

# FIRE

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by Mike Astbury

## Learning &amp; Development

# Preparing for the lean times

Mike Astbury, Director Alexander, discusses the company's recent management conference

## LAST NOVEMBER'S MANAGEMENT

Strategic Performance conference addressed some of the many challenges facing the management of the Fire and Rescue Service.

Some 60 days on, Alistair Darling announced that the public sector was set for "the toughest cuts for 20 years." Had the announcement surfaced on the day of the conference, how would it have affected the tone and urgency of the event, given that estimates of its effect range from five percent to a staggering 30 per cent in some services?

Further efforts to regionalise or create more shared services centre will not balance the books – far from it. Directives for greater improvements, increased performance and the proverbial 'do more with less' are the one thing that will not be cut. Most likely, they will create the burning platform for an even greater push for transformational management across the Fire and Rescue Service as a whole. So, how will FRS managers respond to the challenge and, what lessons should they be taking away from the November conference? The following is a short extract of the day.

FRS leaders must engage with their teams like never before. Stability and cohesion is critical in an environment under pressure and where resources will be constrained for some considerable time. The true measure of management will not be in maintaining the status quo. The need is for leadership that is not only able to create a vision for a future state, but able to take the organisation along with it. Whatever the state of industrial relations, discussions of improvements, of cuts and change must be frank and take place in the open. To do so, management must engage with staff and vice-versa for improvements to be effective and sustainable over time.

Delegates were of the view that whilst there is no right or wrong style, there are many attributes essential to being an effective leader – starting with a passion and conviction for what must be done. Given that transformation is a long journey, leaders must be able – and have the determination to – go the distance. Getting their people on board not as passengers, but as the stakeholders they are, is essential. To get through the pain and discomfort of this economic cycle, all parties must be prepared to innovate, adapt and move to new ways of working whilst at the same time sharing and managing risk.

Discussion at the conference indicated there was a need for a common definition of what 'doing more with less' means. Suggestions from the floor were that 'achieving more with less' was a more appropriate interpretation, but that guidance on performance indicators and KPIs would also help the cause. What low hanging fruit there might be – such as regionalisation, shared

services, and IT sharing – will, in comparison only yield a relatively small but necessary percentage of the savings needed.

The real challenge for managers arises from the apparent paradox of the need to increase public safety whilst reducing resources. Fundamental to this is an understanding of the need for response and prevention services and managing the balance of the two. The need to manage stakeholder expectations was discussed in light of the increasing involvement of the FRS in events such as floods and medical incidents in a world of reductions set against reducing resource levels.

Delegates supported the notion that doing more with less is about imaginative use of resources. For example, the potential benefits from the increasing use regional demographics data combined with local trends would help shape service design and delivery. Opportunities exist for efficiency gains from collaboration and joint-services provision with other services. The challenges associated with bringing change to working practices from part-time working and targeting services were apparent through the discussions. The conference was unanimous about the benefits from sharing best-practice and in the desire to learn from other public sector organisations facing similar challenges.

There was a shared view that doing more with less is about a well-understood, well-managed and systematic approach to efficiency and improvement. Much of the discussion here centred on the need for a set of guiding principles complementary to the efficiency goals of the public sector. 'Lean thinking', already successful elsewhere in the public sector, was seen as appropriate for the FRS. Lean is not about cost-cutting but about working more effectively with processes aligned to customer requirements and demands. There are benefits in its ability to show or visualise what improvements or 'value for money' looks like, and that all stakeholders can play an active part whilst taking ownership of improvement initiatives.

With data and fact-based evidence underpinning 'lean' initiatives, it was felt that realising the apparent opportunities for more efficient use of resources required discipline of thought and strong leadership. Job losses and restructuring cannot be ruled out. Further benefits of a 'lean' systems approach comes from the collaboration between functions and sharing of best practice which was seen as lacking in the Fire and Rescue Service.

The final conference session was spent examining the role of customer insight in planning of fire and rescues services. The session's title contrasted the tendency to rely on the analysis of demographic, socio-economic and geographic data

for planning against the potential benefits from insights based on what customers think they want from their local FRS. With case studies emerging that indicate both prevention and response management may benefit, the approach was seen as assisting fire and rescue services with the need to meet customer expectations, and deliver a high quality of service set against a smaller budget. Based on the principles of social marketing, delegates heard how the approach can assist key elements of the consultation and engagement process with the customers.

There was value seen in its emphasis on segmentation of customer groups in order to understand the diversity of values, views and expectations, more especially to understand the attitude and opinions of high-risk groups. It was felt that so-called process of consultation with the public had in the past been more to do with pronouncements of decisions already made, rather than engaging two-way dialogues.

The pitfalls of using survey-based questionnaires and the need to establish sample groups that were representative of the community as a whole was discussed. Delegates again pointed to the benefits of the UK's FRS sharing experience and knowledge if the benefits of deeper customer insights through social marketing were to develop further.

The lessons delegates took from the conference were timely and relevant, and more so with an election on the horizon. Irrespective of the outcome, the Chancellor or his successor, and, by implication, the management and leadership of the FRS, are stakeholders-in-common and share in the challenge: reduce the deficit while protecting frontline services, or face cuts which put services in danger. For the leadership of the FRSs, the need to engage with staff at all levels is clear, the status quo must be challenged and change must follow.

Delegates to the conference were in agreement with the view that it seems likely the difference between success and failure is 'knowing what to do' and 'having the courage to do it'.

Thanks to the following panel members: David Johnson – CFO, Essex FRS; Darran Gunter, CFO, Dorset FRS; John Bonney – CFO, Hampshire FRS; Phil Jackson – Head Policy and Performance, Humberside FRS; Sally Sheen – Deputy Chief Executive, Fire Service College; Vicky Branchett – Head Review and Realisation, Essex County Council; Claire Brum – Head Business Management, London Fire Brigade; Martin Henderson, Head Risk Reduction, South Wales FRS and Jeff French, Director, Strategic Social Marketing Ltd.

For a full copy of the findings: 023 8022 5520 or download a copy from [www.alexander-ecc.com](http://www.alexander-ecc.com).