Public Service Transformation: Organisational Change in a UK Fire and Rescue Service

Thomas Simcock, Faculty of Education and Children's Services, University of Chester
Email: T.Simcock@chester.ac.uk
Twitter: @tomjsimcock

Introduction
The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 has led to an impetus for change within the UK Fire and Rescue Services (UK FRS). Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service (CFRS) has transformed with a strategic shift in focus from response to prevention. Andrews (2000) argues this reflects a cultural change in the UK FRS, to focus on the risks to human life rather than industrial property from fire. As an organisation, CFRS has changed fundamentally, with the delivery of a pioneering fire safety intervention called the Home Safety Assessment (HSA). This successful public service transformation challenges the current academic thinking of public sector organisational change. Hunter, Scott & Killick (2004) argue that public sector organisations are well equipped to sustain the status quo, hence implementing new changes and policies are difficult to achieve.

Aims & Method
1. What have been the factors that have influenced and supported these organisational changes in this specific UK FRS?
2. What have been the outcomes of these transformational changes in Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service?

Analysis
The interview and focus group transcripts were analysed using an inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis followed a realistic stance, to develop "a theoretical, cause-effect explanation of the relationship between behaviours, theoretical constructs and variables" (Cunliffe, 2011, p.660). This study sort to understand and describe the psychological, social and organisational processes involved in these changes.

The analysis highlighted a number of themes and sub-themes relating to the factors influencing the changes and the outcomes of these changes.

(F) [This research was conducted as one phase of a mixed-methods study into the changes at CFRS]

Findings

Organisational Culture
- Development of a Creative Culture
- Cultural Change

Leadership
- The Impact of a Vision for the Future

Management Practices
- The Importance of Communicating the Reasons for Change

Systems
- Partnership with AgeUK and the Contact Assessments

Motivation, Individual Needs and Performance
- Responsibility to the Community

Outcomes and Consequences
- Community Safety as a New Front Line
- Reducing Risk in the Community
- Outcomes of the Partnership Working and Community Safety for the Fire Service and the Community

Discussion & Implications
- Cultural change was found to be an on-going key factor in supporting and ensuring the success of the organisational changes. The development of a creative culture that valued new creative ideas and ways of working to improve peoples lives was found to be an important factor in the success of these changes. These findings suggest a creative culture is vital for an adaptable and successful public sector organisation.
- Effective leadership can help to reduce resistance to organisational change by motivating and inspiring employees through a positive vision for the future. In addition, the leadership style facilitated the transformation of the services delivered by Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service. These findings echo previous research into transformational leadership and organisational change (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003).
- Increased partnership working with other agencies can help to improve outcomes for vulnerable individuals and reduce the burden on the 'public purse', by improving efficiency of public sector organisations and improve the quality of life for vulnerable people.
- These organisational changes have had an unintended consequence of the Community Safety Advocates becoming a new "front line" in helping vulnerable individuals when other agencies (such as social services and the police) are unable to do so. The positive impact of this work is enabled by the "humanising" approach taken by employees.