

# FIREHOUSE



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CAREERS & EDUCATION

## Does Higher Education Really Fit into the Fire

# Service's Mission?

Benjamin Martin discusses the differing perspectives on what qualifies someone for a leadership position in the fire service.

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Aug 1st, 2020

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Seldom is more heat generated than when firefighters sit around the kitchen table to tackle the latest list of promotions in their agency. One item that adds fuel to this fire is the disagreement about the role that higher education has come to play in the hiring or promotional process.

Who our organizations choose to hire and promote remains one of the most critical tests that the fire service faces. This applies regardless of whether you work for the FDNY or a small volunteer agency that has only a few members. As a younger generation of firefighters begin to move up the ladder into leadership positions, the future of the fire service rests with our ability to envision and offer the types of training that will help to prepare them to answer challenges, many of which might not even exist yet. So, what exactly qualifies someone for a leadership position in the first place?

## Blue-collar beginnings

There simply is no arguing that the mission of the fire service has its roots in blue-collar work. This kind of labor, at times requiring tremendous amounts of training and skill, includes the types of tasks that are found in building construction and maintenance, machine and automotive repair, custodial work and manufacturing. Firefighters often perform many of these tasks at the firehouse or on a call for service, so hiring and promoting people who have this type of experience is extremely valuable for organizations. As an example, I spent years swinging a hammer on a construction site, gaining an appreciation of building construction as well as how awful it was to carry a bundle of roof shingles up a 30-foot ladder to a steep-pitched roof. What I learned during that time helps me to make better decisions on the fireground when anticipating how the fire is spreading in a house and attacking the structure.

Despite the obvious value in this type of skill set, it's becoming increasingly common that fire departments sidestep candidates who possess the actual experiences of both leading people and running fire calls in favor of others who have significantly less experience but a college degree.

This shift in preferred qualifications sidelines many otherwise outstanding candidates. It also has created a palpable disconnect and tension within some departments' rank and file. I even am aware of a few cases in which departments require a college degree for any promotional rank; some go so far as to declare it a minimum qualification for their hiring process. Wait! What?

Part of the disconnect that concerns the issue of higher education is that, for many firefighters, their career has or will revolve exclusively around riding an apparatus and going to fires.

However, for others, as they grow in years of service, they begin to explore different aspects of their organization's mission, such as an assignment to the training, fire marshal or planning sections. Although some are drawn to supervise at the company level, some eventually aspire to chief's buggies or office positions. Once promoted to these new assignments, these folks might not be subject to running 9-1-1 calls at 2 a.m. anymore, but it doesn't take long before they are faced with program management responsibilities, budget development requests, station design, construction projects, chairing committees, or guiding apparatus purchasing and financing.

When leaders solve these types of problems, they still are as much a part of the fire service's mission as those who answer the 9-1-1 calls, but, all of a sudden, the landscape of what qualifies someone for this type of leadership position looks differently. If the pool from which we promote remains the same, it could lead to a lack of having qualified people. If not addressed, to fill these senior level leadership positions, organizations might need to promote from the outside or face the risk of promoting someone internally who ends up causing tremendous damage to morale, because he/she lacks the skills to address what the organization is asking them to do.

## Leveraging higher education

“Wait,” you might say. “What do you mean leveraging? I thought this was going to be a good old higher education browbeating session.”

The fact is, the answer to this challenge isn't black and white. I firmly believe that the understanding of building construction that I gained over the years provides me the ability to be an asset on the fireground, but so does what I learned while completing my bachelor's degree in fire science. The classes in the particular program that I completed included strategy

and tactics, fire behavior, fire protection systems and water supply. After becoming a lieutenant, I realized that, to better understand the decisions that were coming down the pipeline, I needed to learn more about how my organization runs administratively.

So, I went back to school for a master's degree in public administration, and I learned about shaping organizational culture, leading strategic change, managing projects and how adults learn. I even took a course in professional ethics. I used this information during my role as the lieutenant of training in charge of recruit academy instruction to enhance our programs. After I was promoted to captain, I used what I learned during a succession management and communications strategy course to improve the health and morale of our department's Marine Response team. To put it simply, I'm a better leader, coach, manager, instructor and overall firefighter because of the investment that I made by pursuing higher education.

## **To change or not to change**

It's easy to see why people are disgruntled over higher education when departments have seen fit to move the goal posts for promotion without input from or explanation to its tenured workforce. Incumbents have

put in the time and sweat to accomplish this mission, and any reasonable person would want to feel that his/her leaders value their contributions and sacrifices. Dramatically changing your department's promotional and hiring process, particularly in a vacuum and absent a high level of transparency, is a perfect recipe for creating a workforce that is rich in uncertainty and rife with conflict. It's worth pointing out that you can tell people that you value them, but who you decide to hire or promote might suggest differently. I like it said best this way: "Show me your department's promotional process, and I'll show you what they value."—Ric Jorge, Palm Beach, FL, Fire Department (Ret.)

Although the fire service has a reputation for being resistant to change, I believe that the opposite is true—well, kind of. How members feel about the changes coming down the pipeline is primarily determined by how good of a job that leaders do explaining why the change is needed, particularly in cases where tradition is concerned. It's equally as vital that we allow others to disagree with our conclusions and that we seek to prove them right, to ensure that what we present is indeed the best solution moving forward.

## Square peg, round hole

At face value, I get why this could be upsetting for folks, but the point that I have been building to is this: Square pegs don't fit into round holes. Here's what I mean:

Although I currently serve as a captain in my organization, I have heard the word no more times than yes, including when it comes to promotion. When our egos are injured, it can be difficult to maintain objectivity. We can fall into the trap of making ourselves into victims and believing that people who we trusted to make decisions about and for us now are bad people. Part of what fuels this is the idea that tenure equals promotability—which it most certainly does not.

For example, a hard-charging and well-respected lieutenant heard the word no when he went for promotion to captain. After seeing a younger officer who had less experience than he but a college degree get the nod, his guys wasted no time convincing him to feel jaded and overlooked. However, after learning that the new captain was assigned to work in the planning section—a 40-hour work week that had no sight of an apparatus—he quickly changed his tune regarding the chief's decision. The gentleman who received the promotion happened to have a background and interest in project management. It was a good fit for the organization and both of the officers.



## Above and beyond

I certainly appreciate that this article won't speak to everyone in the fire service, and that is totally OK. I do hope that everyone might consider for at least a moment the following: It isn't about whether you do or don't have trade skills or a college degree. Success on this job comes down to a leader's ability to leverage whatever skills his/her team possesses. Focus on staying engaged and learning about this job. Care about each other and about the oath that you swore, and you always will be on a path to success.

Chiefs: When employees disagree about what should and shouldn't be a priority in an organization, what often results is loss of morale, decreased engagement and motivation and the emergence of politics. Leaders are obliged to go above and beyond communicating when it comes to their intent, particularly when change and traditions are involved. There always has been, and always will be, a need for firefighters who have a blue-collar background. There also is no question about the need for some of these same firefighters who desire leadership positions to pursue training in areas that don't involve the front seat of an apparatus.

Ensure that the people who you hire and promote reflect the same values and mission that you hang on the walls of your fire station. It's your job to have and

execute a vision that results in the right mix of people receiving the training and the opportunity to answer whatever challenges await the fire service tomorrow. Not everyone in your organization will understand the weight and toll that this will take on you, but that's part of the role that you signed up for when you asked for the job.

Firefighters and aspiring or existing leaders: If you managed to read this far and are curious as to what opportunities might lie in wait for you throughout your career, please consider this: There are plenty of opportunities, be it at the firehouse during your downtime or on your days off, to spend one less hour watching Netflix and instead spend it learning about something that will help you to become more qualified for your next career goal.

Remember, take pride in what you do but always be able to laugh at yourself. Put the team and mission first, and you always will feel as though you have the greatest job in the world.

### Make Your Own Opportunity

There's no shortage of occasions to enhance your qualifications as a means of putting yourself in position for consideration for promotion.

- Attend a weekend hands-on training class or fire conference
- Read a NIOSH or UL report for lessons learned and emerging science
- Watch a fire service presentation on YouTube
- Audit a basic computing class at a local community college
- Transfer to an administrative position to gain a perspective that's unique from operations
- Work on a project that will benefit your department
- Pursue an online degree or certificate in higher education

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**Source URL:** <https://www.firehouse.com/careers-education/article/21143572/does-higher-education-really-fit-into-the-fire-services-mission>