

Creating culture change through inclusion

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What if we changed the way we approached culture, diversity and inclusion in an emergency service? How can we foster a culture of respect and safety; taking a male-dominated organisation to modern-day work practices?

In 2017, the South Australia Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS) underwent an independent review into its organisational culture that was conducted by the South Australia Equal Opportunity Commission. The review found an embedded culture where diversity was frowned upon, inclusion not seen as a necessity and gender inclusion seen as tokenistic.

As one of the oldest fire services in the world, the MFS needed to move forwards, ensuring existing employees are included and that it becomes an attractive employer for future recruits and staff with diverse backgrounds, skills and experiences.

Recognising these issues, a change project was commenced. MFS recognised that it did not have the skills nor expertise to progress change internally and engaged an external consultant to help guide and advise on the changes required.

Unpacking the report by the Equal Opportunity Commission, listening to the journey taken already in terms of recruitment and drawing on experiences of the external consultant from the SA Police cultural reform, a plan was created.

Our approach

Fire services in Australia tend to have a hierarchical, para-military and patriarchal structure. Firefighting operations rely on a command-and-control structure to respond to incidents quickly and efficiently. Employees tend to have long careers, so relationships between them can be very strong and traditions are maintained with pride. This shapes the culture of an organisation and can limit the speed of change.

Any change cannot be successful without engaging the people it affects in real and relevant ways. An

announce-and-defend approach creates mistrust and misconceptions of the change. They rarely play out well and the change is often unsuccessful.

People-centric, co-design approaches have been used for all the changes underway for diversity and inclusion within the MFS. Our changes occur *with* people *for* people, not *to* people. This required a mindset shift.

Our actions

Creation of a Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee – a group of MFS employees who volunteered to have oversight and provide a lens on the work to be undertaken. This group is an important aspect of all the changes. They provide operational, cultural or demographic insights to the changes, provide input on what and how the change looks like and give feedback on communications for implementation.

One of the first actions undertaken was to understand the current diversity demographics by answering the questions:

- Who are we?
- What does diversity look like in the MFS and what are we looking for?
- Beyond diversity demographics, what other aspects of our identity are important?
- What skills are important and how can they benefit the MFS?

We can now map and monitor the diversity data and embed it into our processes.

A clear vision –we needed a vision which was inclusive and showed every employee that they can feel a part of the organisation and can contribute. The MFS Culture and Diversity Vision is: ‘an



Assistant Chief Fire Officer Peter Button experiencing virtual reality scenarios of ‘power’ and ‘exclusion’.

Image: Sally Woolford, South Australia Metropolitan Fire Service.

organisation that reflects its community where all feel respected, safe, and valued’. Every change we implement aligns with this vision.

Culture and Diversity Plan – beyond diversity and inclusion, we wanted to increase focus on culture. Our culture (or cultures as is sometimes the case) is everything that makes a fire and emergency service either a great employee experience or one that isn’t so great. Culture underpins everything that we do, from our relationships, the way we lead and treat each other and how we work together to deliver services.

The key areas of the Culture and Diversity Plan include:

- Culture and Behaviour – developing a more inclusive, values-based culture
- Diversity and Inclusion - a workforce more representative of our community
- Inclusive Leadership – a role model for culture, diversity, and inclusion

- Employee Wellness – a healthy, safe, and sustainable workforce
- Change Management – find innovative and flexible ways to create lasting change.

Continued focus on employee safety and wellbeing – employee safety and wellbeing (particularly mental and physical health) are pivotal parts of culture and are an enabler or detractor from how happy and safe we feel at work. If it isn’t fair or we don’t feel safe, or our mental health and wellbeing is affected, then we feel unhappy at work. Happy employees means great performance and outcomes.

Focused communications, awareness and training – creating training and awareness approaches aimed at increasing confidence and understanding as well as the role everyone has to each other. These were built to recognise the unique context of MFS while bringing in new thinking and challenging stereotypes.

Our training approaches:

Leading Diversity and Inclusion training – enabling leaders to understand the ‘why of D&I’ and how they can play their part. For some sessions (pre-pandemic) we used virtual reality technology in this training.

Online learning module – incorporating videos, humour, and key compliance information to take employees on a 30-minute guided journey from the ‘why’ to the ‘what’ and ‘how’.

On-request presentations – going out to fire stations and offices to support their learning about what is culture, diversity and respect and what does it look like here?

Revising workplace behaviour – inclusive and safe cultures hinge on respectful behaviour. They are an enabler for how an employee experiences the culture of an organisation, what the organisation stands for and how the organisation responds when there are instances of inappropriate behaviour.

MFS policies and practices had gaps and we needed to create a new policy combining conflict, bullying and harassment (including sexual harassment) into one policy and process. This provides employees a one-stop shop irrespective of the type of behaviour. They don’t need to identify or categorise the behaviour, rather that it is inappropriate.

We’ve worked collaboratively with the United Firefighters Union SA and representatives from across the organisation to establish a diverse working group. As a working group, we co-designed the policy and processes and built something unique.

Our approach has some underpinning practices:

Zero tolerance – adopting a zero-tolerance approach to inappropriate workplace behaviour means we are committed to providing safe, healthy and respectful workplaces that are free of bullying, harassment (including sexual harassment), discrimination and victimisation. Zero tolerance isn’t an unrealistic expectation that there will be zero instances of inappropriate behaviour. It is merely a standpoint that when it does happen, we are firm in our approach.

Compliance but accessible – we improved compliance with values, community and government expectations, such as a Code of Ethics/Code of Conduct and legislation by adopting the practice approaches outlined by SafeWork Australia and the Australian Human Rights Commission Respect@ Work Report while customising them for the MFS context.

Transparency – we reviewed other policies and practices and found that most had policy position statements but limited process. Transparency is important when encouraging people to comply. When someone submits a complaint, they want to know they’ve been heard and won’t have to tell their story multiple times and that the complaint will be taken seriously.

Consistency – providing a fair and consistent framework and processes where expected behaviours and consequences are clearly defined and communicated builds trust and confidence in the system.

Confidentiality – covers workplace behaviours, how it is maintained and when it may not be able to be maintained.

Early intervention – if you can stop inappropriate behaviour early, you can prevent it from escalating. Catching it early enables learning, increased confidence in the zero-tolerance approach and opportunity for those involved to stop behaviour quickly.

Equally, and just as importantly, we’ve reviewed our honours and awards policy and have included additional ways to recognise positive behaviour and performance. It’s not just about focusing on negative behaviours but encouraging positive ones and for them to be broadly recognised.

Fundamentals to successful culture change

We have learnt a few fundamental aspects:

Commitment – without commitment you cannot change culture. This isn’t just commitment from the top but real commitment in every part of the organisation. You need those who are committed to know how they can be a part of the change and support it.

Consistency – continuing to ‘drip feed’ the vision and its goals into everything, embedding diversity and inclusion into part of the everyday experience. Always looking for opportunities to embed messaging into training and communications.

Challenging – being prepared to challenge the current ways of working and creating momentum to what could be. Work like this is tough and you need to be brave and challenging while having resilience. Not everyone will like every change and not everyone enjoys the journey.

Confidence – taking a leap to trust an external voice that knows how emergency services work but with a culture lens.

Inclusion, equality and belonging and our approach to change is integral to our culture. They are a part of how culture feels to our employees; their lived experience of the MFS: ‘Can I bring my true self to work?’, ‘Am I included and treated as an equal?’, ‘Do I feel safe here?’ ‘Can I thrive here?’.

The safety and wellbeing of a workforce is a result of its culture and practices. The expectations of future employees, societal expectations and legal requirements have changed. Every workplace needs to identify and set its bar higher to ensure that everyone is included, can contribute and that they feel they belong and are valued.

We’ve set our bar higher and are on our way to achieving a better workplace culture.