

How to change a workplace culture: a case study in power of reflective learning

This case study looks at the experience of Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service (WFRS), an organisation that faced a number of challenges in responding to considerable cultural and organisational changes. Having successfully worked with Acas before, WFRS decided to use training provided by Acas to enable the service to maintain and improve their productivity through this period of significant change.¹

Where are they now?

Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service employs approximately 650 full-time and retained fire fighters and support staff in 24 local fire stations with its head office based in Devizes. Despite some restructures that have taken place over the years, staff turnover remains low, with a high proportion of employees having only worked at the Service. Most full-time firefighting staff in the organisation are represented by the Fire Brigades Union, with other staff represented by UNISON and the Retained Fire Firefighters' Union.

In April 2016 the Service is going to be combined with Dorset Fire & Rescue Service. Over the last year or so the Service has reviewed and updated the way it carries out important personnel activities, such as managing performance and conflict, as well as addressing more underlying behavioural issues.

The 'combination' project between Wiltshire and Dorset Fire Services provides a real opportunity to further reflect on how they can improve the way they work, but has also been the cause of uncertainty among staff about job security and terms and conditions of employment.

What challenges do Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service face?

The culture of the Service is, in some ways, its greatest strength, but it can also raise challenges. Emotional and community bonds are often very strong and tight knit, but so are traditional views about obeying procedures to the letter.

The day to day duties of the fire service have changed markedly over the last few years – with much more emphasis on prevention than responding to fires and other emergencies. The way the organisation sees itself, and the way it is perceived, has led to the need for some intense periods of reflective learning. The Service is having to adapt to the following challenges:

- **Public perception:** fire staff are stereotypically seen as jumping down poles and pouring water on fires. In reality, they are more likely to be seen in schools educating young people, advising builders on safety regulations or helping others, particularly the vulnerable in the community, to identify fire risks.



- **Different working patterns:** the decreasing need for 'firefighters' to put out fires has meant that fewer staff are needed at stations. Many fire fighters are 'retained' which means they can be on call and used only when needed. This has led to the adoption of different pay structures and working patterns.
- **Coming out of the shadow of the past:** the original 'Fire Services Disciplinary Regulation' that was in operation until the early 2000s, reflected a hierarchical organisation with very prescriptive procedures. For example, if someone appealed against a case of gross misconduct the appeal process could go all the way to the Home Secretary.
- **Facing up to behavioural issues:** the firefighter mindset is based upon the precept of "you will" and many staff have difficulty dealing with grey areas where colleagues are not fully conforming to accepted standards of behaviour or conduct.

How did Wiltshire Fire Service respond to the need for cultural change?

Managers, employers and unions have worked hard to challenge cultural and behavioural norms by paying particular attention to the way in which they:

- **Communicate:** A culture based upon obeying orders has had to shift to allow staff to share experiences and exchange ideas more freely.
- **Balance the need for job autonomy:** With a deeper understanding of employee rights and line management responsibilities. In the past, some small fire stations were run like family businesses which led to a lack of consistency in how policies were applied.
- **Supported and trained line managers:** Encouraging line managers to take a more pro-active role in performance issues has revealed a lack of confidence that urgently needed to be addressed.

Where did Acas come in?

Acas has had a very productive working relationship with the Service over many years. This is partly based upon the recognised authority of the Acas brand, but also on the close personal rapport the Acas advisor developed with managers and union representatives. One union rep said he had a "whole folder called Acas" and valued both the online and face-to-face services.

Acas has previously delivered effective sessions to line managers on handling of TUPE² and redundancy processes and the Organisational Development (OD) Manager found that line managers were particularly receptive to Acas guidance.

This cultural shift is a work in progress, with much work still to be done around improving disciplinary and grievance procedures, but notable improvements so far include:



Much greater line manager confidence

An Acas programme of training sessions, specifically tailored to the needs of the Service, led 47 managers to undertake e-learning on handling disciplinary and grievance issues (78 per cent rated the 'overall usefulness' of the training as good or excellent).

Managers were able to specify where they personally would benefit from further development and where they thought managers as a group required further training. This allowed the Service to target uncertainty around:

- **How to resolve problems early and take formal action.** Due to the close working ties within teams, managers were often inclined to delay taking action. Although they might say they were in the 'informal stage', they were rarely being pro-active about addressing issues and shied away from 'difficult conversations'.
- **Greater knowledge of the internal discipline and grievance procedures.** The Service acknowledges that there is still some room for improvement in its internal procedures, but Acas intervention has helped to simplify what were often lengthy and complex documents and improve consistency in the way they are applied.
- **Producing an investigation report.** Acas has experienced a great demand for training in this area from many of its customers. As well as how to conduct an investigation, support staff requested training in taking notes at meetings – a vital skill when accuracy is paramount.

More open and challenging communication forums

The training sessions also led to the creation of Communities of Practice in the Service. These are quarterly sessions held by each duty group in which experience, learning and good practice are discussed and shared over a range of issues, including discipline and grievance.

The approach taken to improve the application of the discipline and grievance processes also reflects the wider 'Systems Thinking' initiative in the Service, which encourages all employees to question whether familiar and proposed ways of working are an efficient use of time.

These forums also allowed managers to reflect more about the way jobs were designed. With a huge period of change underway, everyone has been encouraged to go back to basics and ask:

- Where should jobs be based?
- How can we use technology to improve the services we offer?
- What is the best way to combine the skills of both fire services?



Acas gave the Service the opportunity and the means to do some reflective learning about the kind of organisation it was – building on traditional strengths but letting go of unhelpful stereotypes and outdated procedures – and the kind of innovative and flexible organisation it wanted to become.

Conclusion: a work in progress but an appetite for continual learning

As the Acas advisor most involved with the Service said: “in many ways, the journey that Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service is embarking on reflects the journey that Acas has been on in the last few decades. They have had to change the public perception that firefighters purely fight fire. Acas largely focuses on preventing conflict in the same way that firefighters largely work on preventing fires. It’s a shift in focus and how you see yourselves. The key is to be prepared to keep learning and be as innovative as you can.”

A manager in the Service also commented that, Acas intervention did not always require a wholesale change of policies, but they were certainly simplified and made “better versions of what they once were”.

Skilled line managers, effective employee voice and well designed work are three of Acas’ ‘seven levers of productivity’. Find out more here:

<http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/7/9/Building-productivity-in-the-uk.pdf>

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Endnotes

- 1 This case study is based on interviews conducted by the University of Plymouth with a human resources manager, a trade union representative and an organisation development Manager at Wiltshire Fire Service, along with discussions with Acas staff.
2. TUPE refers to the “Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006”. The TUPE rules protect employees’ rights when the organisation or service they work for transfers to a new employer. For more info see: www.acas.org.uk/tupe

