

5 Key Points You Need to Consider if You Want to Promote to Captain or Lieutenant

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The Fire Captain/Lieutenant promotional exam, or otherwise known as the Promotional Assessment Center, can certainly be one of the most difficult challenges of your career. Outlined below, I've given you 5 key points to consider that most candidates experience when they do poorly on their promotional exam.

While preparation for the exam itself is critical for success, it's even more important to prepare for the position. If you are prepared to assume the role of company officer, you will typically be successful and even excel in all parts of the examination process.

There are very few promotional exams that try to trick the candidate. While some exams are written and administered better than others, it's not the intent of the exam process to trick any of the candidates. With that being said, the exam is challenging and is written in a way that only rewards those who study and are prepared for the job, and fails those who are not fully prepared. Always know that the raters and evaluators want you to succeed. Nothing overjoys a rater more than when a candidate comes in who is fully prepared to assume the role of Company Officer on day one.

Additionally, many times candidates finish within hundredths of a point of one another on the final list, so remember that every point counts. You typically start with 100 points and then points are deducted for each mistake you make. The key is to not make any of the fatal mistakes listed below.

The typical promotional exam process is designed to evaluate a candidate's ability to perform the job of a company officer, so if you prepare for all aspects of the job, the better the chances you have at finishing at or near the top of the list.

The Top 5 Key Points to Consider to Help You Prevent a Failing Score

1. Poor listening and communication skills

- a. Listen to the entire question or scenario being asked by the interview panel member, or tactical panel member, or panel member in the subordinate counseling scenario.
 - i. The question/scenario may have several parts you may need to answer.
 - ii. Giving an incomplete answer may not necessarily result in a failing score, it will certainly lower your score.

- iii. Be sure to read the entire scenario carefully in the tactical portion. Although you may only have a few minutes to read the scenario, mark the key points with red and blue pens for quick reference. Mark the time of day, weather conditions, wind direction with a blue pen, and mark the hazards, rescue issues, and number of victims with a red pen. You'll be glad you did.
- b. Many Captain and Lieutenant Assessment Centers include a written essay or memorandum (some form of written memo) that will be graded and/or discussed in your interview.
 - i. Your written paper will be scored on content, grammar, sentence structure and usage.
 - ii. The written exercise could count for as much as 25% to 40% of your overall score.
 - iii. A grade of 75% on your written exercise will significantly lower your overall score, so don't take this part of the exam lightly.
 - iv. It's important to practice writing short essays using good grammar and sentence structure.
 - v. If you do not pass the written exercise, you usually do not move forward in the rest of the process.

2. Not knowing your department's policies, procedures, SOGs, rules and regulations

- a. You must know your department's policies to be successful.
- b. You must know your city's administrative regulations (city/county policies).
- c. Not knowing your department's policies and procedures regarding sexual harassment and hostile work environment will result in a failing score.
 - i. These are very black and white rules and actions that are required for reporting incidents of sexual harassment and hostile work environment.
 - ii. Not knowing the procedures and fully understanding your role as a company officer, in relation to complaints about sexual harassment or witnessing sexual harassment, or hostile work environment, is an automatic failure.
- d. Not knowing your department's policy on discipline and your role as a company officer will be an automatic fail point.

3. Your inability to effectively manage the initial alarm assignments and transfer of command

- a. You must know and understand company officer tactics for all types of incidents including single family, multi-family, commercial, and high-rise structure fires.
- b. You must know how to form a basic strategy or plan for managing an incident, and how you will place the first and second alarm assignments to achieve your objectives.
- c. Always give a size-up and assume command.
 - i. A strong size up will paint a clear picture for incoming units and will be clear who is the IC and the command post location.
 - ii. If it's known that you are first in to the incident, as the company officer, you must assume command.
 1. It's an automatic failure if you don't assume command, or if you pass off command, as the first in officer.
 2. When you're first on scene, the panel members will evaluate your ability to assume command, manage the initial assignment, and properly transfer command when a higher ranking officer arrives on scene.
- d. Knowledge of and ability to properly use the Incident Command System.
 - i. You must have a good working knowledge of initial incident management (making the correct assignments and assigning the proper divisions and groups within the ICS structure).
 - ii. More than 5-7 for span of control, poor accountability, poor or unclear communications, are all fail points.
- e. Always ID hazards over the radio.
 - i. Failure to ID wires down, flammable liquids, partial collapse, or other on scene hazards, especially pointed out in the scenario sheet, are automatic failures.
- f. Forgetting to establish a supply line on any working structure fire is an automatic failure.
 - i. Depending on the scenario, failing to obtain a second supply line may lower your score for that incident.
- g. Know the [2 in/2 out] policy for your department.
 - i. Know when you are NOT required to adhere to 2 in/2 out.

- ii. Know which engine, on the initial assignment, assumes the role of RIC/RIT for your department.
- h. Your inability to think quickly on your feet when faced with changing conditions (firefighter down, firefighter lost, firefighter trapped, exposures becoming involved, rescue problem, or unexpected change in conditions, etc.) will result in a failing score.

4. Your inability to defend your actions and your decisions

- a. There is usually more than one way to accomplish objectives during your tactical exercise.
 - i. You must be flexible and have the ability to go to plan B or C, if plan A doesn't work. It's an automatic failure if you can't change direction or be flexible when the incident requires it.
- b. You will be asked why you made certain decisions or took certain actions during the incident. If you cannot defend or justify your decisions and actions, either by citing policy or using logic, common sense and experience, you will receive a failing score.

5. Not being prepared for the position

- a. Your ability to step into the job on day one will be evaluated by all raters during every part of the assessment center exam.
- b. You are also being evaluated for your command presence, which includes how confident you are in your ability to perform the job, so don't let your nerves get the best of you.
- c. They understand you are a little nervous going in, but if you can't control your nerves during the exam, the raters won't have confidence that you can control your nerves during real emergencies, or when faced with real life threatening situations on the fireground or other incidents.
- d. The raters need to feel confident that you can step into the job today, or it will significantly lower score, and may be an automatic failure.
 - i. The raters assume somebody will be promoted, as soon as the list is certified, which is why it's so critical to be fully prepared for the job.

Conclusion

While this list covers the most common fail points you should consider as you study for your exam, it doesn't cover every possible fail point. Again, preparation and practice are the keys to success.

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Chances are you are not going to be perfect during every part of the exam, but that's okay. None of the raters or interview panel members expect you to be perfect. What they do want is to see is that you're prepared to assume the role of company officer today, and that you can carry out those duties in a safe, effective and professional manner.

The want to see that you can make logical decisions, while using good judgment, which will affect the outcome of an incident in a positive way. They want to see that you know and understand the policies and procedures of your department, and know what actions to take when mistakes, injuries or accidents occur. They also want to know that you know how to deal with performance and behavioral issues from subordinates.

It's all about making good decisions and knowing when to take action when action is warranted.

If you are a candidate that puts in the time, usually 6 to 8 months, studying the right materials and information, you will have a better chance at finishing with a high overall score and gain the promotion you've been working tirelessly to achieve.

So, if you're serious about promoting to Lieutenant or Captain, dedicate the time necessary to prepare, not just for the exam, but for the job!

If you have any questions, or are interested in my group Company Officer Training Workshop, or one-on-one coaching to help you prepare, please contact me at:

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Good luck to you and I hope to hear that you finished at or near the top of the list!

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Battalion Chief Dean Guccione

Chief Dean Guccione has helped dozens and dozens of career firefighters promote to the rank of Fire Captain/Lieutenant and Battalion Chief. As the Personnel Division Chief for the Beverly Hills Fire Dept., Dean was responsible for writing and administering the Captain's and Battalion Chief's exams.

Chief Guccione has also sat on interview and tactical promotional panels for cities all over California including LA City, Torrance, Santa Monica, Newport Beach, Fullerton, and Huntington Beach Fire Departments, just to name a few. He has also worked with Chief Officers all over the state of California in developing Captain and Battalion Chief promotional exams with Chiefs from San Jose, Long Beach, Oakland, Fullerton, LA County, LA City, Anaheim, Torrance, Manhattan Beach, Culver City and Santa Monica Fire Departments, just to name a few. Chief Guccione has also collaborated with Chiefs from Texas, Arizona, Colorado and Florida on best practices for writing and administering promotional assessment center exams.

His unique coaching style and perspective will give you the confidence you need to finish at or near the top of the list, and step into the position of company officer on day one.



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