From Heroic Leader to Adaptive Leadership
EFMD Excellence in Practice Awards

WARWICK BUSINESS SCHOOL
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

NFCC
National Fire Chiefs Council
Executive Summary

A firefighter’s focus is less on fire-fighting and more on prevention, protection and working with multiple stakeholders in a complex, cost-conscious environment that seeks to ensure and enhance community safety.

Previous training had taught Firefighters rational approaches that stifled both their critical thinking and adapting their approaches to the given situations. With so few suitable applicants for senior positions it was becoming increasingly important to develop a diverse cadre of strategic and self-aware Leaders for the future success of the UK Fire and Rescue Service (FRS).

Since 2008, a significant number of stakeholders have collaborated to take the FRS through a cultural shift on a journey from rules-based behaviours to adaptive behaviours, where senior Leaders are now better able to deal with the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world they find themselves operating in. The journey has seen sixteen cohorts, 306 participants, attend the programme with more in the pipeline.

The Executive Leadership Programme (ELP) reflects the realities the ‘aspiring senior Leaders’ find themselves working in, by immersing them into five highly-experiential modules that evolve and adapt to reflect the current needs triggered by participants. The shift from using pre-determined approaches creates huge uneasiness and vulnerability across the cohort, taking participants out of their comfort zone, whilst simultaneously building their resilience, agility and emotional intelligence.

The programme has resulted in a number of benefits including:

■ A larger cadre of Leaders ready for promotion, with at least a 300% increase in suitable applicants for strategic roles
■ Greater inclusivity of women in the FRS culture, with a 19% increase in women applying for the programme since 2008
■ An eco-system of ‘critical friends’ with Action Learning Sets and cohorts continuing to connect years beyond their programme
■ Greater confidence and courage across participants to deal with uncertain and ambiguous situations, including alumni taking themselves out of their comfort zones to pursue new strategic roles across the FRS
■ Leaders with greater self-awareness, who actively listen and bring their teams with them rather than do Leadership to them
■ More distributed and collaborative leadership, with decision-making placed at the right level and in consensus with colleagues
■ A greater understanding of the political landscape by discussing the complexities of the Fire sector and meeting Government Ministers
■ An understanding that these Leaders have a role in shaping the future direction of the FRS, if not them, then who?

“Leadership is a practice and not a position.”
Becci Bryant
former ELP Lead, FRS

“Warwick Business School and the National Fire Chiefs’ Council have worked closely to ensure the programme meets the needs of Strategic Leaders in modern Fire and Rescue Services by regularly reviewing content and delivery, and ensuring learning is candidate led so the leadership challenges explored are always current in an ever-changing environment.”
Chris Blacksell
Chief Fire Officer for Humberside Fire and Rescue Service and Programme Lead