

# MORAL IMPERATIVE

**Timothy Curtis** comments on the ethical challenges faced by fire and rescue service leaders as their organisations and local communities become more diverse

IN THE constantly changing and diverse environment of the fire service, it is crucial that leaders and managers have an understanding of cultural differences – both in their organisations and the wider community – and perform in such a way that exhibits acceptable moral and ethical values.

Traditionally, some fire service leaders had given only limited consideration to ethical issues. However, in the modern-day service – which is seeking to recruit personnel from more diverse backgrounds and which is serving communities with ever-more diverse social and cultural make-ups – it is essential that brigades have effective organisational ethics policies, driven from the top.

These policies, which should be communicated to all staff, should consider both the diversity of the fire service workplace and the local community. In addition, ethics must be part of educational and training packages in every aspect of the organisation<sup>1</sup>.

Traditionally, firefighters are held in high esteem by the general public. There is an inherent trust that public servants – specifically firefighters – will have high moral and ethical values. The service needs to make sure it has the policies in place to justify this public view and confidence.

## Ethical concerns

Fire service leaders should not assume that all staff understand the ethical expectations of the organisation when providing services in the community and in the workplace. After all, those expectations were developed by individuals who instilled their own distinct personalities, values, beliefs, cultures and backgrounds within their rules.

Leaders at every level need to help the organisation to address the ethical issues that can arise. The service has to give its personnel the tools that will help them tackle moral and ethical concerns<sup>2</sup>.

In most urban communities, diversity of culture and ethnicity is commonplace. Moreover, the synergistic

reaction of combining multiple values and beliefs influences moral and ethical understanding and acceptance. Fire service personnel will interact on a daily basis with a society whose values and beliefs could run from one spectrum to another, and perhaps even beyond the acceptable norms prescribed by law. Conversely, fire service employees are consistently evolving within these same societal influences.

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**‘Understanding ethical concerns is important for any fire service’**

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The result is a multicultural workforce with differing values and beliefs that provides services to a multicultural population with differing values and beliefs. It is for that very reason that understanding cultural differences and the ethical concerns that can arise is so important to any fire service.

It is therefore imperative for fire services to develop and communicate a policy which considers community diversity and also maintains the vision, mission and ethical attitude expected by the organisation, the community, and by law.

Ethical beliefs and moral values in the workplace, and the interaction between employees, sets the stage for how an organisation will perform. There was a time when an organisation would take a ‘melting pot’ approach to differences, assuming that people with differing values and beliefs would somehow automatically assimilate. We now recognise that employees have a tendency not to set aside their cultural values and lifestyle preferences when they come to work.

The challenge for fire service leaders is to make themselves more accommodating to diverse groups of people by recognising differences in lifestyles, family values and working styles, while maintaining workplace harmony, civil rights and performance.

The melting pot assumption is being replaced by one that recognises and values differences<sup>3</sup>.

Traditionally, the topic of leadership and ethics has received minimal attention. Only recently have researchers begun to consider the ethical implications in leadership and how specific leadership styles can influence issues pertaining to morality and ethics.

### Leadership styles

Ethics impacts the leadership at many levels. For instance, transformational leadership styles have been described as fostering moral virtue when they try and change organisational values and beliefs. Conversely, charismatic leadership styles have been described as having a great deal of influence over organisational issues but upon a two-edged sword. One side of the blade is those unethical leaders who use their power, influence and charisma to promulgate a self-serving agenda. The opposite side of the sword finds the ethical leader who uses their charisma in socially-constructive ways<sup>3</sup>.

Consideration of community and workplace diversity is imperative when developing ethics policies in fire services. Such a policy must follow the organisation's vision, while at the same time accepting the constantly evolving culture in the organisation. If it does not, then concerns may arise over civil liability, the organisation's social status may be placed in jeopardy, and there may be a decrease in the leadership's ability to move the service in a positive direction.

It is for these reasons that fire service leaders and managers at all levels should receive education on issues regarding community and workplace ethics – learning the main ethical lesson of how to maintain integrity by doing what is right, as opposed to what is popular. Such education will also help ensure that leaders can grow their organisation in line with current and future societal needs ■

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### References

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2. Thompson, B., Leadership: what about your department? Retrieved 1 November 2006 from: <http://www.firehouse.com/content/article/article.jsp?id+100&sectionId=5>
3. Robbins, S., Organisational behaviour, 9th edition, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2004.

# Stadium visit

**Dan Ford** reports on a recent visit to Twickenham rugby stadium by members of the Institution of Fire Engineers (IFE) Thames Valley Branch

**A** GROUP of IFE members from the Thames Valley visited Twickenham Stadium in south-west London on 27 May 2008. The group included representatives from a range of organisations, including fire and rescue services and private sector fire engineering and fire safety companies.

The group was welcomed by Ken Taylor, the stadium's safety and event manager, who accompanied them on a tour of Twickenham's facilities, including a privileged glimpse behind the scenes of the players' changing rooms and the Royal Box.

Following the tour, Mr Taylor explained the complex planning and teamwork surrounding the provision of fire safety during the wide range of events that take place at the stadium. One example he used was that of a promotional item produced on behalf of a sponsor and designed to be distributed during a match. This proved to be highly flammable when tested and had to be replaced with a less volatile substitute.

Among the interesting issues he highlighted was the level of policing required at Twickenham for a major rugby sporting fixture, in contrast to that of Wembley Stadium. Members were surprised to learn that the number of officers required for crowd control and traffic management at rugby events is minimal, compared to football matches.

Mr Taylor also discussed the need to take into account the impact of the many regulatory guidelines, unrelated to fire safety, when planning for major events, particularly in relation to corporate sponsorship and promotions. The visit ended with a question-and-answer session to address any individual member's queries ■

*Dan Ford of Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, who organised the trip and is also a member of Thames Valley IFE, would welcome ideas for future visits. He can be contacted on tel: +44 (0)118 932 2273.*