“MAKING A DIFFERENCE”

(A Study Of Under Representation In UK and USA Fire Services)

Brigade Command Course project
Conference Paper
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CHANGING THE BALANCE

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Introduction

The purpose of this conference paper is to draw together the main points of the Brigade Command Course report ‘Making a Difference’ submitted by the author to the Fire Service College as his international research project for the Brigade Command Course and to present the key findings and recommendations of this report. The author during the research carried out a comparative analysis of firefighters in the USA and UK fire brigades using a multi-faceted methodology.

The research found that the fire service is predominantly a white male institute, that is slow in changing and that there are pockets of strong resistance still to the change that is needed. The service lacks funding and strategic support and guidance for many of the major changes that are needed, diversity being one. Little has been done by brigades and by those responsible at national level in the way of monitoring, auditing and evaluated performance in the area of diversity and when it has been provided such as, the Race Relations Amendment Act 2002, McPherson report (===) and the equality thematic reviews from the Home Office Inspectorate, the recommendations have not been widely and wholeheartedly accepted. This view is also supported by Jack Straw’s comments at the LGA conference in 1999:

The Fire Service’s record to date in the field of equality is – let us not mince words - totally unacceptable. There are less than one percent of women and just over one and a half percent of members of ethnic minorities in the operational service. I simply cannot accept that there are any justifiable reasons for these figures. It is time for the service to stop making excuses and to set its house in order. I am encouraged that many of you are reaching the very same conclusions. Jack Straw (1999)

The author set the following hypothesis to focus the research:

The majority of people who join the service have a connection with a serving firefighter.

The following research objectives were also set to support the research:
• To seek to determine if there is a difference between ethnic and gender groups in the connections they have prior to joining the service.

• To seek to determine if there is a difference between the USA and the UK when comparing connections that firefighters have prior to joining the service.

• To investigate the reasons that motivate people to join the service and what influenced them to join.

• To identify best practice from an analysis of the information received during the research.

• To identify a business case for addressing diversity in fire service.

The hypothesis was tested primarily by the use of two questionnaires and these were completed by officers and firefighters in the UK and the USA. The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide quantitative data to meet the needs of the hypothesis and the objectives. One of the key questions that was tested was, what connections firefighters had with serving firefighters prior to joining the fire service. The analysis of the questionnaires was able to confirm the views expressed by Bucke (1994, p.iv):

Social networks surrounding firefighting were found to have a degree of influence in attracting certain groups to this occupation. Such networks were found to create an informal recruitment process which preceded the formal one. White men were most likely to be initially drawn to firefighting through knowing a serving firefighter whilst women and ethnic minorities were more likely drawn by advertising or seeing firefighters at work.

The author adopted a research methodology that closely fitted the following definition of research:

Seeking through methodical processes to add to one’s body of knowledge and hopefully to that of others by the discovery of non-trivial facts and insights. Howard and Sharp (1983, p.6)

Research findings

A major challenge at the heart of this report was that of how to approach a literature review of such a broad subject. The author found that for organisations to adopt and successfully change policies on diversity issues they need to take account of ten key factors. The key factors found are discussed in this conference paper. One of the first things organisations need to do is to understand why diversity and the under-representation of women and black sections of the community is important. B. Roper (1998, p.3) stresses this point in his report:
Diversity is more than just ethnic and gender differences; it is a management responsibility and it is management’s duty to bring about diversity internally and bring into their service the external values and beliefs of the community.

McGuirk (2000, p.6) highlights the need to build a business case and gives six reasons why the fire service should seek to build a diverse service:

- Integrate our services alongside those of other public sector bodies and add more value to the urban renewal/social inclusion agenda, and local strategic partnerships.
- Build on existing good practice of working with the elderly and young people through partnerships.
- Enhance traditional methods of service delivery and encompass a wider safety dimension.
- Be less ‘threatening’ and be better able to work at the heart of communities through reflecting the race, culture and faiths of our local communities.
- Improve our corporate image and be better equipped to compete in the labour market and attract people who can rise to meet future challenge. In relation to customers and service provision, there are heightened expectations of equality because of the increased social awareness in a society where there is a greater acknowledgement of the potential for institutional discrimination and a desire to do something practical about it.
- Change our internal culture and reduce costs related to morale, job satisfaction, turnover and absenteeism.

The business case is further supported by the example cited by Mathis (1999) who calculated that (in the years 1993 to 1999) the Los Angeles Fire Department paid out $4 million in settlements to women who filed cases for wrongful practices. He claims this makes a compelling financial case for improving fire brigade/department diversity procedures and policies.

A practical example is given by CFO of Atlanta of how his fire department was able to reduce fire deaths by over 50% in the predominantly black areas of Atlanta by increasing the recruitment of black firefighters in the Fire Department over a period of twenty years.

Another ingredient for the successful implementation of diversity in the workplace is dealing with harassment in the workplace by publicising and demonstrating management commitment. This will include:

- Building and maintaining efficient, responsive complaint channels.
- Protecting the victims of harassment and providing counselling.
• Effective enforcement.

A number of writers cite leadership and managing change as having a critical role in the process of managing diversity and in effectively changing the workforce representation. Burton (1998, p.160) cites the studies of Morrison and Associates (1992):

Leadership commitment is the single most helpful factor in improving women’s advancement within an organisation. Leadership’s commitment and support of the integration of women is crucial for the acceptance by managers that their energy and resources need to be directed to gender integration outcomes. This signals to women that they can expect fair and equitable treatment.

Bucke (1994) supports the view that leadership is critical in meeting the equality agenda and goes on to explain why some brigades were further ahead than others. Bucke (1994) suggests that various explanations exist for the under-representation of women and black members of the community in the fire service. The main reason being that of commitment to the equal opportunities policy by senior management:

The support of senior management is therefore clearly important, but the danger is that a decline can occur with senior personnel changes. This is especially relevant to a strong hierarchical organization such as the fire service. Bucke (1994, p.74)

Leadership is clearly important, however, it must be coupled with accountability. These two measures are essential ingredients in ensuring the success of equality/diversity policies. Burton (1998) supports this view, he maintains that one certain way to ensure leaders and managers comply with policies is to make them accountable for their own achievements in these matters. A recognised method of achieving accountability is to clearly describe the responsibilities in every manager’s job description and hold them responsible for the achievement of specific goals in a performance reporting and appraisal system. Burton (1998) goes on to say that for managers to carry out these responsibilities and accountabilities effectively, they need comprehensive training and the opportunity for informal discussions so they develop confidence and a thorough understanding of what is expected of them.

Monitoring and review are two additional tools needed for any successful strategy for the implementation of change, the effectiveness of equality programmes needs to be measured through monitoring and evaluation systems. Both quantitative and qualitative data need to be collected and analysed. Burton (1998, p.45). This should include:

The maintenance of a database of all staff for equality issues, regular reviews of human resource policies and practices to identify areas of bias and discrimination, exit interviews, cultural audits and climate surveys of the fire service.
The author supports the use of cultural audits and climate surveys, as these provide benchmarks against which change can be measured. Two measures of the effectiveness of equality programmes is provided by Edgar (2001, p.35) who recommends using the following performance indicators:

1. Any alterations or changes evident in the representation of firefighters from the under-represented groups in the fire service compared to changes in their representation in the total labour force.

2. Changes in the proportional representation of black and women firefighters at various levels throughout the fire service’s rank structure to check on promotion.

A numbers of tools and models are discussed in the author’s BCC report ‘Making a Difference’, one model worthy of review by fire brigades is a model used in the USA and supported by the US Federal Employment Opportunities Commission (1997, p.8). The program is named ‘SPLENDID’. This an acronym that stands for a series of actions that employers can take to address equality and diversity issues in the work place, Study, Plan, Lead, Encourage, Notice, Discussion, Inclusion and Dedication. This covers many of the issues highlighted in the author’s BCC report. (See Appendix 1.)

The results of the questionnaires of UK and USA firefighters (see Appendix 2) confirmed the views expressed by Bucke (1994). The graphs (figure 1) below illustrate the findings. These were much higher than expected by the author in that in the UK and USA respectively 69% and 79% of firefighters joining the service had connections with a serving firefighter. This research was also able to confirm that friends were the largest group in the UK and USA that motivated and influenced firefighters to join. The research also showed that in the UK at 39%, women, had the largest influence of any group, from family members in the fire service of the groups surveyed that is. The author did not find this surprising as when attending the IABPFF conference, a black Chief Fire Officer of the association said:

‘Do not be surprised that your efforts to address under-representation leads to more white women joining more quickly than black section of the community. You will find as you change your culture and procedure then white male firefighters will begin to encourage their partners and daughters to join the service’.

Black, Senior Officer, Buffalo, IABPFF Conference

The above was further confirmed during the BCC, when the author attended a passing out parade at the Fire Service College, of the four women who completed the course, two had partners in the service.
Figure 1  Prior to joining the service, % of respondents who knew a serving firefighter

The questionnaire was also able to highlight that the majority of firefighters join the service because of six factors, these being: job satisfaction, working as a team, practical aspects of the job, physical aspects of the job, opportunities to serve the community and the excitement of attending emergencies (see Appendix 2); this confirms the finding of the research of Shuttleworth (2001) and McGill (2002). The findings are illustrated in the graphs below figure 2.
These six factors do not acknowledge that the fire service has changed its role from being predominantly a firefighting role to being more proactive in the community, particularly in education on fire safety matters. This also does not take account of the wider role of the fire service in special services and working in partnerships with community groups on matters such as crime and disorder and safer community agenda. The service needs to take account of the finding of this report and develop strategies that will ensure applicants are fully aware of the roles and competencies needed by a modern firefighter. To do this it will need to draw up clear competencies, skill, and emotional intelligence criteria required of a firefighter. The service will need to communicate this to all members of the service, as well as the community it is serving. Firefighters currently influence over 60% of all new firefighters who join the service in the UK. (See figure 3 below.)
The above charts show the factors that influenced firefighters to join the fire service at the time of application. Once again, friends and family played a major part. The chart also shows that the public also relied on ringing the brigade to find out if they were recruiting at the time of application. For this reason the call handler should be fully trained to handle calls from all sections of the community, to ensure the callers receive accurate and appropriate information and that the call handlers are able to direct under-represented groups to mentors or access courses (if the brigade or department are running them). Often positive action activities occur in isolation to the recruitment section, call handlers are therefore unable to direct potential applicants from the under-represented sections of the service to possible sources of further advice.

The Internet was also used by some applicants to find out about the fire service (a point made in the other section of section four of the questionnaire). The author believes that the internet is a growing area. In order to meet this need the fire service (CACFOA and or ODPM) should develop a professional web site giving all sections of the community the information needed. Additionally, each brigade should develop its own web page that supports the recruitment of women and black firefighters. (Figure 4 illustrates this point.)
Conclusion

The fire service needs to carefully examine the findings of this report and each brigade needs to carry out its own survey and match it against the database to see to what extent connections play a part in their recruitment process. If the fire service continues to recruit in the manner it has historically then it may as the culture changes and becomes more positive towards under-represented groups and have an effect on more women joining. However, it is unlikely that sufficient black firefighters will join the service as insufficient role models are currently employed to make a significant difference. The fire service should engage all uniformed sections of the service in its drive to recruit more firefighters from the under-represented groups. When analysing what factors influenced firefighter to join the fire service, not surprisingly, the main influences were not proactive measures taken by the service but friends and family, if the fire service is serious about making a change to the representation of women and black sections of the community then the influence of role models noted in Phoenix should not be overlooked. This is an area that has not been properly resourced in the UK fire brigades, other than in London Fire and Civil Defence Authority and in West Midlands Fire Service. The work of the London Fire Service outreach work team in providing dedicated and committed resources is worthy of note and further study.

Senior officers in the UK and the USA expressed a view that in terms of strategy and best practice, the fire service needs to get better at publishing
and sharing best practices. More collaboration and partnership work in the area of recruitment and diversity would enable smaller fire brigades take advantage of economies of scale as well as allowing the larger brigades to share and benchmark best practice. The CACFOA equality group by setting up the national, regional and the practitioners committees goes some way to meet this need. The east of England CACFOA group is one such group that is making best use of sharing best practice. CACFOA regularly organises seminars to meet this need, as does the FBU by running national and regional equality schools for its officials, this enables the sharing of best practice. More could be done if all the stakeholders worked together in partnership to share best practice and developed joint seminars and training.

This project by the use a multi-faceted methodology confirmed that firefighters who join the service are influenced and motivated by the connections they have in the service. The research has also been able to confirm where brigades have taken positive action to provide mentors and role models this has had success. In Phoenix Arizona, the fire department have support programmes for women, black and for Hispanic section of the community, LFCDA have a dedicated out reach team, West Midlands Fire Service have a full-time black Sub Officer working in the community, utilising a Government funded initiative (Connecting Communities), this has in the past year provided a number of applicants to the fire service:

‘In less than a year I have been able to get over 200 black members of the community to register an interest in joining the fire service. If I could get just ten percent of these to pass the entrance test I would be happy’. Sub Officer Smith West Midlands Fire Service

In Avon the Connecting Communities programme has been run jointly with the police and probation service, the project manager has been very pleased with the results to date and has placed a number of people into the police and probation service. Due to the low numbers of recruitment in the fire service in Avon, he believes it will take time before the Avon project for fire realises similar results to the police and the probation service. Cambridge Fire Service also provided positive feedback to the questionnaire of senior fire officers, the positive action initiatives that the above brigades are following are worthy of further study and evaluation.

**Recommendations**

The author makes nine recommendations that would support brigades and Government objectives to improve the under-representation of women and black section of the community in the fire service. The four key recommendations are listed below:

- CACFOA equality group develop an audit, review and monitoring model that will support brigades in their work, as well as support the sharing of best practice.

- The fire service should take note of the high numbers of firefighters who are recruited by serving firefighters, fire brigades in the UK and fire
departments in the USA need to develop strategies that acknowledge and take account of this fact.

- That the Fire Service Inspectorate develop the role of the National Fire Safety Centre in supporting brigades and also look at ways in which it can provide more resources for positive action campaigns.

- A central outreach team be established either by the Fire Service Inspectorate or consideration be given to run it from the Fire Service College. (One advantage of running the team from the Fire Service College would be it could also provide a valuable training resource as well as recruitment outreach work.)
References


McGuirk, S. (2002) *Are We Serious*. Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association, Tamworth


Roper, B. (1998) *Building the foundation for a Diversity Plan to serve the community*. Executive Fire Officers Program, National Fire Academy, Emmetsburg


Appendix 1

SPLENDID Model

A model used in the USA and supported by the US Federal Employment Opportunities Commission (1997, p.8)

- **Study**- Know the law, the standard that define obligations and the various barriers to EEO.

- **Plan**- Know ones own circumstances. Define ones problems, purpose solutions and develop strategies for achieving them.

- **Lead**- senior, middle and lower management must champion the cause of diversity as a business imperative and provide leadership for the successful attainment of the vision of a diverse workforce at all levels of the management.

- **Encourage**- Companies should encourage the attainment of diversity by all managers and employees and the structure and reward systems to reinforce those corporate objectives. Link pay and performance not only to technical competence but also for how employees interact support and respect each other.

- **Notice**- Take notice of the impact of your practices, after monitoring and assessing company progress. Self-analysis is a key part of this process. Ensure that a corrective strategy does not cause or result in unfairness.

- **Discussion**- communicate and reinforce the message that diversity is a business asset and a key element of business success in a national and global market.

- **Inclusion**- Bring everyone into the process, include white males. Help them understand that EEO incentives are good for the company and good for everyone. Include them in the analysis, planning and implementation.

- **Dedication**- Stay persistent in your quest. Long-term gains for these practices may cost in the short term. Invest in the needed human and capital resources.
Appendix 2

Prior to joining the Service, % of respondents who knew a serving firefighter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior to joining the Service, % of respondents who knew a serving firefighter</th>
<th>Firefighters UK total</th>
<th>Firefighters USA %</th>
<th>black UK USA Firefighter Total</th>
<th>black UK USA Firefighter %</th>
<th>White UK USA Firefighter Total</th>
<th>White UK USA Firefighter %</th>
<th>Women UK USA Firefighter Total</th>
<th>Women UK USA Firefighter %</th>
<th>Men UK USA Firefighters USA total</th>
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<th>Men UK Firefighter %</th>
<th>Women UK Firefighter Total</th>
<th>Women UK Firefighter %</th>
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<td>66.37</td>
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<td>174</td>
<td>56.46</td>
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Questionnaire Summary Factors that motivated firefighters to join the Fire Service

| Factors that motivated firefighters to join the Fire Service. | Male FF UK Mean | Female FF UK Mean | Male FF USA Mean | Female FF USA Mean | Male FF UK & USA Mean | Female FF UK & USA Mean | White FF UK Mean | Black FF UK Mean | White FF UK & USA Mean | Black FF UK & USA Mean | White FF UK Only Mean | Black FF UK Only Mean | White FF UK Only Mean | Black FF UK Only Mean | White FF Men Only Mean | Black FF Men Only Mean | White FF Women Only Mean | Black FF Women Only Mean | P Value |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------|
| Being part of a disciplined service                          | 2.6066         | 2.273            | 2.545            | 2.312            | 2.556                | 2.365                 | 2.627           | 2.394            | 0.152                | 2.677                | 2.312                | 0.1604               | 2.607                | 2.52                | 0.663               | 2.52                | 0.663               | 0.00395|
| Being part of a uniformed service                            | 2.5315         | 2.3157           | 2.489            | 2.406            | 2.493                | 2.428                 | 2.555           | 2.342            | 0.63                | 2.52                | 2.342                | 0.206                | 2.525                | 2.6                | 0.717               | 2.6                | 0.717               | 0.059   |
| Good career progression opportunities                        | 3.153          | 3.063            | 0.384            | 3.143            | 3.123                | 3.19                  | 3.142           | 3.236            | 0.532                | 3.149                | 3.142                | 0.312                | 3.149                | 3.2                | 0.781               | 3.2                | 0.781               | 0.1377  |
| Duty system                                                  | 2.639          | 2.473            | 0.147            | 2.58             | 2.602                | 2.875                 | 2.603           | 2.71             | 0.638                | 2.6                | 2.6                 | 0.111                | 2.6                | 1.2                | 0.0111              | 2.6                | 1.2                | 0.0111  |
| Excitement of attending emergencies                          | 3.228          | 2.947            | 0.0052           | 3.164            | 3.187                | 0.883                 | 3.212           | 2.904            | 0.009                | 3.277                | 2.842                | 0.001                | 3.227                | 3.4                | 0.94                | 3.4                | 0.94                | 0.94    |
| Friends in Fire Service                                      | 2.027          | 2.463            | 0.000047         | 2.121            | 2.156                | 0.867                 | 2.139           | 2.031            | 0.487                | 2.047                | 1.868                | 0.346                | 3                   | 2.08                | 0.802               | 2.08                | 0.802               | 0.111   |
| Family in Fire Service                                       | 1.483          | 2.063            | 0.000002         | 1.593            | 1.843                | 0.196                 | 1.643           | 1.428            | 0.1342               | 1.518                | 1.21                 | 0.647                | 1.464                | 1.72                | 0.204               | 1.72                | 0.204               | 0.000047|
| Job satisfaction                                              | 3.702          | 3.378            | 0.000008         | 3.623            | 3.437                | 0.467                 | 3.668           | 3.412            | 0.008                | 3.718                | 3.578                | 0.194                | 3.69                 | 3.8                | 0.418               | 3.8                | 0.418               | 0.1377  |
| Opportunity to serve the community                           | 3.39           | 3.315            | 0.41             | 3.368            | 3.437                | 0.63                  | 3.35            | 3.507            | 0.138                | 3.379                | 3.473                | 0.468                | 3.37                 | 3.56                | 0.24                | 3.56                | 0.24                | 0.1377  |
| Physical aspects of job                                      | 3.3033         | 2.905            | 0.000023         | 3.194            | 3.468                | 0.067                 | 3.257           | 2.968            | 0.009                | 3.335                | 3.052                | 0.0352               | 3.279                | 3.6                | 0.048               | 3.6                | 0.048               | 0.000047|
| Practical aspects of job                                     | 3.33           | 2.93             | 0.000031         | 3.237            | 3.312                | 0.612                 | 3.301           | 2.904            | 0.0003               | 3.372                | 3                   | 0.00488              | 3.24                 | 3.4                | 0.639               | 3.4                | 0.639               | 0.000047|
| Working as part of a team                                    | 3.447          | 3.0315           | 0.000014         | 3.34             | 3.531                | 0.2123                | 3.416           | 3.312            | 0.0002               | 3.498                | 3.05                 | 0.0067               | 3.435                | 3.6                | 0.3                 | 3.6                | 0.3                 | 0.000047|
| Out of work at the time                                      | 1.336          | 1.484            | 0.111            | 1.383            | 1.187                | 0.1807                | 1.317           | 1.666            | 0.0012               | 1.305                | 1.5789               | 0.0416               | 1.357                | 1.08               | 0.0878              | 1.08               | 0.0878              | 0.1377  |
| Pay                                                         | 1.882          | 2.2315           | 0.0000824        | 1.972            | 1.812                | 0.335                 | 1.92            | 2.19             | 0.0278               | 1.854                | 2.105                | 0.0922               | 1.902                | 1.64               | 0.144               | 1.64               | 0.144               | 0.000047|