



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## **Roadmap to Success**

If you were going to take a trip to somewhere you had never been before, what would you use to make sure you got there? You would probably ask someone who had been there before. You might get a roadmap or an atlas and look for directions to your destination. Or you might go to AAA and get the route map. You would not just get in your car and drive in a general direction, hoping to arrive on time.

When you first entered the fire service, did you have any idea how you were going to become the fire chief or chief officer? Did you have a road map? Probably when you came on board you were given an orientation as a probationary firefighter and, if you are like most of us, you acquired knowledge of promotional opportunities and the prerequisites for those promotions in an evolutionary process as you rose through the ranks. Very few of us came to work that first day having decided we were going to become chief of the department.

I wonder how many of you made false starts or decisions that ultimately became counter-productive. In talking to many individuals who were pursuing promotional opportunities, I have sensed a frustration on the part of many candidates regarding “not knowing what the rules are” for promotion. In most cases, the preparation for promotion has consisted of gathering intelligence from those who already had gone through the promotional process and, in some cases; the information was obsolete or inaccurate.

Many fire departments are beginning to recognize that they have a definite responsibility to inform their *members of career development criteria*. *One concept developed to carry out this responsibility is called a “career development guide” (CDG)*. It is like a “roadmap” that allows a member of an individual firefighting agency to understand where he fits into the context of the department and how best to prepare for any upward mobility in that organization.

The career development guide concept has its advantages for both the individual and the fire department. For the department, implementation of a CDG program consolidates and clarifies a lot of issues relative to the succession planning of the organization.

Succession planning literally means the system utilized in an organization to assure there will be competent, well-trained individuals to replace those competent, well-trained individuals as they retire from that organization. Failure to have a succession-planning program in an agency often results in obsolescence occurring at the upper levels of the organization.

The advantage to the individual is very simple. The presence of a CDG eliminates surprises. It puts all the information in one location for an individual to review in plotting his course of action for the next five to ten years of his life.



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In either case, the organization as a whole, benefits. Historically, the information regarding promotions and the promotional requirements has been available to all the participants, but the information is often fragmented and disjointed. In some cases, the information is generated by the personnel department. In others, it is generated within the fire department. In some cases, the information comes out over an extended period of time and unless one creates his own filing system, pieces of the material can get lost.

What does a career development guide look like? The concept started approximately ten years ago in fire departments in several parts of the country. One of the leaders in this concept was the Phoenix (Arizona) Fire Department. Since then, CDGs have emerged in many fire departments but essentially all contain the same elements and roughly the same information. They take on the appearance of a “book.” Several have been developed with very nice covers and bindings that allow them to become a reference work for members of the department. The contents are as follows:

1. A compilation of all the job descriptions for positions in the organization.
2. A compilation of the prerequisites and promotional requirements for achieving those positions in the organization.
3. An analysis of the career paths available in the organization.
4. An overview of the promotional and testing procedures utilized by the organization.
5. Information regarding training and educational opportunities in the agency.
6. A glossary of term definitions.

One of the issues to be faced in CDGs initially is the fact that the adoption is a joint program between the labor organizations and the management of a fire department. Therefore, the items listed above require a certain amount of research to assure the information being put into the CDG is accurate and in conformance with memorandums of understanding and other forms of labor management agreements.

Generally, job descriptions are already available in most organizations. Their use in the career development guide is similar, but different. Most job descriptions change very infrequently. If the job description contains some general requirements, these often get translated into the testing criteria used to evaluate candidates for that position. Therefore, the job descriptions are transferred from the job description filing system into the career development guide as a form to clarify a developmental plan for the potential candidate. It is important that, when job descriptions are placed in a CDG, they be the latest, most accurate, up-to-date descriptions adopted by the entity. In working with different fire departments I have had the experience of interviewing candidates who have prepared for jobs with old job descriptions. They took their information from file cabinets or from old copies that had been posted on bulletin boards. The career development guide makes sure that the latest job descriptions are posted and placed into context.



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The promotional flyers announcing examinations usually contain specific information on minimum requirements to take that exam. The CDG places these into context after the job description so that the position requirements can be compared with the testing requirements. This is especially important if the job requirements include educational or experiential minimums.

Probably one of the most important elements of the CDG is the overview of the testing procedures. There is a tendency for people to overreact to this information being offered in a CDG. In discussing this concept with many chief officers there is a general resistance to write down the testing requirements for fear the requirements will change and there will be conflict between the labor and management organizations. This area of a CDG is not intended to be a rigid description of exactly how things are going to go on any given test. Instead, it is an overview of the processes used in testing. It may or may not include sections on how to study for examinations, how to prepare for oral examinations, a general overview of written examinations, assessment center processes, certification criteria, and may even include information on probationary periods. This section of the CDG is helpful to the candidate who has never taken an examination. It is designed to eliminate ambiguity and anxiety. If prepared in an open, very general fashion it is a fair exposition of what all candidates are expected to see when they enter the testing process.

It does not contain specific information on the types of questions one might find on a written examination or the specific questions or exercises one might find on an oral board or assessment lab. It is designed to be preparatory to the examination - not a description of the actual examination.

Many career development guides contain additional information on accessing the training and education opportunities of the organization. The purpose of this section of the document is to keep individual members aware of what is required to be reimbursed for participation in educational opportunities, how to access educational incentive programs, and how to relate both of these to the promotional processes and the minimum job requirements contained in the job description.

The glossary and definition section of the CDG is a listing of terms individuals may need as a part of the vocabulary to understand certification, study habits, or testing criteria.

One thing to recognize about this CDG concept is that it is a guide, not a cast-in-stone document. If an organization is to evolve and make changes to keep up with the state of the art, it is common for job requirements to change. The development of a CDG is not intended to inhibit that process. In fact, the presence of a CDG may highlight the existence of inconsistencies between written documents and actual practices in an organization. It does require a lengthy process for development. One does not merely go through the file cabinet, copy various documents, put them together and call it a career development guide.



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In most cases a careful analysis of the system by at least one staff member is required, with assistance from the labor organizations, the personnel department, and in some cases the city attorney and ultimate adoption of the CDG by the organization through council or commission action. A CDG that can be put together quickly may contain inconsistencies and inaccuracies. It is far better for the organization to take time to develop a comprehensive career development guide that is understood by both labor and management.

Having a career development guide helps personnel help themselves. It helps your organization to focus on its future and it provides incentive for individuals to achieve. It seems like those three objectives would make the promulgation of a career development guide desirable for any organization.