



CALIFORNIA FIRE CHIEFS ASSOCIATION OPERATIONS

Succession Planning for the Next Generation of California Fire Service Operations Chiefs

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Research Brief Presented by:

California Fire Chiefs Association Operations Section Working Group

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ABSTRACT

From December 18, 2018, to January 8, 2019, the California Fire Chiefs Association (CalChiefs) Operations Section surveyed 145 current and past Chief Fire Officers from more than 93 California fire departments to determine the preparedness and readiness levels of newly promoted Operations Chiefs. The results of this study indicate that while most newly promoted Officers felt “moderately” to “very prepared” to handle the incident command responsibilities of the position, fewer felt ready to handle the administrative responsibilities, workload, and the overall demands of the job. Further analyses indicate four main areas of opportunity for enhanced professional development: 1) human resources and legal issues, 2) administrative duties and workload management, 3) interpersonal skills and stakeholder relations, and 4) budget, finance, and contracts for service.

BACKGROUND

The California Fire service is losing a generation of experienced Chief Officers to retirement, leaving a significant gap in industry knowledge, field experience, and operational know-how. To address this void, the CalChiefs Operations Section aims to identify and quantify the necessary critical skills and professional development needs of future industry leaders. The following research describes the first step in this process.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a cross-sectional study design and a web-based questionnaire to survey a sample (n=145) of California Fire Chiefs with experience in fire department operations. Data were collected from December 18, 2018 to January 8, 2019 using the online survey platform SurveyMonkey. The sample was drawn from email distribution lists maintained by CalChiefs Operations and Training sections. A total of 177 respondents acknowledged receiving study recruitment materials and 145 returned completed questionnaires.

Questionnaire content was developed based on input from the Operations Section working group during the September 2018 CalChief's annual conference in Sacramento, California, and consisted of both open and closed-ended questions. Questionnaires asked respondents: basic demographic questions, including years of experience and rank; agency specific questions, including department size, population served, and level of government; and a series of questions designed to measure professional development and Chief Officer position preparedness. Final questionnaire content was pretested and pilot-

tested on a convenience sample of 12 fire service professionals to confirm instrument validity.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

The final analytical sample was well balanced on rank, fire service experience, and years of management level experience in fire department operations. Ranks of respondents ranged from Fire Captain to retired Fire Chief with most respondents currently serving as Division, Deputy, or Assistant Chiefs for their respective agencies. Fire service experience ranged from 9 to 50 years (average = 28.4 years) while management level operations experience ranged from 1 to 36 years (average = 10 years). More than 93 fire departments were represented in this study, including special district, city, county, state, federal, and tribal fire agencies.

Preparedness Levels of New Chief Officers

Study respondents were asked how prepared they felt when first promoted into a management level position with operational oversight. Using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1 - unprepared” to “5 - very prepared,” respondents reported administrative, command, and overall preparedness levels. Results from these questions indicate that, while most respondents felt “moderately” to “very” prepared for the command duties of the position (mean = 3.40) (see Figure 1), fewer reported the same level of preparedness for the administrative responsibilities of the position (mean = 2.79) (see Figure 2).

Figure 1.

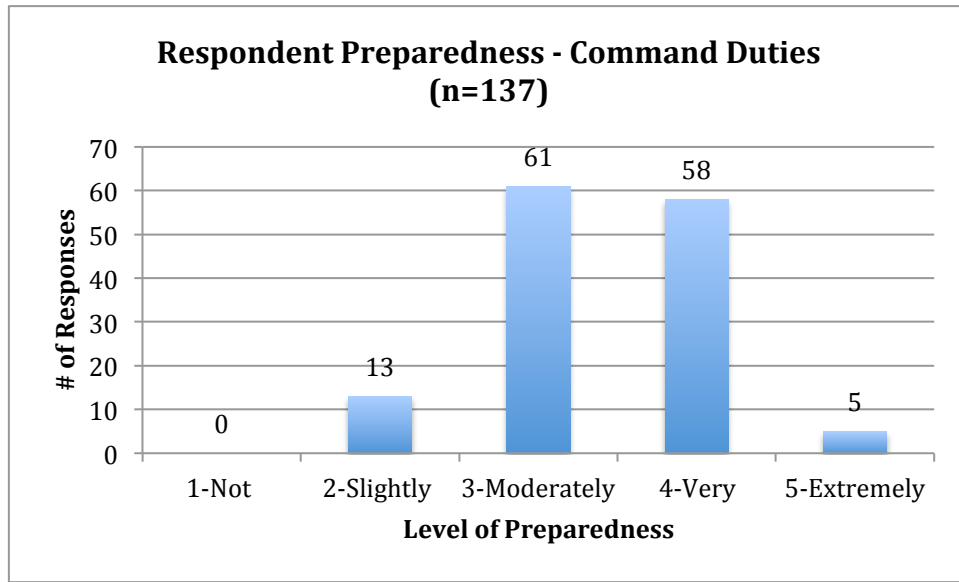
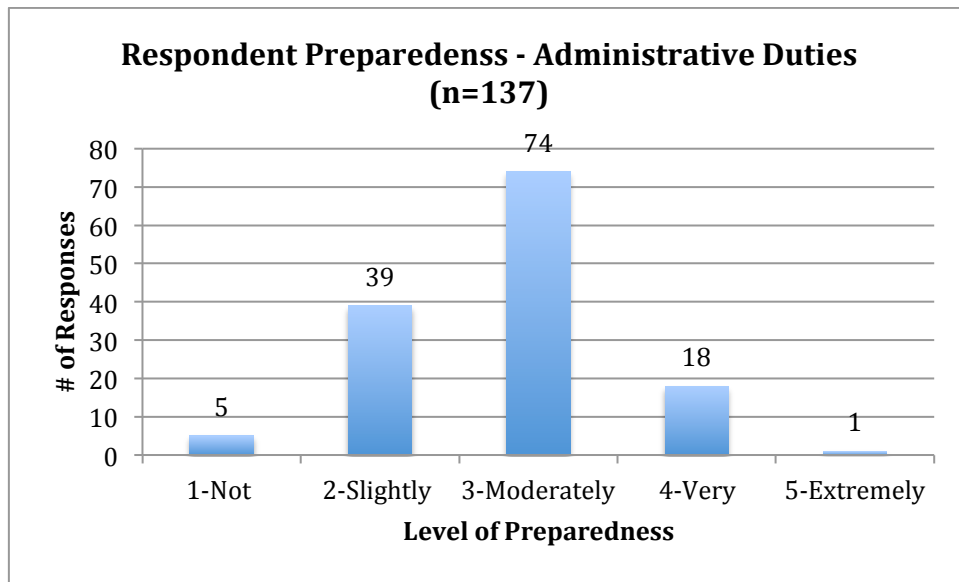


Figure 2.



Agency Prerequisites and Support for Professional Development

Respondents were asked whether their agencies required or supported higher education, engaged in formal succession planning or employee professional development,

and supported ICS training through single resource assignments (see Table 1). Only 34% of respondents reported working for an agency that requires an undergraduate degree for management level work, yet more than half reported receiving some form of agency support for undergraduate education. Only 40% of respondents reported working for agencies that have formal professional development plans or programs, but a majority (70%) reported receiving training support for ICS level single resource assignments.

Table. 1 Agency requirements, guidance, and support

	Response	n	Percent
<u>Does your agency?</u>			
Require a Bachelors Degree to work in Mgmt. level operations?	Yes	49	34%
	No	94	66%
Provide support for undergraduate or graduate level education?	Yes	79	56%
	No	59	42%
	Don't Know	3	2%
Have a professional development plan or program?	Yes	56	40%
	No	82	58%
	Don't Know	3	2%
Support ICS single resource assignments?	Yes	99	70%
	Somewhat	33	23%
	No	9	6%
<u>Prior to promoting to an Ops Mgmt. position, did your agency?</u>			
Provide training to develop Mgmt. level operational skills?	Yes	72	53%
	No	64	47%
Provide training on fire department cooperative agreements?	Yes	41	30%
	No	94	70%
Groom you for a Mgmt. level position in operations?	Yes	96	67%
	No	47	33%

Professional Development Opportunities

A series of open-ended questions were asked to determine the specific professional development needs of study respondents. Of those responding (n=143), 24% reported needs in human resources and legal issue training, 22% in administrative duties and workload management, 18% in relationships, interpersonal skills, and political skills, and 18% in budgeting, finance, and cooperative agreements.

Human resources management and legal considerations

The most common areas of training noted in this category were personnel management, the discipline process, human resources responsibilities, the Firefighter Bill of Rights, and general labor law.

General administrative duties and overall workload

Respondents in this category overwhelmingly reported a significant increase in workload upon promoting to a management level position. Common responses included: “An increase in volume of work,” “significant increase in administrative load and responsibility,” “a disruption in work/life balance,” and “never clocking out of the administrative role.”

Relationships, interpersonal communications, and politics

The need for positive labor-management relationship was the most frequently cited challenge in this category. The bulk of respondents indicated a need to respond more effectively to labor, and to develop better relationships with labor leadership.

Budget, finance, and accounting

A lack of understanding of agency budgetary processes was the single most cited deficiency in this category.

DISCUSSION

While 56% respondents reported working for California fire departments that support higher education for Chief Officers, and 67% reported working for agencies that actively groom personnel for management level operations positions, the average respondent felt less than moderately prepared for the administrative responsibilities of the job. This discrepancy highlights an unmet need in employee development and preparedness for new California Chief Officers.

These findings highlight the need for increased Chief Officer professional development, but do not specifically identify the means to get there. Possible reasons for these deficiencies may include a lack of quality in higher education programs, insufficient industry certification training programs, and/or a lack of agency specific professional development and mentorship.

To help answer these questions, a focus group consisting of California fire service leaders should convene to determine the specific needs of future fire service Operations Chiefs.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information revealed by this study, many newly promoted California Fire service leaders feel under-prepared for the move to management, where responsibilities change significantly. With record setting catastrophic fires impacting the State, more attention should be paid to Chief Officer professional development and focus placed on identifying the particular administrative, workload, and interpersonal skills needed for individual and organizational success. With a generation of experienced

Chief Officers hitting retirement age, the need to prepare the next generation of California fire service Chief Officers could not be greater.