Many fire departments today use assessment processes for promotion. While there are many different approaches to assessment centers, most share some common elements including in-baskets, incident operations, delegation, and subordinate counseling. Over the years I have both developed processes and evaluated candidates participating in a process. I have put together the information below based on my experiences in those areas. Hopefully, it will be beneficial to you as a participant in a process or as an evaluator.

Overview of Assessment Processes

Assessment processes are designed to evaluate specific performances. Unlike promotional tests which were previously used in the fire service, assessment processes focus on behaviors rather than simply knowledge. In other words, they measure what you can do rather than what you know. The characteristics of assessment processes are summarized below.

- Assessment processes evaluate performance rather than knowledge. Successful performance requires technical knowledge, but it is based on what the participant does rather than what the participant knows.

- Assessment processes measures specific behavior and elements. Assessment processes are designed to measure specific behaviors and tasks that are necessary to successfully perform the identified position.

- Assessment processes are based on the principle that 'behavior predicts behavior.' In other words, if a participant successfully performs the behaviors in a process, they will probably be able to perform them in that position.

- Job analysis guides the development of the assessment process. Each valid assessment process is based on a thorough analysis of the identified job. The dimensions, behaviors, and tasks included in the assessment reflect those required in the position.

- An assessment process is a systematic process for measuring the identified behaviors and dimensions. It has been carefully planned and validated.

- Preparation for an assessment process requires practice and professional development. An assessment process is more than regurgitating knowledge; it is evaluation of a person's ability to apply knowledge. Unlike a written test, if a person has not take the time to develop those skills and behaviors, reading and studying won't be of any value.

Dimensions

A dimension is an attribute or quality necessary to perform a task or a job. For any given job in the fire service, there are specific dimensions which are the foundation for being able to successfully perform the job. For example, the dimension oral communication is required for any officer position.
During the development of an assessment process, the developer identifies the specific dimensions required for the position. Based on those dimensions, the components are identified which will be used in the assessment. It is essential that every promotional candidate have a clear understanding of the dimensions for the job they are seeking. This understanding makes preparation for the assessment more straightforward.

Keep in mind that dimensions are different than personality traits. Personality traits such as honesty, initiative, etc. are embedded in each dimension. Those traits become part of how each person applies the dimension. For example, an important personality trait is respect for others. This trait is a key ingredient in such dimensions as interpersonal relations and decision-making.

There are many different dimensions used in performance evaluation processes. However, there are eleven which are most commonly used in fire service assessment processes. Those eleven are described below.

1. Oral Communication. The ability to clearly and concisely communicate orders and information to others, and the ability to listen to messages others are sending.

2. Written Communication. The ability to create, complete and disseminate written materials such as reports, memos, letters, etc.

3. Problem Analysis. The ability to break a problem into individual parts and identify the relationships between the parts and the problem.

4. Interpersonal Relations. The ability to create and maintain positive working relationships with other people. The relations should foster honesty, trust, and open communication.

5. Delegation. The ability to identify tasks which can be given to others, and the ability to communicate expectations and specifics about the tasks.

6. Decision Making. The ability to identify solutions to problems, evaluate the pros and cons of each solution, select the best solution, and then communicate that solution to others.

7. Decisiveness. The readiness to make decisions and stay committed to a course of action.

8. Organization. The ability to efficiently establish a plan of action for self and subordinates to achieve a specific goal. This includes effective use of personnel and resources.

9. Technical Expertise. The skills necessary to perform technical operations safely, effectively, and efficiently. For example, as a company officer technical expertise is required in fire ground operations.

10. Evaluation. The ability to objectively assess personnel performance or progress towards a goal.
11. Time Management. The ability to effectively and efficiently use time as a resource in accomplishing assigned tasks and duties.

Professional Development Plan

Unlike preparing for a written promotional test, an assessment process requires that a candidate have the skills necessary to perform the job being assessed. These skills cannot be developed by 'cramming' a week before the process. The skills must be developed through planned training and education, guided practice, and supervised experience. These must be accomplished before the assessment process.

To achieve this goal, it is essential to create a professional development plan based on the skills required for the desired position. A professional development plan considers the specific job performance requirements for the position, the candidate's current skills and abilities, and the best methods for developing the skills and abilities which are lacking. In short, the professional development plan identifies the job areas which require improvement, and then identifies a plan for improving those areas.

The first step in creating a professional development plan is to analyze the job description for the position being sought. This includes identifying the specific dimensions and tasks unique to that job. The analysis also identifies areas on which to focus development for the immediate future. Finally, the analysis provides insight into the probable dimensions which will be measured in the assessment process.

The next step is to conduct a professional self-assessment. The purpose of the professional self-assessment is to identify your personal strengths and limitations for those tasks required in the new position. This process involves personal, peer, and supervisory assessment and feedback. Based on the feedback gained, you will be able to select the training and education, guided practice, and supervised experience required to overcome your limitations.

Once the self-assessment has been completed, the plan is developed. The plan identifies specific tasks necessary to overcome the limitations, and then states the specific methods to achieve those tasks. For example, during a self-assessment you may identify that you need more development with verbal communication. There is a class at the local college on public speaking. In your plan you will list the class and identify a timeline for completing the class.

Remember, there are three ways to overcome limitations; training and education; guided practice; and supervised experience. Education/training is necessary to develop knowledge and skills in specific areas. For example, if you have a limitation in the area of budget development, you should take a class in governmental budgeting or a related field. Guided practice is used to develop new skills associated with the position. This is typically done with a mentor such as a supervisor. For example, you may have the basic skills necessary to write memos. Guided practice provides you with the opportunity to draft memos that would be used in the desired position. Finally, supervised experience provides the opportunity to refine current skills. For example, you have proven during guided practice that you have the ability to write memos. The mentor then provides you with experience by allowing you to write memos used in the course of business. The mentor still provides feedback and direction.
Once you have developed the plan, it is time to implement the plan. The plan is only a guide to achieve your goal; it will not achieve the goal for you. You must act on the plan and complete the objectives in the specified time periods.

**Strategies for Meetings**

A meeting is an assembly for a specific purpose. Meetings are commonly used in the fire service. The ability to effectively plan and manage a meeting is necessary for most officer positions.

Meetings are used when it is necessary to;
- clarify information within the work group,
- ensure the members of the work group understand information or assignments,
- solicit feedback and ideas on problems,
- and develop consensus of the work group on a given issue.

There are three types of meetings. The first is **information-giving** meetings. These meetings are used to present new information to the work group. The information is presented by the leader, and then followed with a few questions. In this type of meeting the leader does most of the talking. A brief discussion may be used to ensure understanding.

An **information-taking** meeting is used to get data, ideas, facts, opinions, etc. from the work group. In this type of meeting, the leader draws upon the experience and knowledge of the work group members. The leader uses open-ended questions to gain the desired information and facilitate discussion. It is essential the leader remains neutral during the discussion and the information provided comes from the work group.

A **problem-solving** meeting is used to identify solutions to specific problems. The leader must facilitate three-way communication during a problem-solving meeting. The leader keeps the discussion focused on solving problem, and works with the members to develop the best solutions.

Regardless of the type of meeting, there are some basic tips which the leader or facilitator can use to ensure the meeting achieves its purpose. Those tips are listed below.

- There should be a clear purpose developed and communicated for every type of meeting. The purpose states why the meeting is being held and the goal or objectives of the meeting.
✓ It is essential that the proper participants be identified. If you are tasked by the chief with developing consensus on a new operational policy, your audience should probably be the department's command officers.

✓ Prior to beginning the meeting, develop an agenda which includes the purpose and the outline of the discussion. For some meetings, such as information-giving meetings with a small work group, it may not be necessary to distribute the agenda to all the participants. If it is a larger group, it is best to provide an agenda to all the participants.

✓ Keep the discussions focused on the purpose of the meeting. A good method for this is to follow the agenda and remind the participants of the purpose for the meeting when necessary.

✓ Ensure that each participant clearly understands the purpose and goal of the meeting.

✓ Create an open environment which allows, and promotes, each participant to be honest and candid during the discussion.

✓ As the leader or facilitator, it is essential that you listen actively to the participants. Listen to what they are telling you, and in some cases, to what is not being said. When appropriate, seek more information or clarify the information you have already provided.

✓ At the end of the meeting, restate the solutions, information, etc. which was discussed during the meeting.

If you are leading a meeting which requires that you gain the participation of each member, the following tips will help you gain the necessary participation.

✓ At the beginning of the meeting, state your needs and the benefits to achieving the goal of the meeting.

✓ Call on the specific expertise or experience of the different participants.

✓ Compliment individuals on the ideas and feedback provided.

✓ Use previous information gathered to stimulate the discussion.

✓ Use open-ended questions to get participants to share ideas, solutions, etc.

✓ If you don't understand a response or idea, clarify the information to ensure you understand the information.

Strategies for Subordinate Counseling
An essential skill for any manager or supervisor is subordinate counseling. The purpose of subordinate counseling is to provide feedback to employees, resulting in improved performance. There are three different categories of subordinate counseling; performance counseling, follow-up counseling; and disciplinary counseling.

It is important to emphasize that the type of counseling session used for a given problem depends upon three things; the nature of the problem, the goal of the counseling session, and the policies guiding counseling sessions. For example, you may be supervising a new fire fighter. The fire fighter is having difficulty working with the other members of the crew. This would require performance counseling. However, if that fire fighter was caught stealing from the station food fund, policy would probably require disciplinary counseling. Because of this, it is essential that every candidate for promotion have an in-depth understanding of all department policies and rules which apply to the position being sought.

Before discussing each type of counseling, it is important to mention the key principles for counseling sessions. These key principles are methods which apply to all types of counseling sessions. The key principles are summarized below.

1. Be objective. All actions taken during a counseling session must be based on facts, not feelings. Discussions are limited to provable facts, not rumor.

2. Base decisions on policy. Every decision should be based on department policy and personnel rules. Knowing the rules and policy help to determine what action can be taken for specific problems.

3. Focus on employee’s habits, performance, actions etc. The problem is due to performance. Keep discussion away from personal values and feelings.

4. Ensure the understanding of the employee. It is the officer’s responsibility to ensure that the employee clearly understands the problem, the actions to be taken, and the consequences.

5. Identify solutions. Counseling sessions are held to find and implement solutions to performance problems. It is essential that the officer identify the solution(s) as soon as possible in the session.

6. Listen actively. The officer must take the time to listen to the employee’s responses and questions.

7. Take and keep control of the session. The officer is the leader and must control the flow and content of the session.

8. Identify and communicate the problem. The problem must be clearly stated as early as possible.
9. Stay on the issues. Don’t allow the employee to lead the discussion away from the problem and solutions.

10. Be decisive. The officer makes the decisions. Take command and make a decision.

11. Communicate reasons for action. Refer to expected performance, follow-up, policy, etc. The employee must understand the actions are not arbitrary.

12. Identify specific follow-up actions and dates.


**Performance counseling** is used when an employee’s work habits or performance does not meet the supervisor’s expectation, or the performance is in conflict with department policy or rules. The steps for conducting a performance counseling session are listed below.

1. State the performance problem objectively and specifically. Explain the reason for the session. Also, explain the reason the performance is not acceptable. Whenever possible, refer to the appropriate department policy or rule.

2. Discuss the causes of the problem. Use open-ended questions to get information from the employee. It is important to identify if the problem is based on a lack of skill, misunderstanding of policy, willful misconduct, etc.

3. Discuss solutions. Emphasize that the performance must be corrected. When possible, allow the employee to identify the solutions. Ensure the solutions still hold the employee accountable for solving the problem.

4. Identify specific actions, dates, etc. necessary to solve the problem. When appropriate, allow the employee to identify dates.

5. Explain the consequences to the employee if the performance continues. Again, when possible, refer to department policy and rules.

6. Review your expectations, actions agreed upon, dates, etc. Ensure the employee understands all points covered in the discussion. Don’t seek agreement, simply clarify understanding.

**Follow-up counseling** is used to evaluate progress from a previous session. The steps for conducting a follow-up counseling session are listed below.
1. Review the previous discussion. Focus on the problem and the solutions already identified. Refer to notes made from the previous meeting. Attempt to gain information on progress towards solving the problem.

2. Explain the continued performance deficiencies. Refer to policy, rules, etc. when possible. Also, be very specific.

3. Ask for an explanation why the poor performance is continuing and the solutions have not been achieved.

4. Specify action (solution) that is required of the employee. This is no longer a session which seeks employee feedback. The problem must be corrected.

5. Identify the consequences to the employee if the poor performance continues, and the positive consequences to correcting the performance.

6. Review the discussion and stated expectations. Ensure the employee understands all the expectations and consequences.

A disciplinary counseling session is held when an employee has not, or will not, improve performance, or when there has been a serious violation of a department policy or rule. The steps for conducting a disciplinary counseling session are listed below.

1. Review the performance problem and previous discussions. Refer to department policy and rules so that it is clear which policies or rules have been violated.

2. Explain the disciplinary action being taken and the reasons for the action. Again, refer to the department's policy on disciplinary action.

3. Identify the employee's options, if any, to appeal the action.

4. Review the action taken and any pertinent points of the discussion. Ensure the employee understands the action and their options for appeal.

Golden Rules for Assessment Processes

There are ten key behaviors which are essential to success in any assessment process. Those behaviors are described below.

✓ Play the role. It is essential that the performance is based on the job being sought, not the person's current position.

✓ Follow the rules. Seek out as much information about the process as possible, as early as possible. Understand the dimensions being measured, the components, time limits, expected dress, etc.
✓ Display initiative. Fire officers must have initiative. Whenever possible, display that initiative in the process.

✓ Be a problem solver. Identify problems, seek alternatives, and implement the best solution. This applies to all components and all jobs.

✓ Carry out policy. It is essential that all solutions and answers be based on the organization's policies and rules.

✓ Communicate effectively. Provide answers that are easily understood. During subordinate counseling and meetings, listen actively. Always clarify understanding.

✓ Look and act professional. Demonstrate that you respect the position and the purpose of the assessment process.

✓ Be prepared. Understand the process and be ready to complete the components.

✓ Be decisive. Once solutions and courses of action have been identified, implement them. Take the lead and keep control.

✓ If you don't understand something about the process, ask.

If I had one best tip to give you about success in an assessment center it would be to actively seek out opportunities to do the job which you are seeking. Nothing in a textbook replaces the experience of being a relief driver or acting officer. This experience builds confidence which should be apparent in the assessment process.

Good luck on your professional journey.