From Heroic Leader to Adaptive Leadership

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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
Warwick Business School (WBS)

Warwick Business School isn’t just a world-class business school at the heart of a world-class university, it’s a hub of curiosity that is constantly challenging the status quo and championing business as a power for good. Since 1967 we have welcomed those who are curious, open, restless, and striving for excellence, from all over the globe. Studying at WBS means being open to new ideas, viewpoints and new voices, taking on new perspectives and challenging your thinking. Our dynamic and vibrant business research environment encourages collaboration – including with policymakers, with the healthcare sector, and with charities - to ensure organisations are embracing the changing future and creating a fairer world.

The National Fire Chiefs Council on behalf of the UK Fire and Rescue Services

The National Fire Chiefs Council is the professional voice of the UK Fire and Rescue Service (FRS), of which there are 40,029 staff, 31,547 of which are firefighters. NFCC drives improvement and development throughout the UK FRS, while supporting strong leadership – including for the devolved administrations. The collective voice of the NFCC allows them to shape the reform agenda with their stakeholders and co-create the FRS needed for current and future generations. The NFCC represents all Services across the UK and their vision is to improve safety in communities by working collaboratively with the FRS, promoting national approaches where they work best.

1. The Challenge – a new era of Leadership

The problem is that whilst heroes and direction through authority have a place, their relevance applies to little more than 10% of a firefighter’s day job. The focus is less on fire-fighting and more on prevention, protection and working with multiple stakeholders in a complex, cost-conscious, ambiguous, collaborative environment that seeks to ensure and enhance community safety. In many circumstances, firefighters are required to act using their own intuition and judgment. Like so many organisations in the 21st century, it’s important to develop this agile capability which can respond to conflict and contradictory imperatives. This ‘ambidexterity’ is a key function for a Service that seeks to accommodate a range of priorities that require fundamentally diverse forms of execution.

In 2002, an independent review of the Fire Service was conducted by Professor Sir George Bain, at the request of the Government. This happened at a time of national industrial action across the UK Fire and Rescue Services as a result of pay negotiations. The review led to significant changes in the way fire services operated and were run. Contained within the ‘Bain review’ was a recommendation stating that each role across the Fire Service should have entry requirements in order to ensure the correct relationship between roles is maintained and to increase the mobility of staff. As a result, changes were instigated in 2004 and all regulations that had been in place since 1978, along with a number of statutory instruments laid after 1978 relating to promotions, were replaced with a set of core requirements for the development of staff across the FRS. These statutory instruments amended the existing regulations encompassing one made in 1988 which included the statement that for someone to be promoted to Chief Fire Officer they had to have served in a specific rank (Divisional Officer grade 11) and they had to have completed the course for senior officers – the Brigade Command Course (BCC). All mandatory requirements of the pre-established two-year BCC were removed and there was no longer a system that could share best practice and support each other.

To advance the ranks.

To develop a greater sense of leadership.

We set about meeting fire officers who were trailblazers to understand the need for strategic change, to be aligned, and to form relationships.”

Sue Hopgood
Director of Leadership
and OD, FSC

The Fire Service College (FSC) held a diagnostic workshop with six diverse Chief Officers about the future of Leadership within the FRS. This involved challenging conversations which highlighted embedded bias in the FRS culture towards hierarchy and male dominance. When the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA), now the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), were involved in the process, they met with each of the nine FRS regions and local authorities to receive their input into the design of an Executive Leadership Programme (ELP).

A tripartite comprising the FSC, CFOA, and the Fire Services Management Commission (FSMC) co-designed a tender document which they sent out via a Government portal in 2005, with a brief for developing ‘aspiring strategic leaders’ in the FRS across the UK.

The tender document outlined the need for a mindset shift across UK FRS Leaders with the following objectives:

- To grow a diverse Leadership Team. The word ‘Command’ in the title of the Brigade Command Course, along with the inherent culture of working long hours and the male dominance in strategic roles had discouraged women through the ranks.
- To develop a greater sense of self-awareness and to shift to a more collaborative style of Leadership. To overcome the deep-rooted command and control style currently present and to take people ‘with them’ rather than to do Leadership ‘to them’.
- To adopt and understand that different contexts require different responses which, in turn, necessitate the capacity to read and interpret the complexities inherent in those contexts.
- To build the political acuity of Leaders to better navigate the political landscape they operate in.
- To advance the succession plan by growing the number of suitable candidates for senior roles.
- To develop a cohort of ‘critical friends’ across the UK FRS eco-system that could share best practice and support each other.

The key measure of success initially was ensuring 100% of participants successfully completed the programme and to develop a cadre of Leaders in the absence of the BCC over the past two years. The briefing included a request that the programme result in a qualification to certify a Leader’s commitment and successful development through the programme. The elected Minister declared that they wanted to see a cadre of suitable candidates coming through that were ready for Leadership roles as well as a greater inclusivity of women.

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“In had been recognised through discussion with local authority political leaders, that applicants for the most senior leadership roles in the FRS, whilst demonstrating intellect and knowledge, appeared to lack self-awareness allied to a gap in their strategic understanding of the complexities involved in leading a 21st century public service organisation, alongside a lack of political acuity in what was an evolving VUCA environment.”

Dee Pritchard
CFOA Director for People and Organisational Development

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2. The Commitment – achieving more together

Before the inception of any design, commitment was needed from a number of key stakeholders. In 2007, the Fire Minister launched the programme concept to all Fire Chiefs, their elected members, Chairs and local authorities, which got the buy-in of all the Chief Fire Officers and relevant politicians.

The development of the programme was initially funded by the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) via the Fire Service College, and each Service had to fund candidate attendance. The development funding was subsequently withdrawn and the Services themselves ended up resourcing any further design. For a non-mandatory programme, this financial commitment highlights the importance placed on it by the Services.

When WBS reviewed the tender document, their initial analysis was that the rules-based culture created a pattern that needed to be broken. In order to do so, they would need to immerse participants in an experiential programme that simulated scenarios to develop their self-awareness, agility, resilience and political acuity. They wanted to develop critical thinking by enabling participants to question the relevance of any Leadership model presented to them in the context of their own roles. Importance would need to be placed on establishing a safe environment in which to experiment with approaches to dealing with complex situations, be vulnerable and challenge the culture. Given the differences in participants’ roles and locations, delivery would need to remain flexible to adapt to varying contexts and create opportunities for collaboration. Albeit an emergent approach, there would need to be a modular structure that could be assessed as part of the qualification process and which would also serve to apply the learning back to participants’ roles. Many participants had MBAs so the programme would need to be underpinned with conceptual materials and academic papers, whilst finding synergy with the practical aspects of the design that enabled application.

When WBS were awarded the work in the Autumn of 2007, it was in partnership with the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), each playing a role in design and delivery. The complexity in the undertaking of this was huge, with 25 stakeholders brought together to design the programme. After Cohort 1, NCSL took a step back from the programme, leaving it with WBS. Cohort 1 was delivered in April 2008 across five 2-day modules, but this was soon extended to three, and eventually four days following participant feedback.

There have been an extraordinary number of national and local stakeholders to consider in the ongoing development and delivery of the programme, represented by the NFCC, FSC, the Home Office, the NCSL and Local Government Association. An ‘ELP Board’ was established with stakeholders from several of these institutions to ensure a sustainable relationship ensured, which also enabled the programme to remain relevant in its design. The Board additionally served to review the effectiveness of the initiative on participants’ career progression and for the quality of leadership observed in each service. The contacts on the Board have changed considerably over time, requiring ongoing communication and engagement to secure continued buy-in. There has also been considerable commitment from alumni and senior staff who have taken on active roles in the engagement, selection and delivery activities. The common goals for the programme ensured the relationship went from strength to strength, and what was initially a three-year contract has been renewed over and over again.
The Executive Leadership Programme (ELP) promotes a sophisticated leadership model that reflects the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties characterising the challenges facing the FRS in the 21st Century. It is open to all FRS staff who already hold a strategic leadership position or are likely to do so in the near future. Participants will be at different stages in their career and from different services, contributing to the diverse nature of the cohort.

In order to select participants for the programme the NFCC run an annual selection process called Gateway, whereby nominated candidates attend a day’s assessment centre to determine their readiness for joining the programme. Candidates are nominated by their CFOs and supported by them throughout. Candidates are reviewed for their potential for a strategic role in the FRS, and their readiness to undertake the learning process, which is far removed from anything they’ve previously experienced.

The learning environment is crucial to the success of the programme design. At one point the programme was delivered at the Fire Service College Ltd, but in order to differentiate it from other training courses it was moved to The University of Warwick campus, where the creative and safe learning spaces served to provide the best learning environment possible. Considerable work gone into ensuring each cohort’s experience is one of inclusivity, creating a safe environment for discovery and exploration; an environment in which it is OK to acknowledge what participants don’t understand, what they’re struggling with, and what concerns and anxieties they may have. In this environment participants can develop a learning mindset, be themselves, be vulnerable, have difficult conversations and develop trusting relationships.

Each of the five residential modules focuses on the future direction of the FRS. Designed to create a ‘laboratory’ of learning that is highly experiential, participants are given a variety of opportunities to explore their leadership thinking and the behaviours required to lead the FRS in the 21st century. In addition to the residential modules, the ELP includes lectures, experiential reflective practice, critical incidents, support, business simulations, expert witness sessions, case studies, audio-visual instruments, group activities, internal and external guest speakers from the public and private sector, optional coaching, learning journals, reading and assessed assignments. This rich diet of approaches is intended to reflect the diversity of learning styles and orientations displayed by the participants and to enable reflection and the application of learning to ‘live’ issues. Participants also have the opportunity to participate in a ‘leadership exchange’, and shadow leaders from other organisations, as well as meeting Fire Ministers, Civil Servants and regional Governments to help build political acuity. Participants also discuss the complexities of working with stakeholders from the Fire Brigades Union and from HMICFRS, who independently inspect the sector.

Learning Outcomes:

- Develop the knowledge and skills needed to manage and develop people in an organisation
- Understand and use models to promote personal development and effectiveness
- Understand and develop skills in designing and implementing business strategy
- Understand and develop skills in the application of managing change
- Understand and apply the principles of organisational and political leadership
- Apply management theory in the workplace and evaluating outcomes

Given the challenges initially presented, three golden threads have always driven the content and approach, and which are continually referenced across all elements of the programme:

1. Diversity
2. Political acuity
3. Self-awareness

The programme has evolved over time in terms of content, focus, and delivery. All developments have been informed by module feedback forms from earlier cohorts, who often return to support the programme, and from NFCC and FRS representatives on each cohort, who share the current Fire sector challenges and how the golden threads are tying in with the reality of the Services and government sphere. WBS uses this understanding to tune into the participants in the room, to explore their reactions to content and to ensure its ongoing applicability. Four assignments are an opportunity to develop and assess participants’ learning through critical reflective practice and application. Rather than being exposed to material and asked to critique it in the standard academic way, participants operationalise and apply their learning within the workplace. On successful completion of all assignments, participants achieve a Post Graduate Certificate (60 CATS), which is a third of a Master’s Degree.

The square of progression features a chart showing various stages and modules, such as:

- Module one: Thinking about Leadership
- Module two: Leadership in the UK Public Sector
- Module three: Managing the Fire & Rescue Service for the 21st Century
- Module four: Collaborative Leadership
- Module five: Leading Strategic Change

Each module focuses on the leadership development of participants, covering various aspects such as critical leadership, political acuity, diversity, and adaptive leadership. Participants are encouraged to critically reflect on their leadership skills and explore how they can be developed for future roles.

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4. The Impact – adaptive leadership in action

The ELP has become the significant development vehicle for Strategic Leaders in the majority of the UK’s fire services and is seen by participants, and the whole FRS, as a crucial element in an individual’s personal and professional journey.

The ELP aids critical thinking through participants questioning their assumptions, getting curious, recognising there is no one way of dealing with all things, and to explore alternatives. The programme challenges concepts around identity, through the topic of authenticity, by exploring how we apply our many selves to different situations as we adapt. Participants learn they can’t always do the ‘right thing’ in all situations and save lives in all instances. This requires huge emotional resilience, supported by creating a safe space to discuss how they can remain resilient in a VUCA world.

The NFCC experiences pressure from the HMICFRS and councils to provide impactful development for FRS Leaders. The NFCC therefore assesses the programme through ongoing conversations with each service and through a process of mentoring newly appointed Leaders. Any learning is fed back into the ELP Board. One impact indicator has been the number of candidates coming through the programme into senior roles. Because the programme enables the right candidates to be identified for senior roles much earlier in their careers, there are now between 4-6 applicants for every senior role compared to only one applicant in 2008. Of the current UK Chief Fire Officers across 52 services, a total of 30 individuals have completed the ELP, which equates to 57% of those in Leadership positions being alumni. An average 37% of participants from each cohort over the last five years has been promoted within 12 months of completion. Even though some Fire Services had established their own Leadership development, the number of Fire Services sending candidates to the programme has drastically increased over the years, with only one large service not yet in attendance and some offshore services yet to continue to share best practice and support across regions.

The impact of the programme goes even further than the participants themselves. When Sue Hopper, Director of Leadership and OD at the Fire Service College, moved to the NHS in 2009 she set up the ‘Cross Sector Leadership Exchange’ connecting the co-founding partners for the ELP who then represented the NHS, Police and FRS. Their ambition was to improve Leadership across the public sector and Sue requested that Chief Officers, who were also ELP alumni, share their Leadership stories at NHS conferences. Other organisations in the network represent Prisons, Probation, Local Government and the voluntary sector. Another example is the inclusion of sending NHS Leaders on organisational visits to different Fire & Rescue services, and as a result one assistant director for blood and transplant in the NHS collaborated with a Leader at one of the Services. They decided to offer FRS training venues for Blood donation sessions, saving the NHS over £1 million in its first year.

A second impact indicator is around increasing the diversity of the senior workforce, especially the number of women. Initially the majority of participants were white men that had missed out on the BCC, with no female participants on cohort 1. However, 19.3% of applicants for the 2020 ELP were women, considering only 16.7% of all fire and rescue staff in England are female, is a sizeable proportion. This can be somewhat attributed to the shaping of the culture in the sector by Leaders who’ve attended the ELP and participated in the ‘inclusion debate’. There remain challenges around bringing female and ethnic minority candidates through the sector because of existing stigmas, available role models and the identity attached to the role of a firefighter, still seen as a low caste role in Asian communities. Only 5.5% of applications are from ethnic minority staff.

A third impact indicator is ensuring personal growth and this is reviewed through the four assessments prior to receiving an accreditation. Not all participants achieve the qualification, and a small number have returned years later to complete it in retrospect, seeing the value placed on it for their career progression. Many of the services have added the ELP or similar programme as a ‘desirable’ in the person specification when advertising for senior leadership roles. A benefit of personal growth has led to a leadership becoming more distributed and collaborative, with changes to meeting structures and decision-making processes as a result. The SSL in each service works collectively to make decisions, or places them at the right level to be dealt with by the relevant person.

A fourth impact indicator is in creating a cohort of ‘critical friends’. Action Learning Sets from earlier cohorts continue to meet in support of their roles and learning within the FRS and continue to share best practice and support across regions.

The programme has drastically increased over the years, with only one large service not yet in attendance and some offshore services yet to continue to share best practice and support across regions.
In parallel with the role of an FRS Leader, the partnership expressed in this case study has been one of complexity, collaboration, adaptation and evolution, no less so in times of a Pandemic where there was a need to adapt to changing regulations, social distancing and online learning. The relationship has continued in strength because of the ability of all partners to speak openly, critically, courteously, and to seek continuous improvement.

"For me, the programme journey is still continuing. I am still in contact with many of my programme cohort. I became an assessor for the Gateway as soon as I completed it, and I have done that every year since. The network of friends and colleagues has been one of the best parts for me."

Gavin Tomlinson
Programme Participant

We know that any programme has its limitations, we can never teach participants enough. But what we can do is to teach them the capacity for learning and experimenting with how to lead, to understand what is required of leaders, and to have greater self-awareness, and political acuity. Learning how to be an adaptive Leader gives participants permission to experiment with different leadership styles, thereby achieving things they didn’t know they were capable of.


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