

BATTALION-LEVEL LEADERSHIP



Daily logs can help you provide meaningful feedback to probationary company officers.

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Shift commanders and battalion chiefs are routinely required to complete evaluations for probationary company officers. The type of evaluation, its frequency, and the evaluator's knowledge can significantly impact its effectiveness. In addition to evaluations, there are other strategies you can employ to help the new officers become the best version of themselves.

In my organization, probation for new officers lasts 12 months, during which we conduct monthly evaluations. The evaluation has several categories, including: leading and managing others, decision-making, manipulative tasks, administrative requirements, physical readiness, and attitude. Your department's evaluation should assess a broad range of criteria. Advancing to company officer is one of the hardest career steps a person can take. You need solid hands-on skills but are now required to perform in a leadership role, including functioning as the first-arriving incident commander. In addition to these traditional requirements, the position has evolved into one requiring strong interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, empathy for your crew and effective communication skills. The days of hiding out in an office until a call comes in and returning to it after the call are over. Fire officers are the key to a successful organization, and battalion chiefs have a crucial role in their development.

Completing evaluations can prove difficult if the probationary officer is at a different station than the BC. Things can be even more challenging if you don't have much experience working with the new individual. Our organization, like many, has recently seen a combination of retirements and growth, resulting in over 30 newly promoted lieutenants in just over a year. This has allowed us to evaluate the strengths and opportunities for improvement in our probationary process.

A Daily Log Tracks Progress One Shift at a Time

A new concept we've introduced is the *daily log*, which has proven very helpful. The new lieutenant fills it out each shift and e-mails it to their respective BC. The format of the log is as follows:

- ▶ Interesting or complex calls
- ▶ Personnel issues
- ▶ Training Performed
- ▶ Building walkthroughs
- ▶ Questions/changes/needs

We can also use daily logs for officers coming off probation. The timeframe could be shifted to every few shifts or even monthly.

Before you implement this process, it is important to explain the intent of the daily log and your expectations to the new officer. If they don't know you expect them to perform some type of daily training, which can include a building walkthrough, then those sections may sit empty for months. The goal is not to have them "pencil whip" the log or accomplish something in every section every shift. There should be a variety of responses based on the call type, crew experience and even the station's location. For example:

Interesting or Complex Calls—Responded to an automatic fire alarm at the mall today. I was unaware the mall was undergoing construction. Unable to reset the panel. Mall staff said they would call the alarm company.

Personnel Issues—*Worked with a senior firefighter today. He wasn't interested in the company training I had put together. He said, "I have done this drill 100 times before" and that I should do better. Can you help me with strategies when I face this type of feedback and how I can design drills that can engage a senior firefighter?*

Training Performed—*Took the ladder to the college in our first-due and set it up in multiple locations at a residence hall. While there, we reviewed expectations with each person assigned to the ladder. At the station, we reviewed apparatus inventory with a new crew member we had riding for the shift.*

Building Walkthroughs—*Drove around the campus after the ladder drill looking for placement and access. After an aid call, we reviewed a two-story townhouse that had been converted into nine individual bedrooms for rent. The garage door had been sealed off with a framed wall on the interior, no access from the outside. The first floor interior stairs had a locked door (deadbolt); no access without forcing the door. Direct access to the second floor was on the C side via an exterior door.*

Questions/Changes/Needs—*What considerations do you use when deciding when to upgrade to a two alarm? Specifically thinking about the college dormitory where we drilled. When is it OK to leave an alarm panel that cannot reset? Do I report this to the fire marshal's office?*

We don't get a response for every category on every shift. We tell our lieutenants to use nothing to report (NTR) if they don't have any feedback on

a particular shift. However, if an officer writes NTR in several categories on multiple shifts, it prompts us to discuss how they manage their shifts and our expectations of them.

The daily logs are useful in several ways.

1. They provide a daily feedback loop, allowing us to answer questions, provide clarity and share our knowledge and experiences.
2. They support our monthly evaluations.

One of the sections on the monthly evaluations asks us to review if the officer is conducting realistic training with their crew. Reviewing the daily logs allows us to accurately answer what type of training was completed and when. In addition, the daily logs provide specific examples of what they are doing well and what areas they can improve.

Providing specific examples of a job done well is much more useful to a probationary officer. Instead of saying "Good job" or "Keep up the good work," tell them exactly what you liked. As an example from the Personnel Issues section of the daily log: "I really appreciated that you had a discussion with your driver about their driving habits and what was acceptable." This specificity shows them you notice what they do well and reinforces their good behaviors.

Come Full Circle with a 180 Feedback Loop

Feedback from the new lieutenants on your performance is just as important. We can't forget that our responsibility is to help them become the best version of themselves, which can't happen if we use a standardized approach for every new officer. Before you conduct their monthly evaluation, e-mail them the following questions and be prepared to discuss your answers when you meet.

- What is working? What are you getting that is helpful?
- What is missing? What do you wish was happening?
- Where would you like more clarity or to see change?

These questions allow you to create a training and development plan based on individual needs and strengths. Additionally, the information gathered facilitates a pre-assessment before your meeting to address any necessary changes, ensuring an effective probationary period. This approach also helps you spot trends and identify needs. Much of our feedback is based on identifying only deficits; this method ensures a balanced view that also highlights strengths.

The only way to receive honest answers to these questions is by establishing a high level of trust and accepting feedback without defensiveness.

Being transparent and vulnerable with your lieutenants and others helps build trust both within the organization and with individuals. Additionally, displaying a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset when receiving feedback from the officer on how you can better support them will also foster trust. A fixed mindset views feedback as a personal attack, whereas a growth mindset sees it as a tool to help achieve your goals.

It's our responsibility to help new officers become the best versions of themselves. To achieve this, we must understand how to support their development. If an officer requests more time with you on building construction or strategy and tactics, don't take it as a dig. Your inner voice might be saying, "I have already talked about these things with them. Did I do something wrong or do it poorly?" If their feedback triggers an emotional response, ask yourself where these feelings are coming from—it is often our pride or ego feeling challenged.

Adopting a growth mindset, you might respond by asking, "How can I better explain these topics to improve your knowledge and understanding?" Remember, the goal is to support their growth. This is not about us. Feedback is crucial for officers to reach their highest potential. Daily logs and open, proactive communication are key to achieving this goal. Regular meetings with your officers allow you to guide, mentor and coach them effectively. Additionally, their feedback on how you can better support their needs offers an opportunity for your own growth. We owe it to ourselves, those we supervise and the citizens we serve to continuously strive to be the firefighters they expect us to be. **BS**

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