

The Need for a Personnel Career Development Plan at the
Bonita Springs Fire Control & Rescue District

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to propose the idea of implementing a “Personnel Career Development Plan” (PCDP) for the employees of Bonita Springs Fire Control and Rescue District (BSFCRD). The proposal will include some pertinent research in regards to professional development plans, why BSFCRD needs to implement this type of plan, and a model for the District to follow.

As the fire department moves forward and attempts to get away from its image of “renegade cowboys” running into fires, it becomes ever apparent that we need to implement a plan in order to strive for the professional status we so deserve. Many would agree that to be viewed as a professional, one would need a formal education with many hours of continuing education. In the fire service, this has not been the case until late. As the next generation moves into essential administrative positions, more and more are seeing the need to have that formal education to be able to climb that ladder. If one were to browse any of the current vacant chief’s positions around the country, it becomes evident that one must possess a bachelor’s degree at minimum to be considered for that position. More so, many departments both large and small are requiring a Masters Degree and beyond for their top level officers.

History

Located in Southwest Florida, Bonita Springs makes up the southernmost edges of Lee County along the pristine beaches of the Gulf of Mexico. Bonita Springs has a variety of natural resources, parks, residential and commercial developments. With a year long residency of 45,000 citizens, and an estimated seasonal population of 63,000, Bonita Springs has grown to a desirable place to live or visit. Bonita Springs grew slowly from it’s inception with the majority of revenue coming from citrus, fishing and seasonal tourism. Today, Bonita Springs is now considered one of the fastest growing cities in Southwest Florida.

The Bonita Springs Fire Control & Rescue District was formed in 1950 as a volunteer fire department. In 1965 the department became an independent taxing district with the majority of funding coming from property tax dollars in the community. In 1985, BSFCRD became a full

paid career department with 12 original members. Today, the district has grown to over 129 personnel responding to 5,280 emergency calls in 2006.

BSFCRD currently provides fire suppression, advanced life support, basic life support, and hazardous materials mitigation along with a variety of other emergency situations. Each member of the suppression division as well as administration is trained to the level of Paramedic or Emergency Medical Technician. With 78 percent of the call volume being medical emergencies, the department has focused heavily on training for various types of emergencies including cardiac, respiratory, trauma and pediatrics.

As a professional paid career fire department, BSFCRD has long had an outstanding reputation for providing the best possible service to the members of the community. All personnel are trained to a minimum of Awareness Level in disciplines such as Hazardous Materials, Confined Space and Trench Rescue. Not just limited to these disciplines many individuals have a variety of other certifications that are specialized in nature. As for formal education, approximately 20% of personnel possess an Associates Degree and approximately 15% possess a Bachelors Degree. While BSFCRD has long encouraged education and training, it has lacked in providing guidance for employees in regards to following a set of standards as they continue to educate and train themselves throughout their career. What is being proposed is a Personnel Career Development Plan (PCDP). This plan will highlight and include a clear path for employees to follow and allow for promotional opportunities in the future.

Why Professional Development?

The Fire Service has been viewed as a technical career since it's inception in the 1736 when Ben Franklin started the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia, PA (Delmar, 2008). As we have evolved into the 21st century, the Fire Service still lacks the "professional status" that many

other professions such as lawyers and nurses maintain. It has been argued that to be viewed as a professional, one must possess a formal education, approval of an accrediting board and continuing education requirements (Onieal, 2005). Although more and more fire service personnel are seeking to further educate themselves, this professional development has often lacked coordination usually resulting in duplication of efforts.

The need for professional development not only in the fire service but other professions has been gaining momentum as we move towards industries that provide to people. For example, professionals within the construction industry who wish to continue lifelong learning are finding it difficult to be able to develop professionally and continue to work. It has been proposed that the construction industry develop standards that would allow such development by offering blended type learning formats, thus allowing for integrated opportunities (Ahmed and Wall, 2008). Organizations are slowly realizing their best attributes are those they employ; therefore it is of utmost importance to be able to sustain and lead them on a path which better educates them but also meets the needs of the organization. This path should entail a definite amount of diversity to include technical, continuing education and formal education all which not only give insight as to how to perform the job, but also give a varied collection of management and leadership techniques which can be cultured in the formal education setting. The 1966 Wingspread Conference was the initial steps to introducing higher education and the continual professionalization of the fire service. Fire service leaders introduced a three tiered model and seven content areas to be defined as significant (Burton, 1993). In 2008 The National Professional Development Model Exhibit 1.1 illustrates what the plan is now and how a career firefighter can organize their career path to follow an organized planned course of action. This is not a promotion model addressing credentials; rather, it is an experience-based model that

encourages an efficient path for fire service professional development supported by collaboration between fire-related training, higher education, and certification providers. The model prescribes what these providers' respective roles should be and how they should coordinate their programs (United States Fire Administration).



Exhibit 1.1

Developed by the U.S. Fire Administration/National Fire Academy's Fire & Emergency Services Higher Education Network

The Need for Professional Development at BSFCRD

As was mentioned earlier in this writing, BSFCRD has had a long history of encouraging education and training. What has lacked is an efficient manner in which personnel can plan and develop their careers in order to strengthen their own personal knowledge all the while following the vision of the District. This plan must include a concise path for personnel to follow in order to promote development and discourage replication. It must be mentioned that not all personnel are interested in all types of education or training. Some individuals prefer to stay with the

technical training associated with the fire service, while others lean towards the formal education. There has been a distinction between training and professional development education. Training develops the skills and techniques in order to prepare people for similar tasks needed on the fire ground and various other emergency situations, formal education leads to the information and knowledge that develops potential leaders (Hensler, 1997). Although there is no fault in either path, a well rounded and truly effective professional firefighter will take on the burden of both technical and formal education.

As with any organization, there will also be a resistance to a change in methods. The undertaking of preparing organizations and their employees for change has proved to be one of the most important tasks encompassed in propelling organizations to a successful change (as cited in Harrel, 2007). In order for an effective professional development plan to work there must be several factors which not only personnel adhere to but the leadership as well. In organizations, five factors contribute to successful change efforts; leadership, effective communication, a tight alignment of people and organizational goals, adequate funding for training and education, and a clear definitions of the reason for change (Kotter, 1999).

The writer conducted a personal interview with Fire Chief Phil Kinsey (P.H. Kinsey, personal communication, April 1, 2008) in order to get his response on the need for change and developing a professional development plan. It was noted that Chief Kinsey was in agreement that a planned course of action was essential for the new generation of firefighters to follow in order for them to have an organized career development curriculum. Furthermore, it was his belief that in order for the department to gain the professional status in the eyes of those within the community, education was of utmost importance among all personnel.

The key to developing an effective Personnel Career Development Plan (PCDP) that meets the needs of the employees as well as in the best interest of BSFCRD is to consider quantitative data, organizational culture, and program cost and in particular the human and behavioral aspects of people before implementing any type of program (Kirin, 1998). First of all, the annual budget must be considered and be able to support the needed education and personnel leave time to be able to properly sustain the program. Next is the qualitative data needed to maintain the integrity of what is trying to be accomplished in regards to the mission of the District? Last is the human factor, are the employees of BSFCRD ready to implement and embrace the PCDP or will they resist and continue on the current path with little direction. The answer to all of these questions is yes; BSFCRD is ready on every aspect and should consider implementing this program.

Components of the PCDP

The Personnel Career Development Plan will include a multitude of components to aid the employee on their career path. Although this program is designed to aid an entire career from beginning to end, it will be reviewed annually to ensure consistencies and accuracies. In order for the professional development to be self fulfilling it must cyclical in nature and constantly under review thus enhancing the effectiveness of your program (“Professional Development- How to do it”1.2, 2004). When developing the PCPD the employee and supervisor must consider five factors when designing the personal plan. Factors to consider include:

1. Identify your goals – What do I aim to achieve from professional development?
2. Determine the skills you need-What skills do I need now and in the future?

3. Plan to achieve- How can I maintain or acquire skills to the required level?
4. Record your learning – What am I learning and what evidence do I need to keep?
5. Review – Am I making real progress towards achieving my personal as well as departmental goals?

As the individual and supervisor devise the plan, they must be cognizant of the end result of the of the employees aspirations for the future. If an individual is interested in pursuing a career path in Fire Prevention, their plan would differ than one interested in pursuing advancement within Emergency Medical Services. Although situations can change over time and individuals change their desired outcomes, the plan would be designed to accommodate changes, enabling the individual to pursue an alternate career path. The plan must also include a type of contractual agreement between the employee and the District. Whereas an individual may state they intend to pursue certain options, often times they do not follow up on those actions, thus defeating the overall purpose of the plan.

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) has developed a set of standards for one to follow through their Professional Development Committee. The IAFC (2004) belief is that “Professional development is the planned, progressive life-long process of education, training and self development”. The plan should contain four distinct elements including; education, training, experience, and self development. The first two elements are critical due to the fact that they form the basis of the nationally recognized model for fire service development, (see exhibit 1).

Component one of the PCDP will include an annual evaluation on performance of the employee for the previous year (Appendix C). There will be a total of ten fields of evaluation and will include: job knowledge, initiative, dependability, teamwork, professionalism, physical training, personal appearance, communications, safety and quality of work. As the evaluator grades the individual on a scale of 1-5, 5 being excellent and 1 being poor, an overall score will be given to the individual for the that period. Although no immediate ramifications have been discussed as far as lower scores, it will have to be used as a motivational factor for the employee to improve upon. Any type of consequence towards the employee for an undesirable score would have to be discussed with Bonita Springs Professional Firefighters Local 3444 and BSFCRD Management.

The next component of the PCDP will consist of the Development Action Plan (DAP) and desired outcomes both the employee and supervisor would like to see accomplished in forthcoming review periods (Appendix B). In this component the employee will determine what path they will take to continue the professional development and enhancement of their career. The supervisors will then review and advise the employee as to what training and coursework would be most appropriate for that given period. Although this review is only a recommendation, the supervisor is responsible to determine there has been no duplication of coursework and training in previous years. The supervisor must also be conscious that the employee is meeting his or her own personal needs but also is working within the vision of the District and that the District is able to accommodate the employee's development plan. The DAR will include an agreement between the employee and the District as to the desire of the employees will to make a concerted effort to complete the goals addressed.

Included in the second component will be a Development Activity Record (DAR). The DAR will be a recorded document of training and education and give a summary or course description of what was learned (Appendix A). It will also include the possible applications of what was learned in regards to the employee's job description. This document is of utmost importance as it gives a description of the course and allows the supervisor to eliminate further replication in the future. The DAR will also identify certifications obtained such as Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS) or Vehicle Extrication Technician. By identifying these certification, it allows both the supervisor and employee easy access to expiration dates and renewals of such certifications.

The Final component of the PCDP will be the Career Development Progress (CDP) Worksheet(Appendix D). This will be the worksheet in which the employee defines short term and long term goals. Just as well, the supervisor will expound of areas of concern and possible improvements as well as recommendations for the employee to follow.

Measuring

As with any program, the need to measure progress is of paramount importance. Guskey (2000) believes most professional development plans lack in evaluation, thus reducing the distinction between those programs that were successful and those that were not. In order for the individual to be successful in regards to his or her own PCDP, a process of evaluations also needs to be considered. In this context, progress can be measured in certifications, designations, academic degrees, licenses and continuing education credits (CEUs). Although the credential and document is important, it must be noted that the knowledge and experienced gained is of greater importance and is a testimony to the education completed.

From the inception of the Wingspread Conference to the available programs today, professional fire service's personnel have a multitude of resources to enhance their career and education. The IAFC as well as the U.S. Fire Administration has developed a set of nationally recognized standards for professional development for the fire service. Through a myriad of programs and educational opportunities, both entities have agreed that higher education is the key to promotional opportunities (IAFC ODH, 2004). As one begins to promote within their organization it is essential to have the knowledge and training offered by such courses as the Officer Leadership Series, Chief Fire Officer Designation (CFOD) course, Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) as well as the various Degrees at a Distance Program (DDP) offered by various colleges throughout the United States.

Recommendations

It is the belief of the author that in order for BSFCRD to begin its transformational change from the "old" administration to the "new", they must make essential changes to the current method it uses for promoting professional development

1. The current system of employee evaluation must be taken as a serious endeavor with meaningful input from the supervisor as well as the employee and should be included as part of the PCDP..
2. New hires should be required to design an interim professional development plan.
3. Current veterans of the District should be encouraged to incorporate a systematic and deliberate professional development cognizant of their current position within the department

4. Each suppression personnel will be required to review their PCDP on a yearly basis with input from supervisors.
5. Promotional opportunities will be based on the PCDP, training, years of service and knowledge of departmental policies.

Conclusion

As the fire service moves into a new era of leaders, it becomes ever so apparent that the need to have a well educated, professionally motivated work force is an essential requirement for all fire departments. We are no longer in the business just to fight fires, as any firefighter will tell you their scope of responsibility goes far beyond that. We must be able to mitigate any emergency in the safest, most efficient manner possible all the while maintaining a professional demeanor. We must also continually educate and promote fire safety to those in the community to help reduce their risk and essential make the community more safe. In order for today's new fire department to gain the recognition as professionals we so deserve, we must educate and expand our knowledge far beyond what was learned as a rookie in fire school.

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Appendix A

DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY RECORD		
Subject:		
Date	Type of Activity:	Title and Provider:
Summary of what was covered and/or what was learned:		
Possible application(s) of what was learned:		
Possible area(s) of impact on career opportunities if any:		
Other possible Development Activity(s) suggested by this activity:		
Supervisor Signature: Date:	Supervisors Comments:	

DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLAN	
Name:	Date:
<p style="text-align: center;">Achievements since last Development Action Plan (including report on actions agreed then)</p> <p><i>Section 1</i></p> 	
<p>Employee: Supervisor:</p> <p>Date: Date:</p> 	
<p><i>Section 2</i> Development Actions agreed for next DAP period (Capture any individual career plans and development activities agreed with supervisor or human resources department.) Specify action, competence areas targeted and timescales.</p> 	
<p><i>Plan Agreed</i></p> <p>Candidate: Supervisor:</p> 	

Additional Comments:

Appendix C

Employee Performance Evaluation

Name First Last

Date / MM / DD YYYY

Position

Supervisors Name(s)

Overall Score

Rating Block

1. Job Knowledge - Blending of job related education, skills and experience.

2. Initiative - Voluntarily starts projects and attempts non routine jobs and tasks.

3. Dependability - Accuracy, neatness and thoroughness of work during daily operation.

4. Teamwork - The ability to work well with co-workers and supervisors.

5. Physical Training - The ability to do the required job without undue fatigue or strain.

6. Professionalism - Integrity, commitment, dedication and dependability.

7. Personal Appearance - Meets dress code and grooming standards

8. Communications - Produces neat and grammatically correct documents as well as spoken word.

9. Safety - Continually acts in a safe manner to eliminate harm to self, co-workers and public.

10. Quality of Work - Produces the required amount of work neatly and accurately in a timely manner.

Comments

- Evaluators Signature

- Employee Signature

Career Development Progress Worksheet		
Name:		
Date:	Supervisor:	Title:
What are the employee's short term goals for the upcoming year?		
What are the members' long term career goals?		
What skills can the member improve upon to obtain that goal?		
Recommendations from the supervisor to help employee obtain their goal.		
Employees Signature: Date:	Supervisor's Signature: Comments:	

