

The Strategy of Preparing for Promotion

By Lieutenant Raymond E. Foster, LAPD (ret.), MPA

In our first article we looked at five tactics for taking civil service multiple choice tests. These tips were classified as tactics because they were immediately deployable to the situation. Like field tactics, they are something you learn and then use when they apply. Studying for promotion is significantly different from actual testing. It calls for longer term planning, preparation and implementation. In this article we will look at five test preparation strategies.

A successful study plan is a strategic plan. A good strategic plan starts with an assessment of the enemy, competition, market or in this case, the test. Several basic questions need to be answered:

1. When is the test going to be administered?
2. What type of test is going to be administered?
3. What are the mechanics of the testing process?
4. What types of questions were on the last test?

It is important to know when the next test is likely to be administered because that is going to effect your planning. Most civil service organizations tend to administer promotion examinations on a fairly regular and scheduled basis. If the test is next week and you haven't been studying, don't bother. However, if the test is three or more months away you have a great opportunity to score well. Once you know the approximate date of test, break out a calendar and begin to plan backwards from the test date. If you are fairly certain of the test date you do a number of things to maximize your studying time.

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1. Consider shifting your work hours to day watch or early evening shift three months before. This puts your body clock in sync with the test time. There is nothing worse than working graveyards the night before a 0800 hours test.
2. Consider taking vacation or personal leave two weeks before the test. This gives you ample opportunity for intensive study.
3. Schedule promotional mentoring appointments with superiors six months before the test. We will come back to these interviews, but the scheduling is critical. Generally speaking, after someone has been selected for a promotional board they can not speak with candidates about the process. However, their opinions are usually fair game prior to their official selection.
4. Consider taking a short-term administrative post within your organization. I know that for most of us “street types” this is a initially repugnant idea. However, I guarantee two things. You will be a better street cop if you understand the administrative workings of your organization. An administrative perspective on how and why things are done in an organization will make your life in the street simpler. Also, there is nothing like a pogue job to give you insight into the testing process.
4. As we look at the different strategies, it will make sense that some should be completed months before a test, while others are best accomplished in the last weeks.

You must know the type of test. Is it a multiple choice, essay, interview or assessment center. Indeed, it may be some combination of all of types of tests. But, the type of test changes your long term strategy. In addition to knowing when and what the test is about, you should try to know some fairly simple mechanical issues. For instance, if you know the test location, you can plan to have breakfast nearby beforehand. You will do

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better after eating and you won't be rushed or late. Moreover, you want to know the time limit, if you need to bring something (like identification to get in) or if you can write on the test booklet. Any information you can gather will make you more comfortable about the process and improve your planning.

Once you know when, where and how the test is to be given, the next part of your planning phase is an attempt to determine the test questions. Obviously, if you know the question beforehand you will score higher. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that anyone will give you the exact questions, but they leave plenty of clues enabling you to hone your study plan around the most likely areas and issues.

An excellent place to begin is with prior tests. If they are available, obtain a copy and analyze it. Where did the questions come from? You will probably find that prior tests will contain consistent percentages of questions from various sources. For instance, 50% of the questions might come from you department manual, 10% from your penal code and case law, 10% from an administrative manual (like juvenile procedures), 10% from emergency operations (indeed, I predict you will see an increase in test questions coming directly from the National Incident Management System), 10% on investigative procedures and 10% on issues like community policing.

A breakdown like this will help you schedule you study time. If 50% of the questions are from you department manual don't make the mistake of spending 50% of your time studying case law. If you commit to studying 100 hours before a test, 50 of the hours should be on 50% of you questions. Now, if you are particularly strong in a certain area, divert those hours to your weak areas. Develop you study plan based on your analysis of where the questions are likely to come from.

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In many instances you will know you will be able to view previous tests. This is where your detective skills pay off. First, schedule “career mentoring” interviews with people who have successfully competed and those who are likely to be involved in the process. This means getting a half hour of your chief’s time. Ask him or her, what they think are likely areas of testing. They have not only been through the process, but they are likely to participate in the development of future tests. Second, talk to the people who took the last test. Spend some time picking their brain on questions. If you invest enough cups of coffee you can probably reverse engineer the last test. Just as important, you will probably pick up some great study ideas.

Once you have done everything possible to determine the nature of the test it is time to begin to study. If you want to succeed you should consider three fronts for your strategic plan. The first is the WHY front. Let’s presume that your study plan is six months and that you commit to 100 hours of preparation. If you spend 100 hours over six months studying for a promotional test you will get a very high score. You will get the job. The WHY front is outside of that 100 hours. During six month study period you are going to ask why every time you do your job. For instance, if you are working the street and take a simple theft report. Why do you use that particular form? Why do you ask particular questions? What does the supervisor look for when you submit the report? Where does the report go? What is the report used for? Simply ask yourself and find out, why you do what you do. In the academy and in the field you were simply taught to do a function a certain way. But, it is probably done a specific way for some arcane administrative reason. Track these things down. You will learn a lot about your organization, its rules and its goals. You will learn valuable information that will impact your test score. Use your WHY strategy everyday.

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The next front is the HOW front. It is an axiom of good battlefield leadership that you learn your superior's job and teach your job to your subordinates. This circular form of teaching has many benefits. For instance, on the battlefield, if your superior is killed or wounded you should be able to step up and continue the mission. It is also a stellar way to study for promotion. Learn your supervisor's job. And, teach your job. I caution you to learn the right ways first. Learn and teach the "department" way and understand that your short-cuts are unofficial ways of getting stuff done. As you learn WHY also learn HOW. For the six months of your study plan commit to knowing WHY things are done and HOW your supervisor does them.

Preparation and confidence can have an extraordinary impact on your score. WHY and HOW prepare you and will make you very confident. The formal part of your study program is WHAT. If you spend 100 hours over six months studying WHAT in conjunction with your WHY and HOW you will do very well. Schedule your study time backwards. Plan to spend 40 hours, over ten days just prior to the test. Try something like a ten day schedule, one hour studying, one hour relaxing. That is your eight hour work day. People who study in line at the test, the morning of the test or the night before generally do not do well. By the night before the test you know all you are going to be able to recall. You should spend that night resting.

The other sixty hours should be spent over the previous five months, about three hours a week. Depending on your work, family and social schedule, plan three one hour study sessions per week. Now, in the first months of your study session you may want to consider working with a group. However, cops don't work in groups well. Group sessions tend to deteriorate into BS sessions. However, during the first month of your study plan

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you might consider working in a group to get a sense of what your peers have developed. This might be another way to gain insight into the nature of HOW.

If you are taking a multiple choice test, during the first two months of your study plan read and highlight information. Look for information that would make good test questions. Look for timelines, choices, always and never situations. If a certain type of evidence is ALWAYS booked a certain way - that is a potential question. It is easy for the test writer to pick out. Additionally, tests are usually written a few months before the test date. Indeed, on your search for HOW you might be able to determine the last date that new information would be on a test. Certainly, if your department issues a new policy 3 days before a test it would be a waste of your time to review the policy. It simply could not have been written into the test. As a general rule of thumb, any information that changes during your six month study period should be ignored. This is because test writers probably don't have access to the information and they want to avoid situations wherein you could challenge a question.

After you have read and highlighted the material during months one through three, consider making flash cards during months four and five. That way, during month six, your most intensive study period, you will have greatly distilled and focused information from which to work. Again, if half of the questions are likely to be from your department manual, half of your time should be spent on highlighted manual sections or flashcards derived from your manual. Planning and preparation are the keys to your success.

About the Author

Lieutenant Raymond E. Foster retired from the Los Angeles Police Department after 24 years of service. He is the author of "Police Technology (Prentice Hall, July 2004) and number articles on technology, leadership, terrorism and policing. Raymond is a part-time

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lecture at California State University, Fullerton and a part-time faculty advisor at the Union Institute and University. He has three current book projects. They are on terrorism, policing and leadership.

Raymond's complete CV can be viewed at www.hitechj.com/id55.html and he can be reached by email at <mailto:raymond@hitechj.com>.