

# A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRIMER

What public safety communications management and frontline staff should know about career planning.

By Christine Massengale

**F**or the employee who has one undecided foot on the career ladder and one foot firmly on the ground, it is important for an agency to understand what will draw those employees up the ladder. However, more importantly, what do employees need to know, and how do they prepare to take the first step? In this article, we consider:

- Why should an employee consider moving up the career ladder: why *bother* with the additional responsibility, longer hours or potential after-hours/on-call status?
- How should an employee prepare for moving up the career ladder: what skills are most important, and how do they prepare for promotional consideration?

In the years prior to widespread use of social media and other professional networking platforms, interview questions and promotional assessment processes were often closely guarded secrets by managers and hiring panels. When asked the age-old question, “Where do you see yourself in five years,” the typical response was to strive for some level of leadership or upper management. “I want

your job” was the cheeky response of many eager and ambitious applicants.

Hiring managers are not only faced with a diminished applicant pool for entry-level positions but also a shift in priorities for existing employees and a waning interest in promotional opportunities. Professional development and career ladder growth are no longer the only carrot for employees. This makes it imperative for employers to understand their employees’ priorities. For the employee who wants to advance, it means marketing themselves in ways that highlight their strengths and ability to adapt to a leadership role while outlining ways they can enhance work culture, bring fresh ideas and the expectations they have for their work environment.

In the changing post-pandemic employment landscape, a few trends have emerged that seem to have real staying power, and agencies are realizing they must adapt to this shift in the workforce’s mindset. Public safety communications jobs require private sector expertise in emerging technologies, are more emotionally demanding and stressful while maintaining entry-level minimum standards and stagnant public sector pay, often with limited opportunities for advancement.



A recent article by Mark C. Perna, published in Forbes, “3 Reasons for the Coming Leadership Deficit — And How To Fix It,” cites a 2023 Randstad Workmonitor study that states over a third of employees indicate they never want to become a manager. Other statistics in the study note a starker reality for the looming deficit in future leadership roles — that work-life balance now ranks equally with pay for employees’ top priorities at 93%.<sup>1,2</sup>

Why is this statistic a stark reality for public safety communications? Because, like other 24/7 service-related jobs, the job requires shift work, working weekends and holidays, and time away from home. The bottom line, according to the study, indicates that 39% of the workforce is happy right where they are and that stability is more important than upward movement. This is especially true if it draws them further away from home and family and the ability to live their life outside of work.

So why would anyone want to move onward and upward? Likely, for a combination of the same reasons as always, both intrinsic and extrinsic, although the order of priorities may have shifted to achieving personal goals, effecting positive change in an organization, more pay or better retirement benefits, and generally to make a difference for both themselves and the organization. What has changed are the things employees are no longer willing to sacrifice for career



advancement. Employees do not want to sacrifice time with family, mental health and personal values. Those are priorities that should not be sacrificed, so it is important for agencies to find ways to provide the work-life balance that employees need to remain productive, engaged, promotable and retainable.

For the employee thinking of moving ahead, it's important to understand that a combination of skill sets, institutional knowledge, experiences and attitude is still what employers value. Many agencies have a promotional matrix or assessment that may consider tenure, but employees who want to move ahead shouldn't depend on their tenure as the deciding factor. It isn't an endurance race after all, or at least it shouldn't be the only deciding factor. Otherwise, one could simply sit back and wait one's turn, while the newest employees would have no hope of advancing for many years to come.

How does one develop those valued skill sets (and what are they)? One area in the Randstad study indicates that 72% of employees put a high priority on training, which secures job stability.<sup>3</sup> Start with the attitude of a growth mindset and an active rather than passive approach to learning and understanding the world in which you work. Employees gain insight into the agency's ecosystem and an ability to see the bigger picture by understanding others' roles and how they fit within the organization and by acquiring knowledge about the systems.

Ask questions about the phone, radio and CAD systems. When a user experiences an issue, what is the process for troubleshooting the fix? What is the system network? Who are the carriers, vendors and service providers? Employees can gain institutional knowledge simply by observing and asking questions about these processes — even though they may not be their job or responsibility.

Engage in industry activities such as volunteering for committee work or learning about legislative, governance, funding and other issues at the local, regional and national level. Research minimum training standards and the progress of your agency's status with emerging technology, NG9-1-1 implementation, continuity of operations plans and policy development.

Often, it is difficult for line-level employees to find time to learn while on the job. If the agency can support attendance at industry training, conferences and other venues, take advantage of these opportunities to

learn and network with others. Visit vendor booths and learn about other products, even products you don't understand or envision your agency using. Conferences and vendor halls can provide employees with invaluable experiences in talking to other professionals, learning about new technology and exercising interpersonal soft skills by navigating crowds and meeting new people.

Soft skills are highly coveted for leadership roles. Being proficient in a job does not mean an employee has the necessary soft skills to navigate management of those same roles. Doing the job well and leading others to do the job well is not the same thing. It is worth noting that many employees are great informal leaders — they can be persuasive and personable, well-liked by their peers and easily followed. It comes as a surprise if these newly promoted employees then struggle with the realities of being in a leadership role, especially without proper training, mentoring and onboarding.

Leaders may lead naturally, but anyone worth promoting benefits from instruction in necessary skill sets, such as interpersonal communications, managing conflict, decision making, negotiating and motivating others. Other skills and knowledge sets that must be developed include effective written and oral communication, presentation skills and social skills such as the ability to instruct and persuade others.

There are plenty of free resources and activities employees can take advantage of to develop these skills for themselves: self-guided courses online, reading articles and books, role-playing how to respond to work scenarios with friends and colleagues, asking questions and practicing active listening, exercising “what-if” solutions — i.e., what if I was the supervisor who had to handle this difficult situation? Or what if I had to find a solution to an on-going issue?

Many centers provide employees with opportunities to participate in job and recruiting fairs, and public education events. For telecommunicators who are mostly heard but seldom seen, public speaking engagements build confidence and a sense of pride in the agency. By taking advantage of these activities, employees can gain invaluable insight into the public's perception of the job they do, learn how to project a confident, professional demeanor in the public arena, and develop the ability to articulate the agency's mission and values to others.

This helps employees internalize these messages for themselves.

Self-assessment or self-evaluation is often difficult. It's hard to look at oneself objectively, so it may be helpful to ask a trusted colleague to provide insights about your areas for improvement. Conducting the same assessment of others may also prove helpful. What traits or characteristics do you value and like or dislike in leaders or managers? Write some sample promotional interview questions, then ask others these questions and think about their responses. Write your own answers to the questions and research the best responses. Consider whether you would promote yourself — and if not, why not? If possible, ask to participate in new employee interviews. This can help you recognize desirable traits in prospective employees (and, in turn, desirable traits for yourself).

Writing a resume gives you an opportunity to summarize your level of expertise and experiences, highlight your strengths, and identify areas you'd like to develop further. Research sample resumes and keep your resume current. Freshen it up when you learn a new skill or take on additional responsibilities. Find free resume writing workshops for critiques and constructive feedback.

When mapping a career move, it is also worth considering lateral professional growth. Some positions may have a similar pay scale or rank but very different roles and responsibilities. An employee looking for a change in duties may want to explore training positions, technology or other administrative duties. These positions within the organization may also provide an employee a better fit for the work-life balance they need.

Leaders must think strategically rather than tactically. Promotable employees can think through complex problems and offer viable solutions to existing leadership rather than just identifying the problem and bringing it to someone else with the expectation that they will fix it. Strategic thinking requires the employee to recognize issues beyond what directly impacts them and to see different perspectives, organizational and governance limitations, and long-ranging solutions that will set the organization up for success even after they move on or retire.

There are many clichés about observing versus participating, such as being the change you want to see, you can't win if you don't play and if you don't vote you can't

complain. The point is those who want to see strong and effective leaders in their future may have to be the ones who fulfill the role. Whether choosing stability by staying in the same role or seeking promotional opportunities, developing oneself professionally enhances job satisfaction, improves morale, keeps skills relevant and improves the organization, making it a better place to work and a place where others want to work with you. ●

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**REFERENCES**

- 1 Perna, Mark C. "3 Reasons For The Coming Leadership Deficit — And How To Fix It" *Forbes*. March 12, 2024. [www.forbes.com/sites/markperna/2024/03/12/3-reasons-for-the-coming-leadership-deficit-and-how-to-fix-it/?sh=7e64fdd44373](https://www.forbes.com/sites/markperna/2024/03/12/3-reasons-for-the-coming-leadership-deficit-and-how-to-fix-it/?sh=7e64fdd44373)
- 2 Randstad. *Workmonitor 2024*. <https://www.randstad.com/workmonitor/>
- 3 Ibid.

**CDE EXAM #67611**

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A recent study indicates that which of the following values (besides pay) is most important to employees:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Recognition and importance of job titles</li> <li>b. Work-life balance</li> <li>c. Work environment (comfort level)</li> <li>d. Retirement benefits</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. The same study indicates what percentage of employees have no interest in becoming a manager:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Over a third (39%)</li> <li>b. Over half (59%)</li> <li>c. Most (93%)</li> <li>d. Nearly three-quarters (72%)</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. What are two important values for updating a resume?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Highlighting strengths and identifying areas that need further development</li> <li>b. Making it look more modern and eye-catching</li> <li>c. Providing more detail and embellishing minor accomplishments</li> <li>d. None of these</li> </ol> </li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. What is an important soft skill that leaders should develop?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Typing</li> <li>b. Spelling</li> <li>c. Managing conflict</li> <li>d. Mapping network paths</li> </ol> </li> <li>5. Institutional knowledge of agency systems might consist of a basic understanding of:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Wiring diagrams inside control panels</li> <li>b. The vendors and service providers for the CAD system</li> <li>c. The radio network’s programming system keys</li> <li>d. The phone system configuration for call routing</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. In the Randstad study, training was highly valued as a way for employees to maintain:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Job stability</li> <li>b. Morale</li> <li>c. Satisfaction</li> <li>d. Interest</li> </ol> </li> <li>7. Lateral growth opportunities may provide employees with other ways to develop professionally.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. True</li> <li>b. False</li> </ol> </li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Promotional assessments may evaluate an employee’s:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Institutional knowledge</li> <li>b. Experience</li> <li>c. Combination of skill sets</li> <li>d. Attitude</li> <li>e. All of the above</li> <li>f. None of the above</li> </ol> </li> <li>9. Two ways to do a self-assessment of your own leadership traits are:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Look in the mirror and read your annual review</li> <li>b. Ask a colleague to provide insights about you and write promotional interview questions then answer them for yourself</li> <li>c. Write a short autobiography and review resumes</li> <li>d. Draw up a list of problems in your center and identify who can solve those problems</li> </ol> </li> <li>10. Why do employees most likely seek promotions?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. They want greater responsibility</li> <li>b. They want the overtime</li> <li>c. To make a difference for both them and the organization</li> <li>d. They enjoy dealing with complex employee problems and conflicts</li> </ol> </li> </ol> |
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