

Supervisory Promotional Processes: The Written Test's Effectiveness in Identifying Supervisory Skills

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Abstract

A written test is often the first step in a promotional process. This research paper examined the effectiveness of written tests for identifying supervisory and leadership skills and knowledge. Specifically focusing on law enforcement supervisor promotional exams, the research analyzed the questions from three (3) different tests: the Altamonte Springs Police Department's Lieutenant exam, a like-sized agency Lieutenant exam, an exam offered by a commercial testing company. Results show that neither agency test had more than 8% of the questions aimed at identifying supervisory skills or leadership ability. The commercially available test is significantly weighted towards supervisor identification with 50% of the questions geared towards those skills.

Introduction

Promoting the correct person to a supervisory rank within an organization is often a difficult task. Naturally, the goal is to select the individual with the best chance of success. To accomplish that goal, organizations have developed processes to capture the candidate's level of ability in a variety of areas. The process used by the Altamonte Springs Police Department includes: eligibility verification, a written test, in-basket exercise, operational plan exercise, and a role play exercise. Other agencies may also include a records review, an oral interview or multiple scenarios to evaluate the candidate's ability to think on his/her feet, make decisions, and effectively communicate.

Each individual component in the selection process assists in identifying the candidate's supervisory and leadership knowledge, ability, and potential. The written test, used widely as the first component of many processes, usually centers on agency policies/ procedures and criminal statutes. The Altamonte Springs Police Department also includes short hand-outs on both Leadership Skills and Community Oriented Policing. While a good working knowledge of the agency's policies and procedures is absolutely necessary, an organization does not need supervisors who are just "policy parrots", able to recite any given policy on cue. An organization needs supervisors who are able to lead other officers and provide them the knowledge and tools to successfully carry-out the mission of the organization.

In 1999, a study of police sergeants in the city of Baltimore identified 42 characteristics of exemplary supervisors. Characteristics were initially identified by focus groups of police officers. Those characteristics were then shown to

nearly 1,000 officers who were asked to identify by name two sergeants who, in their opinion, most closely resembled the characteristics (Vicchio, 2001). The officers were additionally tasked with articulating why they picked the first place supervisor over the second place supervisor. The nominated supervisors were then used to establish a control group with similar biographical information as those nominated by the officers (i.e., age, race, gender, years on job, and assignments during career). The double blind study, consisting of many phases and information from personnel records and human resources, was able to correctly identify nearly all of the nominated supervisors.

If the data from this study was able to be used to identify exemplary supervisors, it may also be possible to develop questions that would evoke correct responses regarding supervisory effectiveness and leadership ability.

With the current state of promotional testing, does the written test adequately assess the candidate's potential ability as a supervisor, or leader? And, are we eliminating good supervisors at the first stage of the process because maybe they couldn't remember obscure intricacies of a policy or statute? Or are agencies missing the boat by not including supervisory based questions on their written exam? All of the components mentioned above, including in-basket exercises, operational plan exercise, role play scenarios, oral interviews, and records reviews are all valid tools used to select individuals for promotion. This research will focus on written exams from the Altamonte Springs Police Department, a like sized agency in Florida, and a commercially available exam.

Methods

The purpose of this research is to determine if the written test portion of the police supervisor promotional process contributes to the identification and selection of candidates with the appropriate supervisory skill sets. The data analyzed was archival test data pulled from 3 promotional tests: 1 from the Altamonte Springs Lieutenant exam, 1 from a like sized agency in Florida (100-125 sworn personnel), and 1 from a test generated by a commercial exam service.

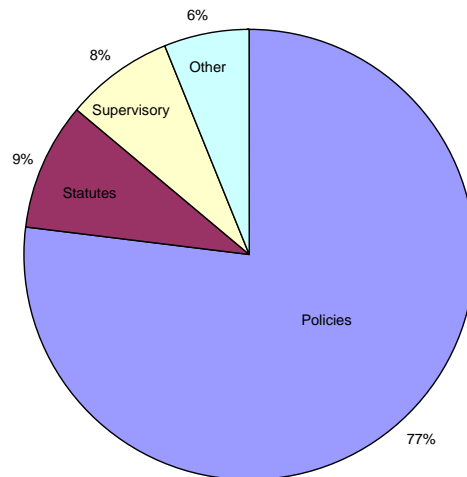
Analysis was done on the number of questions presented on each exam and the percentage of questions relating to skills or knowledge of supervisory or leadership ability. A breakdown of the questions from each exam was completed and the questions were categorized into one of four groups: Policy/Procedure, Criminal Law, Supervisory/Leadership, and Other. The results were compared to determine not only if the tests were actually testing for the required skill sets, but to see how the Altamonte Springs Police Department test performed relative to the other two instruments.

Results

****Note**** When referring to “Policy”, the writer is referring to any combination of Policies, Procedures, Rules, Regulations, Standard Operating Procedures, General Orders, City Policies, and information included in City or Department handbooks.

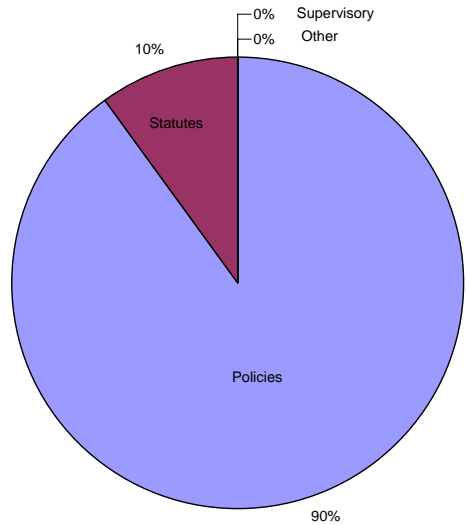
To determine the extent to which the Altamonte Springs Police Department seeks to identify supervisory or leadership knowledge through the written examination, the 2005 Lieutenant exam was reviewed. The exam was broken down to determine the number of questions written to test for knowledge in specific areas, including: policy, state statute, and supervisory and/or leadership knowledge. Questions not fitting into one of the 3 aforementioned categories were classified as other.

Altamonte Springs P.D. Question Breakdown

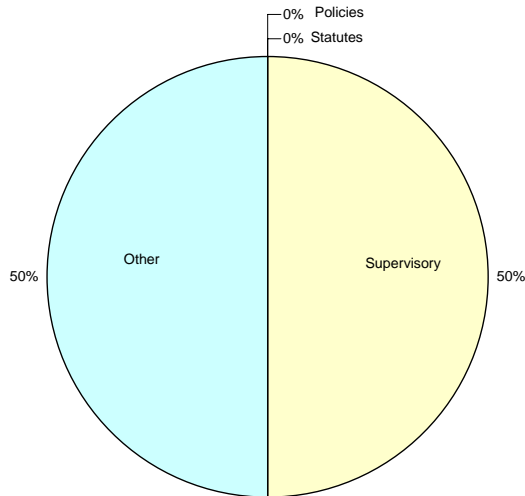


The process was then repeated using a lieutenant exam from an agency of like size to the Altamonte Springs Police Department and an exam from a commercial exam service.

Comparison Agency Question Breakdown



Commercial Service Question Breakdown



Each of the exams was comprised of a combination of multiple choice and/or true or false questions. The Altamonte Springs Police Department exam included 126 questions, while the comparison agency exam and the commercially available exam both included 100 questions. The analysis of test

questions from the Altamonte Springs and the comparison agency's lieutenant examinations were similar in that they were heavily weighted towards department and/or city policies, with 77% and 90% respectively. The Altamonte Springs exam was slightly different in that it included a small percentage of questions in both the "other" and "supervisory/leadership" categories which accounted for an additional 6% and 8%, respectively.

The remaining questions of the Altamonte Springs and comparison agency exams were derived from state statutes, with 9% and 10%, respectively. (See Appendix for complete list of results)

In stark contrast was the percentage of questions geared toward supervisory or leadership knowledge on the commercially available Lieutenant exam. While the percentage of questions would likely be lower if the exam was customized to a particular agency, 50% of the questions dealt with supervisory or leadership knowledge and skills. The remaining 50% of the commercially available exam was classified as other. The other category in the commercial exam was comprised of general law enforcement principles, investigations, and interviewing. Given the information obtained in this study, it appears that the agency created written exams do not adequately test for supervisory or leadership knowledge and ability.

In order to develop test questions that could be used to determine a candidate's knowledge level with regard to supervisory and leadership skills, the test questions must be based on, and taken from, a particular document(s). For example, the Supervision Handbook (Ferrari, 1990) cites the primary job of a supervisor as "getting work out of others". If this definition of a supervisor's main responsibility is in line with your agency's directives, a possible question could be:

The most important quality of a supervisor is _____?
A. Arrogant Confidence
B. Getting work out of others
C. Lack of Absenteeism
D. Ability to Delegate

Similarly, the Supervision Handbook outlines several traits of leadership. One of the cited traits is aggressiveness with humility. The handbook states that "firmness is essential when dealing with a group of people, but firmness must be tempered with humility". Again, if this belief is held by your agency, a possible question could be:

_____ is essential in handling a group of people, but this must be tempered with humility.
A. A quiet demeanor
B. Firmness
C. Ambiguity
D. "Iron fist" ruling

Although many variations of effective supervisors and leaders exist, the candidates in promotional processes must understand what traits, skills, and beliefs are held by the leaders of their organization. By validating a specific document, such as the Supervision Handbook, the organization is able to relay what should be the widely held views on proper supervision and leadership skills. Analysis of the last 2 written tests given by the Altamonte Springs Police Department show that the written test portion of the process is not eliminating candidates, as was previously theorized. In fact, 100% of the candidates in the past 2 processes passed the written portion of the process. Perhaps including a series of questions on supervisory and leadership skills would enable the process to eliminate a portion of the candidates who may not necessarily be the best candidates for the position, thereby giving the written test more of a "bell curve" result.

Discussion

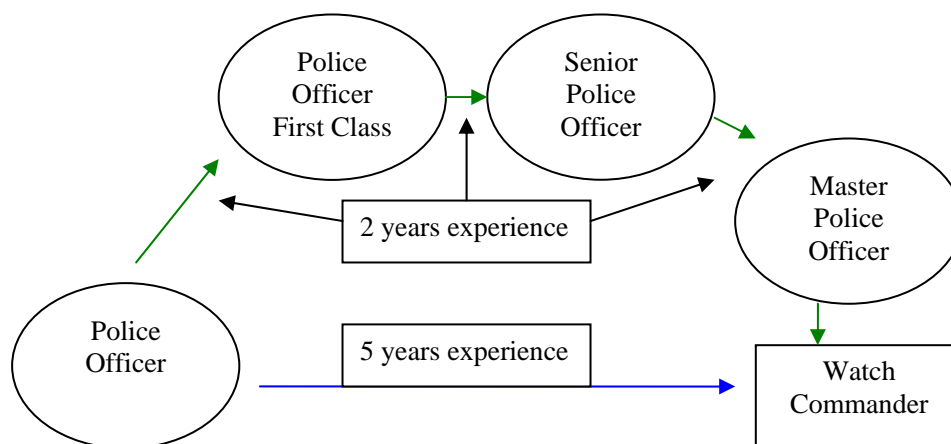
The purpose of the written test is to ascertain the amount of knowledge a candidate has in a particular area. In addition to the knowledge about the agency, its policies, and the law, there are other aspects to be concerned with when selecting supervisors. The vast majority of questions on promotional exams for lower ranking officers are geared towards knowledge of specific departmental policies/procedures and criminal statutes. Supervisory exams, because of the nature of the work that will be performed, theoretically should have more emphasis placed on supervision and leadership. While it would not be prudent to drastically reduce the number of policy related questions, the exam could benefit from a gradual change toward more questions about supervisory and leadership skills.

The results show that this has not been the case with regard to examinations created by the individual police agencies. These exams, which are routinely created by command staff personnel, tended to focus primarily on the agency's policies. This result is not surprising when you take into account the level of liability that is placed on the city when a supervisor makes a decision. The actions and justifications of the supervisor must be squarely rooted in the policies of the department. Issues often arise when the supervisor fails to weigh all of the factors that can contribute to a given situation. Some supervisors are remarkably able to quote, word for word, the policies that pertain to every situation imaginable. However, without the ability to effectively apply the theory and understand the spirit behind the policy, these supervisors can be ineffective.

A good supervisor, acting within policy, will lead his or her subordinates through a given situation and provide them guidance when needed, while possibly deciding when it may be necessary to act outside of a policy. Leadership must act contemporaneous with management, or supervision, to be truly effective. Leadership is establishing a direction or vision for a group to follow and carrying out the vision through interaction with the group. Management/supervision is controlling or directing people in a group according to pre-established principles or values (Team Technology, 2006).

There is no doubt that knowledge of policies and laws are crucial to a supervisor's effectiveness, and it would be impractical to remove these areas from any promotional examinations. However, given the disparity between the agency exams and the commercial exam looked at here, it may be necessary to shift the pendulum slightly to bridge the gap and diversify the knowledge that police supervisors are being tested for.

Currently, the criteria set forth in policy for the Altamonte Springs Police Department states that an individual wishing to test for the position of Watch Commander (lieutenant) must meet the following : May not have had formal discipline within the previous 18 months, Must have maintained a level of "good performance" on the previous evaluation, with no category rated as "needs improvement" or lower, must have met the 50th percentile requirement for the wellness testing, and must have at least 5 years employment as a sworn police officer (regardless of rank). This means that technically an officer with good evaluations, no discipline history, and average physical ability can move from a slick sleeve patrol officer, or any rank in between, to a lieutenant after 5 years of service; Obviously, this is not the norm. Promotions to the rank of lieutenant are usually made after the candidate has 7 or more years of experience. The chart below illustrates the two paths to becoming a Watch Commander.



Many individuals who make promotion to the rank of lieutenant have done so after proceeding through the ranks of Patrolman First Class (PFC), Senior Police Officer (SPO), and Master Police Officer (MPO). Current policy for promotion of operational career track employees in the Altamonte Springs Police Department requires that each of these ranks be held for at least 2 years prior to being eligible for promotion to a subsequent rank. In either case, command track or operational career track employees who have reached this level within the department are going to have a fairly good working knowledge of the policies and procedures in the organization. Additionally, the study guide does a decent job of narrowing down the study material to a manageable level. Given these facts, there is room in the test for more emphasis to be placed on supervisory skills

After analyzing the questions of the exams in this study, the Altamonte Springs exam does include a small percentage of questions on supervisory and leadership, whereas the comparison agency exam did not. The limited number of exams analyzed could be a limitation of this study's accuracy when measured across the board. The overriding theme relative to the exams reviewed is that the agency made exams tend to be more critical of the rules of the department and city, while the commercially available exam was more critical of the skill sets that were more supervisory and leadership oriented. As stated earlier, this disparity could be lessened by the commercially available test's adaptation to a particular agency. The agency would likely provide a number of questions to be integrated into the exam that would be based on their respective policies and procedures. While this would likely reduce the percentage of questions based on supervisory/leadership skills, it seems that the number of questions would still be higher than the number currently found in the agency generated tests examined in this study.

At the very least, agencies should include in the study material what the agency leader believes the proper skills and traits of his/her supervisors and leaders should be. Opening up for discussion and standing behind the expectations that supervisors must live up to will enable tests to incorporate more substantive questions that may assist in promoting the person with the best chance of success as a supervisor. It is better to have learned prior to doing than to do prior to learning.

The results of this study are not intended in any manner to suggest that the written exams surveyed are ineffective at capturing knowledge in the areas that they test for. The goal is to open for discussion the possibility that supervisory and leadership based questions may have useful application in the written component of the promotional process. Of course, the other components of the process also disclose information about the candidate's supervisory and leadership ability. The ultimate goal is to promote those individuals most likely to succeed in their positions as supervisors and leaders. Why rely on one or two aspects of the process to identify supervisory skills when each part of the process can identify, in some manner, those skills needed to be an effective supervisor and leader. Changing the thought process about what information needs to be tested for and including that information in all components of the process could be a step in the right direction.

Lieutenant Dan Smutz has been with the Altamonte Springs Police Department since 1996. He has worked in several areas to include patrol, traffic and tactical bike units. Dan currently is assigned to the operations support bureau and oversees school resource officers, emergency management, information systems representative and liaison to the Seminole County Sheriff's Office for dispatch, paperless reporting and mobile computer applications. Dan has a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Delaware.

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Appendix

Questions from ASPD Lieutenants exam

# of Questions	126	
# based on:		
P/P, R/R, SOP , GO	97	
Statutes	11	
Supervisory/Leadership	10	
Other	8	
% based on :		
P/P, R/R, SOP, GO	77%	(76.98)
Statutes	9%	(8.73)
Supervisory/Leadership	8%	(7.93)
Other	6%	(6.35)

Questions from like sized agency in Florida exam

(104 Sworn members)

# of Questions	100	
# based on:		
P/P, R/R, SOP, GO	90	
Statutes	10	
Supervisory/Leadership	0	
Other	0	
% based on:		
P/P, R/R, SOP, GO	90%	
Statutes	10%	
Supervisory/Leadership	0%	
Other	0%	

Questions from Commercially generated exam (general, non-agency specific)

# of Questions	100	
# based on:		
P/P, R/R, SOP, GO	0	
Statutes	0	
Supervisory/Leadership	50	
Other	50	

NOTE: Because this is a generic test, application for Statutes and Department Policies were not included.