

Pride and Ownership: The Love for the Job

Changing Shirts- The Promotion

by Rick Lasky

One of the many great opportunities that are available in our great fire service is the ability to promote and move up the ladder if one chooses to do so. Whether you work in this wonderful profession as a volunteer or paid firefighter, the opportunities are there. How well one prepares to promote and then if fortunate, gets promoted, requires some planning or “promotional pre-planning” if you will.

Promotional opportunities have a strange way of presenting themselves. You could be lucky enough to work in an area that is rapidly growing and in doing so, is building fire houses and hiring firefighters to keep up with that growth. Along with the growth comes promotions and if someone isn't staying awake (and it has happened) a fire department ends up playing catch up, trying to fund the firehouses, apparatus and personnel that should have been planned for in the first place. A friend of mine is going through this right now. You could also be sitting in a firehouse that hasn't seen a promotion in years due to a variety of reasons. If you're in the latter, it can be hard to stay fresh and in the promotional preparation mode. But time and time again, we see firefighters and officers decide not to prepare and enter the promotional process because they don't see any promotions happening within the list's dates, only to see someone retire unexpectedly, have new positions all of a sudden being approved, someone wins the lottery or whatever, leaving them wishing they had prepared and taken the exam. The best way to stay sharp and fresh is to prepare, enter the process and see what happens. About the worst thing that could happen is you get better and better at taking the exams and stay just that much more current and on top of things. Don't fall into the rut of remaining stagnant.

The Decision to Promote

Upon deciding to enter a promotional process, you'll need to ask yourself several questions.

- First, why do I want to promote to this position? If you're a paid firefighter, is it for the money? Because it seems like the thing to do? Or is it to make a difference? Hopefully that last one will be the biggest reason but I understand that if you're paid the money might be right up there close, but making a difference, contributing and knowing you have something to offer should be the driving force. When you don't have someone that feels this way, if they get promoted, they end up as one of those officers that don't accomplish much and seems like he's just hanging out. And lastly in the decision process, don't get all wrapped up in the "I'm only taking it for the experience" stage. You either are or you are not. If you are, give it your all and do the best you can with your best effort. If not, you're really not going to experience much except for the process but you won't know where your strengths and weaknesses are.
- Can I do the job? Hopefully your answer will be yes and a loud yes. If you're not sure maybe it isn't your time yet. You don't want to get promoted into a position that you weren't ready for. It also might be that you need to talk to one of your mentors and see what he or she feels about your situation and whether you should go for it yet or not. But we've all seen the firefighter that's been on the job for about a year and has seen a "little" action, I mean a little, and looks up front at the driver's seat, usually at someone that has been driving for a while, and says "I can do that, that's not so hard." And then eventually they get there and after a while

they look over to the right and see the officer sitting there and say “Hey, I can blow the siren and talk on the radio, that’s not so hard.” And then once they make it into that seat they look out at the battalion chief and say (I hope you can see where I’m going with this…) “Hey, that doesn’t look so hard, I can do that.” Eventually looking at the chief of department saying “Hey, that doesn’t look so hard either.” It’s not bad to always think you can do it better than the other guy, just don’t forget that it takes preparation and hard work to get there as well. You also don’t want to end up the guy that gets on the “train of life” and starts out by saying all that matters is getting to the next station, that’s it. Kind of like “if I get this firefighting job, that will be it, I’ll be happy for life. But as the train gets close to that station he starts looking ahead at the next station thinking well that’s not to far and just hurry past this one and get to the next one, then that will be it I’ll be set. Then again when that station approaches he gets the same feeling and just keeps blowing by each station not experiencing much and worse forgetting to stop and enjoy life for a while. You end up retired asking yourself “Where the heck did my career go and boy it sure flew by.”

- Can I make the life style change required? This can be easy for some, but for some it can be extremely difficult. Most of us have been there where we said something, maybe even did some things that seemed like the thing to do at the time, only to realize later that in order for you to take on more responsibility, you have to be responsible. Knowing up front, early in your career, that the decisions you make, the actions you take, as you promote can and will affect those who work with you and for you. Some of those things you did earlier in your career

can hurt you for a long time. Make the changes early that are necessary to handle those responsibilities. “Changing shirts” doesn’t take away the fact that if you were screwing up or were a problem child before be promoted, that now all of that goes away. We’ve seen plenty of people that were some of the biggest problems or whatever, get promoted and then immediately come down hard on the guys for doing the same things that they were doing just months ago. Take care of business early.

- Do I have the courage to lead? Being a leader takes courage. The courage needed to make hard and tough decisions and I don’t mean just on the fireground. Sometimes as an officer, a leader, you have to make decisions that are not going to be popular with the troops and many of them probably are your friends. But you have to make those decisions based on what’s “right” and not what’s “popular.” In the long run you’ll be happy you did what you did and for the right reasons. Making that leap from buddy to boss is not as easy as it seems. Ask anyone (that will be honest with you) if anything changed when they got promoted and they’ll say YES! I can tell you first hand, that sometimes no matter what you do, no matter what your decision is, some of the guys aren’t going to be happy. No matter how well you think you’re doing. Even when you think you’re doing a good job some can make you feel like you just can’t win. Bottom line is no matter how hard you try you’re not going to make everybody happy all of the time. I asked a friend of mine how he was adjusting to being a new lieutenant and he said, “You know there’s good days and bad days.” Then he pointed to his

collar pins and said “Some days they’re trumpets and some days they’re funnels.”

Make decisions based on good solid information and integrity.

Study Habits

Back to the whole studying thing. Start early, way before the promotional announcement. Why wait to start studying until they stick the notice on the bulletin board. Make it so when you approach the examination process it’s more of a review than the first time you’re cracking the binders on the books. Again all it’s going to do is keep you sharp. Study with a friend or a partner. A lot of people are afraid that if they study with someone, and in doing so help them, that they’ll beat you out on the exam and score higher. I’ve always looked at it this way; I need all of the help I can get and if in doing so he or she scores higher than me, so be it. They were probably going to score higher anyway. Set aside some time each day to study even if it’s just a small segment of time. Try to find a quiet area. It’s hard to concentrate at the kitchen table or in the day room. Find ways to test yourself. Truly become a student. Especially if you’ve been out of school for a while. Simply try to build good study habits.

Provide a Good Process

If you’re a chief and have a say in the process, provide a promotional process that is fair and objective. I’ve had the help of a lot of people along with some of my mentors and we’ve done really well with our’s. Without getting into the whole process here, probably the biggest impact though has been that we conduct the process on the candidate’s day off, after a day off. This allows for them to be fresh, well rested and in a good, clear frame of mind. It really doesn’t seem fair to put someone through a process especially an all day process, when they just came off shift and had been running calls all

night while the other candidates were home sleeping. It's a lot more work than a one-day process, but it really helps to even things out a little.

Going to Days

Getting promoted and going to days (Monday – Friday, 8 to 5) can probably be one of the most difficult changes to make. Not only are you leaving a “shift work” schedule, you're changing things at home as well. Now you're home every night. Let me say that again, now you're home every night! That can be a good thing and we'll discuss that in a little bit, but it is a major life style adjustment at home. I know my wife at times misses her every third day of freedom. You know what I'm talking about. We're best friends but when you're use to that break every third day, you miss it when it's gone.

Now for some of the good stuff. Yes you're working Monday through Friday, but you are home every night. You are home for the holidays, all of them. You end up missing fewer activities with the kids and holidays with the family. For some they love it. They take to it like a duck to water. However, some do not. Unfortunately for some, it becomes something really horrible and difficult and in some circumstances can strain relationships in the first family, the one at home. For some it may be a reduction in income because they're not working their side job anymore on their days off. Either way, either situation, if the promotion you are going for means that you'll be “going to days,” make sure your lifestyle can make the adjustment. Doing that will save you from a lot of headaches and hardship.

Lastly, here are just a few points to ponder when considering whether or not to “change shirts.”

- Form good study habits early and early in your career.

- Prepare to promote early in your career with making good decisions and leading by example now. Don't get to a point where you're playing catch up.
- If you're worried about the "Skeletons in your closet" stay away from the graveyard. (Think about it)
- Set your goals early in your career as to where you want to go and then start preparing.
- Pick good mentors and surround yourself with good people.
- Do a core values check-up. Are yours in order?
- Stay fresh by studying all of the time or at least often. (Whether you see any chances to promote or not. Don't fall into the regret trap).
- Test no matter what. Enter into the promotional process even if they're no openings and don't do it "just for the experience." Do the best you can!
- Remember that it takes courage to lead.
- Remember; Leaders enforce values, managers enforce rules. It's important to be a manager but in the fire service the scales are tipped just a little bit more to the leadership side.
- If you get promoted always try to remember (and these are just a few):
 - Take care of your people.
 - Make good decisions on good information, not emotions.
 - Remember, they're called "on accidents," not "on purposes." We all make mistakes.
 - Spend time doing good evaluations.
 - Don't stop studying and learning about the job.

- Don't give all of the orders you've been saving for years at the first fire you go to.
- And probably the biggest, **DON'T FORGET WHERE YOU CAME FROM!**