CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Research Presented in Partial Fulfillment

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Executive Fire Officer Program

by

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Abstract

Despite historical traditions, the fire service must adapt to modern challenges, including technological advancements, evolving workforce dynamics, and changing community needs. This research aims to evaluate the professional development needs of Captains and Battalion Chiefs within the Fort Smith Fire Department (FSFD) through generic qualitative inquiry. The study explores how these leaders perceive professional development's importance, the type of professional development they consider essential, and the potential impact on departmental success. The study reveals a consensus among participants regarding the critical role of professional development in adapting to evolving firefighting demands. This qualitative research delves into the importance of ongoing professional development for Captains and Battalion Chiefs within the FSFD. Recommendations advocate for the implementation of structured professional development programs, increased resources, and leadership involvement in the decision making processes. Finally, this study emphasizes the strategic importance of professional development in enhancing organizational effectiveness and better serving communities, highlighting the need for proactive measures to address ongoing challenges and foster continuous growth within the organization.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The fire service has a history steeped in tradition. While many wonderful things can come from history and tradition, there can also be a hesitant mindset toward change. The proud 200-year-old traditions of the fire service are the same traditions that often hinder us from adopting the new mission of today's modern fire department (Metro, 2003).

Traditionally, professional development within the fire service is considered to meet the minimum requirements to be eligible for promotion to the next level. Little to no emphasis is given to minimum requirements for continuing education, especially at the company and battalion chief officer level. The Fort Smith Fire Department is Arkansas's second-largest fire department, with 11 stations, 150 members, and an average of 15,000 calls annually. This research aims to show the value and importance that should be put into continuing education in professional development for members in leadership roles.

In the Fort Smith Fire Department (FSFD), individuals are promoted to the organization's company officer and/or chief officer level and can choose never to take another professional development class during their career. This trend is not only a concern for the individual involved but also poses a challenge in a constantly evolving field, especially while trying to recruit, hire, and lead younger generations of firefighters. This problem must be fixed in the fire service nationwide, including in the FSFD.

BACKGROUND

The rank structure in the Fort Smith Fire Department is as follows (in ascending order): Probationary Firefighter, Firefighter, Driver, Captain, Battalion Chief, Division Chief, Assistant Chief, and Fire Chief. The FSFD has a total of 42 Captains and 10 Battalion Chiefs. Four of the Battalion Chiefs are in administrative roles in the training and fire marshal offices, with six

working as shift commanders. For the purpose of this research, the officer level is defined as the Captain and Battalion Chief levels, and the focus will be on shift commanders at the Battalion Chief level.

Historically, the Fort Smith Fire Department has not placed an emphasis on higher education, and it has been more of a vocational route through fire officer classes for promotion. The requirements to be promoted to Captain and Battalion Chief are a combination of pre-requisite classes and testing. A driver wishing to test for Captain must take Instructor I, Officer I, and Officer II IFSAC classes and complete ICS 300/400. The International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) is a not-for-profit, peer-driven, self-governing system of fire service and certifying entities and higher education fire-related degree programs.

Once these prerequisites are met, the candidate can sign up to take a written test, and if they pass the written test, they will participate in an interview-style evaluation in which they must answer questions that are scored for the answers. Once finished, their names are compiled on a list factoring in seniority points, and as people retire, promotions are made off the list. The list is valid for one year.

A Captain wishing to test for Battalion Chief can become eligible through three different pathways. They can take a four-week Chief Fire Officer class through the Arkansas Fire Academy or be eligible with a bachelor's degree in fire science. Finally, they can become eligible by taking Officer III and IV IFSAC classes. Once the prerequisites are met, the candidate goes through the same process as when they tested for Captain with a written test and interview style evaluation. A list of eligible candidates is then compiled, and the list is eligible for a year.

This research aims to demonstrate the necessity and significance of continuing education for members in leadership roles within the FSFD, specifically in professional development.

Anticipating differing opinions within the FSFD, this study seeks to explore the potential benefits and challenges associated with implementing professional development CEUs.

Vitt (2023) states "Chiefs and leaders have learned they have to adapt to the new culture of workers that they're hiring" (p. 5). This statement shows that leaders throughout the fire service are dealing with different generational norms in their new-hire firefighter candidates and that the old ways are no longer working as they once did. The fire service must evolve and embrace change with the rest of the world to stay relevant and help improve recruiting and retention. The implementation of changes starts from the top of the organization down.

"It can be concluded that promotion is the progress of a productive employee to another job that demands greater responsibility, better salary and status, prestige, opportunities, and challenges, as well as higher authority" (Yansen, 2021). The sense of accomplishment for firefighters after studying, testing, and promoting is significant, with the excitement of moving up the ranks, taking on more responsibility, and the pay raise that comes with the promotion.

Once the officer has become proficient in the new job, the initial nervousness of being a new officer calms down, and with time and experience, the new officer becomes comfortable in the new role. It is a natural human trait to want, seek out, and find comfort for oneself, not just at home but at work, which is why people feel so accomplished, relieved, and happy when they learn and become proficient at a new job that at one time was confusing, hard, and incredibly stressful. Once the relief is felt a comfort set in that can lead to the forming of habits both good and bad. "Unfortunately, habits also result in people being less aware of what is going on around them" (Lipinski, 2021).

"Comfort is paramount for us as humans, and it is the second stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, proving that it is a basic human need" (Maslow, 2012). This comfort comes from

knowing the job well and feeling a sense of job security. Unfortunately, another human trait is that people prefer to continue to do what is familiar, known, and easy, which can then override an officer's dedication to ongoing professional development.

The issue with a lack of professional development requirements, outside of minimum standards for promotion to the officer position, can be a complacent mindset. "A complacent mindset can cause laziness, incompetence, and resistance to change. Targeting the root cause of complacency means periodically changing up the brain activity and re-engaging the executive functions of the brain" (Lipinski, 2021). Continuing professional development is a great way to engage officers' executive functions, helping to prevent a complacent mindset.

Implementing continuing professional development requirements has challenges and limitations, too. Financial and logistical challenges for many departments are genuine issues. Attempting to have every officer in a department take even just one class a year can be costly and a logistical challenge, depending on how many officers are in a department. The solution is not just as simple as making the declaration that starting tomorrow, every officer must take a class every year. Officer and leadership development can take time and involves more than a couple of classes for promotion, an excellent officer/leader does not happen by accident.

Significance of the Study

While the fire service is historically steeped in tradition, the change that has occurred over the last century and the speed of change is truly unprecedented. The Center for Public Safety Excellence (CPSE) (2020) states, that "from the equipment in use, new applications in technology, changes in the workforce, use of social media, the speed of information, and the shift and increase in the calls responded to – all have made for a dramatic difference as we

transformed in the 21st-century fire and emergency service" (p. 2). This change and evolution must involve ongoing professional development for officers to succeed.

It is time for the fire service and fire departments throughout the U.S. to change from being proactive to reactive. The mission statement of the EFO program is "To create an environment and opportunities that foster individual growth, development, and an appreciation for lifelong learning as a strategic community leader" (USFA, 2023). It is in the best interest of the departments, the members, and the citizens they serve to foster this type of environment and promote officers' ongoing professional development.

"A frequent response for necessary future skills were leadership skills – ranging from public speaking, program development, strategic thinking, and research" (CPSE, 2020). The problem is apparent. Even though firefighters are promoted every day throughout the country into officer positions, it does not mean that these men and women are reaching their full potential as officers due to a lack of ongoing or continuing education requirements.

More than just the organization and officers, the men and women who work under them and the actual stakeholders, the citizens, are affected by this lack of professional development. Firefighters cannot look through a fire magazine without finding at least one article about new and evolving technology or training the next generation of firefighters. The days of the officer who is excellent on a fire but needs to improve with reports, dealing with personnel issues, or speaking in public need to become a thing of the past.

Problem Statement

The problem is the absence of ongoing professional development hinders the creation of genuinely knowledgeable and competent officers, jeopardizing the effectiveness and adaptability of fire departments nationwide. "Effective leadership is essential to the smooth operation of an

organization" (Chuan-Chung Hsieh, 2018). Organizations cannot expect to evolve and grow without providing and encouraging professional development for their officers. Leadership training often falls into the "we would like to but" category rather than the "we *must* do it" category (Shaw Jr, 2021). The Fort Smith Fire Department has not evaluated the need for ongoing professional development with its officers since its inception in 1899. "A frequent response for necessary future skills were leadership skills – ranging from public speaking, program development, strategic thinking, and research" (CPSE, 2020).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this generic qualitative inquiry is to evaluate the professional development needs for ongoing officer development within the Fort Smith Fire Department.

Research Question(s)

The leadership within a fire department, particularly Captains and Battalion Chiefs, play a pivotal role in shaping the organizational culture and ensuring its long-term success. This raises questions about how these leaders perceive professional development and its significance for the department's overall effectiveness. How, if at all, do Captains and Battalion Chiefs perceive professional development as essential to the organizational success of the department? What types of professional development do Captains deem essential for ongoing professional development? What types of professional development do Battalion Chiefs deem essential for ongoing professional development?

Summary

The following chapters will delve into the perspectives of officers, assess the feasibility of professional development CEUs, and gauge the perceived impact on the fire service, its members, and the services provided to citizens by the organization. Through this research, the

intent is to contribute valuable insights into the ongoing debate on optimizing leadership

practices within fire departments for the benefit of both personnel and the communities they

serve. Moving forward, Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the existing literature on the

research topic. Chapter 3 will detail the methodological approach used, followed by Chapter 4,

providing the study results and the conclusion and recommendations in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review seeks to verify a need for ongoing professional development within the fire service in leadership roles. While professional development is always a topic at the top of many organizations' priority lists, leadership development and ongoing leadership training are not priorities. The mission statement of the Executive Fire Officer Program is "To create an environment and opportunities that foster individual growth, development, and an appreciation for lifelong learning as a strategic community leader" (USFA, 2023). This should be the goal for every organization throughout the United States.

Existing Literature

In a vocational career like the fire service, so much more effort, time, and energy are put into training new young firefighters, while little is put into continuing professional development for officers. "Unfortunately, as people promote, they tend to lose the desire to train and educate themselves. This can be a critical failure of a new or young officer" (Costa, 2020). "Organizations offer professional development budgets as a benefit to their employees" (Van Meter, 2023). "Each year, at least $50 billion is spent globally on leadership development—more than any other training and development program" (Kirchner, 2018). Our formal leaders need the same intensity of training that was provided to them as recruits because, at each rank, they need to go through "boot camp" all over again (Davidson, 2018). Globally, companies are heavily investing in leadership development and succession planning as a result of pressing leadership shortages and rapidly changing organizations (Kirchner & Akdere, 2019). With little emphasis or guidance placed on formal career development, the fire service appears to be playing constant catch up (Kolarik, 2018). The biographies of those recognized as outstanding commanders

confirm that effectiveness on the battlefield and the greatest victories were achieved by comprehensively educated military leaders (Wierzbic, 2022).

Learning is not simply an activity carried out as part of a training program, but a lifelong process of investigation, practice, and reflection (Carolino, 2022). A good leader is someone who has the ability and desire to learn and keeps on learning as a lifelong reflective task (Salsbury, 2022). Continuing education is widespread in numerous aspects of the fire and EMS service, except when it comes to leadership skills. "Where there is strong, effective leadership, you will typically find employees who have bought into the organizational agenda" (Weeraratne, 2023). Organizations should be promoting the National Fire Academy (NFA) and the Professional Development Model at every opportunity (Roberson, 2018). "Officer development is one of the most discussed issues facing the fire service, one reason for this is leadership is adaptive, and one size does not fit all" (Sanford, 2018).

Professional development programs provide employees with opportunities to learn new skills and acquire updated knowledge. This results in employees being better equipped to handle their tasks, make informed decisions, and adapt to changes in their work environment (Clinciu, 2023). In today's era, it is vital for leaders in the public sector to not only continue providing exceptional services, but they also need to focus on personal development (Kolarik, 2018).

> Professional development also allows us to gain a better breadth and depth of job related knowledge and experience, whether it be the type of equipment or new ways of training being used by other fire services, or revised policies, procedures, and industry best practices and trends within the fire service. (McFadden, 2021)

"Good leaders come in all shapes and sizes and at all levels of a business. It is not just the CEO, MD or chair that should play that role. It is up to every individual across an organization to

exercise sound judgment, be ethically minded and communicated effectively in the workplace, good leadership stems from curiosity, asking questions and thinking outside the square to challenge some of the standard answers" (Motto, 2023).

The value of professional development is a subject of debate in many firehouses to this day. The precedent, guidelines, and expectations have been made clear thanks to the work of the National Fire Academy and the International Association of Fire Chiefs and those that choose not to follow these recommendations are poised to be ill-equipped to meet the challenges of this ever-changing profession (Roberson, 2018). Demands for service and a smile are at an all-time high for nearly every profession, and the fire service is no exception. "With the almighty tax dollar stretched thin many communities are facing significant cutbacks, it is vital for leaders in the public sector to not only continue providing exceptional services, they also need to focus on professional development" (Kolarik, 2018).

Leadership principles are universal. "You show me a well-run profitable McDonald's, and I'll show you a well-trained leader who has become a master of his craft and understands how to supervise and manage" (Davidson, 2018). One strong indicator of crisis leadership efficacy is a learning goal orientation, as individuals with high learning goal orientations will be better equipped to acquire skills and will be less likely to see mistakes as threats or to withdraw in the face of adversity (Denny, 2021).

"The difference between a firefighter and a professional firefighter is that the pros are the ones who have a passion for the career and will dedicate extra time to continuously learn, participating in off-the-clock endeavors to improve at the job. This makes for a better, more well-rounded firefighter, enhancing knowledge and decision-making skills both on the fire ground and in the fire station" (McFadden, 2021). The U.S. Army sets a great example for the

fire service when it comes to leader development. Leader development in the U.S. Army is at the core of soldier training. Rather than offer leadership training to select high-potential new leaders or underperforming soldiers, the Army embeds leader development into the initial as well as on going training regimen for service (Kirchner, 2018).

"Leadership development has been defined as "broadening the capacity of an individual to be effective in leadership roles and processes." More specifically, it involves helping to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities that organizations value with regard to leadership" (Mondore, 2011). A clear difference between high- and lower-performing organizations is the degree to which executives are involved in leadership development. High-performing organizations are significantly more likely to engage their executives in modeling effective leadership behaviors; setting clear expectations for leadership development; sponsoring community efforts; and teaching, leading, and recording videos for leadership programs (Leimbach, 2022). Effective officer development becomes increasingly important as the levels and types of services provided by the fire service continue to rise. It is important because expectations of the public the fire service serves rises too (Nelson, 2018).

"Changes in service delivery, technology, and staffing plague many organizations that are not committed to developing their workforce with the diverse skillsets that enable continued growth and success" (Riley, 2018). "The complexity and turbulence of today's environment, embodied leaders need to practice leadership agility by continuously recognizing their internal states, responding effectively to external changing conditions, and guiding others through disruptive change" (Szelwach, 2023). Leadership development can help organizations achieve their goal more effectively and efficiently. This can be achieved through management education

and development programs that aim to strengthen management skills and encourage creativity and innovation within organizations (Zen, 2023).

Succession planning is similar to the process of purchasing life insurance. Few people enjoy doing so, and even fewer take pleasure in discussing the reasons why it is needed. However, for long-term stability purposes, both are necessary to prepare for the future (Johnson, 2022). In any corporation or even small business, succession planning is of utmost importance. Although there are many differences between the private and public sectors, this basic truth remains the same: change will come and all people will eventually leave the organization. Proactive organizations are able to lose members in leadership positions without skipping a beat; they simply allow their well-prepared successors to move right into the top positions and business goes on as usual (Hill, 2019). A dedicated succession plan utilizing internal leadership development has shown to be the first step in achieving smooth and effective upper leadership replacement (Murphy, 2019).

Though components of a succession planning program can be neatly modularized; succession planning programs are dynamic processes that must be organically cultivated within a fire service organization. Following a natural progression of life-long learning, individuals acquire vast amounts of institutional knowledge and experience throughout their respective careers that is rarely shared with younger generations of fire service personnel. Upon these senior members achieving the earned right to retire consequentially, their institutional knowledge and experience retires with them (Box, 2018). There is no quick way to replace the loss of experience and institutional knowledge that takes place by attrition. Countering the challenges inherent to such loss requires a strategy to develop leaders capable of dealing with the resultant change (Howard, 2019).

Synthesis of the Existing Literature

The fire service plays a critical role in ensuring public safety, and the professional development of its personnel is paramount to maintaining high standards of performance. A large body of literature highlights a concerning lack of emphasis on continuing professional development within the fire service. Several articles underscore the historical context of the fire service, emphasizing a traditional focus on operational skills and experience over formalized educational opportunities. This historical perspective has hindered the integration of continuing professional development within the fire service culture. A culture resistant to change within the fire service has been identified as a key obstacle to continuing professional development. Research suggests that the traditional mindset, places a higher value on experience than formal education, creating resistance to embracing new learning methodologies and hindering a proactive approach to ongoing professional development.

Organizational barriers impeding continuous professional development in the fire service are limited budget allocations, inadequate resources, and lack of a structured framework for professional development. Fire departments often face challenges in prioritizing continuous professional development amongst competing demands for funding and resources. The absence of continuous professional development opportunities has repercussions for individual firefighters. Limited access to training programs may hinder skill diversification, career advancement, and result in a workforce that may not be adequately prepared to address evolving challenges in fire service operations. Literature highlights that the lack of continuous professional development can have broader consequences for fire service organizations. Inadequate professional development may lead to stagnation of skills, reduced adaptability to

emerging threats, and diminished organizational resilience. Ultimately, this can compromise the ability of fire departments to effectively fulfill their mission in an ever-changing environment.

Summary

The literature reveals a concerning gap in continuing professional development within the fire service, as a result of historical perspectives, organizational barriers, and cultural resistance to change. Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring that current and future officers receive the training necessary to excel in their roles, and that fire service organizations remain adaptable and effective in the face of evolving challenges. Going forward research and policy initiatives should focus on overcoming these barriers to foster a culture of continuous learning development with officers within the fire service.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in conducting the research to evaluate the professional development needs for ongoing officer development within the Fort Smith Fire Department (FSFD). The research will attempt to explore the perceptions of Captains and Battalion Chiefs regarding professional development, its significance for the department's overall effectiveness, and the essential types of professional development needed for ongoing growth and success. John W. Best (as stated in Pandey, 2021) has rightly said, "The secret of our cultural development has been research, pushing back the areas of ignorance by discovering new truths, which, in turn, lead to better ways of doing things and better products" (p.7.)

This study seeks to determine if a need and justification for ongoing professional development is necessary within the FSFD and if so, it will provide justification for suggesting, implementing, and applying a new professional development plan for officers in the FSFD. This chapter will outline the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques employed in the study. This project began after a lack of ongoing professional development for officers of the FSFD was observed.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to evaluate the FSFD's professional development needs. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences, which helps with understanding the perspectives of Captains and Battalion Chiefs regarding professional development within the FSFD. Qualitative Research: Creswell states, "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting,

data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure" (Creswell, 2022). Quantitative Research: Creswell also states that "Quantitative research is an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures. The final written report has a set structure consisting of introduction, literature and theory, methods, results, and discussions" (Creswell, 2022). Mixed Methods Research: Creswell states that "Mixed methods research is an approach to inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. The core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the integration of qualitative and quantitative data yields additional insight beyond the information provided by either the quantitative or qualitative alone" (Creswell, 2022).

Qualitative research is the best approach for this topic because semi-structured interviews are going to allow this study to get more in depth and experienced data by being able to probe the answers of the participants. This section will provide a comprehensive overview of the research methodology used to investigate the topic and seeks to find meaningful insights from the participants on their perspectives, experiences, and preferences regarding professional development within the FSFD. This study will employ a qualitative research design, specifically a generic qualitative inquiry to explore the perspectives of officers in the FSFD regarding ongoing professional development. Generic qualitative inquiry investigates people's reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences (Percy K. K., 2015). As a formal method of inquiry, qualitative research—with its emphasis on the individual

and the role that context and relationships play in forming thoughts and behaviors—is at the core of what it means to conduct research with human subjects (or with artifacts from humans, e.g., in content analysis) (Roller, 2015).

Population and Sample Size

The FSFD has a total of 15 Administrative Chief officers, a Fire Chief, an Assistant Chief, and a Deputy Chief/Division Chief of operations. Division Chief of Training, Division Chief of Fire marshal, one Fire Training Chief, and three Deputy Fire Marshals. These chiefs make up the administrative side of the FSFD, working in the administrative offices. There are also six Battalion Chief/Shift commanders that work shifts, working a 24/48 schedule, two per shift covering three shifts. The Battalion Chief/Shift commanders are in direct leadership roles overseeing stations, and the crews that work those stations. The FSFD has a total of 42 Captains spread out over three 24-hour shifts, with a total of 14 Captains working every day throughout the 11 stations around Fort Smith. Captains in the FSFD are assigned to stations and oversee a driver and a firefighter on their apparatus. Six battalion chief/shift commanders and six captains, all within the FSFD, are the samples for interviews for this qualitative case study.

The parameters used for the selection of individuals for interviews were the requirements of being in a leadership role currently within the FSFD. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere relate that a small non representative sample can be used when that small sample is highly informed (Percy K. K., 2015). The 12 subjects were chosen to gather extensive insights from two separate ranks of individuals; both ranks are leadership positions in the FSFD with direct leadership responsibilities of the people who work under them in rank. The interview subjects were chosen due to their differences in years of experience at their current position. "The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual

material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question"
(Creswell, 2022). Participants will have a wide range of time in rank, from captains and battalion
chiefs with less than one year of experience in their current position to captains and battalion
chiefs with 10-plus years in their current position. The breadth of this experience in rank and age
will allow for a more complete and overall data collection for the study. Both ranks are
leadership roles of varying levels and will provide rich data for this study.

Instrument(s)

In person semi-structured interview questions will be used for this qualitative case study.
Accommodations will be made to conduct the interviews while the subjects are on duty at their
stations. While the interviews are planned to be conducted in person due to busy schedules,
Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and or FaceTime interviews may be required at some point to
accommodate everyone involved. Participants in the interview process will be required to sign
informed consent forms, which will be attached (See Appendix A). All interviews will be
recorded and transcribed on an Apple iPhone using the Otter.ai transcribe voice notes
application. The transcription will then be listened to and processed to obtain information for this
qualitative study and placed in a Word document. Approval from the FSFD Fire Chief, allowing
permission and access to conduct these interviews is attached in the appendices. Interview
questions have been field tested using three subjects. One of the three subjects used to field test
interview questions holds a PH.D. and is an instructor at the University of Arkansas Center for
Economic Development. The second subject used for field testing of interview questions holds a
PH.D. and is an instructor at Columbia Southern University. The third subject used to field test
interview questions is the Chief Operating Officer for a company in the area who has an MBA.
The questions used for the interview of the participants will be attached (See Appendix B).

Research Process

After receiving permission from the Fire Chief and field testing the interview questions, the researcher conducted interviews with participants. The approval of the Fire Chief is attached (See Appendix C). The researcher traveled to where the participants were and interviewed them while they were at work to accommodate the participants. The researcher received signed consent forms from all participants. At the time of receiving consent, the researcher did not attempt to influence any of the participants and informed each participant that they could stop the interview or back out of the interview at any time without any recourse. Every effort was made to provide a comfortable interview experience for the participants, and open communication was encouraged by the researcher from the start of the interview to the finish with each participant. Participants were also informed and encouraged by the researcher that during the interview if they were to think of something missed or not said from a previous question, they should and could go back and state what they had missed. Once the participants were comfortable and ready and the informed consent forms were signed, the interviews began first with the audio recording of the interview and then the start of the semi-structured interview questions. The audio recording was conducted on an iPhone using the Otter-ai application. The researcher used a semi-structured open-ended interview process with each participant to allow for participants to feel comfortable and give complete answers.

The analysis of the data collected began with the transcription of the recording of interviews. Once all data was collected and transcribed through the Otter.ai app, the researcher coded the data.

Coding is the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks (or test or image segments) and writing a word representing a category in the margins segmenting

sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often base in the actual language of the participant. (Creswell, 2022)During the transcription and coding of information, themes were looked for and analyzed by comparing the results of the coding process. The researcher looked for themes that tied together the identified codes into groups recognized by their subject matter. Once themes were recognized, the researcher checked to see how well the themes supported the coded data that was extracted. Once the coding and identification of themes were finished, the researcher compiled everything in the final report, producing a comprehensive summary of codes and themes to provide the findings of the research along with any other relevant data.

Ethical Considerations

Before interviews were conducted, informed consent forms were signed, and participants were asked if they fully understood the intent of the research. Any bias or influence was removed or prevented by not discussing the topic or research study that the researcher was studying before the interviews. Also, due to relationships with the Battalion Chief/Shift commanders, the researcher informed the participants that there were no wrong or right answers and that their opinions, thoughts, and views were for the research purposes of this study. Since the researcher is in a supervisory rank over the captains interviewed, they were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that their thoughts, views, and opinions were for the research purposes of this study only. Participants were also assured that their answers, thoughts, and opinions would not be held against them in any way and that no preferential treatment or retribution for participants would result from being a part of this study or answering in a certain way. All participants were assured that all personal identifying information would be

removed while reviewing the transcriptions and that all personal identifying information is required to be omitted due to the privacy act. Participants were also informed that interview recordings, information, and results would be saved in a password-protected folder until the research process is complete and then kept on an encrypted, external hard drive and kept secure in a locked safe for a minimum of five years after the completion of the research process.

Summary

Chapter three covered the step-by-step process of research conducted, instruments utilized, and ethical considerations used during the research process. In-Person face-to-face interviews and audio recordings, with semi-structured open-ended questions, will help to answer the research questions established in Chapter One. Interview questions were field tested through three individuals outside of the fire service. Informed consent forms were signed and documented prior to conducting interviews. Multiple considerations were made to assure that the highest ethical standards were followed including removing all bias, informing participants that answers would not gain preferential treatment or punishment, and assuring participants that all personal identifying information would be always kept completely confidential. Participants were also informed that the information from interviews and data analysis results would be stored in a password protected folder while being processed and on an encrypted external hard drive and stored in a locked safe for five years after the research was completed.

CHAPTER 4: STUDY RESULTS

Introduction – Demographics of the Participants

This research project involved twelve participants from the FSFD who were interviewed, comprised of six Captains and six Battalion Chiefs, all occupying leadership positions. All participants had varying degrees of time in their leadership rank, from under one year to over 23 years in a leadership position. All participants were male and Caucasian which make up 98% of the FSFD. Participants ranged from 31 to 57 years old, with three participants in their 30's, four in their 40's, and five in their 50's.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Years of Service	Years in Rank
Captain # 1	Male	31	11	10 months
Captain # 2	Male	36	14	5
Captain # 3	Male	37	11	6
Captain # 4	Male	46	23	10
Captain # 5	Male	56	35	23
Captain # 6	Male	57	32	21
Battalion Chief # 1	Male	43	23	1
Battalion Chief # 2	Male	49	20	6
Battalion Chief # 3	Male	49	23	10 Months
Battalion Chief # 4	Male	56	34	11
Battalion Chief # 5	Male	57	31	9
Battalion Chief # 6	Male	57	31	17

The purpose of this qualitative research study and interviews was to evaluate the professional development needs for ongoing officer development within the FSFD. In these interviews the researcher was seeking to answer research questions for this qualitative study. The first question is, "How do Captains and Battalion Chiefs perceive professional development as essential to the organizational success of the department?" The second question is "What types of professional development do Captains deem essential for ongoing professional development?" Finally, the third question is "What types of professional development do Battalion Chiefs deem essential for ongoing professional development?" In the dynamic, challenging, and ever evolving world of firefighting, effective leadership and ongoing professional development are paramount for ensuring the safety of both firefighters and the communities they serve. This chapter investigates the discussions and insights surrounding fire department leaders' qualifications, training, and ongoing development within the FSFD, particularly focusing on Captains and Battalion Chiefs.

Research Results

Generic qualitative research was completed utilizing in person face-to-face interviews with 12 participants in leadership positions within the FSFD to understand thoughts and opinions on professional development requirements within the FSFD. Interview questions were created to provide a perspective on what Captains and Battalion Chiefs, who are in leadership roles, feel is important for the success of the FSFD in leadership roles concerning ongoing professional development.

Research Question 1: How do Captains/Battalion Chiefs perceive professional development as essential to the organizational success of the department?

The researcher utilized all the interview questions (see Appendix B) to understand RQ1. After analyzing the data through Otter.ai, the theme was identified that all participants believe professional development is vital to the organization and that the FSFD lacks ongoing professional development for both captains and battalion chiefs, and that more could be done to contribute to the success of the FSFD by implementing ongoing professional development requirements. A unanimous acknowledgment among participants regarding the importance of ongoing professional development for both individual growth and the overall effectiveness of the department. Experience was identified as an important and crucial qualification for leadership roles within the FSFD. Captains and battalion chiefs also recognize the significance of leadership, personnel management, and professional development in effectively managing fire department operations and personnel successfully. Participant Battalion Chief #6 emphasized "The importance of education on leadership roles, particularly in personnel management, as it is a daily challenge for battalion chiefs." Participant Captain #5 believes "Ongoing professional development is essential for success in the FSFD, including leadership training, time management, incident command, and interpersonal skills."

Both captains and battalion chiefs emphasized the importance of continuous learning and ongoing professional development to adapt to changing circumstances and improve job performance. The consensus by captains and battalion chiefs is that in-person classes are preferred over online alternatives for job training and professional development, citing the need for hands-on learning and immediate feedback. Participant Captain #2 "prefers in-person classes over online classes, citing the importance of hands-on learning and face-to-face interaction." Captains and battalion chiefs feel they should be heavily involved in the decision-making process for ongoing professional development within the FSFD to ensure that needed ongoing

professional development is addressed. Participant Battalion Chief #5 believes "Battalion chiefs should be heavily involved in the decision-making process for ongoing professional development." A frustration of captains and battalion chiefs is that the FSFD is limited in providing opportunities for leadership experience and insufficient preparation for higher ranking leadership roles like captain and battalion chief. Captains and battalion chiefs both feel that the FSFD has never implemented ongoing professional development because of the emphasis put on training young firefighters and that training for leadership roles has always been an afterthought. All interviewees feel that the benefits of ongoing professional development include staying relevant in the fire service and providing the absolute best service possible to the shareholders in the Fort Smith, Arkansas, community.

Research Question 2: What types of professional development do Captains deem essential for ongoing professional development?

Captains prioritized leadership training for ongoing professional development, recognizing its importance for effective incident command and crew management. Captains emphasized the importance of being open-minded and checking one's ego when it comes to professional development, both on an individual and departmental level. Participant Captain #3 stated, "The importance of ongoing professional development in the FSFD, citing the need to stay up to date with new techniques and technologies in the fire service." The consensus among captains was a twice-yearly ongoing professional development requirement focusing on practical application and experience over theoretical classes. Throughout the captain's interviews, the common theme of needing more incident command training was prevalent and stated multiple times by all captains. Participant Captain #1 emphasized "The importance of ongoing professional development for captains, suggesting that it should be required every year and

tailored to individual specialties." Another need deemed essential for professional development by captains was interpersonal skills and conflict management training. All captains feel that there could have been more professional development opportunities to help them succeed in their current leadership roles, and most feel that they were just placed in their new roles without any type of real preparation outside of studying and taking a promotional test and expected to learn their new job as they go. Participant Captain #4 believes "Captain's ongoing professional development requirements may be beneficial for experience and call diversity." Throughout the interviews, all captains stated that ongoing professional development is needed by the FSFD and that to ensure success going forward, as well as staying relevant in the fire service, ongoing professional development is a must. Participant Captain #6 states, "While ongoing professional development is not a requirement for captains, having leadership training in the form of ongoing professional development will help the FSFD succeed in the future."

Research Question 3: What types of professional development do Battalion Chiefs deem essential for ongoing professional development?

Battalion chiefs prioritized ongoing professional development in areas such as incident command, leadership, interpersonal skills, and personnel management. Professional development is seen as crucial by battalion chiefs for improving adaptability and gaining experience necessary for the role. Participant Battalion Chief #1 stated, "Interpersonal skills are essential for success as a battalion chief, highlighting the importance of flexibility and adaptability in dealing with different personalities and situations." Battalion Chief's prioritize leadership development and personnel management skills in ongoing professional development. Participant Battalion Chief #2 stated "The FSFD leadership positions should have ongoing professional development requirements which will provide improved job performance by battalion chiefs in their

leadership positions." The consensus of all battalion chiefs is that they prefer in person classes over online classes for professional development with a more interactive environment with instant feedback from instructors. All battalion chiefs stated that they believe they should provide input for ongoing professional development requirements for their rank. Participant Battalion Chief #4 stated, "Battalion Chiefs should have a significant word in what training is provided as we know what we don't know or need help with." All battalion chiefs agreed that the benefits of ongoing professional development far exceeded the cons if there are any requiring ongoing professional development. Participant Battalion Chief #3 said, "Ongoing professional development for battalion chiefs would be beneficial, with pros including unlimited opportunities and cons being non-existent."

Summary

This chapter discussed the demographics of the participants, and each of the 12 interviewees provided thoughtful insight into ongoing professional development requirements for the FSFD. Interview questions were carefully formulated and reviewed to ensure they would aid in understanding the research questions. More than three hours of interview questions by participants were recorded and transcribed using otter ai. No significant differences in opinions between captains and battalion chiefs were established regarding ongoing professional development. The findings presented in this chapter are derived from the qualitative research conducted to evaluate professional development needs within the FSFD. Valuable information was gained regarding interviewees' perspectives, experiences, and preferences related to professional development in the FSFD. In Chapter 5, data will be interpreted to assist in understanding the three research questions along with providing conclusions from the data.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Results

This generic qualitative research sought to evaluate the significance of ongoing professional development through the leadership ranks of Captains and Battalion Chiefs within the FSFD. The interviews used for data collection provided the researcher with valuable information. The information was then used to understand the research questions. The first research question sought to understand how the participants perceived professional development as essential to the organizational success of the FSFD. The second research question compared what types of professional development the participants deem essential for ongoing professional development for Captains. A few themes from the research data focus on professional development, types, input, and benefits. The final research question attempted to identify what types of professional development the participants deem essential for ongoing professional development for Battalion Chiefs. In this chapter, conclusions drawn from the study's results will be presented along with considerations for limitations, implications, and recommendations for the field and future research.

Conclusions Based Upon Results

The study focused on three research questions to answer the problem statement. The qualitative data gathered identified common themes. These themes, along with the information from the previous four chapters, were utilized to assist in answering each of the research questions. Interpretations of the following data are based on all information collected throughout this research.

RQ1: How do Captains and Battalion Chiefs perceive professional development as essential to the organization's success of the department?

From the interviews, Captains and Battalion Chiefs perceive ongoing professional development as vital for organizational success. The literature review reflects many of the same observations identified by the participants. Participants expressed a consensus that the current level of professional development within the department is insufficient and emphasized the importance of continuous learning in adapting to the evolving changes in firefighting. Interview participants related frustration with current training opportunities, a lack of opportunities for leadership experience, and inadequate preparation for higher-ranking leadership roles. Participants state that ongoing professional development has been neglected in favor of training for young firefighters. Participants expressed a desire to be involved in the decision-making process for ongoing professional development within the FSFD to ensure that the training meets their needs effectively. There is a clear preference among both groups for in-person training over online alternatives due to the value of face-to-face interaction and immediate feedback. All participants related that they could see only positives and upside to any ongoing professional development requirements for FSFD Captains and Battalion Chiefs with no negative aspects at all. All 12 interviewees related that ongoing professional development requirements are needed and integral in the success of the FSFD moving into the future.

RQ2: What types of professional development do Captains deem essential for ongoing professional development?

Captains expressed the need for more and continued incident command training, interpersonal skills training, leadership training, and computer skills training to help with the success of the FSFD moving forward. Participants deem incident command training and leadership training as essential for captains to succeed and help with experience and call diversity. All participants mentioned dealing with interpersonal skills and conflicts as vital

training. Captains prefer in-person to online training, and all related that they should have significant input into the types of ongoing professional development training that would be required. None of the Captains could provide or consider any drawbacks or disadvantages of requiring ongoing professional development for company officers. All Captains relate that the current level of professional development within the FSFD is insufficient and emphasize the importance of implementing ongoing professional development for Captains within the department. All Captain participants stated that yearly professional development training, at a minimum, should be considered for Captains to be successful at their jobs and for the FSFD to succeed in providing the best possible service to the citizens of Fort Smith.

RQ3: What types of professional development do Battalion Chiefs deem essential for ongoing professional development?

All Battalion Chiefs conveyed the need for continued incident command training, personnel management, interpersonal, computer, and leadership training. All Battalion Chiefs deemed incident command and personnel management training and skills as essential to their success as Battalion Chiefs. All participants stated a lack of preparation for dealing with personnel and personnel problems when they were first promoted to their Battalion Chief position. One participant stated that interpersonal skills are essential for success as a battalion chief, highlighting the importance of flexibility and adaptability in dealing with different personalities and situations. Participants also stated incident command training is vital for Battalion Chiefs as the number of fires in the city of Fort Smith has dropped over the last several years, making it harder for Battalion Chiefs to gain experience. Participants all stated they should have significant input and involvement in the decision making process for ongoing professional development. Every Battalion Chief preferred in-person training over online alternatives, citing

the benefits of engaging face-to-face with different instructors and departments and the networking benefits. The overwhelming consensus from the Battalion Chiefs is that ongoing professional development requirements have no downsides or disadvantages. All Battalion Chiefs stated multiple times the need for ongoing incident command training, with many stating that it is a vital role in their job, yet no training is done to help them succeed on the fireground where lives are at stake. This study has concluded that ongoing professional development requirements for leadership roles within the FSFD are seen as vital, essential, and necessary to ensure success going forward for the FSFD.

Limitations

Utilizing only in-person face-to-face interviews may limit the depth of insights compared to employing multiple data collection methods. The study's sample size was relatively small, consisting solely of male Caucasian participants, all within the FSFD. This may limit the data compared to a larger and broader study conducted with participants from other departments by not providing more generalized results from other organizations or the fire service in general. Due to potential conflicts with obtaining truthful data from internal participants, the researcher discussed their perceived views of the current department culture. The researcher also serves as a Fire Marshal at the Battalion Chief rank for the FSFD. While all attempts were made to separate the researcher from the role of Fire Marshal/Battalion Chief rank, interview participants may have withheld information for fear of angering a chief officer by not saying the right things or not being in agreeance. The data collected through interviews may be subject to bias or interpretation, despite efforts to maintain objectivity in data analysis.

Implications and Recommendations to the Field

The fire service of today is evolving rapidly in all facets of the job from technology to tactics to generational changes in the individuals hired. If the fire service is to evolve and stay relevant, ongoing professional development for leadership positions is key to evolution, growth, and success in providing the best and most efficient services to its stakeholders. The FSFD should consider building and implementing an ongoing professional development program to address the needs of Captains and Battalion Chiefs. This could be a minimum number of hours or classes taken yearly or every other year if time or budgetary constraints become an issue. This will involve increasing resources allocated to ongoing training and involving leadership in the decision-making process for training initiatives. Captains and Battalion Chiefs should take proactive steps to seek out additional professional development opportunities outside of the department to provide for the lack of a required ongoing professional development program. The FSFD has transitioned to a very young department with an average seniority of 13 years of experience. The time for positive change in leadership is now to ensure that the FSFD is providing the community with the absolute best service possible.

Recommendations for Future Research

This generic qualitative study provided a snapshot of the perspectives of individuals within the FSFD. Comparative studies between departments with varying levels of professional development resources could shed light on best practices and areas for improvement. Further research on a broader scale with multiple departments could provide more data. Future studies should aim to include a more diverse sample of participants to explore potential differences in perspectives based on gender, race, and rank within the fire service. Long term studies tracking the impact of ongoing professional development on job performance and organizational success

over time would provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of training initiatives. This research focused on whether there is a need for ongoing professional development in the FSFD. Continued research could be conducted to ensure that any changes implemented after this study are effective. More research could also be conducted on other individual fire departments to perform internal reviews of their ongoing professional development requirements or lack thereof.

Conclusion

This research focused on the challenges and perspectives of ongoing professional development within the FSFD. While this study reveals a need for ongoing professional development requirements for the FSFD, failure by fire departments to implement ongoing professional development requirements for leadership roles could be detrimental not just to the organization but also to the communities they serve. The FSFD and other departments around the country should promote a culture of continuous learning and professional growth among its leadership ranks. Encouraging Captains and Battalion Chiefs to pursue further education, certifications, and training can greatly contribute to their ongoing development and the success of their organizations in the future. By implementing these recommendations, the FSFD can strengthen its leadership capabilities, improve operational effectiveness, and ultimately better serve the Fort Smith community. Required ongoing professional development is not just a means of personal growth for leaders but a strategic investment in the department's future success.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Interview Consent form

Interview Consent Form

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Les Pyeatt from the National Fire Academy (NFA) and Columbia Southern University. The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of a critical issue in the fire and emergency services. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of their final project for the Executive Fire Officer program.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all of your questions about the study have been answered to your satisfaction. The study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your experience within a particular community. An audio recording of the interview will be taken for transcription purposes. The audio file will be deleted at the conclusion of the study and will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require approximately 45-60 minutes of your time.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

The NFA, Columbia Southern University, and its contractors take no responsibility for the actions or outcomes of the research study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to the participant; however, information from this study may benefit your, and other communities, in the future.

Incentives

There are no incentives (financial or otherwise) associated with participation in this study.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented to NFA and Columbia Southern University program faculty and students. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers (including audio recordings) will be destroyed. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion, or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Les Pyeatt   **Dr. Justin Heim**
Student   Course Manager
National Fire Academy   Columbia Southern University
lpyeatt@fortsmithar.gov   Justin.Heim@columbiasouthern.edu

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form, and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have received satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18-years of age.

☐ I give consent to be filmed and audio recorded during my interview. _____ (interviewee initials)
☐ I give consent to be audio recorded during my interview. _____ (interviewee initials)

Interviewer Signature		**Date**:	

Interviewee Signature		**Date:**	
Interviewee Signature		**Date:**	

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Capstone Research Study

1. Based on your experience, how do you see the qualifications required for individuals to test for Captain/Battalion Chief? I have a copy of the FSFD Promotion Policy and Requirements available.

2. How would you describe the preparation and requirements of the FSFD to prepare you for your current leadership position?

3. How do you see or look at ongoing professional development requirements for Captains/Battalion Chiefs?

4. What change or improvement would you suggest to help the next generation of leaders in the FSFD succeed in your current position?

5. As a Captain/Battalion Chief, what type of professional development would you say is essential to being successful in your current role and in leading to the success of the FSFD?

6. As a Captain/Battalion Chief, what training for ongoing professional development classes would be most beneficial for you in your current rank?

7. Would you rather participate in in-person classes or online classes to fulfill ongoing professional development requirements? Why?

8. If you were given the choice to choose ongoing professional development classes, what would you choose? Leadership, Time management, Incident Command, etc………… Why that type of training?

9. How much input should Captains/Battalion Chiefs have in the decision process, requirements, and implementation of an ongoing professional development plan?

10. As a Captain/Battalion Chief, how much ongoing professional development do you think would be suitable?

11. If ongoing professional development was required for your position by the FSFD, what exceptions, if any, would you think could be considered or applied?

12. As someone in a leadership position within the FSFD, what are the pros and cons of ongoing professional development requirements for your position?

13. Why do you think the FSFD has not implemented ongoing professional development requirements for your rank?

14. Why do you think the FSFD has no ongoing professional development requirements for leadership positions?

15. While this interview has been about professional development requirements for Captains/Battalion Chiefs, what are your opinions on administrative staff, Fire Chief, Assistant Chief, Division Chief, Fire marshals, and Training Chiefs having these requirements?

Appendix C: Gatekeeper Approval

Chief Waters,

      I am emailing you to ask permission to interview 6 shift commanders and 6 Captains of the FSFD for my EFO Capstone research project? Thank you and have a nice day.

V/R

Les Pyeatt
Fire Marshal
Fort Smith Fire Department
Office-479-308-3342
Cell-479-221-0865

Chief Pyeatt,

I approve this request. Have a great day!

Boyd Waters
Fire Chief
Fort Smith Fire Department
Cell (479)461-6405
Office (479)308-3331