



Photo: Derek O. Hanley



FINDING THE RIGHT LEADER

How can you be sure to hire the best candidates for open positions?

By Susan Long, MA, NRP

Successfully filling open EMS leadership positions is no slam dunk. It can involve a lot of organizational reflection about things like hiring from within vs. going outside; determining what leadership attributes are important to your organization; and finding qualified candidates and fairly comparing one to another. If all goes well, you will eventually have to draw your best conclusion about whom you want to make an offer to, and you will need to understand your compensation offer, what benefits are included, and what may be options. You'll also need to be ready to navigate postoffer negotiations with

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candidates who might counteroffer, say no, or simply don't respond (yes—it happens).

Let's start with the market. Where do you find good people? The reality is there is not a secret pool of qualified candidates you can call up on the Internet. Really strong candidates are hard to come by. Some organizations do a good job of growing their own, but this is not always the case, and organizations will have to decide whether they want to hire only internally or look outside.

The advantages of hiring from within include having people who know your organization and want it to succeed. It also sends a clear message that there is opportunity for advancement at your shop. Looking outside can have advantages as well. Sometimes you simply will not find the level of expertise, education, and experience you're looking internally. A set of "fresh eyes" can be a benefit to any organization from time to time.

What to Look for and How

Your process to fill an opening for a frontline supervisor will probably look different than if you're hiring a new chief. The fundamentals are related, but the makeup of any interview panel, their questions, and the expectations around education, experience, and the like will be different.

It is not uncommon to set up a two- or three-step interview process. For a supervisor or manager position, that may include the hiring manager and other leaders along with frontline staff and/or union representatives. Executive positions might include steps above and beyond traditional interviews, such as meetings with key stakeholders or an informal meal with the board of directors, senior team members, etc.

The National EMS Management Association created a document entitled *Seven Pillars of National EMS Officer Competencies*. It provides guidance on the competencies



you might look for in potential leaders. They are broken down by position level: supervisor, manager, and executive. It is available for free download on the NEMSMA website and provides a helpful tool for designing a recruitment and interview process that fits the position(s) you're trying to fill.

It's been said a traditional one-on-one interview is a poor way to really get to know someone. Nonetheless, interviews still have their place when done right. Use an interview panel with as much of a cross-section of your agency as possible. Make it clear to the panel if you are asking for their recommendation or a hiring decision.

It may seem clear (and it should be) that some questions, such as "How old are you?" and "Are you pregnant?" are inappropriate and legally precarious. But it's surprising how many people still don't know what is OK and not OK to ask. If you establish an interview panel without a lot of experience in this area, provide them with clear direction about the basic HR dos and don'ts of interviewing. If you have human resources expertise to lean on, do so. If your organization doesn't have this expertise internally, consider contracting with an outside group to help.

In terms of good questions, I like asking candidates what experiences they have already had, rather than theoretical

questions about how they might respond. You will often get much richer insights into how they think about issues. This is often referred to as the STAR method (*situation, task, action, result*).

I also want to find out how prepared the candidate is for the interview. What do they know about our agency, the position, and the communities we serve?

Here are a few examples of STAR method questions and follow-ups:

- Describe a situation when you had to work with a difficult partner or leader. How did you interact with them?
- Tell us about the best team you were ever a part of. What made it so great?
- How do you prioritize your workday tasks? What specific tools do you use to help manage your schedule?
- Tell me about a time when you helped someone else be successful.

The Call

You've done all the work and gotten through the vetting and interview process—now it's time to make the offer to your choice as well as let the others know they didn't get the position. In larger organizations this pleasure may be left to an internal recruiter or HR person. But if the task is up to you, there are a few things to consider.

I call this a *pleasure* because it is indeed very exciting to make a job offer that might literally impact a person's life. If you are the hiring manager and have the option, make these contacts yourself. In addition to the successful candidate, also personally call those who made the short list but didn't get the job. These top candidates should never hear about your decision via e-mail or the grapevine. There are precious few exceptional EMS leaders to recruit out there. Chances are someone who made it to the end of an interview process but was not offered the position will show up again somewhere down the line. They will remember those organizations that showed the courtesy and integrity to make personal contacts.

Other considerations include timing. Surely you want to have a solid process and have your ducks in a row before making the call, but try not to keep your top candidate

hanging. They may get disinterested, take a position elsewhere, or simply think you don't care. It's a poor reflection on your organization and personally discourteous to string out a hiring process too long.

Lastly, be sure to call your top candidate first. Give them time to consider your offer and ask them to respond within a set timeline, for instance 3–5 days. If they end up not accepting, this still gives you time to move on to your next choice. Wait until you have an accepted offer (at least verbally; some argue in writing) before you notify the unsuccessful candidates.

There have been times when I've made a job offer and was met with a counteroffer. This is normal part of the process and not cause for offense. These are instances when your HR colleagues or external support team can really help. They can revisit market conditions, help define options, and help you wrestle with just how much you want this person.

On rare occasions I have made a job offer and simply never heard back from the candidate. Honor the timeline you gave them to consider your offer, and if you still hear nothing, move on.

Once you have your new leader in the door, be sure to give equal energy to their onboarding and orientation. It goes without saying that regular check-ins can be valuable and show your commitment to that person's success. Schedule these touchpoints on your calendar and regularly ask what's going well and what needs improvement. Give your new leader ample opportunity to "find their spot" within your organization while at the same time clearly letting them know your expectations about their performance and deliverables.

Finding the right fit for an open leadership position is an extremely rewarding experience. With the right forethought and planning, you can hire the best leader for your agency. Good luck! 🍀

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