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Perceptions:

what is believed to be true can become true in
its consequence

A snapshot cultural audit for South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service

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A Snapshot Cultural Audit for South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service

1. Introduction

1.1. Brief

This report was commissioned by CFO Smitherman as part of a snapshot cultural audit of the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (SYFRs). The research took place over four consecutive days (19th-22nd July) and focused on improving engagement between the workforce and the CFO.

The scheme of work was sent on the 24th of April and the CFO further briefed fitting-in at the start of the audit. His brief was to carry out a cultural audit that will:

- Help with organisational direction and culture
- Increase staff confidence
- Test perceptions of reality
- Identify tools for direction
- Explore multiple cultural positions
- Inform the action plan within the people strategy.

During the four days allocated for this audit, fitting-in has sought to understand and take the cultural temperature of SYFRs and the following report provides a summary, analysis and action points that represent our findings.

In the introduction, we provide the context for the audit, then explore and evaluate the formal and informal cultures operating in the organisation. We then provide the findings/data from the research followed by our analysis and action points. Finally, we offer an action plan that focuses on achieving the ‘immediate’ improvement in engagement that is necessary if personnel are going to help in a debate about the future of SYFRs.

This report should be seen as work in progress: a basis for further discussion. Whilst in places the report may provide difficult reading for some, it is only by recognising that to achieve the Authority’s aims and objectives it was felt necessary to take certain actions and often these actions can have unintended outcomes. This can and has left a legacy, but that legacy can become history.

If people read the report looking for examples or analysis that can be used by *their* side to batter the *other* side then they will be misreading the intention of this research. Rather, we take the view that by airing the difficulties and providing points of action the organisation can move to a position to tackle and ameliorate some of the challenges.

1.2. Historical Context to the Current Day

Mark Smitherman was appointed Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive¹ in December 2004.

With a requirement to modernise (ODPM 2003; HOC 2006) and faced with a union whose “*default answer was no,*” the CFO made extensive use of a “*robust performance management system*” (Audit Commission 2009: 9) to achieve the changes he wanted (*including substantial budget savings from which a large proportion was re-invested*). Despite a 15% reduction in personnel of personnel, it

was not until 2009 that the FBU took strike action (to challenge a change in shift hours from 9/15 to 12/12). Most station personnel took part in the strike and most middle managers and above stayed on duty to maintain operational cover.

The strike was eventually solved by Joint Secretaries who facilitated an agreement for 11/13 shift adjustment. Included in the agreement was a promise that there would be no imposed shift changes for five years and that both sides would attempt to work together.

There has been a longstanding recognition of a gap between managers and firefighters (Baigent 2000; Baigent 2001; HMCIFS 2001; Bain 2002). However, the unintended outcome of the strike was to increase this gap. As a result the workforce have split almost horizontally between those who serve at a station *and* their managers who maintained fire cover during the strike (see Baigent, O'Connor et al. 2008 for a similar example in another fire service).

This audit recognises that a strong team of executive and senior managers are clear about a strategy for a new engagement with the workforce – to get the workforce to participate in this will require a new style because you cannot order firefighters to engage.

Middle manager's reaction during our workshop with them indicates some confusion about the change in style. Whilst the decision to change style is a strategic one, for middle managers it is much more complicated. Previously they managed directly (at arm's length); now they have to be participative and improve their engagement with personnel (see McGregor 1985 X and Y theory management).

For station personnel the strike and events that led up to it have bonded watches into very tight knit groups. These groups are not closed to other firefighters and we recognised the immediate very cordial and collegiate relations when watches from different stations mixed. We further note that in our discussions it was not possible to recognise watch managers as having any different view to the firefighters they worked with. The data provided by stations indicates that SYFRs directive style of leadership is resented and that whilst they support their watch managers they are largely alienated from other managers.

From our meeting with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Authority we recognised that they were actively involved in SYFRs and took their role in the arrangements for the delivery of an effective service very seriously.

1.3. Political Context of this report – the formal culture setting the scene

Finding

Having faced a strike and arrived at an agreement then a new area of concern has come to the fore. The government's agenda to implement an unconfirmed but substantial budget cut represents a new common challenge: a potential budget cut of £9 million.ⁱⁱ This threatens safety (Smitherman 2010):

CFO: The organisation has been going forward and now is faced with stepping back; effectively undoing progress for the community

The CFO has also issued a public statement declaring his opposition to cuts (Smitherman 2010) and at the same time sent a clear message to his workforce informing them of his position (Appendix 1). His view is clear:

CFO: The more I can get below £9 million the more I can maintain resources and reduce risk to public and firefighters

The Chief Officer, in speaking out against any further radical cuts has provided a lead for the fire service nationally. Few if any other Chief Officers have publically supported his stance. As well as speaking out against the cuts, the Chief Officer is also offering leadership locally by asking the question of his workforce “*how are we going to help each other?*”

Analysis

- The directive approach taken by the CFO to manage the service on behalf of the Fire Authority has led to the Audit Commission recognising the modernisation of the service (see Audit Commission 2009 Appendix 2)
- We reiterate our verbal feedback that the directive management style used to achieve modernisation is sustainable
- However, there is a cost attached to maintaining such a directive style:
 - the gap between managers and the majority of the workforce is unlikely to be bridged
 - alienation occurs (see Mayo 1949)
 - engagement in any real terms is unlikely to be achieved
- The attempt to engage with the workforce, particularly to develop a shared definition of engagement, is amongst the hardest of tasks facing SYFRs (because it requires the co-operation of the workforce)
- This opportunity is time limitedⁱⁱⁱ and a change in the organisational direction and culture is only likely to be achieved if there is a *transformational* change in relations

Action Point

- To develop a truly shared definition of engagement and to then achieve it, the proposed changes in management style should be implemented rapidly *and* the workforce will have to respond positively^{iv}

1.4. Political context – the informal culture’s response

Finding

This research indicates that many in the workforce, particularly those serving at stations, are sceptical of the CFO’s motives about engagement. Equally, the majority of firefighters do not understand why the CFO has made so many changes since 2004. The conservative cultural arrangements amongst firefighters (Howell 1996; Baigent 2001; Wood 2002; see also Schein 2004) almost legislate against firefighters changing their view.

Nonetheless, there is a perception of reality; some firefighters we have spoken with would equally recognise that it is in their interest to work with the CFO over the potential reductions in budget. This is a window of opportunity - if any progress on engagement is to be achieved some way has to be found to build on this.

Analysis

- Whilst the arguments about whose fault it was that the previous disputes took place may be rehearsed ad-infinitum this debate serves little purpose except to further entrench positions
- If there is going to be any engagement there is a need for people at all levels to take the lead in promoting an atmosphere that will allow a focus on the future - the past has to become history!
- A question remains if this attempt at engagement is simply setting the organisation up to fail so as to clear the decks for the battle over cuts

Action Point

- Representative bodies and the CFO have to be prepared to be pragmatic
- Everything will rely on both sides calling a truce over the past

2. Methodology

Our central hypothesis is that membership of an institution makes it harder to observe or understand that institution: we become caught up in the anxieties inherent in the work and the characteristic institutional defences against those anxieties. This soon leads to shared, habitual ways of seeing, and a common failure to question 'holy writ'. Newcomers may be able to see more clearly, but have no licence to comment. By the time they do, they have either forgotten how to see, or have learned not to.

(Mosse 2009: 8)

2.1. Theoretical Background

The research is qualitative and our methodology is to collect data and analyse it using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This approach provides a way of developing, expanding and testing hypothesis as we research, and for producing an outcome that those involved in the research should understand.

We take the view that methodology is a resource for use by craftspeople and not a rigid positive mainstream framework. Comte argues that research is dead if methods are not flexible, adjusted to fit the problem at hand reflexively in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 30). Following this lead, we have developed a methodology for carrying out research in the fireservice that uses our theoretical understandings alongside our empirical work to *respond according to the data*. This type of reflexivity allows the development of hypotheses about the underlying reasons/structures behind what is observed and their influence on the individual/group.

What we do not do is use rigor as a replacement for theoretical analysis (Bourdieu 1992: 28). Like Bourdieu we believe that too often rigor is a mask for those who lack a substantial background in theory and simply provide data that proves *yet again* similar and popular findings. We equally see that our role is to apply our knowledge to what we find rather than simply reflecting the view of any parties to the research. In particular, we are mindful of our integrity and recognise that unlike some consultants we will not provide sterile analysis that reflects the views of those who employ us (Fevre 2003).

2.2. Actual research

In this research we have carried out:

- *one to one interviews with all five of the executive team*,
- *a focus group with senior managers*
- *a focus group with middle managers*
- *focus groups on two wholetime stations*
- *focus group on one retained station*

- *brief discussion with CFS managers*
- *interview with the FBU negotiating team*
- *discussion with fire authority members*
- *focus group with the FBU brigade committee*

2.3. The sample at stations

An executive manager and the FBU chose the stations we visited. There were standby pumps at the two WDS stations and by including their crews in the focus group, the sample increased. At the RDS station, seven of the watch also served as WDS personnel and this again increased the range/scope of our data. Taking these opportunities to widen the range of representatives was a considerable advantage to the research. Instead of getting a sample from three stations, the focus groups contained personnel from five stations and because the RDS group contained representatives from seven WDS stations this again widened the sample.

With the permission of participants, we recorded most of the interviews to provide qualitative data as part of our ‘findings’ for ‘analysis’ and ‘action points’ (see Appendix 3).

An important part of the data collection process has also included a day of feedback to the executive, the FBU, FOA and Unison; this feedback then became data for the research.

2.4. Anonymity

With the exception of the CFO, we have provided anonymity to the respondents and the level of this increases as you move down the hierarchy.

2.5. Interviewing

It is usual when researching the fire service to experience barriers to entry in one way or another. Initially our interviews normally start with a somewhat unreceptive audience. With the exception of the middle managers, who were difficult to ‘get started,’ this was not the case in South Yorkshire. What we have chosen to describe as ‘Yorkshire hospitality’ deviates from our experience and research norm, providing a significant difference to be noted.

It was also noticeable that when we conducted focus groups at the station that everyone spoke. Traditionally this is not the case. More often one or two members tend to police the proceedings. In SYFRs, firefighters and their local managers were not inhibited by their role, length of service, age, gender or ethnicity from speaking. Interviewing in South Yorkshire was refreshing and suggests an informal culture that is welcoming and inclusive and not particularly steeped in homosocial practices (Lipman-Blumen 1976) or other difficult masculine hierarchal arrangements (see Baigent 2001). It is also necessary to repeat that during focus groups on stations the views of crew and watch managers were indistinguishable from the main body of firefighters.

There has been some criticism that this research gives firefighters and middle managers an opportunity to push their own agenda and for researchers to be sucked in. It is unlikely that this has happened here because there is such a congruity of data. To suggest otherwise would be to suggest a conspiracy of immense proportions. It also has to be recognised that others have innocently corroborated much of the data.

2.6. Feedback

During the feedback to the Executive, we were aware that there was some concern over our analysis of the middle manager’s cohort because these managers had a difficult meeting the day before with their seniors. For our part, we believe that we have the expertise to recognise when people are letting off steam. We would also like to point out that during the verbal feedback one FOA representative complimented us on filtering elements of subjectivity that had occurred during this particular focus group.

Furthermore, we would like to believe that as our schedules were fixed six weeks earlier that if executive managers thought this ‘challenging meeting’ and the ‘conversation with FOA’ were likely to affect the data then they would not have held their meeting with middle managers just prior to our focus group.

2.7. Group Think

During focus groups it is sometimes possible for an argument to be made that is accepted by the researchers and yet does not represent the thoughts of the group. To avoid this type of ‘group think’ (Janis 1972) we made it clear that individuals had a responsibility to speak out if they heard any comments they did not agree with. At times, particularly when rational aspects of an argument were underpinned by very powerful emotion, we reinforced this check by specifically working to identify if there was a consensus.

3. Managing SYFRs

3.1. Overview

Finding

To achieve the aims and objectives of the Fire Authority, since 2004 performance management and directive styles of leadership have been employed in SYFRs. With those aims largely achieved, middle managers are now being encouraged to take a greater role as agents for transformational change and to motivate their watches to engage with the organisation.

Analysis

- If the CFO is able to get the workforce to recognise the problems he is facing and work with him rather than against him then there may be tangible benefits
- Whilst the CFO has always held the view that managers should lead in their own areas the style has been directive and many managers have developed a style to lead in this way that may not easily be adapted

Action point

- The change in style to participative leadership has to be adopted by all managers and recognised by the workforce as a matter of urgency
- There is urgent need for a customised education and training programme to support this change

3.2. Middle Managers Perceptions

Finding

The middle managers had a ‘challenging’ meeting with members of the executive and senior managers the day before they took part in a focus group with us (see methodology).

According to middle managers, much of the ‘challenging meeting’ was spent on talking about leadership (we have now been informed that the topic was not so much about leadership but about a change in style). Despite the executive team clearly believing that they have promoted leadership as a concept for some considerable time some/many middle managers had not recognised this and saw the change in style as an about face

Analysis

- Over the past 6 years, the objectives of modernisation have been achieved by a directive style of leadership/management. Middle and senior managers were keen to point out that they personally supported the CFO's directive approach to address the difficulties the service faced from 2004 to the current day
- Despite an argument by the executive that leadership has always been required of managers; middle managers have told us they see this emphasis as a new approach. This may be simply about definition, but this is an important training need. Those middle managers whose perception was that they were there to pass on directions, rather than lead on them, will need support and development to gain the necessary skills to engage in this process
- Middle managers may also perceive a possible vulnerability in adopting a new style that requires them to get closer to their teams - be more hands on (charismatic see Weber 1964) and again the skills necessary to achieve this transformation will need to be developed
- Many managers believe they were chosen for their directive skills and to support this stance promotions have been based on a "*nationally accredited process, chosen to lead the organisation through this modernisation agenda*" (Executive Manager). Executive managers argued this did not result in "*Yes men*" being employed. Rather "*A selection process based around skills, qualities and attributes was developed to identify future managers who shared the aspirations of SY Fire. One essential attribute will have been the ability to manage performance*" (Executive Manager). Nonetheless, some middle managers interpreted the promotion policy as choosing people who were prepared to accept instructions and pass them on. It is also possible to recognise that the nationally accredited process for leading through modernisation was deliberately chosen for a time when directive rather than participative leadership was necessary
- There are plenty of leaders in the fire service and many of these do not hold a formal position in the organisational hierarchy. These informal leaders (e.g. FBU representatives) are not just firefighters speaking out but people who have been elected by firefighters as officials to speak out for them. These FBU representatives have to be engaged with if their members' participation and engagement is going to work. There are ways of achieving this through joint working/education and training.

Action Point

- There is a strong case for developing a radical programme to encourage leadership, engagement and participation at all levels (that needs to be developed, tested and critiqued before rolling it out throughout the organisation)
- Ensure that managers receive the training necessary to first recognise that they have to take more responsibility locally to achieve a transformational change to improve engagement and secondly that they develop the skills necessary to achieve this
- The recent leadership lecture was largely identified as insulting by middle managers – something more educational and interactive is necessary to work with and reinforce/support current knowledge to develop leadership abilities on engaging with their workforce
- The distinction between perception and reality about promotion should be addressed. It may be that selection criteria and the personal qualities and abilities required in the future may differ from those used in the past

- Engagement of FBU leaders should be encouraged through joint working to establish where the joint agendas are and where collaborative working can be successful. Without this the new policy will be weakened/fail

Finding

Some managers have already started to change style and this has been recognised.

Analysis

- These small windows of opportunity have to be built on

Action point

- Identify role models who can lead the change and use these positive examples in workshops with their peers

4. Trust

Finding

There can be unintended outcomes of a directive management style. We found an example of this when speaking to middle managers who constantly defaulted to personal examples of a backlash following a critique of a more senior manager. Perceptions at these times are of the greatest importance. What some may see as a spirited defence by senior managers, can also be perceived by some as threatening.

It would be impossible to relate these examples without identifying the subjects. However, mostly the examples involved middle managers who at times were fearful of actually leading (or making decisions) in case their judgement was challenged by senior managers. In similar terms, some were concerned about being treated fairly if they spoke out.

It is difficult to judge how real or current middle managers' perceptions are. Nonetheless, given the new style *and* middle managers desire to be involved (and to please), good communications and education/training should make it relatively easy to overcome any fear (real or perceived). The proposed workshops on giving and receiving critique (that should be attended by all managers) will go a long way to overcoming what some may see as a tool for policing individual behaviour *and the behaviour of the whole audience*.

Analysis

- It is our view that some middle managers are fearful of their seniors. There can be a number of explanations for this from individual incidents to a culture of embedded fear and a lack of trust
- The word "*trust*" is frequently used in the fire service:
 - On the fireground people have to trust each other, or at least recognise those they do not trust
 - Away from the operational arena trust can also relate to how much people actually believe what they are told *and* to how much people can believe they are free to speak out
- Trust can also be affected when personnel believe their managers lack compassion. Government requirements and Authority aims and objectives to modernise have led to

managers/leaders adopting new styles (a neo liberal rationality see Miller and Rose 2008) to implement new policies. Middle managers (and the remainder of the workforce) may lack an understanding of why this is and take it personally. For example, there is also a belief amongst firefighters that senior management should share their values about prioritising the operational response to emergencies. When community fire safety is prioritised and the service is cut this can be seen as breaking a trust that their CFO should protect them, their role and their work (as they believe it should be done)

Action point

- Improve communications (covered extensively later in this report)
- Develop the existing initiative by the CFO that informs watches about the framework and bureaucracy of a modern fire service and how involved government actually are when they set the budget
- Develop workshops on giving and receiving critique (that should be attended by a mix of managers)

Finding

‘Trust’ can also relate to how much employees trust that their leaders will involve them in the organisational decision-making. Middle managers spoke of concerns about being ignored. The data from senior managers also innocently provided evidence that they too knew about this concern.

Analysis

- There is a complete mismatch here in the evidence. On the one side you have middle managers saying they are, for example, ‘potentially estranged’ and then you have executive managers saying there is an ‘arena for consultation’
- We have experienced a very similar finding in another fire service that had been involved in strike action

Action point

- The role of the MMAS needs to be clearly defined to avoid misunderstandings
- There needs to be a better communication of the boundaries around consultation and discussion

Finding

Whilst firefighters appeared to have good relationships with their watch managers, they had concerns about speaking out to more senior managers.

Firefighters also recognised that their station managers had similar difficulties about speaking out to their seniors and this innocent recognition adds weight to middle managers perceptions. There is a real need for training on how to give, accept and grow from critique.

Analysis

- It is not uncommon to find that communications and lack of trust be highlighted during research in the fire service. What is important here is the extent to which these elements exist
- There may be some benefit in recognising that an important motivator for public servants is their sense of service. In this respect, the ethos that the fire service provides an *efficient* service to the public is worth some consideration. ‘Efficient’ to Government, Fire Authority, stakeholders and CFO’s is steering the service towards prevention and modernisation; this also involves achieving imposed budget cuts, community safety and now identification with

‘Localism.’ On the other hand firefighters, largely believe that an efficient fire service aims the majority of resources at the point of delivery of the emergency service in its operational role *and they also believe that this is/should be a shared value throughout the service*. This gap between understanding needs to be bridged and is an important training/education need

- Firefighters make very similar arguments to some middle managers about how *their* service is changing without them being involved in the process. This may be about a belief in a perception of shared values as there are many in SYFRs who do not recognise that government are setting agendas that ‘have’ to be followed
- Given that the CFO wants everyone to contribute to the debate about the future then it has to be recognised that before this happens:
 - boundaries of discussion need to be clear
 - people will have to believe they are safe to contribute
 - that change without discussion leaves employees believing they are not important: a loss of esteem (and trust)
- The new term for ‘efficiency’ that key stakeholders (above) see as re-skilling firefighters can be interpreted by firefighters as de-skilling (because it changes their role, which in turn challenges their needs for esteem and self-actualisation through emergency responses).
- Firefighters in their evidence to us also want to take ownership of their service, not only to provide it according to their ideal of ‘efficient’ (as both employees and as part of the community) but also to feed their own needs (Baigent 2001) and the way they see their identity. For example employees fulfil a number of needs through the way they deliver their operational response to emergencies:
 - Esteem and self actualisation, sit alongside pride and belonging as a psychological rewards for doing a good job (Maslow 1987)
 - It may be that firefighters put their trust in the FBU because they perceive that it is their union that defends their needs and not the CFO

Action Point

The Fire Service is no longer a family business (if it ever was). There may be some benefit if staff were aware of the CFO’s role and stance in the modernised fire service post Bain (Bain 2002) so that misconceptions do not lead to expectations that will not be fulfilled

People have to believe it is safe to contribute and critique

It has to be recognised that attempts to engage with the workforce will raise expectations that their views will be not only considered *but also followed*. This will have to be carefully managed if problems are to be avoided

There needs to be a real engagement with middle managers who in turn will then engage with the workforce. This needs a considered and joined up education/training programme that ‘everyone’ can support

5. Communications

5.1. Communications overview

Finding

Communications in an organisation that runs 24 hours a day and 365 days a year are always difficult. However, trying to get the workforce to actually hear the message rather than simply receiving it can be complicated when there is a lack of trust; particularly when informal networking amongst some firefighters to ‘bury’ the message given out by managers can be so efficient.

Firefighters who believe trust is developed through debate and interaction, and have a perception that managers only visit to “*talk down to us*”, are going to be difficult to engage. First, they will need convincing that participation means their voice will at least be heard – *however* SYFRs have to be clear about what that actually means and ensure that when firefighters participate that they receive feedback.

Analysis

- Firefighters really care (for whatever reason) about their service. They also want a say in how it is run. At the same time the service wants firefighters to be engaged but there can be a gap between what different parties understand engagement to mean

Action Point

- SYFRs expectation of what they mean by ‘participation’ should be spelt out or otherwise middle managers’/firefighters’ may have expectations that are likely to be dashed and the whole project will be set up to fail
- *There needs to be a hierarchy for communications in which station managers are expected to be responsible for passing on messages/strategy/expectations to their watches* and in turn making this a two way process.
 - Training will be necessary here as station managers will have to take responsibility for and lead on these communications
 - When the watch make a suggestion station managers should expect to feed back on the outcome
 - Station managers must also be trained in the important elements of critique and be prepared to take unpopular messages back to their managers
- Station managers and watches may need assistance in achieving the level of trust for this communication to be successful
- The workshops training given on the receiving, handling and delivery of critique (constructive criticism) should also help to overcome people being afraid to speak out and help to develop a leadership model, voice and vision
- When the executive deliver a policy message directly to firefighters, then station managers should reinforce this message with their watches and engage them in debate on the policy
- Consideration should be given as to when strategic managers go ‘off piste’ during direct communications with watches transcends/damages the communication hierarchy (in both directions)

Finding

Firefighters believe that their views are filtered by station managers.

Analysis

- If station manager’s perception is that their managers do not want to hear negative messages, criticism or critique, then communications up to senior managers are likely to be filtered. In

effect middle managers could be acting to provide what they believe is the right impression (Goffman 1997).

Action Point

For engagement to work all managers need to know what is *really happening* at watch level. Station managers should be engaging with their watches, promoting the service policy and feeding back on their success (and difficulties). It needs to be understood that addressing difficulties, even saying “No”, provides the energy to move forward

When firefighters make suggestions to their station managers and these are fed up to the hierarchy a system needs to be established to ensure the watch/individual gets feedback on the result

Finding

An important indicator of how communications are failing (and of the perceived fear factor) is provided by how people are interpreting the intention of the ‘operational assurance team’ (OAT), which monitors operational activity, as punitive (a similar argument was repeated by a middle manager in our discussions with them).

Analysis

- If managers and firefighters perceive that OAT is part of a blame culture then communications are failing because this team is an important part of operational safety.
- This evidence came from operational crews and middle managers and points to a lack of effective communications, a fear of reprisals or a lack of trust that OAT inspections are in fact not part of the blame culture
- Whether this is the reality or not it is indeed a perception and the results are likely to be tangible in outcome (and potentially dangerous)

Action Point

Ensure all personnel understand *and believe* the reasoning and intention behind OAT inspections

Finding

Executive managers put a considerable store in their ability to talk to the workforce. Whilst managers may believe that they are able to engage with personnel, they may also have some concerns that at least some of the time the communication is one way.

Some corporate staff have also (innocently) corroborated the possibility that when a uniformed manager speaks with the watch that a certain amount of impression management and lack of meaningful engagement takes place because the watch recognise the ability of the uniformed manager to act against them. A similar argument was made about one to one conversations with people who are in a position to influence promotion prospects.

The same lack of engagement can be seen in that only 17% of staff completed the current consultation on cuts.

Analysis

- There is an abundance of communication, through a number of channels within the organisation yet this may not be delivering the expected outcome

- The CFO on behalf of the Fire Authority has made hard strategic decisions that have impacted on the workforce. It should be recognised that because the argument/policy has been communicated to the workforce this does not mean it has been understood or accepted
- When we have found unexpected findings this does not mean managers lack the ability to communicate or that there is a lack of good communication. It is our view that amongst firefighters' informal cultures there is a resistance to hearing a message and a greater resistance to believing the things they do not want to hear. Then resistance occurs through rumour making and story telling

Action Point

Communication strategies have to be considered in the light of the cultural arrangements amongst firefighters' networks

6. Community Safety

6.1. Findings

Despite some peripheral arguments about the way statistics are collected the evidence points to the overwhelming success of community safety in SYFRs. Calls in some areas are almost halved and middle managers were keen to point out that their innovation has shaped this success.

However, CFS is not something that firefighters in SYFRs (or elsewhere) have been enthusiastic about and an element of pressure has been necessary to make it work:

Community Manager: Big stick approach to achieve community work

Targets in particular have not been welcomed on stations:

Firefighter: No bonuses for points only bollocking for not

Firefighters have a list of arguments against CFS that include how it reduces training time, the cost of fuel and the embarrassment of what one firefighter called “*begging them to have fire alarms.*”

Antagonism over CFS occurs nationally and we hear similar arguments in other services.

Analysis

- There is little doubt that without performance managed targets that the success of CFS would not have been achieved
- The fact that firefighters are confronted by aggressive ‘customers’ needs recognition

Action Point

Some way of persuading firefighters to engage with CFS has to be found (this is a national problem)

There could be an incentive in providing an incentive; consideration could be given to providing recognition when targets are achieved

Middle managers need to be more hands on here

7. Finance

Findings

Firefighters' perceptions about spending are illustrated below:

Converting part of the station to make it into a community room
Cost implication of delivering leaflets and fire alarms
Rewiring of the station
Refurbishing kitchens
£10,000 to move a porta cabin

Firefighters who are being asked to take part in the consultative exercise may well point to a lack of consideration about the small things:

Firefighter: It's like peanuts you save enough and you get a packet – it's a principal thing

Successful communications, leadership and trust could easily challenge these arguments.

Analysis

- Whether it is firefighters being awkward or a failure in communications there is a clear perception amongst firefighters that in some areas managers are wasting money. Here is one area where engagement clearly can take place to the advantage of all
- Looking after the pennies (or peanuts), may be small by comparison to the real financial pressures to come but could provide for important dividends of trust

Action Point

- It is always difficult to reconcile necessary maintenance (planned or otherwise) with budget cutbacks. Firefighters can often argue that they receive mixed messages when, on the one hand the talk is of budget cutbacks and then on the other hand they see what they perceive as 'unnecessary' expenditure on maintenance. Station managers should be sufficiently in the loop to stop the rumours that do so much damage at these times

8. Some positive views

Findings

A great deal of data and analysis highlight some important points that pose challenges. This is not necessarily a negative perspective and fitting-in aim to stress the major points that can take the service forward so that positioning and outputs can be more aligned. The historical political tensions have also contributed to the current cultural tensions. However, there are clear signs that people want to move on.

Some senior managers, recognising the threat from the treasury, are indicating by the questions that they ask that they are positive in their engagement and are looking for clear guidance from the Fire Authority and CFO. These are some of their comments:

- *Long term drip cuts – need something in black and white*
- *Need to know what priorities are – what is sacred and what isn't*
- *Need a steer from top now – what's in place; is it big bang or slow – formulate a plan*
- *Need to be a dynamic that keeps the pace up – the landscape is not yet set*

The data from senior managers also advises on ways to succeed by involving the workforce:

- *Need to galvanise workforce*
- *Transparency*

- *Laying it on the table*
- *Consistent open dialogue*

When actually asked for a list of their key priorities, we collected the following comments on a flip chart:

- *Clear priorities*
- *Consistency – what targets, messages and communication*
- *360 degree promotion*
- *Interpretation of procedures to be consistent*
- *More thorough implementation of points system – which was dropped in and we had to run with.*
- *Consultation, acknowledgement and feedback from above and below.*
- *Want to feel valued*
- *End user needs consulting*

Middle managers thoughts are similar to their seniors.

Analysis

- The senior and middle managers recognise the need to cultivate certain work practices within the present culture and offer recognition of some of the problems
- What is unusual here (given that for most of the meeting with middle managers we had to move people away from relaying their negative personal experiences) is that middle managers look forward rather than back when asked for a list of priorities
- Nonetheless whilst managers recognise what may need to be done they are not offering any way it should be operationalised

Action Point

The future priorities and concerns of senior and middle managers need to be considered (and answered)

Once answered managers must decide how they will proceed on their priorities and (answered) concerns

Their needs to be an interactive workshop through which middle managers recognise their role, and develop a leadership strategy and common vision to move forward

9. Support for change

Findings

Occasionally people did mention briefly that there was going to have to be changes. When we tried to follow up these comments there was silence and people quickly changed the subject.

Some people did not even know that the CFO had gone public on potential cuts.

Analysis

- It is possible that many in the workforce are in denial about just how challenging the potential budget cut is going to be
- No one wanted to enter into a debate on this area and this suggests
 - a lack of reality
 - a belief that there is nothing that can be achieved by talking about budget cuts

- that the FBU will deal with this issue

Action Point

- Engaging the workforce will need radical thinking and we provide this in the action plan

10. FBU View

Finding

The FBU negotiators argue that they are committed to the back to work agreement to work with SYFRs. They admit that relations are improving:

FBU: Deal to go back to work was to work with managers – we are doing this but cautiously

FBU: We are not standing side by side but we are talking

FBU Middle managers are often doing little things that can be resolved but this all takes time

The FBU have yet to come to a consensus about how they see their future relationship with SYFRs. They have three views.

1. We should help shape the agenda
2. Let's wait and see
3. Community is not our role – at a time of cutbacks we should return to core business

Analysis

- These three views are a topic for debate between the service and the union
- It is our judgement that if the FBU (and other representative bodies) and service negotiators can actively work on developing trust at a personal and organisational (professional) level then they will sponsor this belief to those they work with or represent
- What has been interesting has been a considerable view amongst managers that the Brigade Committee is a potential block to good relations with the FBU. We have already indicated that the FBU are looking to make a success of working with managers but remain sceptical and there is little to be gained in labouring this point
- For our part, we found the meeting with the Brigade Committee to be positive. We heard a catalogue of concerns but joint workshops may well make these difficulties into distant memories

Action Point

- The FBU negotiators and the Brigade Committee have to be convinced of the advantages of employee engagement (because they are uniquely placed in having the trust of most firefighters) or the planned engagement with the workforce is unlikely to occur
- Joint workshops should be planned between the Brigade Committee and middle managers

11. Action Plan

We have conducted a snapshot cultural audit focusing on how to promote engagement that has considered how to help with organisational direction and culture, increase staff confidence, test perceptions of reality, identify tools for direction, explore multiple cultural positions and inform the

action plan within the people strategy. In appendix 4, there is also a diagram to indicate a snapshot of the cultures within SYFRs (see Appendix 4).

We do however consider this report as a work in progress, a living document that will form the basis for further discussions. This document like many other reports in the fire service is not the answer to a problem, just a guide to understanding. What we recommend now is that SYFRs use the understanding that we have gained to compliment their skills to interpret a way forward along the line of our action plan. Fitting-in would very much like to continue to be part of this way forward.

Our action plan focuses on one priority: station managers and their engagement with their watch.

We propose a new communications and leadership strategy for stations. This will do far more than simply communicate, it will put station managers at the centre of the watches on their stations to promote engagement, bring the CFO's voice onto the station *and feedback responses to him*.

What follows are five steps that should provide a framework for this change. An education/training plan to achieve this is available if required

Step One

Putting station managers at the heart of the watch involves a transformational change. SYFRs do not have the luxury of time; the need is for a transformation and an 'immediate' improvement in engagement between station managers and their watch.

Step Two

Our research suggests:

- As experiential learners firefighters' preference is for verbal messages from people that they trust
- Station managers therefore have to get the trust of their watches
- Communications have to be reinforced all the time if station managers are going to engage the workforce

Therefore, in addition to any written communications we suggest that SYFRs **reorganise communications** so that they operate verbally through the hierarchy.

Specifically for a trial period, station managers should be given the flexibility to increase direct communications with their watches and being at the front end of engagement by embedding them in their watches to develop leadership.

Step Three

Provide station managers with the necessary support by holding informal workshop to discuss the new style that will:

- Prepare station managers to deliver the engagement messages to their stations
- Persuade station managers to lead and be the referral point for communications on the watch
- Encourage station managers to feed back warts and all
- Develop a help and support group where managers can take and share problems and successes

Point Four

- Establish a workshop where station managers and the brigade committee can work together
- Develop this workshop into a forum that meets regularly

Point Five

Increase leadership development training to drive forward on action points – specifically there needs to be training that will address the following:

- The use of critique and constructive criticism to engage the workforce and develop the organisation
- Leading and managing fire service culture
- Developing a leadership model, subjecting this to critique and affecting the mobilisation of this as a living and developing model.

- Establish and embed station managers role in communications

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13. Appendix 1: CFO statement on future cuts

Chief's Budget Cut Fears 09 July 2010

South Yorkshire's Chief Fire Officer, Mark Smitherman, has warned that fire stations could be forced to close if budget cuts of the levels suggested by the coalition Government become reality. That would lead to slower response times to attend emergency incidents and the prospect that the South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue (SYFR) would be left without the resources necessary to respond to the county's risks. Mr Smitherman has also warned that recent dramatic improvements in the safety of local people could be "thrown away", and urged the Government to consider the "unique needs" of the Fire & Rescue Service before implementing public sector cuts.

SYFR has been preparing for the possibility of cuts in its Government grant, by launching a public consultation, which is still ongoing. But, following the Chancellor's emergency Budget announcement that the average cut in public services would be around 25%, Mr Smitherman said it was time to stand up for his staff and the safety of the South Yorkshire public, by launching a passionate defence of the county's fire and rescue service.

He said: "South Yorkshire people are safer now than they have ever been before. Accidental house fires, deliberate fires and the number of people killed and injured in fires have fallen dramatically in the last five years. But a funding cut of the levels suggested in the Budget would be likely to mean that fire stations would have to close. I will do my utmost to defend our service and our staff against cuts that could affect public safety and our firefighters' ability to do their jobs effectively."

"As an emergency service we have unique needs because our work is based purely on risk, not activity levels. Emergency incidents have reduced significantly due to the Service's excellent prevention work. But the risks to the public are still out there – if anything, they have increased, because as well as fires and road traffic collisions, people now expect us to respond to events such as flooding and terrorism. Reduced public spending could also increase our activity levels because the evidence shows that arson levels increase at times of economic hardship.

"Councils facing a budget cut can choose to cut the grass less often or change the opening hours of their libraries and leisure centres. Even if our prevention work continues to reduce emergency incidents, we must keep enough resources available 24/7, just in case. We place our fire stations and fire engines across the county according to the risks in the community but cuts of the levels suggested will seriously threaten our ability to keep all those fire stations open."

"We recognise that the budget is the Government's overall priority and all public sector bodies have to play a part in helping to reduce the deficit. There are some efficiencies we can make. But we are already an extremely efficient organisation. The number of firefighters in South Yorkshire has reduced over recent years but we have still been able to make people safer than ever. The change in shift times which took place earlier this year was controversial, but it has made us significantly more efficient. There isn't much more we can do."

Almost eighty per cent of SYFR's budget is spent on staff costs, three-quarters of that paying for full-time firefighters. Mr Smitherman added: "We can make some efficiencies behind the scenes. A new structure is being developed to reduce management costs. But the fact is that reducing management costs and support staff departments won't come anywhere near to saving the amounts being proposed by the Government. If the cut is 25%, as is being suggested, that will have significant implications for our frontline service. I have to stand up for my staff and the public and say that this could compromise our ability to deliver vital emergency services."

The Chief said that closing fire stations would be "a last resort", and that he could not put a figure on the number of jobs which would be affected until the size of the cut was known. He added that the service's ability to manage reducing staff numbers through natural wastage such as retirements would be dependent entirely on the size of the reduction in Government grant.

Finally, he promised that the views of the public, staff and trade unions will be listened to as the service plans for a difficult future: "We have a staff and public consultation ongoing until the start of August, and we have already had some excellent responses submitted," Mr Smitherman explained. "All those responses will be read and fully considered before we publish our new service plans this autumn."

He added: "Staff have been fully involved throughout this process. We have made good strides in improving relations with the Fire Brigades Union over recent months and I believe we can work with them to face the challenges ahead

together. We have a common interest in wanting to provide the best emergency service we possibly can to the public of South Yorkshire. But I am standing up now to say we cannot do that unless we have adequate resources available to us.”

Mark Smitherman

14. Appendix 2: Extracts from Audit Commission

South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority is a metropolitan fire authority covering a population of almost 1.3 million and four metropolitan areas, Barnsley; Doncaster; Sheffield and Rotherham. The Authority provides emergency fire and rescue services to all of South Yorkshire, which covers an area of around 600 square miles. It enforces fire safety laws, provides advice on fire safety matters and carries out a wide range of other activities aimed at improving community safety and civil resilience in the event of a large-scale emergency.

The Authority employs 1177 full time equivalent staff to deliver services from within four areas that cover the boundaries of the four local councils in South Yorkshire. There are 23 fire stations, eighteen of these stations are wholtime (staffed 24 hours) and five are retained (staff on call). The Authority has 12 elected councillors, who represent the four local authorities. The Authority has a vision statement entitled 'Working for a Safer South Yorkshire' and has the following priorities for improvement:

- Responding quickly to life threatening emergencies;
- Reducing fatalities and casualties due to fires;
- Reducing accidental dwelling fires and deliberate fires;
- Reducing malicious false alarm calls and fire appliance mobilisations to false alarms;
- Reducing number of people killed or injured in road traffic collisions and;
- Reduction in staff days lost to sickness absence.

...

Service improvements have been delivered, with seven of its eight key delivery objectives for the period 2006 to 2009 being achieved. Deaths and injuries in accidental house fires reduced by 33 per cent; accidental house fires by 18 per cent and arson by 30 per cent over this period. The Authority is not however, able to meet its challenging attendance standard of a six-minute response on 80 per cent of occasions.

(Audit Commission 2009)

15. Appendix 3: Summary Action Points

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop a truly shared definition of engagement and to then achieve it, the proposed changes in management style should be implemented rapidly <i>and</i> the workforce will have to respond positively^{vi}
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representative bodies and the CFO have to be prepared to be pragmatic Everything will rely on both sides calling a truce over the past
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The change in style to participative leadership has to be adopted by all managers and recognised by the workforce as a matter of urgency There is urgent need for a customised education and training programme to support this change
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a strong case for developing a radical programme to encourage leadership, engagement and participation at all levels (that needs to be developed, tested and critiqued before rolling it out throughout the organisation) Ensure that managers receive the training necessary to first recognise that they have to take more responsibility locally to achieve a transformational change to improve engagement and secondly that they develop the skills necessary to achieve this The recent leadership lecture was largely identified as insulting by middle managers – something more educational and interactive is necessary to work with and reinforce/support current knowledge to develop leadership abilities on engaging with their workforce The distinction between perception and reality about promotion should be addressed. It may be that selection criteria and the personal qualities and abilities required in the future may differ from those used in the past Engagement of FBU leaders should be encouraged through joint working to establish where the joint agendas are and where collaborative working can be successful. Without this the new policy will be weakened/fail
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify role models who can lead the change and use these positive examples in workshops with their peers
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve communications (covered extensively later in this report) Develop the existing initiative by the CFO that informs watches about the framework and bureaucracy of a modern fire service and how involved government actually are when they set the budget Develop workshops on giving and receiving critique (that should be attended by a mix of managers)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of the MMAS needs to be clearly defined to avoid misunderstandings • There needs to be a better communication of the boundaries around consultation and discussion
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Fire Service is no longer a family business (if it ever was). There may be some benefit if staff were aware of the CFO's role and stance in the modernised fire service post Bain (Bain 2002) so that misconceptions do not lead to expectations that will not be fulfilled • People have to believe it is safe to contribute and critique • It has to be recognised that attempts to engage with the workforce will raise expectations that their views will be not only considered <i>but also followed</i>. This will have to be carefully managed if problems are to be avoided • There needs to be a real engagement with middle managers who in turn will then engage with the workforce. This needs a considered and joined up education/training programme that 'everyone' can support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SYFRs expectation of what participation means have to be spelt out or otherwise middle managers'/firefighters' may have expectations that are likely to be dashed and the whole project will be set up to fail • <i>There needs to be a hierarchy for communications in which station managers are expected to be responsible for passing on messages/strategy/expectations to their watches</i> and in turn making this a two way process. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Training will be necessary here as station managers will have to take responsibility for and lead on these communications ○ When the watch make a suggestion station managers should expect to feed back on the outcome ○ Station managers must also be trained in the important elements of critique and be prepared to take unpopular messages back to their managers • Station managers and watches may need assistance in achieving the level of trust for this communication to be successful • The workshops training given on the receiving, handling and delivery of critique (constructive criticism) should also help to overcome people being afraid to speak out and help to develop a leadership model, voice and vision • When the executive deliver a policy message directly to firefighters, then station managers should reinforce this message with their watches and engage them in debate on the policy • Consideration should be given as to when strategic managers go 'off piste' during direct communications with watches transcends/damages the communication hierarchy (in both directions)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For engagement to work all managers need to know what is <i>really happening</i> at watch level. Station managers should be engaging with their watches, promoting the service policy and feeding back on their success (and difficulties). It needs to be understood that addressing difficulties, even saying “No”, provides the energy to move forward • When firefighters make suggestions to their station managers and these are fed up to the hierarchy a system needs to be established to ensure the watch/individual gets feedback on the result
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ensure all personnel understand <i>and believe</i> the reasoning and intention behind OAT inspections
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communication strategies have to be considered in the light of the cultural arrangements amongst firefighters’ networks
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Some way of persuading firefighters to engage with CFS has to be found (this is a national problem) ○ There could be an incentive in providing an incentive; consideration could be given to providing recognition when targets are achieved ○ Middle managers need to be more hands on here
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is always difficult to reconcile necessary maintenance (planned or otherwise) with budget cutbacks. Firefighters can often argue that they receive mixed messages when, on the one hand the talk is of budget cutbacks and then on the other hand they see what they perceive as ‘unnecessary’ expenditure on maintenance. Station managers should be sufficiently in the loop to stop the rumours that do so much damage at these times
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The future priorities and concerns of senior and middle managers need to be considered (and answered) ○ Once answered managers must decide how they will proceed on their priorities and (answered) concerns ○ The needs to be an active workshop through which middle managers recognise their role, and develop a leadership strategy and common vision to move forward
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging the workforce will need radical thinking and we provide this in the action plan
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The FBU negotiators and the Brigade Committee have to be convinced of the advantages of employee engagement (because they are uniquely placed in having the trust of most firefighters) or the planned engagement with the workforce is unlikely to occur • Joint workshops should be planned between the Brigade Committee and middle managers

16. Appendix 4: Cultural Chart

Firefighters and watch managers

Welcoming, inclusive, receptive, family.

Distrusting of middle managers and above, live under a blame culture, climate of fear, mixed messages, bollocking for not hitting targets, perception managers waste money.

Expect consultation, perception is they don't get the opportunity to voice their opinions and if they do no one listens.

New touchy feely type of management, tight knit group in the watch are sceptical, we have been here before, where is the catch?

Watch managers and firefighters views are indistinguishable.

Trust the FBU

Middle Management

Often fearful of how their actions will affect their promotion/role.

Fearful about critiquing their managers

Have views about way forward, expect consultation, this perception is unfulfilled.

Think they have proved their innovation and leadership skills.

Firefighters perceive them as having a lack of identity, not able to make their *own* decisions or form their *own* opinions, fail to represent their messages to those above.

Directive management to give way to a new touchy feely style.

Recognise difficulties in engaging with the workforce after previous style.

Corporate Senior Management

Senior Uniformed Managers

Recognise the budgetry problems ,

Have a list of questions they need answered to manage the change

Suggest that there is a need for the CFO to be transparent, consistant, set out the priorities.

Recognise the discontent within the service both at uniformed and corporate level.

Executive Management

Have a clear vision for the future.

Are pushing for engagement.

May not recognise that their communications skills alone will not convince firefighters.

17. Endnotes

ⁱ Chief Executive – Make it work - The manager of the fire service – interested in outcome

Chief Officer – Professional position how can we make it work – The leader of *his* fire service – strategy/process

ⁱⁱ It will be October before the actual figure is known

ⁱⁱⁱ The budget cuts are going to be announced in October and the clock starts ticking then (some may consider it has already started ticking).

^{iv} The next section indicates that this process has been started.

^v One interview was carried out by telephone.

^{vi} The next section indicates that this process has been started.