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ABSTRACT

The history of the fire service is based on the tradition of passing down the knowledge and skills of one generation to the next. Although this typically occurs at the company officer and/or firefighter level, it rarely occurs at the chief officer level. As a result, decades of experience from those retiring from the profession are typically lost, forcing new leaders to relearn important lessons from the past. This type of organizational inefficiency can be overcome through a rigorous succession planning program that develops appropriate change management behaviors and leadership traits within fire department personnel. This paper is important because it will identify how organizational knowledge is obtained, as well as the specific change management elements that enable knowledge transfer to occur. It will also examine specific succession planning programs within the industry that utilize the administrative elements of budgeting, forecasting, strategic planning, and political interaction to produce an efficient and effective succession planning program.
Introduction

In private business or any other profession, it is not about having people in certain positions but rather having the right people, in the right place, at the right time. Although there are many elements that determine organizational success, one of the most important elements is having a well-defined succession program in place that properly identifies and develops new leaders to replace those that are leaving and/or retiring. Although this type of organizational planning is common within the business community, it is rarely done or accomplished within the fire service because of what veteran Sacramento CA Metro Fire Department Chief Anthony Kastros calls the profession’s “leadership pandemic” (Kastros, 2017). This pandemic, which has arguably been exacerbated by today’s ever expanding role and mission of the fire service, is the result of management’s inability to properly communicate their message, manage their emotions, and/or foster the type of relationships that are critical to modern managerial success (Goleman, 1995). These deficiencies, which are often the result of the different cultural, socio-economic, technological, lifestyle-choice, experiential, and political diversity challenges that are present within most communities, has forced chief fire officers to re-examine their approach towards dealing with the different knowledge and cultural norms that are present within the industry.

Organizational Knowledge

According to Mozuriuniene et al, organizational knowledge is the product of several different processes: (1) socialization - the process of creating knowledge through shared activities and communication with others within the organization; (2) externalization – the process of creating knowledge through the construction and identification of collective knowledge from outside the organization; (3) internalization – the process of creating knowledge through the collective knowledge, culture, and training within the organization; and (4)
individual learning – the process of creating knowledge through personalization and meta-tagging (Mozuriuniene et al, 2013 and Hartley & West, 2007). Throughout a majority of organizations, such knowledge is typically produced through traditional Mode 1 knowledge systems that utilize insight from the academic community, as well as Mode 2 systems that utilize the work of interdisciplinary groups to provide subject matter expert relevance (Huff, 1999). Although such knowledge is normally disseminated through very structured and regulated processes that coincide with organizational needs, most organizations (especially the fire services) are slow to change due to their inability to adapt to the many changing contexts, opportunities, and challenges that are present within today’s dynamic and ever-changing world (Lawler & Worley, 2006 cited in Mohrman & Lawler, 2012). As a result, changing organizational knowledge, traditions, and cultural norms can be very difficult to achieve (Caldwell, 2003).

Organizational Change

According to Warrilow (2012), all organizational change requires the five C’s: (1) clarity – ensuring employees’ understand the specifics of the change, its benefits, and its continued impacts; (2) communication – conducting active, two-way communication so that everyone’s questions regarding how the change will affect them is addressed; (3) consistency – ensuring that there is a consistent approach and understanding of how the change event will be managed and acted upon; (4) commitment – inspiring the workforce by demonstrating total ownership of the program and being active and visible; and (5) capability – maintaining constant attention to the various tasks, activities, projects, and initiatives associated with the change event. In addition to knowing these elements, managers should also know and deal with the various barriers that inhibit learning and organizational change from occurring. Specifically, they should identify the
presence of: (1) poor or absent dialogue/communication; (2) poor or absent feedback; (3) neglecting feedback that is received; (4) rigidity of core beliefs, values, and assumptions; (5) the lack of autonomy of change agents; (6) denial and the disregard of outside opinions due to perceived internal expertise; (7) assuming that crises/problems are unique to the organization (i.e., cognitive narrowing & fixation); (8) minimizing organizational threats or denying the potential that a worst case scenario can or will occur; (9) disregarding corporate responsibility and shifting blame to others (i.e., scapegoating); (10) an unwillingness to challenge organizational learning methods; and (11) not using trials or experiments to test ideas (Smith & Elliott, 2007).

Succession Planning

In order to overcome these difficulties and enhance the five C’s, organizations within the business community began implementing succession planning as a way of developing and training their personnel to align with the strategic needs of their organization. Started in the early 1920s, initial strategic and succession planning methodologies tried to unite and coordinate company resources, senior management, market information, and social obligations so that senior management could determine the appropriate organizational structure and strategies needed for obtaining improved economic performance (Blackerby, 2003). After World War II, this focus shifted away from organizational policy and structure towards better managing risk, industry growth, and market share (Evans, 2017). These same issues, which developed within the public sector in the mid-to-late 1980’s as resources became more scarce or limited (Young, nd), caused public and private sector managers to formally utilize succession planning ideas and processes to protect their business concerns (Barton, 2017).
According to Human Resources expert Shellie Haroski (2012) succession planning is extremely important because it: (1) provides ongoing job analysis and opportunity for executive staff to adjust their roles based on changing business conditions and strategic initiatives; (2) strengthens relationships and information flow between senior management and the rest of the organization; and (3) helps prepare for unexpected vacancies. Succession planning is also important because it increases the chances of the organization having capable employees take over responsibility of these same roles whenever personnel leave the organization (Business Dictionary, 2017). Regarding the fire service, this process helps departments prepare their future officers to assume positions that are needed to be filled, either sooner than later due to uncontrollable circumstances. Per IFSTA Chief Officer (Second Edition), succession planning is "a proactive approach that ensures that personnel hired, trained and promoted today will have the skills to meet the challenges of tomorrow. It not only involves matching the job requirements with the skills of the applicants for the position, but also:

- Enables internal promotions to occur
- Increases morale
- Ensures the department can fill every position within in their organization
- Reduces the amount of promotions of unprepared or unqualified individuals
- Decreases the chances of having more positions than people on an eligibility list

According to Wichita, Kansas Fire Chief S. Newby (2010), specific elements that aid in successfully implementing succession planning within the fire service include having a mentoring and coaching program which enables personnel to shadow others, as well as having
professional development plans that allow them to perform/complete special assignments that are relevant to their promotable position.

**Fire Service Succession Planning**

Although many departments around the country offer initial training and continuing education to line personnel, few have viable succession programs in place for their top administrative personnel. The department that I work for (Boca Raton Fire Rescue or BRFR), for example, is a fire rescue department that has 247 employees, eight fire stations and four divisions (Operations, Administration, Logistics & Support and Fire & Life Safety). Within the Operations division, BRFR employs four Battalion Chiefs, four EMS Captains, thirty-two Captains, twenty-four Lieutenants, thirty-six Firefighter/Drivers, and one hundred and four Firefighters. The department has formal training programs for all of the aforementioned shift schedule ranks, as well as a “step-up” packet that must be completed before they can assume the duties and responsibilities of the rank they are upgrading to. This packet requires the signatures of their Company Officer, Battalion Chief, and Training Division before they can step up in rank and/or become eligible to take the promotional test for that position (Boca Raton Fire Rescue Services, 2017). Unfortunately, when Battalion Chiefs or EMS Captains decide to promote up to the position of Assistant Chief, they have no formal Chief Officer Development Program in place to help prepare them for the duties and responsibilities of this position. As a result, future chief officers within the department have no mechanism in place to formally capture/learn from those that they are potentially replacing. Comparing BRFR to other departments that are considered to be “trend setters” within the fire service, shows that BRFR falls short in their chief officer development and succession planning process.
One such trend setter in this area is the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD). Although LAFD does not have a formal chief officer training program in terms of providing specific training to become a chief officer, they do have a continuing education program that personnel utilize once they achieve a chief officer rank. This in-service program, called the Chief Officer Continuing Education Program (COCEP), provides a holistic educational approach that focuses on various departmental safety, effectiveness, and efficiency issues (McKnight, 2017). Specific elements of this program include: (1) regionalized command system training; (2) large-scale, all-risk emergency response training; (3) specialized training events for the departments and its urban area partners; and (4) tactical interoperability communications plan training (TICP). This latter element is extremely important since it has enabled LAFD to become one of the first fire departments in the nation to complete the National Incident Management System (NIMS) requirement of developing common and shared communications lines between the department and other local/regional agencies. This program also enables other, more experienced chief officers throughout the region to share their experiences and knowledge with those who have been newly promoted (McKnight, 2017).

Another department that has developed a robust succession planning program in the Fire Department of New York City (FDNY). Starting with their First Line Supervisors Preparation Program and continuing with their Chief Officer Development Program, FDNY provides specific succession planning training to all of its officer corps personnel. In the former, candidates are sent a booklet containing information on subjects with which they should be familiar six months prior to their anticipated promotion. This booklet, which contains basic administrative material and information on topics that a company officer will typically encounter on a daily basis, is used in conjunction with on-duty officers who share their knowledge and
experience with the lieutenant candidates (Turner, 2014). As personnel promote up through the ranks, they receive additional training in leadership theory, injury and accident prevention, problem assessment, hazardous materials and terrorism recognition/tactics, arson awareness, legal issues, employee counseling, and critical incident stress management recognition (Parr, 2017). The department’s Chief Officer Development Program designates specific deputy chiefs as division commanders who will accept promotion to staff, as well providing a written document that describes the functions and duties of each staff position. It also includes a mentorship program that rotates future staff chiefs through different bureaus and leadership positions across the organization so that they gain the necessary experience to promote up through increasing levels of responsibility (Bierster, 2011).

**Conclusion**

Although most fire departments do not currently utilize succession planning like they should, the aforementioned examples of FDNY and LAFD should prove that the transfer of organizational knowledge not only decreases operational inefficiencies, but also enables real organizational change to occur by virtue of how it positively affects the five C’s of organizational success. In keeping this in mind, I would recommend the following: (1) completion of the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program offered by the National Fire Academy (NFA); (2) policy and procedures that outline the career path and training requirements for all positions within the departments; (3) a mentorship program that allows each prospective individual to become a trainee for a few shifts/months with the rank they are aspiring to achieve; and (4) require formal business/public administration from accredited university so that personnel contain a broad base knowledge of business practices and personnel management.
References:


