

Promotion Time

10 Questions to Ask Yourself Before Taking the Plunge

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The time for promotional examinations at your department is drawing near. Ordinarily, people will form into three distinct groups: those who will take the test, those who won't and those who are undecided. Although this article may be of some value to members in all three groups, it is written primarily for those who are undecided. They will be making a very important decision in the near future, but where can they find criteria upon which to base this decision? Unfortunately, little attention has been given to how to determine whether or not to take a test for promotion.

In an attempt to provide some guidance in this area, this article poses 10 soul searching questions. These questions should be answered with absolute honesty, following careful thought and introspection. Although this article is written with promotion from officer to sergeant in mind, certain points will apply equally well to promotions for higher ranks.

Do you really want to be a supervisor?

If you are undecided about taking the test, you are really undecided about whether or not you want to be a supervisor. Critical analysis is necessary to determine why you are so undecided. This may require some in-depth conversation with trusted allies in order to bring out these reasons, particularly those that lie beneath the surface.

Do you feel you don't have enough experience? Is it that you don't like the current direction of the department? Maybe it's simply that you have a fear of failure, either during the testing process or in your ability to perform competently as a supervisor, should you receive the promotion.

Only after uncovering the real reasons for your indecision can you individually analyze each one, and see if they are surmountable. Often, by breaking down complex issues into small components, you will be able to work through the issues in sufficient detail to overcome your concerns. You may be able to find some of your concerns identified and listed in some of the remaining questions.

Perhaps after identifying your reasons for being undecided and critically assessing each one, you may find that the issues causing your hesitancy were not that great after all. If this is the case, then you may well be on your way to taking your promotional test. If, on the other hand, you cannot overcome your concerns, perhaps it is best that you not take the test. Promotional testing is difficult enough when you're focused, but testing when your heart's not in it is not recommended.

Being a supervisor means a lot of things. It means being a leader and role model. It means accepting responsibility for other people's problems and mistakes. It requires the desire to be in charge of people, and a commitment and loyalty to the organization beyond what is required as an officer. If this is not the person you are, or want to be, perhaps it is best to not try and fit yourself into a position in which you'll be unhappy.

Are you willing to invest the time and effort to properly prepare yourself?

Preparation for promotion takes two forms. You must prepare yourself both for the test and for the position. These are two distinct efforts, although there is of course overlap between the two. If you prepare only for the test, there is no assurance you will be completely ready for the position. If you prepare for the position, there is no assurance you will be polished enough to pass the test. You need to cover both bases.

Asked how it felt to step onto the moon, astronaut Neil Armstrong commented, "I felt as if I had been there a thousand times." How could this be? The answer, of course, is preparation. While studying for a promotion is not quite the same as training to go to the moon, there is one consistent theme: preparation pays off. You must be willing to devote a substantial amount of effort to studying for the test and preparing yourself for the position. This will optimally be done over a multi-year period, but you should plan on a minimum of six months of intensive study and preparation.

A plan of action for how you will prepare should be developed. The plan should be ambitious, realistic, well thought-out and flexible. The famous football coach Vince Lombardi once said, "It is not so much the will to win that's important; it is the will to prepare to win." Unless you are willing to invest a substantial amount of time and effort to be successful in the competition, you may be better off in the stands.

Do you have the necessary experience to be promoted?

Each promotion will carry with it minimum requirements that must be satisfied. These are just the minimums, though, and anyone expecting to be competitive will normally have to go far beyond the minimum. Of course, years on the job has some bearing, but even more important is what has been done with those years. Diversity and quality of experience are critical. The more assignments and details you have worked, the broader your understanding of the organization as a whole will be.

Experience is a hard teacher. It gives you the test first and the lesson afterward. But there is no substitute for high-quality experience. Many officers with 20 years on the job say they have 20 years experience. In reality they may have one year's experience repeated 20 times.

Depth and breadth of experience are so critical that they must be taken into account when deciding whether or not to compete for a promotion. Look at the quality and diversity of the years worked before you make any decisions about your promotional chances.



Do you have the necessary education to be promoted?

Again, there will be minimum criteria for the position, but to get promoted you normally need to go far beyond the minimum. Education is critical for entry into the supervisory ranks for a variety of reasons. First, education helps you to learn better and more quickly from your experiences. This is important because as a supervisor much more will be asked of you, and you need to be able to learn fast. Second, education gives you a broader base of knowledge and information that goes beyond law enforcement. Third, it shows a commitment to self-improvement, which in turn lays the groundwork for being a life-long learner.

If you have been unwilling or unable to educate yourself through college courses and training classes, you are probably unprepared to take the test, and unprepared to assume the position. If so, perhaps it is better to regroup and attend to this deficiency, rather than to set yourself up for failure in the promotional process.



Do you have the necessary determination to prepare and succeed?

It is extremely unusual for someone to pass the test and get promoted the first time he takes the test. What normally happens to good candidates is that they are ultimately successful the third or fourth time they take the test. Some people succeed because they are destined to succeed, but most succeed because they are determined to succeed.

Winston Churchill said, "Success is the ability to go from one failure to the next with great enthusiasm." Remember this as you strive for promotion. There will be failures and setbacks, but those who are determined enough will ultimately be successful. For some though, it is too demoralizing to think of facing yet another failure. You must consider your individual make-up in deciding whether it is worth it to put yourself through this very arduous process.



Do you possess the necessary self-confidence for the test and the position?

Sir Edmund Hillary said, "It's not the mountain you conquer, it's yourself." To do well in a promotional test, and ultimately be successful in the new position, you must have an abundance of self-confidence. There is a fine line between healthy self-confidence and arrogance, but it is one you must walk if you are to be successful. A supervisor who is not confident in his abilities will be sniffed out a mile away by the troops. Furthermore, it is demoralizing to have someone who lacks confidence in a position of leadership. In order to inspire confidence in your people, you must be confident in yourself.

This is an extremely difficult question to be self-analytical on because it is almost impossible to accurately perceive yourself in this area. It may be necessary to discretely draw people out on their perceptions of you in this area. Remember: you must not only have self-confidence but be able to project it.

If you don't have the self-confidence to be successful, figure out why, and work on correcting the problem or perception before charting a course for promotion.

Are you willing to become more involved in your community?

If the answer to this question is no, you should probably reconsider your promotional aspirations. With the advent of community policing, supervisors and managers can no longer sit behind the desk and isolate themselves from direct public contact. Most departments are now requiring some measure of additional community involvement on the part of their supervisory staff.

This could take many forms, but examples include membership in service clubs, speaking engagements for local groups, volunteer work and attendance at community events. Examples of community events include council meetings, chamber of commerce "mixers," school events and town hall meetings.

If you don't wish to participate in such activities, think long and hard about whether you want to be promoted. As a general rule, the higher your rank, the more the community expects you to be visible at these events. For some, this is no problem; for others, it is torturous. If you can't picture yourself cooking pancakes at the Rotary fund raiser, beware of how far up the ladder you move.

Do you have good people skills?

This may be another area that does not lend itself well to self-evaluation. However, it may be the most important skill any supervisor can possess. It is also the hardest to teach, because it goes to the core of an individual's personality. Some people are just naturally good at dealing with other people. They like the interaction and even thrive on it. They know how to make people feel good about themselves, and how to create a work environment that is friendly and fun. Other individuals do not do well in dealing with people. They may be overly introverted, or just quiet. They may like to work alone, and may thrive when left to a computer screen and their own devices.

Neither personality type is either all good or bad; they are just different. However, if you are to be an effective supervisor, you'll need to deal with people constantly. If you are not good with people, you will probably not be happy, and those who have to work with you certainly will not be happy.

This is not to say that someone who does not have good people skills cannot be an effective supervisor—it depends on the environment of the organization and the assignment in question. Generally speaking, though, if you do not like dealing with people and their problems, supervision may not be for you. Give this topic a great deal of thought prior to jumping into the promotional process.

Are you willing to make the hard decisions that come with being a supervisor?

The buck must stop somewhere, and if you're a supervisor, it should stop with you. Especially on the night shift, decisions must be made without the benefit of having the "brass" around. If you are one of those who says "hooray" to that notion, you are possibly supervisory material.

Officers make hard decisions all the time, but they usually have a supervisor available to consult with. As the supervisor, there will be many times when you have no such back-up, and you must be willing to make the call. If you're hesitant to do this, don't even consider becoming a supervisor. There is nothing worse than a supervisor who either cannot or will not make a decision. Not only is such a person ineffective, but he has a demoralizing effect on his people.

You must critically evaluate yourself in this area. If you fall short, you don't need to announce it to the world. Perhaps over time you can figure out why you don't want to be in such a position, and work toward becoming more decisive. If you don't want to change, that's okay, too! Simply make decisions appropriate to your current rank, and let your supervisor do the rest.



Do you feel you are the best candidate for promotion in your department?

This is an important question to answer. Hopefully, you truly believe you are the best candidate for promotion. If so, this will be evident in the testing process. If not, you need to figure out why you don't think you are the best candidate. Are you just too modest to say so? Or do you have some deficiencies that need to be addressed? Either way, you need to do something about this self-perception because it will adversely affect you in the testing process.

Remember that, during the test, you will need to forcefully convince the raters that you are the best candidate for promotion. If you cannot even convince yourself that you are the best candidate, how in the world will you convince anyone else?

Conclusion

Competing in a promotional process is not something that should be undertaken lightly. You want to make sure that if you take the test, you prepare properly to give yourself every chance to succeed. This preparation also extends to the position itself. If you are successful in the testing process, you'll certainly want to be successful in the position. Again, preparation is the key.

If your answer to all of the above questions is "yes," you're ready to go. But if there are any negative answers, you need to look deeper into those areas before making a decision. Even one "no" answer may be enough reason not to participate in the test, although that depends on individual circumstances.

The two hardest things to handle in life are failure and success. If you choose to participate in the testing process, you will almost certainly be dealing with one of the two. Chances are, though, that if you have prepared properly for the test and the position, you will be dealing with the "problem" of how you are going to handle your success.