

Criteria to Successfully Pass Firefighter Probation in Bend Fire and Rescue

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Certification Statement

I hereby certify this paper constitutes my own product, that where language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: _____

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Abstract

The first year of employment for a new firefighter is typically known as the probationary period. During this time, the probationary firefighter can be evaluated frequently including, but not limited to, daily evaluations, written tests, and skills evaluations. The problem is that Bend Fire and Rescue has not identified the criteria to be used to transition a firefighter from probationary to non-probationary status. The purpose of this study was to identify the criteria to be used to transition a firefighter from probationary to non-probationary status. The research questions asked were; 1) what are the minimum knowledge, skills, and abilities required to make the transition from probationary to non-probationary status; 2) how will the probationary firefighter's knowledge, skills, and abilities be measured; and 3) what procedure should be followed if a probationary firefighter fails to meet the minimum knowledge, skills, and abilities? A descriptive research method was used to answer the three research questions, as well as an extensive literature review, an electronic questionnaire, a fillable form questionnaire, and personal interviews. Those questioned for the purposes of gathering data included line staff from Bend Fire and Rescue, members of Bend Fire and Rescue's management team and human resources, and training officers from around the State of Oregon. The results of the research led to recommendations that included the reinstatement of the task book system to track progress, creating a list of evolutions that probationary firefighters must be proficient in performing, establishing benchmark scores for written tests and performance criteria for skills, and formulating clear expectations and measurable objectives to successfully pass firefighter probation.

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Introduction

Fire departments around the world face countless challenges every day. The professionals that are employed by those departments use their training and experience to successfully mitigate a wide range of emergencies. Something every firefighter in every fire department has in common is they all experienced their first day. They were all once a “newbie, a rookie or a proby;” the terms given to the new firefighter vary, but the implications are usually the same. Learn the culture and performance requirements of the organization during the probationary year, or look for a new job.

Usually lasting one year, the probationary year of a new firefighter is a busy time. Often an academy starts the learning in a very regimented, scheduled environment where expectations are clear. The curriculum is delivered in a classroom setting, and the hands-on skills are taught on a drill ground. The length and format of the academy will differ from department to department, but the intent is usually the same. Teach the basics, make sure the new firefighters can demonstrate proficiency and then send them out into the field as part of an actual crew. This is where the probationary firefighter will learn the culture of the organization, hone their skills, and prove that they belong on the team.

Each department invests personnel, effort, time and money into the training and indoctrination of each new firefighter. Results and expectations may vary, but every fire department gets to decide what information and skills are important for their probationary firefighters to be responsible for. It is a unique experience for the new employee, especially if the fire service is a new environment. The probationary firefighter is essentially on stage the entire time they are on duty. Fire station life for the new

firefighter can be a high-pressure situation. Eyes are on you all the time, constantly critiquing your actions both on emergency calls and around the station.

Some of the stress a probationary firefighter experiences can be alleviated by setting clear expectations in the beginning. It is also critically important when evaluating new employees to have clear criteria on what acceptable actions and performance looks like. This information needs to be clear to both the person doing the evaluating as well as to the probationary firefighter. When the criteria are clearly understood, it helps to remove much of the subjectivity that can alter what are supposed to be objective evaluations.

The problem selected for research is Bend Fire and Rescue has not identified the criteria to be used for transitioning a firefighter from probationary to non-probationary status. While the material taught in the firefighter academy has been relatively consistent, the requirements of the new firefighters following their graduation have varied greatly. The expectations of the probationary firefighter have changed with each group, leaving those responsible for their training following the academy unsure on what process to follow.

The purpose of this research is to identify the criteria to be used to transition a firefighter from probationary to non-probationary status. Some graduating classes have been responsible for completing task books. If a group had experienced firefighters, the task books were eliminated. Written tests have changed with each class, and no standard exists in regards to a passing score. There is no drill ground exercise at the end of the year for the probationary firefighter to demonstrate the ability to perform to an acceptable standard. When the one-year anniversary of their hire date comes, the probationary

firefighter is simply no longer on probation. Without clear criteria to evaluate performance and without clear benchmarks to monitor progress, each group of probationary firefighters differs in knowledge, skills and abilities. This result is contrary for a department that strives for standardization and predictability, which are also two important characteristics for a probationary firefighter.

A descriptive research method was used to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the minimum knowledge, skills and abilities required to make the transition from probationary to non-probationary status?
2. How will the probationary firefighter's knowledge, skills and abilities be measured?
3. What procedure should be followed if a probationary firefighter fails to meet the minimum knowledge, skills and abilities?

Background and Significance

Sitting on the eastern slope of the Cascade Mountain Range, Bend, Oregon is an outdoor enthusiast's playground. The west side of the town sits among towering pine trees with easy access to national forest land with miles of mountain bike and running trails. Twenty minutes west of town is the iconic ski resort, Mount Bachelor. The east side of Bend is characterized by a more arid landscape; pine trees give way to juniper trees and sagebrush. Plenty of BLM land exists on the eastside with an abundance of options for recreation. Splitting the city in half is the famous Deschutes River. With its headwaters only 30 miles away, the Deschutes quickly grows in size to become a formidable river through the city of Bend. Just minutes south of the city limits are a

series of Class VI rapids that are an impressive sight. Although not free of hazards entirely, kayakers, inner-tubers, and stand-up paddle boarders use the section of river that flows through the city heavily.

There was no fire department protecting the city until 1905, when a landmark fire downtown in the O’Kane Building forced city leaders to address the problem. An all-volunteer department was created and stayed that way until 1920, when the City hired its first paid chief and two paid engineers. The combination of paid firefighters and volunteers existed until 1996, when the department went exclusively paid. Today, the residents of Bend are served by 71 paid firefighters, 5 office support staff and 6 prevention employees out of five fire stations. The management structure consists of a fire chief, five deputy chiefs and four battalion chiefs. Bend Fire is the transporting agency for the city and surrounding area, with an advanced life support (ALS) ambulance in every station. Firefighter paramedics staff two of the five ambulances full-time, while the other three are cross-staffed by the engine crew. There are five ALS engines and one ALS truck in the city, as well as four Type 3 interface engines and three water tenders.

In 2011, CNN.com reported Bend as the tenth fastest growing city in the United States. With the explosive growth came an increase in the demand for all city services, and call volume for the fire department was just one example. Because the fire department was another city service, funds had to come through the city’s general fund. The need for additional staff was obvious, but the money simply wasn’t there. Even with an impressive recovery from the recession, there was not enough money in the general fund to hire the number of firefighters that were so desperately needed. In a move that was unprecedented in the fire department’s 109-year history, Bend Fire went to the voters

in 2014 and asked for additional money in the form of an operating levy. The promise that was made to the voters was increased staffing and a subsequent decrease in response times. The levy passed by an overwhelming majority, and now it's time to bring on the additional staff in the form of firefighter paramedics.

A typical hiring past practice for Bend Fire has been to bring on firefighters in groups ranging from 3 to 6 individuals every couple years. There have been more frequent academies, but there have also been large gaps of several years between groups. The largest class brought on to date was 9 firefighters in 2005. When the volunteer program was active, it was common practice to hire qualified personnel from their ranks before hiring from the outside. When a volunteer was hired, many aspects of their training were modified simply because these firefighters were already familiar with department policies, procedures, fire ground evolutions and department culture. A short orientation was provided, and then it was straight to the fire stations where they were immediately part of a crew. When the volunteer program was eliminated, the fire department lost a steady stream of future firefighters that were already proficient in the ways of Bend Fire. All future hiring was done from the outside, and an academy format was adopted to deliver essential training. Depending on how many firefighters were hired and their experience level, the length of the academy was adjusted. In the twelve years the researcher has been employed by Bend Fire, no two academies have been the same.

Following the formal academy, the training of the probationary firefighters has varied greatly as well. Specific training benchmarks have not been identified; no standard has been established as to what acceptable performance looks like. As a result,

the probationary firefighters have been evaluated on a subjective level without any real evidence of satisfactory or unacceptable behavior or performance. Even when written tests are administered, no passing score has been identified. Fire ground evolutions to evaluate the probationary firefighter's progress are nonexistent. When the one-year anniversary of the probationary firefighter's hire date comes, the probationary designation is simply removed.

There have been attempts made to track and evaluate the probationary firefighter's progress. A task book system has been used in varying forms with each graduating class. From 2005 – 2009, comprehensive task books were issued to each probationary firefighter that had to be completed in their first year. In addition, they attended monthly meetings with the training chief and battalion chief where progress and performance were reviewed. At the end of the probationary year, the training chief, battalion chief, and company officer made a collective decision as to whether a firefighter would successfully pass their probationary period. For reasons unknown, that methodical and systematic evaluation of the probationary firefighter is not currently being used.

Bend Fire is in the beginning of a hiring boom. The number of firefighters that will be brought into the organization is unprecedented. Our past hiring practices have allowed members of the fire department to focus on a probationary employee and get them trained to a satisfactory level. The lack of clear criteria to pass probation has not been addressed simply because our hiring numbers have been low and company officers have been able to devote time and attention to the new firefighter. But now the hiring system, the academy and probationary training are going to be thoroughly tested. Any gap or deficiency in training is going to be amplified simply because of the sheer number

of new firefighters that will be introduced to the organization. Training objectives and benchmarks must be established in order to ensure the probationary firefighters are getting the training they need. A way to track their progress and evaluate their performance must accompany this new method as well. The training division and the company officers are going to be overwhelmed with the training requirements of a large group of probationary firefighters, especially if one or more are struggling to meet the established standard. It should be clear to a company officer what they should be training on with their probationary firefighter, as well as what should be done if that firefighter is not meeting the standard.

By establishing clear criteria for a firefighter to successfully pass probation, the entire fire department will benefit. The training plan for each firefighter will be easily established, and company officers will know where to focus their time depending on the strengths and weaknesses of the firefighter assigned to them. The senior firefighters will know that every probationary employee, regardless of station or shift, have achieved the established benchmarks; eliminating the questions that currently surrounds our probationary employees when it comes to their knowledge and skill base. As the department grows and changes in the future, making modifications to the established criteria is much easier than trying to recreate them with each probationary class.

As a student in the *Executive Development* portion of the Executive Fire Officer Program, the differences between an adaptive challenge and a technical problem were examined. The Bend Fire Department is facing an adaptive challenge with not only the influx of a large number of new employees, but also creating the criteria with which to hold the probationary employees accountable. Another aspect of the Executive

Development curriculum that directly applies to this research is the concept of organizational culture and change. The department is ripe for the needed change, and our current proactive culture will facilitate its implementation.

This research will help to reduce risk at the local level through prevention and mitigation, thus meeting one of the United States Fire Administration's strategic goals. Another goal of the USFA that will be addressed is to improve the fire and emergency services' professional status. Internally, members of Bend Fire and Rescue will know the probationary firefighters have successfully met each of the established criteria. Externally, members of the community will benefit by having the newest members of the fire department be held to a high professional standard.

Literature Review

A thorough literature review was conducted on new employees in organizations, with a particular focus on probationary firefighters. The probationary firefighter is the subject of many articles, and everyone has a strong opinion on the topic. Although the focus was on the probationary firefighter, much can be learned from the private sector. Hiring the best new employees, developing them, retaining them, and shaping them into future leaders are issues faced by both fire service organizations and businesses alike.

The National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) is a trade association that creates codes and standards for adoption by local governments. NFPA 1001, Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications, identifies the minimum job performance requirements for structural firefighters. In Oregon, the Department of Public Safety, Standards, and Training (DPSST) is responsible for maintaining state fire certification standards through the Fire Certification Section. This section also ensures local fire

department and district training programs meet accreditation requirements. The state does not make a distinction between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of a probationary firefighter and one that is no longer on probation. Every agency has a different, unique culture. Response areas vary greatly as well as the type of equipment each department uses. The length of time a new firefighter is on probation also varies from department to department.

Many factors affect a probationary firefighter's experience. Size of the organization, culture of the department, and prior experience of the firefighter are just a few examples of how one firefighter's experience could differ from another in separate department. Does the department choose to use a "watch-and-observe" method of the new firefighter, or do they prefer to "shape and mold" the firefighter? Both methods have positive and negative aspects. The decision of which method to use is usually dictated by the resources the department can devote to probationary firefighter training (Cowardin, 1999). But Ludwig (2011) points out that in some cases, firefighters have a tendency to be ruthless toward the newest members of the department. Probationary employees are, by definition, new to the organization. Some organizations have a culture that expects these new employees to function as if they're seasoned veterans. And when a mistake is made, these probationary employees are held to the same standard as someone who's been doing the job for 20 years. The culture of some organizations can be ruthless toward a probationary firefighter who shows some vulnerability.

Much has been written on how to behave while on probation, as well as what to expect as a probationary firefighter. Although firefighting is a difficult job, in many cases the most difficult part of an entire career is the probationary year. Scrutiny,

coaching, criticism, and stress are all part of the journey of the probationary firefighter (Viscuso, 2012). Pearn (2011) also offers advice to the probationary firefighter. The expectations he sets forth repeat themes that are commonly expressed when advice is being given to a probationary firefighter. The advice includes things like show up early, be ready for duty, be proactive, take the job seriously, and listen and not be heard. But he goes one step further by saying, "Follow the advice...and you will successfully complete your probationary period" (Pearn, 2011).

Measuring a probationary firefighter's knowledge, skills, and abilities goes beyond the standard metrics of achieving a passing score on a written test or successfully completing a specified evolution. There are many intangible, subjective aspects to the measurement of a probationary employee. Prziborowski (2012) identifies the importance of setting clear expectations anytime a new firefighter comes into the firehouse. Every company officer will have different idiosyncrasies, which can be a challenge for the new firefighter who is trying to please everyone. It is critically important, however, to make sure the expectations are known. Any employee, probationary or not, cannot be held accountable to a performance measurement if the expectations were not clearly defined ahead of time.

Probationary firefighters are tested both formally and informally the moment they step into the firehouse. At any given moment, the newest firefighter may be called upon to rescue his or her supervisor. With this in mind, all members of the crew have ownership in making the probationary firefighter the best he or she can be; everyone's life depends on it. It does not give any member the right to harass the probationary employee. In no circumstance is that acceptable. But the new firefighter will be stressed,

and the crew needs to know the probationary firefighter will perform under pressure (Vicuso, 2012).

It goes without saying that the company officer must take a lead role in providing training. But it cannot be the officer's responsibility alone; senior members of the crew need to play a major role as well. One of the most effective ways to measure knowledge retention and test critical thinking is to have the new employee deliver training his or her crew (O'Connor, 2008). This proactive approach may seem contradictory in a culture that many times forces a probationary firefighter to quietly work around the fire station. Being seen and not heard is unfortunately what many probationary periods are all about. But that may not be what's best for the probationary employee and ultimately what's best for the organization. Asking questions leads to deeper understanding and challenging best practices forces organizations to be innovative. If the probationary firefighters are the organization's future leaders, their development should not be stifled when they are most susceptible to influence, both positive and negative (VonAppen, 2013).

Measuring job performance starts with a thorough job description. Required knowledge, skills, and experience should be outlined in the description, as well as clearly specified job objectives. Going one step further, performance criteria needs to be included when a performance management process will be used to evaluate the employee. When these elements are in place, it will be clear to the employee and the organization when the probationary employee's performance is not meeting the expectation (Cushway, 2008).

To get the most out of an employee, probationary or not, it is important to provide them with constant challenges. The probationary year is a stressful time, but that does

not mean the new employee does need goals to help him or her along the way. Murphy (2014) stresses the importance of ensuring your performance management system is integrated into the process, and be sure you are training and evaluating the employee based on clear and specific performance expectations. Additionally, performance can be expected to increase as the difficulty of the goal increases, all the way up until the true limits of one's abilities are reached.

When an employee is not meeting the desired performance objective, all aspects of the employee's training plan need to be evaluated. Is the performance gap a result of the employee not meeting the standard, or are the expectations and objectives not clearly defined (Smith, 2004)? When a deficiency has been identified, it is important that the employee has a complete understanding of problem and the steps necessary to achieve the desired performance. This can be accomplished by placing the employee in a warning period where he or she is further under the microscope, and both parties know what is at stake. An organization has the authority to dismiss a probationary employee at any time for any reason, but that is not always the answer (Clark, 2012). Probationary firefighter should, however, be expected to demonstrate their best behavior and show determined effort. When a firefighter shows up with an attitude or behavior problem, their employment should be terminated (Smith, 2004).

A significant investment has been made in the probationary firefighter, both monetarily and personally. But that is not an excuse to keep a firefighter that is not meeting the desired standard. If performance measures are not being met when the stakes are high, what does that say about the type of employee he or she will be once protected and no longer on probation (Cowardin, 1999)? Extending probation is an option as well,

but the organization must be careful when this is done. Clear reasons to extend probation include an injury or illness. But if the reason is performance based, the department may open itself up to questions of inconsistent treatment. It must be remembered that the purpose of a probationary period is to determine a time frame to review performance and predict success (Smith, 2004).

If an organization has a contractual disciplinary procedure, then care must be taken to follow the correct steps before an employee is terminated (Dixon, 2012). Many departments classify their probationary firefighters as “at will” employees. But increasingly this concept has been eroded in the courts, and departments have incurred liability if the terminated probationary “at will” employee was wronged in some way. Anytime an employee is fired, the possibility of legal liability exists. At the other end of the spectrum, keeping an underperforming employee out of fear of legal action can have just as hazardous consequences for the department (Smith, 2004).

Throughout the literature review, several similarities emerged. It became apparent that when new employees are brought into an organization, both parties must understand clear objectives and goals. If performance is going to be measured, then expectations need to be explicit. This is especially true for a probationary firefighter, who is being tested and evaluated regularly throughout the year. The findings assisted in creating the data collection instruments by narrowing their focus.

Procedures

Prior to attending the Executive Development course at the National Emergency Training Center (NETC), the researcher conducted informal interviews with members of Bend Fire and Rescue’s management team to get ideas for a possible research paper.

While in attendance at the National Fire Academy, one particular problem began to take shape. By the end of the two-week course, the researcher had developed a problem statement, purpose statement, and established three research questions. A descriptive research method was used to investigate the problem that the Bend Fire Department does not have specific criteria to transition a firefighter from probationary to non-probationary status. While on campus, the Learning Resource Center (LRC) was utilized to gather research material from fire service journals, periodicals, and books. Using the search function in the LRC, topics searched included probationary firefighters, firefighter expectations, and criteria for probationary firefighters.

Upon completion of the Executive Development course, an email was sent to Al Connors (assigned evaluator) with the draft applied research project (ARP) proposal. Approval of the submitted proposal was received on November 26, 2014. The literature review process that was initiated at the LRC was supplemented by gathering material from the downtown branch of the Deschutes Public Library in Bend, OR. Using the library's internal search computer, topics entered included performance management, job descriptions, and measurement of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Additional material was gathered for the literature review by using the online search engine Google. Topics searched using Google included firefighter expectations, managing poor performance, and probationary employees.

On December 10, 2014, the website www.SurveyMonkey.com was used to develop 10 questions that focused on the first research question of the ARP. The questions were written, reviewed by several members outside the Bend Fire Department, and revised into a final draft. On January 15, 2015, all operational personnel in the Bend

Fire Department were sent an email explaining the purpose and intent of the questionnaire, with a link to access it (Appendix A). Because every person in the Bend Fire Department has gone through a probationary period of some kind, all thoughts and experiences were important. The questions were developed to obtain the opinion of the members in the department as it pertains to probationary firefighter testing and evaluation. It is extremely important to identify what the line personnel expect from the probationary firefighters, since the firefighters will be responsible for indoctrinating them into the fire department and will handle the majority of their training. The group consisted of 5 deputy chiefs, 4 battalion chiefs, 18 captains, 18 engineers, and 35** firefighters.

To gather data for the second research question, a fillable form questionnaire was created in Microsoft Word. These 11 questions were emailed individually to a representative of the training division in the 15 largest fire departments in the State of Oregon. To ensure the questionnaire was sent to the correct person, email addresses were verified by phone prior to sending them out. An introductory email was sent to each individual explaining the purpose of the project (Appendix B), and the questionnaire was attached (Appendix C). There were five yes or no questions and six comment boxes in the questionnaire. The questions were structured to gather information on how each fire department tests and evaluates their probationary firefighters. Once complete, the recipient was instructed to save the attachment and send it back electronically.

Face to face interviews were conducted to gather data for the third research question. In February of 2015, the Fire Chief, Deputy Chief of Training and Safety, and a Human Resources representative were interviewed. No specific order for the

interviews was designated. When the interview took place was a simple factor of scheduling availability. Prior to the start of each interview, the purpose of the project was explained and each person was given an opportunity to ask any clarifying questions they may have had. The face-to-face interaction allowed for excellent communication and the ability to ask follow-up questions as necessary. Because the interview questions focused on a probationary firefighter that was failing to perform at an acceptable level, the target audience of the interviews was those that would have to deal with terminating the employment of the firefighter if that was the recommended course of action.

Once the literature review was complete and the data gathering instruments were returned and analyzed, several limitations were noted. The most obvious limitation was attempting to analyze a topic that in many ways is based in subjectivity. A probationary firefighter could theoretically do everything well but not fit into the culture of a particular organization and is therefore let go. But the research was limited to the objective, measureable components of a probationary firefighter.

Another limitation had to do with the questionnaire that was sent out via email to the members of Bend Fire and Rescue. Of the 70 questionnaires sent out, 49 of them were returned, which equals a 70% response rate. A reminder email was sent two weeks after the questionnaire was initially sent. Five weeks later, the number of responses had not changed. The low response rate did not reach the desired 100% from the vested department members, but the results were important nonetheless. The answers expressed showed a majority of the members of Bend Fire and Rescue have similar expectations when it comes to measuring the knowledge, skills, and abilities of probationary firefighters.

Because of the different requirements for firefighters from state to state, the researcher chose to limit sending the questionnaire only to training officers in Oregon. Although it is important to know what neighboring states are doing, for the purpose of addressing this research problem, the researcher decided to stay within state lines. By addressing the email to each training officer individually, the response rate improved. 13 of the 15 questionnaires were completed and returned, an 87% response rate. A reminder email was sent to the two that did not send the questionnaire back with no response. The answers themselves in the questionnaire were limiting as well. Every fire department has different needs and priorities, including probationary firefighter training and evaluation. Just because a department has a program that works for them does not mean it will work in another jurisdiction. Additionally, the wording and the formatting of the questions were a limiting factor. Although several questions allowed for comments, it was difficult to integrate the thoughtful comments into the overall results. The final limitation was the size of the departments that the questionnaire was sent to. There are numerous professional departments in Oregon that weren't questioned simply because of their small size. Many of these organizations have student or volunteer programs that are influential in their paid full-time hiring and training practices.

Results

Of the 70 Bend Fire and Rescue employees that were sent the *Criteria for Transitioning from Probationary to Non-probationary Status* questionnaire, 49 were completed and returned. The intent of the questionnaire was to answer the first research question; what are the minimum knowledge, skills, and abilities required to make the transition from probationary to non-probationary status?

The data gathered from the questionnaire encompassed all operational ranks of Bend Fire and Rescue, from Battalion Chiefs to new firefighters. Question #6 asked respondents to check which evolutions they feel are important for the probationary firefighter to be evaluated on (Table A).

	Demonstrate Proficiency During Probation	Not Applicable for Evaluation	Total Responses
Fire Attack Hose Evolutions	100.00% 44	0.00% 0	44
Water Supply Evolutions	92.50% 37	7.50% 3	40
Wild Land Hose Evolutions	97.73% 43	2.27% 1	44
Ladder Evolutions	100.00% 44	0.00% 0	44
SCBA Donning	89.47% 34	10.53% 4	38
RIT Evolutions	86.11% 31	13.89% 5	36
Equipment Location on Apparatus	92.31% 36	7.69% 3	39
Reach and Treat Evolutions	88.89% 32	11.11% 4	36
Forcible Entry Evolutions	100.00% 42	0.00% 0	42
Ventilation Evolutions	100.00% 41	0.00% 0	41
Vehicle Stabilization (cribbing)	97.56% 40	2.44% 1	41

Table A – Probationary Firefighter Evolutions

The list of evolutions answers the part of the question that has to do with skills and abilities necessary for the firefighter to demonstrate proficiency in during their probationary year.

There was unanimous agreement on four of the eleven evolutions listed. Fire attack hose evolutions, ladders, forcible entry, and ventilation all received a 100% response from those that completed the question. Every evolution listed was selected as

important by at least 85% of the members questioned. Wild land hose evolutions and vehicle stabilization received over 97% of the responses. The lowest priority evolution according to the respondents was RIT evolutions (86.11%). An overwhelming majority of respondents (91.84%) would like to see the probationary firefighter demonstrate proficiency in the evolutions and be evaluated by members of the training division.

To address the issue of knowledge and the probationary firefighter, members were asked several questions. In regards to certifications, question #8 asked which ones are important for the probationary firefighter to have at the end of probation (Table B).

Certification	No. Of Responses	Percentage
Firefighter I	40	81.63%
Firefighter II	19	38.78
NWCG FF II	22	44.9%
NWCG FF I	31	63.27%
Instructor I	13	26.53%
NFPA Driver	37	75.51%

Table B – Certifications at the End of Probation

Written exams were identified by 95.92% (47 responses) of members as being necessary to test knowledge retention. In regards to setting a score required to pass the written test, 15 respondents (31.91%) felt that 70% was an adequate score; whereas 21 members (44.68%) believe an 80% should be the necessary passing score. Ten respondents (21.28%) felt that a minimum passing score was not important. Frequency of the skills evaluations and written tests was addressed in question #7. Quarterly tests received 25 responses (51.02%), monthly tests received 21 responses (42.86%), and an end of probation cumulative test received 8 (16.33%).

To track their progress throughout their probationary year, question #2 asked which method of evaluation would be most beneficial. Of the 46 responses gathered for

this question, 38 respondents (82.61%) would like to have a combination of task books for the probationary firefighter and company officer evaluations of the employee.

The questionnaire sent to Training Officers achieved an 87% response (13 of 15 questionnaires returned). This data-gathering instrument was used to answer the second research question; how will the probationary firefighter's knowledge, skills, and abilities be measured? All 13 returned questionnaires (100%) use written tests to measure knowledge retention in their probationary firefighters, and every department assigned a minimum passing score (the minimum score varied, but no department used a score less than 80%). Additionally, 100% of respondents evaluate the probationary firefighter's fire ground skills during their first year. Task books assist in tracking progress in 11 (84.62%) of the departments questioned.

At the end of the probationary year, 10 of the returned questionnaires (76.92%) reported that their department administered a cumulative test. Five out of the ten (50%) responses to this question reported they administer a cumulative written exam in addition to a series of cumulative practical evolutions. One department (10%) administers a written final, and four departments (40%) only require passing a final fire ground skills evaluation. Various members of the fire department conducted the evaluations, with ten departments (83.33%) using staff other than the firefighter's company officer. Two departments (16.67%) use the probationary firefighter's crew as part of their final evaluation (Table C).

Interviews with key members within the City of Bend were used to gather the data for the third research question; what procedure should be followed if a probationary firefighter fails to meet the minimum knowledge, skills, and abilities? The questions

Evaluator	No. Of Responses	Percentage
Training Officer	4	33.33%
Combination of Training Officer and Chief Officers	3	25%
Chief Officers	3	25%
Company Officer of Probationary FF	2	16.67%

Table C – Skills Evaluators

asked in the interview were designed to gather the opinions of those interviewed regarding how much tolerance they have for an underperforming probationary firefighter.

Once a deficiency has been identified, the Fire Chief believes the employee needs to be made aware of the specific areas that need improvement while in the company of union representation. He also recommends placing that firefighter with a knowledgeable and respected evaluator full time through this challenging period. Increasing the frequency of the evaluations is another important aspect for the underperforming firefighter. The Chief believes that if a retake for a written test is necessary, the firefighter should be allowed one chance to retake a test during the probationary year. If a firefighter fails a fire ground skills evaluation, he believes one retake for the skills portion is sufficient as well. And as long as the fire department has fulfilled their end of the bargain in regards to clear expectations, firefighter training, and fair evaluations, the “at will” probationary employee can be terminated at any time for any reason.

The Human Resources (HR) employee has no direct fire service experience. The fire department is one of many city departments that HR interfaces with. In regards to an underperforming probationary firefighter, she stated the firefighter must be made aware of the problem immediately with the option of having union representation. The root of the issue must be identified; is the firefighter unable to perform or unwilling to perform? Clear expectations must be stated and understood by the probationary firefighter before

that firefighter can be held to any standard. She said it is important to clearly identify what success looks like and to identify the resources needed to achieve a positive course correction for the firefighter. If a probationary firefighter fails a written test, she would defer to the leadership of the department regarding a possible retake. If a retake is allowed, she feels that offering one chance to take it again is a fair number during the probationary year. Many of the answers she gave started with the words “it depends.” Her reasoning for saying that is because she wanted to know more about the probationary firefighter. If the rest of their probationary performance is satisfactory and he / she has had acceptable performance up to this point, then the reason for the deficiency must be identified. She stated it is important to look at the whole picture before focusing too much on a particular test score.

The Deputy Chief of Training and Safety concurred with the other two interviewees in stating the underperforming probationary firefighter needs to know the specific area(s) of deficiency. He went a step further in wanting to find out what methods were used to teach the firefighter and to see if clear expectations had been given. If the probationary firefighter fails a written test, he stated he'd like to see how the rest of the probationary firefighters did on the same test and review the test himself. As for retakes, he was not concerned with how many retakes a firefighter needed, rather has the important material been retained? He pointed out that the written tests we give have not been validated, and as such we cannot be rigid in holding probationary firefighters to a set score. If a firefighter fails to perform a fire ground skill, he would like to look at the process used to teach the skill originally. He favors remedial training and breaking tasks down into their basic parts until success is achieved. He views the “at will” concept as

more of a philosophy than a designation. He trusts our hiring practices and the effort made in the firefighter academy, viewing each probationary firefighter as a unique investment that deserves every opportunity to be successful.

Discussion

The literature review, data collection through questionnaires, and personal interviews were used to help the researcher answer the three research questions. The first question asked what are the minimum knowledge skills and abilities required to make the transition from probationary to non-probationary status? The second question asked how the probationary firefighter's knowledge, skills, and abilities be measured? And the third question was what procedure should be followed if a probationary firefighter fails to meet the minimum knowledge, skills, and abilities?

Almost every fire department places new firefighters on some kind of probation. The length of the probationary period and the requirements during that time are vastly different. There is not a template to follow when it comes to training probationary firefighters. Too many variations exist from one jurisdiction to the next, not to mention different requirements across state lines. But there are many similarities in the probationary period as well. For any employee to be successful, especially the probationary firefighter, clear expectations must be communicated and understood. Without set expectations, the company officer and his or her crew are making the probationary period needlessly challenging and exhausting (Prziborowski, 2012). Nayar (2010) stresses that feedback can be used as an important method to develop new employees rather than being used as a tool for judgment or evaluation. Using feedback in this manner helps build a trusting environment.

The findings in the literature review were consistent in acknowledging the importance of having clear criteria for employees to be successful. Specific criteria were not identified, but that was not a significant finding. The significance lies in understanding what the performance expectation is. Cushway (2008) identifies the importance of identifying what the content of the job actually is. Without this information, standards of performance are difficult to measure. Unacceptable job performance is easy to identify when individual performance does not match the expected output.

The members of Bend Fire and Rescue provided clear data in regards to what they feel a probationary firefighter should be able to perform to a satisfactory standard. The background of the problem identified an organizational frustration with the lack of accountability for the probationary firefighters. Evolutions that received 100% agreement from the operational personnel were fire attack hose pulls, forcible entry, ladders, and ventilation proficiency. The majority of BF&R members would like every probationary firefighter to have the following certifications: Firefighter I, NFPA Driver, and NWCG Firefighter Type I. It should be noted that any certification relating to their EMT level was not addressed in this questionnaire.

Training Officers from across Oregon were questioned regarding how to measure a probationary firefighter's knowledge, skills, and abilities and methods used to do it. Not surprisingly, the results varied greatly on how to measure competency. Even though each department had a different approach to measuring their probationary firefighters, every single one had some type of system in place that met their needs. Many used a combination of written exams and skills evaluations to get an overall picture of the

performance of their probationary firefighters. Cowardin (1999) emphasizes that for every skill a probationary firefighter will have to demonstrate, an evaluation method for that skill must be made available in writing. The probationary firefighter must be evaluated objectively.

When a probationary firefighter is not performing to the desired standard, clear communication becomes very important. These conversations need to be systematic, consistent, and transparent (Hoffman, 2010). Personal interviews with key members in the City of Bend yielded mixed results, although the findings were not surprising to the researcher. The Human Resources representative was oriented heavily to the employee and making sure the probationary firefighter had all the resources necessary to be successful. The Training Chief focused on the instructional process and the method of evaluation. The Fire Chief had the least amount of tolerance for an underperforming probationary firefighter and was the quickest to suggest terminating their employment. As stated by Smith (2004), do not let the fear of litigation paralyze your decision-making. With sound policies, procedures, and guidelines in place, an underperforming employee can be terminated while minimizing the risk of liability to the organization.

By not having a standard method to measure probationary firefighter performance, Bend Fire and Rescue is doing itself a disservice. Once out of the academy, the probationary firefighters no longer have the structure and guidance they were used to. The ever-changing nature of how the remainder of a firefighter's probation is handled has the duty crews confused as far as what to do with their new member. Although every company officer has the best of intentions, there is no uniformity in training and evaluating the probationary firefighters.

Recommendations

As identified in the background section of this research paper, Bend Fire and Rescue has a history of changing methods and processes for training and evaluating its probationary firefighters. What the research and data clearly identify is the need for that to change. BF&R needs to start by clearly defining what success as a probationary firefighter looks like. If success can be defined with clear objectives and measurable outcomes, the process can be repeated with every probationary group. If the process stays the same, the knowledge, skills, and abilities of each probationary firefighter will be similar when the training is complete. This will achieve a major goal of probationary firefighter training; standardization.

It is recommended that BF&R create a list of evolutions that every probationary firefighter, regardless of experience, can demonstrate proficiency in. Once that list is created, the measurement or evaluation tool needs to be identified and published. If time standards are important, then the times need to be established and agreed upon by the union and management. If minimum test scores are going to be part of the expected performance, then the tests need to be written and validated. A clear process also needs to be established in case a probationary firefighter fails to perform to the expected standard, either in a practical scenario or on a written test.

Perhaps most important, it is recommended that BF&R create a list of expectations for the probationary firefighter. This document can be handed out on their first day of employment and can serve as a roadmap to being a successful probationary employee. A firefighter cannot be held accountable for something they didn't know about, and this list of expectations can provide guidance when the probationary

firefighter encounters a new situation or environment. It can be the first introduction to the department's culture, and can give insight to many of the intangible, subjective aspects of being a probationary firefighter in today's fire service.

By following the recommendations listed above, Bend Fire and Rescue will have a clear understanding of every probationary firefighter's knowledge, skills, and abilities. Success for the probationary firefighter will be objective and measurable, thus eliminating many of the unknowns faced today. Progress will be tracked using task books, and benchmarks for completing the books will be clearly communicated. The standardized process for training and evaluating probationary firefighters will help determine if the employee will be successful in the organization. With clearly communicated expectations, probationary firefighters, company officers, and line firefighters will all be on the same page. When the firefighter has met all of the established criteria, it will be easy for Bend Fire and Rescue to transition the firefighter from probationary to non-probationary status.

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Appendix A

Introduction letter for the questionnaire to Bend Fire and Rescue personnel

Hi Everyone,

In case you weren't aware, I'm currently enrolled in the Executive Fire Officer Program. Part of this program is to complete a research paper once a year for the next four years. My topic for this year's paper will be focused on the training of our probationary firefighters, with specific emphasis on what criteria will be used to determine if a firefighter should "pass" probation.

Your responses will help define the minimum knowledge, skills and abilities that we want our probationary firefighters to be responsible for and will help provide direction for standardized post-academy training.

Please follow the link to this 10-question survey. Your responses are anonymous and will be used for data collection. And I know this is a busy time of year for everyone...but sooner is better than later in this case.

Thank you in advance!

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/KN2QXKQ>

Todd Riley

Captain, 301 B

Appendix B

Questionnaire - *Criteria for Transitioning From Probationary to Non-probationary Status***1. Following graduation from the firefighter academy, the training plan for the remainder of a firefighter's probation is:**

- Inadequate; more guidance and evaluation is necessary during the probationary year.
- Adequate; the training fulfills the requirements for a probationary employee.
- Overkill; the probationary employee should be held to the same standard as the rest of the crew.

Other (please specify)

2. During a firefighter's probationary year, tracking their progress is best accomplished by:

- An evaluation by their company officer at the end of each tour.
- Monthly evaluations by their company officer.
- A task book system that covers the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities.
- A combination of a task book and periodic evaluations by their company officer.

Other (please specify)

3. Are written exams necessary to test the probationary firefighter's knowledge and retention?

- Yes
- No

4. If you answered "yes" to question #3, should there be a minimum acceptable passing score?

- Yes, any score above 70% should be considered passing.
- Yes, any score above 80% should be considered passing.
- No, the actual score is not important - knowing where to find the correct answers is.

- Not applicable. I answered no to question #3.
- Other (please specify)

5. Would you like to see our probationary firefighters perform specific fire ground evolutions while being evaluated by the training division?

- Yes
- No

6. If you answered "yes" to question #5, what evolutions would you like the probationary firefighter to be evaluated on? (check all that apply)

	Demonstrate proficiency during probationary year	Not applicable
Fire attack hose evolutions	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Water supply evolutions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wild land hose evolutions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ladder evolutions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SCBA donning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
RIT evolutions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Equipment location on apparatus	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reach and treat evolutions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Forcible entry evolutions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ventilation evolutions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Vehicle stabilization (cribbing)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify)

7. How often should the probationary firefighter be evaluated and/or tested? (more than one may be checked)

- Monthly
- Bimonthly
- Quarterly
- Halfway through probation
- A cumulative final at the end of probation

Other (please specify)

8. At the end of the firefighter's probationary year, what are the minimum certifications the employee should be qualified for? (check all that apply)

- Firefighter 1
- Firefighter 2
- NWCG Firefighter Type 2
- NWCG Firefighter Type 1
- Instructor 1
- NFPA Driver

Other (please specify)

9. Please specify your rank.

- Battalion Chief
- Captain
- Engineer
- Firefighter

10. How long have you worked for Bend Fire?

- 0-5 years

- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 21-25 years
- 26+ years

Appendix C

Bend Fire and Rescue questionnaire responses

1. Probationary firefighter training plan:
 - Inadequate = 22
 - Adequate = 25
 - Overkill = 1
2. Best way to track progress:
 - Company officer evaluation at the end of each shift = 4
 - Monthly company officer evaluation = 4
 - Task books only = 0
 - Combination of task books and evaluations = 38
3. Are written exams necessary:
 - Yes = 47
 - No = 2
4. Minimum acceptable passing score for a written test:
 - 70% = 15
 - 80% = 21
 - Actual score not important = 10
5. Skills demonstration to training division:
 - Yes = 45
 - No = 4
6. What skills should be demonstrated:
 - Fire attack hose evolutions = 44

- Water supply = 40
- Wild land hose evolutions = 44
- Ladders = 44
- SCBA donning = 38
- RIT evolutions = 36
- Equipment location exercises = 39
- Reach and treat = 36
- Forcible entry = 42
- Ventilation techniques = 41
- Vehicle stabilization = 41
- 7. Frequency of evaluations and/or tests:
 - Monthly = 21
 - Bimonthly = 3
 - Quarterly = 25
 - Halfway through probation = 3
 - Cumulative final = 8
- 8. Minimum certifications at the end of probation:
 - Firefighter I = 40
 - Firefighter II = 19
 - NWCG Firefighter Type II = 22
 - NWCG Firefighter Type I = 31
 - Instructor I = 13
 - NFPA Driver = 37

9. Rank:

Battalion Chief = 2

Captain = 14

Engineer = 14

Firefighter = 18

10. Years of service:

0-5 = 6

6-10 = 13

11-15 = 14

16-20 = 2

21-25 = 9

26+ = 5

Appendix D

Introduction letter for the questionnaire to Training Officers in Oregon

Dear (),

My name is Todd Riley and I am a captain for Bend Fire. I am emailing you today because I need your help. Attached to this email is a short questionnaire that won't take too much of your valuable time. The subject of the questionnaire is probationary firefighter training; specifically addressed is how probationary firefighters' knowledge, skills and abilities are measured.

The end goal of this questionnaire is data collection for a research paper, but the information gathered will help build a better program for my department. I have selected fire departments from all over Oregon to get a diverse range of perspectives.

I can assure you that your answers will remain confidential; no names or departments will be associated with the responses in any way. Thank you in advance for your help with this project. And if you ever need anything from Bend Fire, please don't hesitate to contact me at triley@bendoregon.gov. I'd be happy to help in any way that I can.

Sincerely,

Todd Riley

Captain, Bend Fire and Rescue

Station 301-B

Appendix E

Questionnaire – *Measurement of probationary firefighters' knowledge, skills, and abilities*

1. Does your department have specific objectives or benchmarks that the probationary firefighter must meet or achieve to successfully pass their probationary period?
Yes No
2. If the answer to question #1 is yes, please list the objectives or benchmarks.
3. Are your firefighters assigned a task book to complete during their probationary period?
Yes No
4. Do your probationary firefighters take written exams?
Yes No

If the answer to question #4 is yes, please answer questions 5 & 6. If the answer is no, please skip to question #7.

5. How often are the tests administered?
6. Is there a minimum score that must be achieved to pass each test?
Yes No
7. Does your department evaluate the firefighter's fire ground skills during their probationary year?
Yes No

If you answered yes to question #7, please answer questions 8 & 9. If the answer is no, please skip to question #10.

8. How often are these skills evaluated?
9. Who is responsible for evaluating these skills?
10. At the end of their probationary year, do you administer a cumulative test?
Written Practical Both

11. Are there any other methods your fire department uses to measure probationary firefighters' knowledge, skills and abilities?

Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire. I appreciate your efforts and the time you took out of your day to complete it. Please save your responses on this form and email it back to me at triley@bendoregon.gov.

Todd Riley
Captain
Bend Fire and Rescue

Appendix F

Training Officer responses

1. Specific objectives or benchmarks to pass probation:

Yes = 13

No = 0

2. Objectives or benchmarks:

- a. Use the learning objectives from IFTSA Essentials manual that correspond with NFPA 1001
- b. Every month has a different learning objective with a written test and skills assessment at the end of the month. For example, month 1 is apparatus and district familiarization; month 2 is communications and radio systems, SCBA, SOG's, etc.
- c. Monthly topics with a final at the end of the year
- d. Two assessments, one at 6 months and the other at 12 months. Both cover Firefighter I material, SOP's, and department information
- e. Basic fire ground skills, SCBA, and EMS
- f. Monthly modules that correspond to Firefighter I and II material. EMS included
- g. Three-phase approach to probationary firefighter training, each building on the knowledge presented in the previous phase
- h. Firefighter I and II skills, as well as paramedic proficiency demonstrated in drills, actual calls, and written and practical tests

- i. Numerous benchmarks throughout the academy, including timed evolutions for hose, ladders, hydrants, SCBA, physical endurance, etc.
 - j. Four modules for the FTEP program – firefighting, driving, EMS, and wild land. Each module has a corresponding task book with benchmarks built in
 - k. EMS protocol test and the completion of a firefighter task book, usually within six months
 - l. Task books, written tests, and skills evaluations for majority of firefighter related evolutions
3. Assigned task books:
- Yes = 11
- No = 1
- Blank = 1
4. Written exams given:
- Yes = 13
- No = 0
5. Frequency of written tests:
- a. Weekly with a midterm and a final
 - b. Once a month
 - c. Monthly
 - d. At 6 months and 11 months
 - e. Every other month, rotating between written tests and practical skills evaluations.
 - f. Weekly (academy)

- g. Once a month
 - h. At the end of each module – quarterly
 - i. Quarterly
 - j. Weekly with a cumulative final (academy)
 - k. Twice per month
6. Minimum passing score for written test:
- Yes = 12
- No = 0
- Blank = 1
7. Fire ground skills evaluated:
- Yes = 13
- No = 0
8. Frequency of skills evaluation:
- a. Evaluated only in the academy
 - b. Once following the academy
 - c. Quarterly after the academy
 - d. At the end of each module – four modules total
 - e. Monthly
 - f. At the end of each phase – three phases
 - g. Monthly
 - h. At the end of each phase – three phases
 - i. Every two months
 - j. Monthly

- k. Monthly
 - l. Two times. The first is an individual skills evaluation; the second is part of an engine company
9. Skills evaluator:
- a. Training officer
 - b. Training officer with two other company officers
 - c. Battalion chief and a union representative
 - d. Training chief, operations chief, and in-house evaluators
 - e. Training division staff
 - f. Training officer
 - g. Battalion chiefs
 - h. Training division staff, their battalion chief, and their company officer
 - i. Company officer
 - j. Training staff with input from their battalion chief and company officer
 - k. Company officer
 - l. Chief officers only
10. Cumulative test:
- Written = 1
- Practical = 4
- Written and practical = 5
- Blank = 3
11. Other methods to measure probationary firefighter knowledge, skills, and abilities:

- a. Task performance evaluations
- b. On the job evaluations
- c. Impressions by the evaluators, confidence, and knowledge in the presentation
- d. Daily observation reports (DOR's)
- e. Currently developing performance benchmarks
- f. The paramedics ride as a third on the ambulance for four shifts to evaluate EMS skills; daily observation reports (DOR's) also completed
- g. Daily observation reports (DOR's) as well as monthly personnel evaluations
- h. Daily observation reports (DOR's)

Appendix G

Personal interview questions

City of Bend Interview with _____

What procedure should be followed if a probationary firefighter fails to meet the minimum knowledge, skills and abilities?

1. An underperforming probationary firefighter has been identified. What steps should be taken to assist this employee?

2. If a probationary firefighter scores below the set standard for a written test, what actions should be taken?

3. How many retakes would you allow during probation?

4. During a skills evaluation on the training ground, the probationary firefighter fails to perform to our acceptable department standard. What actions should be taken?

5. With regards to remedial training, how many opportunities to succeed should we give the probationary employee?

6. Probationary employees are considered "at will" for their first year. Is this designation sufficient to terminate a probationary firefighter for any reason at any time without any (or minimal) supporting documentation?

Appendix H

Interview responses from Fire Chief Larry Langston

Interviewed on February 25, 2015 at 1000 in his office at 1212 SW Simpson Ave. Bend, OR 97702

1. An underperforming probationary firefighter has been identified. What steps should be taken to assist this employee?

“First, we need to bring in the employee, a human resources representative, and a union representative. The firefighter needs to know that a deficiency has been identified. Specific examples or instances need to be pointed out. The frequency of evaluations needs to be increased, and if there was more than one person filling out the evaluations, we need to make it just one evaluator who is respected and has a history of competence when dealing with this sort of thing. This person needs to be knowledgeable and have the courage to make difficult decisions. If there are no signs of improvement, I do not think we should prolong the process, as long as he or she has been given sufficient opportunities to succeed. In my experience, employee performance issues are usually EMS related.”

2. If a probationary firefighter scores below the set standard for a written test, what actions should be taken?

“Give the firefighter time to prepare and give him or her a chance to retake the test. I think it should cover the same material, but it should be a different test.”

3. How many retakes would you allow during probation?

“I think one retake during probation is fair. This is the time when the employee should be at their best, so I have little tolerance for someone who isn’t succeeding as a probationary firefighter.”

4. During a skills evaluation on the drill ground, the probationary firefighter fails to perform to our acceptable department standard. What actions should be taken?

“Give him or her time to prepare to be successful in the evolution, and offer a retake to demonstrate proficiency in the skill.”

5. With regards to remedial training, how many opportunities to succeed should we give the probationary employee?

“One.”

6. Probationary employees are considered “at will” for their first year. Is this designation sufficient to terminate a probationary firefighter for any reason at any time without any (or minimal) supporting documentation?

“Yes, I believe it is; as long as we have fulfilled our end of the bargain.”

Appendix I

Interview responses from Deputy Chief of Training and Safety Mark Taylor

Interviewed on February 27, 2015 at 1145 in the Training Center at 63377 Jamison Rd.

Bend, OR 97701

1. An underperforming employee has been identified. What steps should be taken to assist this employee?

“We would need to bring in the firefighter and be specific with him or her in identifying the deficiency. I would like to know what they are being measured against. Is this person having trouble in other areas, or is this an isolated event? What method was used to teach the skill originally? Have clear expectations been given and were they understood by the firefighter?”

2. If a probationary firefighter scores below the set standard for a written test, what actions should be taken?

“I would like to review the exam as well as the other scores from the rest of the probationary group. I would like to look at what was taught and how the material was delivered. I would look at the bigger picture and evaluate the firefighter’s general performance.”

3. How many retakes would you allow during probation?

“I would like to stay flexible on this issue, simply because our tests have no been validated. And are the tests that are being given relevant to the material that was taught?”

4. During a skills evaluation on the training ground, the probationary firefighter fails to perform to our acceptable department standard. What actions should be taken?

“We would need to sit down with the employee and find out what the underlying issue is. We know that at one point they were able to complete the task successfully. We could break down the task into parts and do remedial training to get them to a point of success.”

5. With regards to remedial training, how many opportunities to succeed should we give the probationary employee?

“This depends on the particular skill and their experience. It is our responsibility to provide the tools that will make them successful. I would use discretion on this issue and not stick to a particular number.”

6. Probationary employees are considered “at will” for their first year. Is this designation sufficient to terminate a probationary firefighter for any reason at any time without any (or minimal) supporting documentation?

“The ‘at will’ term is more of a philosophy than a designation, although once off probation, a firefighter resembles a tenured professor. It’s hard to terminate a firefighter. But it’s really an issue of credibility for the fire department. Every firefighter is an investment, and we need to do our part to make them successful.”

Appendix J

Interview responses from Human Resources employee Shannon Williams

Interviewed on February 25, 2015 at 1330 in the Training Center at 63377 Jamison Rd.

Bend, OR 97701

1. An underperforming employee has been identified. What steps should be taken to assist this employee?

“There is not a one size fits all approach to help a struggling employee. It depends on what the deficiencies include. But it’s important to treat the probationary employee the same as any other employee. What we really need to figure out is the employee unwilling or unable to do what is being asked. A course correction needs to be identified, as well as the resources needed to achieve success. A timeline needs to be established to measure effectiveness. I would include the union in all the conversations. The deficiencies need to be clearly communicated to the firefighter.”

2. If a probationary firefighter scores below the set standard for a written test, what actions should be taken?

“There needs to be a counseling session with the firefighter. Human resources would defer to the fire department’s leadership team on this, because much of this deals with the culture of the organization. A retake should be offered. I would also like to know if this is part of a pattern or trend for the firefighter.”

3. How many retakes would you allow during probation?

“I would allow one, but it depends...how are they doing with all the other aspects of their probationary period?”

4. During a skills evaluation on the training ground, the probationary firefighter fails to perform to our acceptable department standard. What actions should be taken?

“Were the criteria for success clearly identified? Was the employee given clear performance expectations? We would need to set a course correction for the firefighter to achieve success, including additional training.”

5. With regards to remedial training, how many opportunities to succeed should we give the probationary employee?

“We should allow one retake during probation.”

6. Probationary employees are considered “at will” for their first year. Is this designation sufficient to terminate a probationary firefighter for any reason at any time without any (or minimal) supporting documentation?

“Technically, the answer is yes. But in reality, the answer is actually no. We need to treat the probationary employee the same as an employee who is not on probation. I strongly urge the fire department to partner with human resources anytime there is a firefighter who is struggling. We can help with fact finding and the investigation to make sure nothing is being left out and reduce the city’s liability.”