

Value added

With research highlighting the importance of professional values in the fire service, now is the time for brigades to introduce training in this area, says **Yu-chun Ko**

THE EXPECTED behaviour of a firefighter at work is usually defined within a formal job description. However, the spirit of the profession – which determines the benchmark of the work – is implicitly expressed in the profession's work values.

Although few studies exist on the organisational values of the fire service profession, the subject is now attracting the attention of researchers. Studies have highlighted a new cultural emphasis in how fire departments are managed. One study has shown that the traditional paramilitary rigidity of the fire department can hamper the talent of firefighters and lead to decreased efficiency in the brigade¹.

Fire service managers are increasingly being urged to have the courage to break the strong, military tradition that has been upheld in the past and to instead adopt new ideas in terms of organisational structure.

The traditional organisational values of fire departments have been further challenged by research on the potentially harmful effects that paramilitary-style management has on the psychology of firefighters². This study argues that the doctrine of traditional paternalistic paramilitary discipline can fail to meet the psychological needs, as well as the job requirements, of modern firefighters.

To meet the demands of the profession, and ensure the psychological wellbeing of firefighters, 'taking the initiative' should be seen as one of the core values/behavioural guides for both management and firefighters alike.

Communicating values

Identifying and communicating core values and principles that guide organisational behaviours to both frontline firefighters and senior-level officers is another area which has been explored³. One core value is to 'drop your tools' – meaning to give up the old ways, and to encourage individuals to be held accountable for their own actions.

A similar point is made in other research, where the importance of instilling the right attitudes in firefighters is urged⁴. Training firefighters on core fire service values – honour, responsibility,



accountability, courage, commitment and loyalty – is encouraged. Although these values are obvious to some members of the fire profession, research has found that some fire departments do not include them in their staff training programme, since it is assumed that personnel already have these qualities⁵.

Another recent study on the assimilation of firefighters into a fire department stresses 'member reliability' and 'mutual trust among members' as one of the core values of fire departments⁶, while a field-study identified non-prescribed job behaviours such as comradeship, altruistic helping behaviour, volunteering and organisational commitment as essential values to the fire service⁷. These behaviours and their underlying values – though not prescribed in their job description – were positively regarded by firefighters as an important guide for their professional lives.

These functional fire service values and behaviours are difficult to control, reward and motivate, since they are moral requirements that rely on the voluntary commitment of firefighters. They can be seen as being part of a wider underlying value of organisational citizenship behaviour – that is to say, non-prescribed and uncompensated extra behaviours and attitudes that are often not included in formal job descriptions⁸.

Some fire departments stipulate their values in their ethics, values or mission statements. Again, these are normative, attitudinal expectations determined by management and are based on the traditions, beliefs and assumptions of the profession.

Further investigation

The ethics and values of ten fire departments in Asia, Europe and North America, together with one professional organisation, were examined in a research project and are summarised in Table 1. Although the values are expressed in terms of different statements, three main themes emerge: professional practice, social relationship, and personal conduct – reflecting the fire service's emphasis of team spirit, ability and a willingness to work in dangerous environments.

The research revealed that the most emphasis was placed on professional practice – values like professionalism, dedication, responsibility and commitment – and personal conduct – integrity, honesty and openness. Values related to social relationship – mutual respect and *esprit de corps* – were seen as less significant.

These values depict the widely presumed required qualities of a professional firefighter, based on the underlying assumption that the job of firefighting is intrinsically motivating. It is presumed that firefighters are not risking their lives merely for remuneration, but rather for a higher, more moral purpose – suggesting that an intrinsically motivated firefighter is very much committed to their job and will perform to a high standard, well-beyond their job requirement⁹.

Management should not expect its firefighters to be automatically in possession of this high

Table1: Professional ethics and values

| Fire service/organisation | Ethics and values |
|--|---|
| Hong Kong Fire Services Department | Integrity, professionalism and continuous improvement; dedication and commitment to providing a quality service; readiness in meeting challenges and accepting accountability; maintaining high spirits and an <i>esprit de corps</i> among staff members |
| Singapore Civil Defence Force | Pride in saving lives and property; caring for the people and those we serve |
| New Zealand Fire Service | Serving our communities. Integrity; adaptability; skill; comradeship |
| London Fire Brigade | Integrity; openness and honesty; valuing diversity; mutual trust and respect; responsibility |
| Toronto Fire Services | Courage; compassion; service |
| Langley City Fire and Rescue Service, Canada | Safety; values; diversity; dignity; respect; honesty; continuous development; responsibility |
| Institution of Fire Engineers, Canada Branch | Honesty; justice; courtesy; integrity; fidelity to the public, including employers and clients; fairness and impartiality; an interest in public welfare; a readiness to apply their specialist knowledge for the benefit of mankind. Honour and dignity of the profession; avoiding associations with questionable enterprises; tolerance in dealing with fellow professionals |
| Arlington Fire Department, USA | High standards of conduct; active role in maintaining a professional image of the fire service through promptness, efficiency and dedication to duty |
| Pacific Grove Fire Department, USA | Values of ethics: tradition; loyalty; mutual respect; teamwork and commitment to excellence |
| City of Brentwood Fire Department, USA | Respect, honesty, loyalty, compassion, cooperation, teamwork, professional development. An environment open to change; obligations; duties and honour of the profession. Setting high standards; inspiring public confidence; avoiding disfavour towards oneself or the department; to speak the truth; not to allow personal beliefs to influence decisions or activities |
| Trail Park Fire Department, USA | Honour; responsibility and accountability; courage; commitment; devotion to one's family, department and community |

professional moral standard. Considerable efforts should be made to ensure the proper fit between the firefighters and the values of the profession – achievable by selecting recruits who share similar values, and also through value training.

Person-organisation fit

Research shows that a good combination of worker and organisation values contribute to greater organisational commitment and better performance¹⁰. Sharing common values among workers is also essential in ensuring cooperation and teamwork, which is essential during emergency operations. One study indicates that newly-recruited individuals with a high 'person-job fit' as well as a high 'person-organisation fit' – that is to say, matching a worker with organisation values – tend to be more satisfied in their job and less likely to resign^{11,12}.

Staff training also has an important role in changing worker values to match an organisation's culture¹³. A good match of individual and organisational values is often expressed through displaying loyalty, organisational commitment and, in some cases, discretionary extra-role behaviours that are functional to the operation of the fire department, such as working overtime or volunteering to perform high-risk tasks.

However, despite the findings of research, relatively few efforts appear to have been put into training firefighters on work values.

A survey shows that many major international fire departments place sole emphasis on specialised training. Officers from 25 brigades around the world revealed that specific workplace job competencies were their sole concern⁵. Training on the underlying attitudes and values of firefighters was not even mentioned in the survey responses.

Surely, the time has come for fire services to seriously consider the inclusion of value training into regular staff training programmes ■

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