Executive Checklist: Evaluating Intangibles in a Police or Fire Chief Candidate

The Most Important Hire You Will Make

Excerpted from *Executive Oversight: The City Manager's Guide to the Business of Public Safety* by Jeff Cirminiello — Chapter 4

ORGANIZATION	REVIEWED BY	DATE

PURPOSE

This checklist is not intended to replace the city's formal interview process. It is meant to help city managers focus on the qualities that are harder to see on a resume but often determine how successful the chief will be once hired.

The categories below can also be used to develop interview questions. For each area, the city manager should listen for clear examples, practical judgment, and evidence that the candidate's approach fits the city's needs.

1. Judgment and Decision Making

- ☐ Can the candidate explain complex situations clearly?
- ☐ Do they distinguish between what is known and unknown?
- ☐ Do they demonstrate sound decision-making under pressure?

> ***Sample question:*** *Tell me about a time you had to make an important decision with incomplete information. What did you know, what was still unclear, and how did you decide what to do?*

2. Communication and Presence

- ☐ Can they communicate clearly with leadership and the public?
- ☐ Do they respond directly to difficult questions?
- ☐ Can they explain how they would handle a major incident?

> ***Sample question:*** *During a major incident, how would you keep the city manager informed while also preparing the department to communicate with the public?*

3. Community Alignment and Transparency

- ☐ Do they understand expectations for transparency?
- ☐ Can they balance accuracy with timely communication?
- ☐ Do they understand how community expectations should influence leadership decisions?

> ***Sample question:*** *Tell me about a time when the community expected more information or engagement than your organization was prepared to provide. How did you handle it?*

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4. Adaptability and Flexibility

- ☐ Can they adjust their approach when needed?
- ☐ Are they comfortable with uncertainty?

> ***Sample question:*** *Give me an example of a time when your usual approach was not working and you had to adjust.*

5. Relationship and Chemistry

- ☐ Does communication feel natural?
- ☐ Can you work with this person regularly during difficult situations?

> ***Sample question:*** *How do you prefer to communicate with a city manager when an issue is developing quickly?*

6. Leadership Style and Organizational Impact

- ☐ Do they build teams or centralize control?
- ☐ Do they develop others?

> ***Sample question:*** *How do you decide what to handle personally and what to delegate to your command staff?*

7. Cultural Competence and Emotional Intelligence

- ☐ Do they demonstrate awareness and self-control?
- ☐ Can they read the room and adjust their communication based on the audience?

> ***Sample question:*** *Tell me about a time when you had to lead through a sensitive community or employee issue. What did you learn from it?*

8. Assistant Chief and Leadership Bench

- ☐ Do they develop future leaders?
- ☐ Is there evidence that the organization can function without everything running through one person?

> ***Sample question:*** *Tell me about a leader you have mentored or developed for greater responsibility. What specific steps did you take, and what was the outcome?*

9. Political and Governance Awareness

- ☐ Do they understand their role within city leadership?
- ☐ Can they separate operational responsibility from executive accountability?

> ***Sample question:*** *How do you support the city manager and governing body when a decision does not go your way, and how do you maintain professionalism and organizational alignment after that decision has been made?*

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10. Transition and First-Year Readiness

- [ ] Do they have a clear entry plan?
- [ ] Can they explain how they would learn the organization before making major changes?

> ***Sample question:*** *What would your first 90 to 120 days look like, and what would you want to understand before making significant changes?*

11. Knowledge of the City and Operating Environment

- [ ] Have they demonstrated a working understanding of your city?
- [ ] Can they speak meaningfully about local risks, expectations, and priorities?

> ***Sample question:*** *Based on what you know about our city, what do you see as the most important public safety issues facing this organization?*

12. Assessment Beyond the Interview

- [ ] Have they been tested beyond traditional interviews?
- [ ] Have they been observed in scenario discussions, briefings, or executive-level conversations?

> ***Sample question:*** *I'm going to give you a developing incident with limited information. Walk me through how you would brief the city manager in the first hour.*

Final Thought

A police or fire chief can be technically correct and still be the wrong fit. Selecting the right leader is about alignment.

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