not laws and policies nonspecific to the job. These exams can be helpful in the selection process but research suggests it should not be a standalone instrument. Usually a written test is administered first for identifying the personnel to advance to the more intense aspects of the selection process. (Kurz, 2006)

Oral interviews, or boards, are very popular due to their low cost and merely because, "we've always done it that way". These boards tend to simply measure the oral communication skills of the interviewee in a mostly sterile environment. Interviewers, usually supervisors, feel that they get "good sense" of the candidate's qualifications. (Camp, 1999) However research lends little support to its validity.

Promotion should not be based solely on performance evaluations because they may often be biased. Past performance may not be a good measure as well because even if the officer can perform the work required of a supervisor they may not have the interpersonal skills needed for mentoring and motivating their subordinates. (Camp, 1999)

Whereas none of the above methods are very successful alone most do have their merits if used as part of combined process. Their perceived shortcomings have been the reason for agencies across the country to implement Assessment Centers. An Assessment Center is designed to have the candidates participate in a series of on-the-job exercises intended to simulate actual situations encountered by supervisors. Assessment Centers are commonly thought of as the best method for promotion and evaluation of law enforcement supervisors. The advantage of an Assessment Center is they allow agencies to predict how a candidate may perform as a supervisor, and a large number of promotions can be made at one time using the results of the Assessment Center. (Camp, 1999)

Typically Assessment Centers begin with a comprehensive job task analysis to determine what aspects of the position are most important to be assessed. Next is the development of the different exercises and simulations based on the job task analysis that will be conducted by the candidate. Exercises such as in-basket and practical exercises involving things such as citizen complaints, use of force reports and disciplinary acts are common events. Then Assessors need to be selected and trained. The candidates should receive notice describing the Assessment Center. After the Assessment has been administered, an analysis of the results must be performed. Finally the candidates should receive feedback. (Camp, 1999)

Some problems with the Assessment Center are, the process can be costly, especially if there are a large number of candidates eligible for the Assessment Center. Candidates who do not perform well typically feel like they invested a lot of time in the process and it goes unrewarded. The Assessment Center also does little to provide training to the candidates. Some are being assessed on tasks they have never performed before or had training on. (Murphy, 2005)

### *Developing Leaders*

In the past agencies have focused more on selecting officers for promotion and focused little on the development of leaders. (Murphy, 2005) The military does a good job of mentoring and developing the lower ranks for leadership. It is common practice for the U.S. Army soldier to not only be well trained in their specific job, but also mentored to be prepared to do the job of the soldier above him. This is necessary because in combat if an infantry squad leader is lost the team leader takes over. Seldom are these types of replacement common in law enforcement, but the same thought process needs to exist. (First Sergeant A. Wass de Czege USANG, personal communication, February 25, 2010)

The challenge for police agencies is to consider how best to develop their own replacements, using the basic knowledge skills and abilities they have already identified as desired traits for prospective supervisor or manager. (Michelson, 2006)

Research identified a common denominator in the development of leaders and that was training, or lack thereof. In 1993 The Department of Criminal Justice at Georgia State University (GSU) and the Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Authority Police Department (MARTA-PD) partnered to develop a program to link training and promotion. MARTA-PD officers would be allowed to advance in rank based on their performance in the program. A comprehensive job task analysis, (like used in the development of an Assessment Center) was used to develop a training program to provide instruction to candidates eligible for promotion. The Sergeant's course was conducted in an 8 day course over a two week period. The weeks began with a pre-test and ended with an exam. The candidates received training on the elements deemed most important by the job task analysis. The course also consisted of written and oral exercises. The candidates were separated into three groups based solely on their scores as exceptionally qualified, very qualified and qualified. It appears this course

basically combined an Assessment Center with a training curriculum designed to prepare and then assess an officer for his suitability as a supervisor. (Camp, 1999)

Another not so common practice discovered was the use of “Sergeant Academies” to newly promoted supervisors. Some of the topics and concepts used in this training were face to face meetings with: the Chief, Division Commander, Internal Affairs Supervisor, Critical Incident Manager, and Dispatch Supervisor. The meetings with the Chief and or Division Commander is a good way for the commanders to lay a foundation, the new supervisor should walk away from this meeting with an understanding of his chain of commands expectations. The discipline process is another area of importance for new supervisors and a meeting with someone from Internal Affairs can remedy the misconceptions or lack of prospective the new supervisor has. It also offers an understanding of the change in mindset required going from officer to supervisor. Meeting with someone responsible for critical incident management like a SWAT commander or an experienced supervisor will assist understanding the basics of being an incident commander which a supervisor is likely to do even if only for a short duration. Finally the dispatch supervisor can provide a different perspective on dispatch officer relations. (Miller, 2009)

Research would indicate that some form of assessment of specific job related tasks is the best method for selecting supervisors and training those individuals before, in conjunction with assessment, or soon after promotion is the key to creating new supervisors. There does not appear to be a “cookie cutter” method that all agencies can use but it appears there are several methods and techniques that can be tailored to an agency. It’s apparent that care should be taken to develop a system that the officers can believe in and gives them a sense of accomplishment and builds confidence in them as leaders. Often our process damages morale. Systems that pit candidates against each other in the form of formalized testing and evaluation resulting in “winners” and “losers” are dubbed “horse races”, while systems that groom talent from entry into the organization, including formalized programs are considered “relays”. (Murphy, 2005)

My desire in conducting this research is to develop a program designed to “pass the torch” from an old supervisor to the new. Many other training related issues were found, all of which are not pertinent to my agency, and even though the FWC is using many of the techniques for selection and development of our supervisors, it would be interesting to determine what other agencies around the State of Florida are doing.

## Method

The purpose of this research was to determine the methods used for the selection, promotion and development of first line supervisors in Florida law enforcement agencies of comparable size to the FWC Division of Law Enforcement.

I sampled 6 law enforcement agencies closest to the size of the FWC at 722 sworn personnel by written survey. The numbers of sworn personnel in these agencies ranged from 515 to 790. The agencies sampled were the Orlando Police Department,

Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, the Polk County Sheriff's Office, St. Petersburg Police Department, Brevard County Sheriff's Office and the Fort Lauderdale Police Department.

The survey was designed to capture the agencies methods of selection for promotion, development or training pre and post promotion as well as the eligibility for entering the promotion process.

I also conducted an interview with Training Personnel from the Florida Highway Patrol, and Department of Transportation Motor Carrier Compliance. I also used the same survey instrument with them even though one of these agencies is considerably smaller and the other considerably larger than the FWC; they both have the potential to encounter the same difficulties finding suitable candidates for promotion due to residency requirements like the FWC.

### Results

Out of the 8 total agencies which were surveyed, 7 or 87.5 percent responded to the survey. The selection and preparation process for supervisors varied greatly among the different agencies. Eligibility was the first area which was studied. The object of this question was to determine what makes an individual eligible to enter the promotional process to first line supervisor.

The eligibility requirements were similar across the board. All seven surveyed, required a certain number of sworn years of service to be eligible. These ranged from 2 to 7 years of service. Only 3 agencies had a college requirement, 1 was a mandate of at least 60 credit hours, the second would substitute 2 years of sworn service for 2 years college or the equivalent credit hours, the third required 60 credit hours to be hired as an officer, for that reason I included that agency in this count. None of the agencies surveyed used military service or any other requirements.

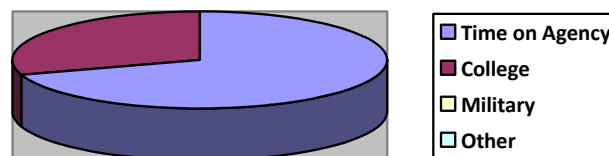
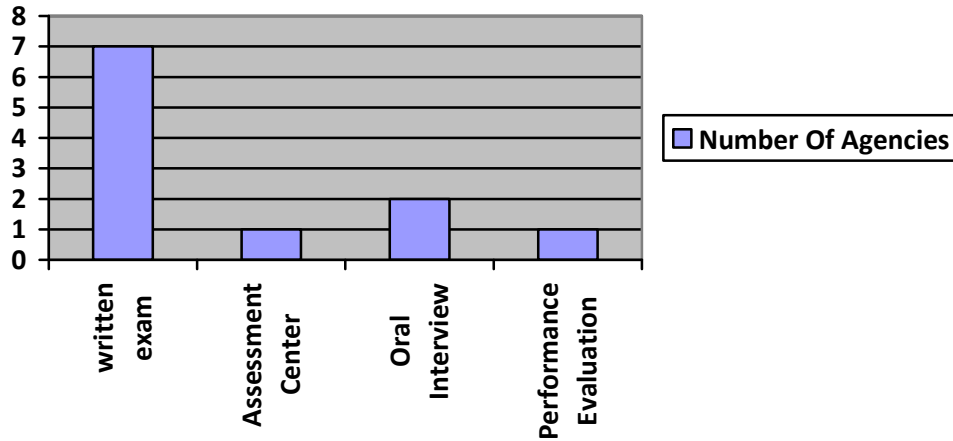


Table 1:

The next portion of the survey covered the selection process and the methods or instruments used to select first line supervisors. 100% of respondents use a written

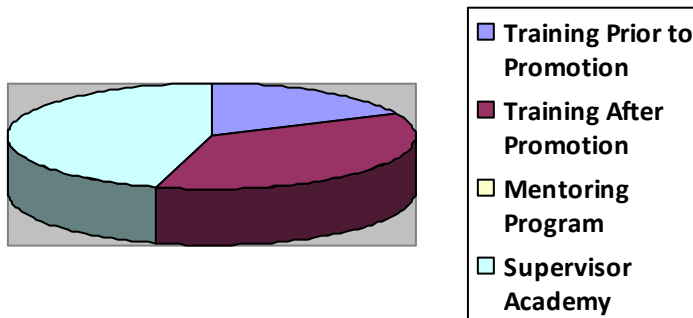
examination as part of their selection process but that is where the similarities end. Only 1 out of the 7 use an assessment center and 2 out of the 7 conduct an oral interview of the candidates. 2 out of the 7 agencies use a performance evaluation as part of the selection process.

Table 2:



Finally the survey captured the preparation of the individuals for the supervisory positions. Out of the 7 agencies only 2 provided training prior to promotion to first line supervisor. Of the 7, 4 mandate supervisory training within a specified time of promotion. None of the agencies surveyed have a mentoring program or any type of supervisors manual. Of the seven, 5 have an in-house supervisor's academy.

Table 3:



I conducted interviews with the Training Center Directors of Florida Department of Transportation Motor Carrier Compliance, (FDOT) and the Florida Highway Patrol, (FHP). My goal was to determine if these State Agencies were encountering the same types of issues as the FWC with regards to supervisor vacancies remaining unfilled for a length of time. Captain Deniz Pekerol with FDOT it was somewhat regional. In north Florida, supervisor positions are filled regularly and do not stay vacant for long; however there seems to be some supervisory vacancies staying open longer in south Florida. Captain Pekerol had not hard evidence for reasons behind this but speculated that loss of pay due to overtime and off duty employment could affect an officer's desire to promote to supervisor. Major Brent Coates told me FHP has seen a trend of supervisory positions remaining vacant and a lack of interest in promoting to first line supervisor. When I asked if there was any specific reason for this, like Capt. Pekerol from FDOT, Major Coates had no finite answer. Major Coates did however; speculate the reasons were mostly financial. He went on to tell me relocation plays a small part, but the possible loss of overtime and off duty were the main reasons. I found these explanations to be on par with what FWC has been experiencing.

### Discussion

This research points out the many different methods in which just 7 agencies in the state use to select and train new first line supervisors. Of the many methods described in my research I found all of them to be used in one way or another and in many combinations among the agencies surveyed. It is clear the agencies surveyed don't rely on one method alone to select their supervisors. In surveying these agencies I have discovered FWC keeping up with the standard other agencies when it comes to selecting supervisors, FWC does more than some and less than others and it appears that all are doing what is working for their agencies.

Limiting my research to Agencies near the same size as the FWC may not be giving me the best picture, but Agencies that are much larger or smaller may require



more assets than FWC would have available or have practices which work fine in a “small pond” environment but not for FWC.

The research has shown that more effort is put into the assessing or evaluating of a supervisory candidate and less into the preparation of the candidate. Only 28.5% of the respondents provide training prior to selection and 0 have a mentoring program. Those who are not receiving training prior to selection/assessment may not perform well being evaluated on tasks they have not been trained for. On the other hand it is apparent agencies are doing a good job of providing supervisory training after promotion, this is represented by 71.4% of the respondents surveyed use supervisor academies for newly promoted supervisors.

### Recommendations

In light of this research I see that the FWC is on the right track with our selection and preparation of new supervisors. To improve our methods I believe it would be best develop a succession planning mind set at all levels. We should be thinking succession not just at our command staff level but from officer to first line supervisor all the way to the top. Effort should be made to identify the Informal leaders among our officer class. Encourage and mentor them. We have no control over the financial issues, and more money is only a short term fix to chronic problem. An ideology of leading change, making a difference and being part of the solution should be a mantra started at the recruit level. Enable those who have earned it with the authority to make decisions. Train them in the everyday supervisory tasks they will be evaluated on during an assessment. I believe those with an honest desire to lead will eagerly participate in a mentoring program, and those who would promote merely for a raise will be less likely to put forth the effort.

Brian Smith has worked for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for 15 years. He began his career as an officer in South West Florida working in Collier, Manatee and Sarasota Counties. In 2004, Brian promoted to Lieutenant in the Training Section and was assigned to the Training Academy. Brian is currently a Captain serving as the Advanced and In-service Training Coordinator.

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## APPENDIX A

Name of Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Sworn members (patrol): \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Sworn First Line Supervisors (patrol): \_\_\_\_\_

1. What are the eligibility requirements to enter the promotional process to first line supervisor? Select all that apply.
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_ years of sworn service
  - B. Minimum degree or college credits \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Military experience/number of years \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. Other \_\_\_\_\_
2. Does your agency use a written exam for selection to first line supervisor?  
YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_
3. Does your agency use a promotional assessment center for selection to first line supervisor? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_
4. Does your agency use an oral interview for selection to first line supervisor?  
YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_
5. Does your agency use performance evaluations for selection to first line supervisor? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_
6. Does your agency provide supervisor training prior to selecting supervisors?  
YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_
7. Does your agency mandate leadership training within a specific time period of promotion to first line supervisor? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_
8. Does your agency have a formal mentoring program from officer/deputy to first line supervisor? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_
9. Does your agency have a supervisor's manual or handbook? YES \_\_\_\_\_  
NO \_\_\_\_\_
10. Does your agency conduct an internal supervisor's academy or course?  
YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_