

Managing and leading change in the South African fire service of the future

By Etienne du Toit: AIFireE, PrDM, B Tech: Fire Technology (Pretoria Technicon)



Managing and leading change in the South African fire service of the future is not only necessary but also the responsibility of professional fire service leaders.

The fire service must transform to become a dynamic, forward-looking organisation, at the centre of the communities we serve, adapting to their evolving needs.

I recently read an interesting article in Fire and Rescue International aptly titled “Celebrating 50 years of Jaws of Life in Bloemfontein. ‘The first Jaws of Life was created by George Hurst in 1961 and has since become an indispensable tool for most fire services throughout the world.

I clearly remember the unmistakable sound and chocking fumes from the two-stroke Hurst power plant once started. Who can forget the weight of the spreader, especially after adding the scissor resembling shears to the device?

Fortunately, technology resulted in the

development of lightweight aircraft aluminium and other alloys which reduced the weight of the equipment. Single hydraulic hose systems coupled to four stroke and electric power sources further enhanced performance. Rescue tools operating at pressures of up to 720 bar have become the norm. New car technology has also necessitated the development of more advanced cutting equipment.

On 20 July 1969, American astronauts Neil Armstrong and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin became the first humans ever to land on the moon. So, when NASA astronauts rapidly approached the moon 50 years ago, they relied on a computer with less than 80 kilobytes of memory.

“Today, 53 years later, a simple USB stick or Wi-Fi router is more powerful, let alone most modern smartphones. Simply put in context, most smartphone clocks are 32,000 times faster than the Apollo era computers and could perform instructions 120,000,000 times faster. In fact, one Google search uses the computing power equivalent to the entire Apollo space mission.

Another incredibly significant development for the fire service happened on 16 February 1968 and saw the first official “911” call placed in the United States. As telephones became common in US households, fire departments around the country recommended establishing a single, simple number to be dialled in the event of a fire or other emergency.

More than 98 percent of the US and Canada can now contact emergency services by dealing 911.

Today about 20 to 22 million people in South Africa use a smartphone, which accounts for about one third of the country’s population. The number of smartphone users is forecast to grow by more than five million though till 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/488376/forecast-of-smartphone-users-in-south-africa/>.

The uncomfortable truth is, that South African Emergency Services, despite all the above technological advances at large, still fail in providing the basics, for example a single emergency number.

Admittedly, there have been some movement in adopting 112 and 107, most fire services however still market their own unique 10-digit emergency number.

The fire service, by virtue of its traditional nature, has by large failed to embrace technology to the fullest, nor has it adapted to the very dynamic environment of South African local government.

The bulk of my early career was plied in combination fire/ EMS services, and I still believe that to have been the optimal model at the time. I therefore found the article in the

same FRI newsletter describing how the City of Tshwane has gradually phased out its ambulance service of particular interest. With effect from 16 May 2022, the rendering of emergency medical and ambulance services in the City of Tshwane will be performed by the Gauteng Emergency Medical Services and other private services. The City of Tshwane was the last remaining municipality in South Africa to render emergency medical services.

Notwithstanding, over the past 28 years, since the 1995 transformation of local government in South Africa, the fire service has been challenged to broaden its scope of services by providing in addition to firefighting also hazmat response, technical rescue, public education, fire safety inspections and a plethora of other services. The proliferation of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) risk has resulted in fires and devastation on a scale never seen before. Socio-economic challenges created by rapidly evolving informal urbanisation pose major fire and life safety risks to a significant proportion of the population. These expanded services place a huge burden on current fire service delivery model.

The future role of the fire service is clearly defined in the White Paper. This paper proposes a move from the traditional reactive model of fire service delivery to one that is more predictive. This will require the use of data to enable evidence-led decisions to improve the services we deliver. There is certainly no shortage of incidents or needs for the fire service in our communities. Both prevention and risk reduction are cornerstones of the proposed legislation that is bound to follow the White Paper. The former will, once fully effected, inevitably reduce both the frequency as well as severity of incidents. Critical thinking will therefore be required to answer the following:

- Is the current service delivery model that we use to provide service to our communities still relevant?
- How to adjust the current service delivery model to meet the future needs of the community?
- What is the cost of a new service delivery model?



- How can the fire service remain relevant within the evolving needs such as provincialisations of the emergency medical service and the future reduction in calls?
- How can the fire service introduce technology into its service delivery models?

Fire service leaders, need to build relationships with their communities. The service must harness and provide data to motivate the need for increased resourcing of our plans. Failure to engage elected political structures may result in uninformed decisions about the future of the fire service and associated unintended consequences.

The challenge for traditional fire service leadership is to step up and examine what the fire service could become if we move beyond the boundaries or limitations that we have imposed on ourselves. The all too familiar, “that won’t work here” or “we

don’t have the money” is completely understandable but growth will not be possible if we are not planning and developing for the future. I can only imagine the scepticism with which the first Jaws of Life was received back in 1961, yet today it is possibly one of the most widely used tools in any rescue arsenal. The same could be said about the 911 single emergency number, which has directly and indirectly contributed to saving countless lives. Comprehensive but also realistic plans will grow the service, we cannot grow if we are not developing and planning. The solution is to evolve holding onto our values but expanding how best we serve our communities.

As leaders in our respective organisations, it is not only our duty but we are both legally as well as morally obliged to ensure that those who rely on our guidance and direction receive the leadership they deserve. ▲

