


Multi-generational leadership in the fire service

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In Fire and Rescue International Volume 6 number 1, I wrote about the "importance of developing leadership and standards within the fire and emergency services. Specific reference was made to the "Gordon-Howell report in which four

criteria for defining a profession are suggested". For this article, I am going to focus on the first of four suggestions, namely, "A profession should rest on a systematic body of knowledge of substantial intellectual content and on the development of personal skill in the application of this knowledge to specific cases."

The next generation of fire service leaders are already in the making. Every generation has its own values

and viewpoints. It is those differences that define each generation but often also lead to disillusion among younger team members and has the potential to cause friction among different generations.

Any leader expecting to be successful in the contemporary workplace, will have to be very skilled at building and sustaining a culture that not only appeals to people from multiple generations but that deliberately pursue and stimulates collaboration between them.

When I first joined the fire service in 1986, I thought I had a good understanding of leadership. As many young South African men of that era, I completed my compulsory National Service in the military. I therefore immediately related to the hierarchical leadership within the fire service. As in the military, there were people in command and there were the rank and file like me who performed the work. There were no grey areas; everybody knew exactly what was expected from them. We worked in a system under clear supervision of a leading fire fighter, which was in turn managed by a station officer. There was a clear

- ▶ coordination and communication must be ongoing between the contractors/hazmat team and the fire service incident commander.

In closing

Flammable fuel road tanker emergencies can present a myriad of challenges to emergency responders. As I stressed earlier, the fact that they are mobile means that incidents involving large volumes of flammable liquids can happen almost anywhere. Add to this the fact that responders

could be faced with two probable scenarios: (1) a major incident (incident with ignition) or, (2) a potentially major incident (incident with no ignition). Both scenarios will require you as incident commander to make many decisions, which might not always be part of your playbook. What if you had a tanker on fire right next to a multi-storey residential with smoke pouring into open windows all along its frontage? What if you had a trailer on fire and you had the option of dropping the trailer's landing gear

and saving the truck by driving it away from the burning trailer?

Think these things through. They are the types of choices you may have to make.

Finally, what does your foam system look like in your department? Are you able to deploy the resources you need to rapidly contain the types of incidents described above and prevent them from getting so large that your bad preparation made you the idiot on the evening news? ▲

span of control and unity of command. I realise today how much I learned and indeed how little I knew about leadership back then. Leadership may be as simple as just doing the right thing or even just to have the confidence to assume responsibility.

Information at the time was not as readily available as now and mostly limited to printed material. The "Manuals of Firemanship" as well as The Fire Service Drill Book provided the foundation for most training and development.

It is accepted that the structures found in the fire service provide a balance, when performing fire fighting, at various emergency scenes and in other activities of the organisation. These structures with which many of us are familiar certainly have their place. Similar reporting models and chains of command exist throughout all military and paramilitary organisations and in fact, most of the public service, including municipalities where the fire service function reside.

Unintentionally, the structure adopted by most fire services, although crucial on the fireground, has the tendency to potentially hamper the development of young leaders with onerous chain of command obstacles. How many times have we heard "this is how we do things here"? or, "it is a good idea but it will never work here". It may or may not be true but simply dismissing an idea because of the belief that the current way is the only way will inevitably lead to a culture where innovation is discouraged.

The fire service, as all other professions, is made up of multiple generations. Millennials, also known as Generation X or Gen Y, probably make up the bulk of the fire service. This generation may be identified by raised usage of and familiarity with electronic devices and social media. They are far more likely to question certain decisions and generally require detailed explanation thereof. Unlike their preceding generation, they have no prior exposure to the organisational structures into which they enter. A very small percentage, if

any, has had exposure to a military or paramilitary organisation.

How do we as leaders encourage our team members to be creative and innovative within the current organisational structures? The fire service prides itself on a strong culture and tradition of public service, rightly so. We as leaders must preserve the former; however, we also need to create an enabling environment where innovation and creativity become part of our culture and tradition. As previously acknowledged, the organisational structure of the fire service is there for a good reason and has its place in all aspects of its activities. However, affording a team member the platform to share an idea with anyone in the organisation provides the open dialogue necessary to engage the incoming generation and make them feel part of the organisation.

Some of the most successful organisations, corporate as well as military, elicit a free exchange of ideas and encourage people, regardless of rank and experience to openly discuss different ideas across all levels of the organisation. By allowing this exchange, organisations are constantly challenging themselves to be better, to grow and learn and that by communicating across the ranks, there is true value and ownership for all members of the organisation.

A major challenge faced by senior leaders is the dynamic and changing environment in which they operate. The leader can easily become isolated from the exigencies and realities of critical day to day operations. The successful leader engages the organisation in continuous learning and adjusts strategy based on shared knowledge.

We must prepare our potential leaders to engage all knowledge and means including abstract reasoning, to correctly identify and appraise complex, multi-faceted events under potentially punishing, life-threatening circumstances and issue directions to manage accordingly.

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That is the basis of why organisations have policies, standard procedures and guidelines that we follow in what we do, whether it is on the fireground or in our daily station routines, fire service standard test and daily drills serve as example. These structures are crucial and should be followed to remain safe and effective.

In addition to these written policies and procedures, we must also train our young leaders to not only know and understand these but also to know how to apply them to their current environment. There may be occasions when these written procedures do not provide all the answers; thus, the training and career development of your officers is instrumental to doing the right thing so that objectives of the organisation are met. The days of dismissing 'outside of the box' thinking or having an opposing opinion on how objectives may be accomplished, has no place in the modern fire service.

The most effective leaders I have had the privilege to work with have been inclusive leaders, those who value the contribution of all their team members thereby nurturing a sense of belonging. These leaders also had the ability to adapt well to changes within the organisation, their decision making was transparent and receptive to any feedback from the people they lead. More importantly, they recognise generational differences, value those differences while focusing on the organisation's needs. These leaders were flexible enough to leverage the strengths of each generation thereby creating an engaging and rewarding environment. 