



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 (2010) 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 and Killoran (2004; Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002) 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?

A sample of 26 participants who were employees of Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service or external stakeholders took part in either semi-structured interviews or focus groups. Discussions primarily focussed on the factors that have influenced the changes in the organisation, the factors that were influencing the implementation of the Home Safety Assessments, and the outcomes of these changes. 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with management and community safety employees. While, 2 focus groups were conducted with operational fire fighters and 1 focus group with community safety advocates.

Analysis

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

The analysis followed a **realist** 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.

[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

Participants described the past culture of the organisation as a 'Command' culture that inhibited new ways of working. Yet, the leadership and cultural changes in the organisation since 2004 were **described as empowering employees to think of new ideas and promoting creativity**. The development of a creative culture was associated by participants with helping to develop new ways to **improve outcomes for vulnerable people** in the community.

Cultural Change

Participants discussed **the importance of cultural change** in this organisation to achieve the transformation required to implement the prevention policy. Moreover, **the cultural change and the organisational changes were found to be interdependent**, with participants describing how historic practices were removed **to develop a culture that values working in the community**. The cultural changes helped to develop an organisation **that valued new ideas** and participants associated this with the transformation of the prevention agenda from just a fire approach to a holistic health approach.

Leadership

The Impact of a Vision for the Future

Participants described how the leadership of the organisation determined the extent of the prevention work being conducted. Participants explained how the **positive vision of the future** was associated with **inspiring and motivating** employees towards transforming the service they delivered. Moreover, senior managers communicated a vision where prevention was not just for the organisation but was the right thing to do for the community, such as *"I regard it as **morally reprehensible** that someone should stand back and **wait for something bad to happen to prove how good they are at their job**".*

Management Practices

The Importance of Communicating the Reasons for Change

Participants explained how the organisation had **evolved** since 2004, with new leadership styles, culture and management practices. Many of the participants described how the **managers valued involving employees and communication**. It was explained how managers provided the reasons and **"agenda" for change** and this was associated with a **reduction in the resistance to change** by employees. Furthermore, senior managers encouraged middle managers to communicate the reasons for change and to discuss the "journey" the organisation is on.

Systems

Partnership with AgeUK and the Contact Assessments

Participants reported how the partnership with AgeUK and the contact assessment aid the prevention work in the **referral of vulnerable elderly residents** to other agencies on **non-fire issues**. Participants associated this with helping to **improve the lives of the over 65's**; by helping to **increase benefits, reduce social isolation**, and ensure those who have dementia have the required care and support.

Motivation, Individual Needs and Performance

Responsibility to the Community

Fire-fighters reported a sense of responsibility to the community and this was associated with the **lack of resistance** to the community safety work. Participants discussed how they joined the Fire Service **to help people** rather than for financial gain, and this was related to the desire to engage in the prevention work. The prevention work was further linked to **an increase in job satisfaction**.

Outcomes and Consequences

Community Safety as a New Front Line

Participants described that as a consequence of the changes in this UK FRS, the **community safety employees are a new front line** for providing support to the vulnerable members of the community. Participants further discussed how community safety advocates are emerging as **"experts"** at handling vulnerable cases when other agencies are unable to do so. This was associated with the **"humanising"** approach utilised by the employees. This was further associated with **improved outcomes** for the individual.

Reducing Risk in the Community

Participants described, how as an outcome of these changes, the risk from fire and other **vulnerabilities was reducing in the community**. Many participants felt that these changes were **helping to reduce the number of incidents the organisation was attending**. Furthermore, participants explained that the partnership working and the referral system was helping to reduce other risks and **improve the quality of life for vulnerable people**.

Outcomes of the Partnership working and Community Safety for the Fire Service and the Community

Participants reported the organisational changes, such as the increased partnership working, was having an outcome of **"up-skilling"** employees in identifying and providing support to vulnerable people in the community. Yet, this was having an unintended consequence of other agencies becoming **more aware of the risk from fire**. Participants further described that these changes were helping to **improve the efficiency** of public services, through reducing duplicated efforts and **ensuring the right support and care was provided for vulnerable individuals**.

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**.

References

- Andrews, R. (2010). The impact of modernisation on fire authority performance: an empirical evaluation. *Policy & Politics*, 38(4), 599-617.
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1993). Transformational leadership and organizational culture. *Public administration quarterly*, 112-121.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2011). Crafting Qualitative Research Morgan and Smircich 30 Years On. *Organizational Research Methods*, 14(4), 647-673.
- Hunter, D. J., & Killoran, A. (2004). *Tackling health inequalities: turning policy into practice*. NHS Health Development Agency.
- Jung, D. I., Chow, C., & Wu, A. (2003). The role of transformational leadership in enhancing organisational innovation: Hypothesis and some preliminary findings. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(4), 525-544.
- Parry, K., & Proctor-Thomson, S. (2002). Leadership, culture and performance: The case of the New Zealand public sector. *Journal of Change Management*, 3(4), 376-399.

Acknowledgements

This study was conducted as a part of a Gladstone Fellowship PhD funded by University of Chester and Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service (CFRS).



University of Chester