



**Bushfire CRC
Enhancing Volunteer Recruitment and Retention
Project (D3)**

**Tasmania Fire Service
Report Number 2: 2010**

Report

Focus Groups with TFS Brigade Chiefs on the Leadership Development Needs of Brigades

Adrian Birch & Jim McLennan

May 2010 (Revised)

© Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre 2010

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form without prior written permission from the copyright owner, except within the conditions permitted under the Australian Copyright Act 1968 and subsequent amendments

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
METHODOLOGY & SAMPLE	5
RESULTS.....	7
<i>General Comments.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Key demographics from Volunteer Leadership Development survey</i>	<i>8</i>
The number of volunteers	8
The records management system (RMS)	8
<i>What is it like being in your brigade?</i>	<i>10</i>
Less authority because of the volunteer basis of the organisation	10
Equity and discrimination	10
Less problems in more remote areas	11
The volunteers’ “glass ceiling”	11
Fire & Incident Reporting System	11
<i>What is the leadership like in your brigade?</i>	<i>12</i>
Length of terms of office	12
Administrative workload on chiefs discourages successors	12
Workload in small brigades	13
Succession planning supported	13
Young or inexperienced brigade chiefs	13
<i>How important are these leadership skills?</i>	<i>14</i>
Important leadership skills	14
Balancing responsibility against political pressure	14
Managing conflict	15
Managing dysfunctional behaviour within brigades	15
Conflict and difficult members in meetings	16
Factions	17
Familial factions	17
<i>How important are these brigade leader behaviours?.....</i>	<i>19</i>
Encouraging members to turn out	19
Leadership demonstrated by career staff	20
<i>How important are training courses in these leadership skills?</i>	<i>22</i>
Resolving conflicts and disputes	22
Running Meetings	22
Informing members about brigade correspondence	23
<i>What are good ways to become a brigade leader?</i>	<i>25</i>
Mentoring	25
Residential training courses	26
<i>Relating satisfaction with brigade leadership to intentions to remain.....</i>	<i>27</i>
The relationship between leadership, satisfaction and intention to remain	27
<i>Factors limiting involvement in TFS.....</i>	<i>28</i>
Perceived bureaucratic nature of TFS	28
Fire & Incident Reporting System	28
Training	29
Competing commitments	31
Lack of activity	31
Disharmony in brigades limits recruitment	31
<i>What would make TFS volunteering easier?.....</i>	<i>32</i>
Call rates and retention	32
Recruitment in small communities	32
Smaller communities have more stable population better retention	32
Rural communities can grow if subdivision is permitted	32
New equipment or facilities can attract new recruits	33
Other incentives for recruitment and retention	33
BIBLIOGRAPHY	35
APPENDIX A – INTRODUCTORY POWERPOINT SLIDES.....	37
APPENDIX B – POWERPOINT SLIDES SHOWN DURING FOCUS GROUP.....	43

This page left intentionally blank

Executive Summary

- This is a report of findings from the fourth, and final, stage of the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project, involving five focus groups with a combined total of 49 brigade chiefs. Two groups were held at east Hobart and at Launceston, one group was held at Burnie.
- The three previous stages of the Project involved: (i) interviews with senior TFS staff; (ii) focus groups with rank-and-file volunteer members; and (iii) a survey of the TFS volunteer membership.
- The aim of the focus groups with brigade chiefs was to augment findings from the survey of the volunteer membership by eliciting their perceptions, reactions and comments about the major issues involving brigade leadership that emerged from the survey of volunteers.
- During the focus group sessions participants were prompted with survey findings focused on leadership issues. They generally endorsed the survey results and often moved on to discuss what they perceived to be other issues or concerns which they believed to be related to the particular survey findings under discussion.
- Overall, most brigades were described as functioning well. There were few first-hand accounts of current brigade leadership problems.
- Several chiefs felt that a lack of active volunteers compelled them, at times, to be more lenient with members than they would have preferred in order to avoid losing these members. They found it difficult to balance the need for discipline during firefighting operations with the need to maintain volunteer numbers.
- Participants thought there was little bullying or harassment in their brigades. However, some said they found it difficult balancing equal opportunity and anti-discrimination requirements with the need to ensure that firefighters were physically and psychologically able to meet the demands of safe firefighting in order to adequately protect brigade members. Some participants reported that actions against them on claims of discrimination had been time-consuming, onerous and humiliating. Other participants described ways in which they had arranged responsibilities to ensure the safety of their members while avoiding the potential for anti-discrimination claims.
- Several complained that the career-path for volunteers seemed to be capped at brigade chief, that volunteers were not encouraged to participate in incident management teams, and that this apparent restriction discouraged some members and may have contributed to resignations.
- Overall, chiefs gave a mixed account of the relative advantages and disadvantages facing brigades in small rural communities, compared with brigades near larger population centres. Rural brigades generally had trouble recruiting new members, but

Report on Focus Groups with TFS Brigade Chiefs

had fewer problems with conflicts and retention. They were described as being more harmonious than brigades in larger communities because members were compelled to work together by mutual need. Chiefs of brigades in larger communities reported that recruitment was easier but turnover was higher. Internal disharmony and factionalism were reported as being more common, and as impacting negatively on both retention and recruitment.

- Participants thought that larger communities had more transitory populations making recruitment easier in some cases but making retention more difficult. They thought smaller communities found recruitment difficult due to the absolute shortage of people, but that residents were less transitory and had a stronger sense of community commitment resulting in better retention.
- Several participants reported that brigades in small communities were sometimes based on a single family. They felt that such brigades could function well because kinship ties helped to keep disharmony within reasonable bounds. However, some respondents to the Volunteer Survey complained that they felt marginalised in brigades dominated by a single family, and unable to aspire to senior positions.
- Chiefs generally supported 5-year terms of office, particularly for brigades with low call-out rates, arguing that that length of time was needed for new leaders to learn the job and start to mould the brigade as they wanted it.
- Some participants said they had difficulty encouraging potential successors and in part blamed the administrative work load imposed on brigade chiefs.
- Some chiefs expressed misgivings about the system of appointing leaders by popular vote. They reported that, at times, their ability to maintain professional standards from members was undermined by challenges from rivals pursuing popularity rather than high standards. They reported that ambitious members sometimes tended to cultivate factions which then caused disharmony in brigades and affected both recruitment and retention. They reported that factions were very difficult to break down once established. They felt they needed to be given skills, not just procedures to follow, in order to manage conflict; and they needed better access to support from independent, appropriately skilled people outside the brigade to help them manage conflict.
- Participants were very supportive of mentoring and commented positively on mentoring across brigades as well as within brigades. They thought the best way to develop new leaders was through a combination of mentoring and formal training by experts. The chiefs believed that their brigade members preferred on-station training, with overnight residential courses being the least preferred of the three options.
- Some participants reported that their members had little interest in formal brigade meetings and that issues were often discussed more effectively after meetings or by keeping meetings relatively informal. Correspondence was also often managed with minimal formality.

- Participants suggested that findings from the survey that some volunteers perceived TFS to be too bureaucratic had several causes. They thought that if the agency tried to apply the same requirements on members across different types of communities, some members (especially in small brigades in remote rural communities) would find those standards irksome. Some also suggested that TFS' administrative arrangements for maintaining membership records, fire reports, and training courses may have failed and inconvenienced members in the past. Some spoke at length about issues with training and felt that the use of regional training centres could inconvenience members, particularly new recruits with demanding jobs and young families. Some also commented critically on the growing load of administrative work required of brigade leaders.
- Participants agreed with the survey finding that competing commitments from work and family were important factors limiting people's involvement with TFS. They also agreed that disharmony in brigades and low levels of brigade turnout rates reduced recruitment and retention.
- Participants reported that they had difficulty getting their members to complete fire reports, and at times they (chiefs) found the process of phoning in fire reports cumbersome.
- Participants agreed that new vehicles and new fire stations helped attract more recruits, and that financial incentives for volunteers, such as exemptions from the fire levy or council rates, should be examined carefully in relation to the long-term need to maintain adequate numbers of volunteers across the State.

Introduction

Volunteer-based emergency services throughout Australia need to sustain adequate numbers of volunteers in order to protect the lives, properties, and assets of communities vulnerable to bushfires. Concerns have been expressed about the likely future impacts of (a) changes in the Australian economy and (b) Australia's ageing population, on emergency services volunteer numbers. The Tasmanian Fire Service (TFS) can do little to influence directly the underlying economic and demographic factors threatening volunteer numbers. However it may be able to reduce the rate at which volunteers leave – that is boost retention. Some resignations are inevitable, such as those due to changed family responsibilities, re-location due to work commitments, ageing, illness and disability. However, some other resignations may be avoidable if brigade morale is high and member commitment is strong.

TFS requested the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (BCRC) Volunteerism Team at La Trobe University to undertake collaborative research to support a Volunteer Leadership Development Project. The project aims to investigate the leadership needs of TFS with the aim of fostering brigade morale and member commitment. The project involves four activities:

1. Interviews by Bushfire CRC staff with TFS Senior Management: Chief Officer, Deputy Chief Officers, Region Chiefs and District Officers;
2. Focus groups with TFS volunteers;
3. A mail-out survey of TFS volunteers seeking their views on brigade leadership needs; and
4. Focus groups with Brigade Chiefs in each Region.

This report documents the findings of Activity 4, focus groups with brigade chiefs in each TFS Region. The focus groups were intended to obtain the views of a number of brigade chiefs on leadership issues in the response to the findings from the Survey of TFS Volunteers on leadership issues. The Volunteer Leadership Survey generated over 900 responses from a population of 4,195 TFS volunteers¹ between December 2008 and February 2009. The findings of that survey are documented in Report 1:2009 to TFS, Volunteer Leadership Development Survey.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge Robyn Pearce and Lucas van Rijswijk of the Tasmanian Fire Service for their generous assistance and support in conducting this survey. We also wish to thank the brigade chiefs who each gave up half a day from their weekends to participate in the focus groups and the regional staff who organised the participants and venues for each session.

¹ TFS (2009) website, About TFS, Hobart. Retrieved June 2, 2009, from <http://www.fire.tas.gov.au/mysite/Show?pageId=colAbout>

Methodology & Sample

In accordance with the plan for the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project, the BCRC Volunteerism team collaborated with staff from TFS Human Services to organise focus groups with brigade chiefs in the regional headquarters of the three TFS Regions.

Focus groups have certain strengths and weaknesses as a research method. As with most forms of social research that seek the views of participants, the resulting data reflect the perceptions of the participants--which may not be objectively accurate. However, people hold their perceptions to be true, and form attitudes and behaviours accordingly. If we can identify people's perceptions, we may better understand, and potentially influence, their attitudes and behaviour.

Brigade chiefs are the practitioners of volunteer brigade leadership. In order to understand the leadership development needs of brigades it is vital to understand brigade chiefs' perspectives on brigade leadership; how they learnt to lead brigades, why they do what they do, and what they think could be done better. As such, a focus group methodology was deemed particularly suited to address the current research aim.

Bryman (2004) notes that focus groups were originally devised as a means of enabling us to learn more about the perspectives of people who have certain shared experiences. The exploratory nature of focus groups allows novel ideas to emerge. In comparison with one-to-one interviews, focus groups allow us to observe how group members interact to encourage expression of each other's opinions and develop a shared understanding of a phenomenon. The recording and transcription of focus groups allows us to record not just what people say, but how they say it. Analysts can capture how members of the group respond to statements made by individual participants; for example whether they debate a point or chuckle in recognition of a shared insight.

Focus groups have some disadvantages compared with other social research methods. In particular, because focus groups are typically much smaller than survey samples, we cannot be as confident that the views expressed in a focus group represent views which are widely held by members of the population from which participants are drawn. The usual ways of addressing this concern are to run a focus group several times with different groups of participants, and/or to run studies that combine focus groups with other methods such as surveys. Both approaches have been used in the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project.

The focus groups with TFS brigade chiefs were timed for late March 2009 to allow time for the data entry, analysis and preliminary reporting of the Volunteer Leadership Survey, which informed the focus group questions. TFS worked through the three Regional Offices to invite participants for two focus groups in each Region. Focus groups were scheduled for morning and afternoon sessions during March 2009 in: Hobart on Saturday 21st, Launceston on Saturday 28th, and Burnie on Saturday 29th. As it happens, the morning session in Burnie was much better subscribed than the afternoon session so only a morning session was held in that Region. Each session involved about 10-15 brigade chiefs, and there were 49 participants in total—representing about one-fifth of all brigade Chiefs/First Officers in the State.

Report on Focus Groups with TFS Brigade Chiefs

The focus group sessions were preceded with a brief explanation to the participants and reassurance that no identifying data would be included in the report back to TFS. They were then shown an introductory PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix A) outlining recent research which suggested that good leadership increases both the recruitment and retention of volunteers. Then a digital voice recorder was switched on and the focus group proper commenced. Over the course of the session, participants were invited to discuss key findings from the Volunteer Leadership Survey presented in a series of ten PowerPoint slides (see Appendix B).

Each session was recorded on a Panasonic digital voice recorder. The recordings were transcribed and analysed to discern broad themes raised by the participants. These themes did not necessarily align with the themes from the Volunteer Leadership Survey used in the PowerPoint slides.

The report is set out using the ten sets of key findings from the Volunteer Leadership Survey as headings, in the order in which they were presented to participants as PowerPoint slides. The participants' responses from across the different focus group sessions have been described and organised into sub-headings. The descriptive text is supported with quotations from the participants to capture some of the emotional texture accompanying their thoughts. Names of places and people have been deleted to avoid identifying the speakers.

Results

General Comments

At several of the focus groups, participants commented that the session had been an opportunity to openly discuss a range of shared concerns and issues among peers in an informal and non-judgemental setting. They could not recall having similar opportunities in the past and expressed interest in having further such opportunities. TFS staff should consider facilitating such forums on a regular, or an occasional, basis.

Most participants were self-assured and warmed to the focus group process fairly quickly. Most participants stayed for the scheduled 2 hour duration, and overall the sessions averaged 2.5 hours in length.

While the findings from the Volunteer Leadership Development Survey were displayed as PowerPoint slides to prompt the participants on specific leadership issues, participants' tended to accept the survey finding in question as sound, and the discussion often drifted to more general issues. Most participants were aware of the broader context of the leadership project as a part of the BCRC Enhancing Volunteerism project. At times participants discussed wider issues of volunteer recruitment and retention rather than confining themselves to issues of leadership. The facilitator mostly adopted a stance of minimal intervention treating participants as subject-matter experts, some having decades of experience leading volunteer fire brigades. Where appropriate, the facilitator endeavoured to steer the discussions back onto specific leadership topics.

As might be expected, the degree of participation varied among participants. Group Officers tended to be among the most engaged participants and sometimes offered insights about the philosophy and direction of TFS management and high-level management committees.

Many participants had given several decades of service as TFS volunteers and were able to offer insights drawn from lengthy experience. They were able to shed light on changes they have observed over many years, and the impact of major historical milestones such as the 1968 Hobart fires. However, at times it was difficult to know if the events and issues being discussed were current, or had occurred some time ago.

Key demographics from Volunteer Leadership Development survey

The first slide shown to participants when the focus group commenced presented the following key demographic statistics from the Volunteer Leadership Development Survey.

TFS Leadership Development Survey

Mailed out to all TFS volunteers -

- 923 out of over 4,000 responded (approx. 20%)
- 83% male & 17% female
- Median age of 49 years
- Median length of service 12 years
- 90% born in Australia
- 81% employed
- Regions proportionally represented in sample

Some participants were sceptical of both the actual number of volunteers and the effective number of *active* volunteers, recalling past instances of apparent failings of the records management system.

The number of volunteers

Some participants contested TFS' claim to have over 4,000 active volunteers. They calculated that, with about 230 brigades across the state, the average number of volunteers per brigade should be about 20. Claims were made that the actual numbers of volunteers who could be relied on to turn out when required was much smaller. Some outlined various techniques they had used to measure, more objectively, the effective membership of their brigades.

The records management system (RMS)

Some participants were critical of the TFS records management system (RMS) saying that in the past it had appeared at times to be poorly maintained and the data it produced may have been unreliable. These participants reported problems they had experienced with transfers to another brigade, or changes of status from active to inactive. Instead, the members concerned discovered that they had been classified as "resigned", leading to anger and frustration directed at the brigade chiefs.

Another participant stated, "I've had a young starter who's been with us for about 18 months, and he's still not on the system. It's causing issues trying to get him trained because it's as though he doesn't exist. Well, you know, I've filled in the form 2 or 3 times, twice now...".

Some participants claimed to have knowledge of brigades that have members on the books who haven't turned up to a fire call for 3 or 4 years. Participants generally believed that many of the problems seemed to have arisen from inaccurate data entry into RMS.

It should be appreciated that these negative perceptions of RMS and its administration may be out-dated, though true at the time. Measures have been taken to improve the maintenance

Report on Focus Groups with TFS Brigade Chiefs

of the data over the past 2-3 years (L. van Rijswijk, personal communication, July 29, 2009). As evidence of improvements it should be noted that the RMS membership database was used to mail questionnaires for the BCRC Survey of Volunteer Leadership Needs to all 4, 238 volunteers registered with the TFS in 2008, and that only 43 questionnaires (1%) were returned as 'not known at this address'. It should also be noted that the TFS magazine, *Fireground*, is mailed to all registered TFS volunteers using the RMS database, and that only 35 magazines were 'returned to sender' from the last mail out. If, as seems likely, at least some of the criticisms made by chiefs about records keeping were based on past circumstances which no longer apply, then TFS might consider communicating evidence of improvements in RMS to the volunteer membership to update perceptions.

What is it like being in your brigade?

Participants were shown a slide outlining results from the survey question “What is it like being in your brigade?”

What is it like being in your brigade?

Most survey respondents were positive about their brigade experiences:

- Few reported experiencing bullying, harassment or discrimination
- General agreement that the atmosphere in the brigade was positive and new members were welcomed
- About half thought there were problems with politics and factions in their brigade
- About one third thought training was well planned or well organized.

Less authority because of the volunteer basis of the organisation

Participants felt that a generalised underlying challenge for brigade leaders was the voluntary foundation of the brigade membership. One participant contrasted managing volunteers compared with managing paid employees: “I think part of the problem that we’ve got is that we’re volunteers. It’s not like a paid workforce where you’ve got a bit more authority about how things are done. We’re dealing with volunteers that come from all different backgrounds and all different expectations, and you’ve got to try and get the balance right. And, normally you do get the balance right, but occasionally people have a problem...”

Asked what the essential differences were between managing volunteers and paid employees, participants noted “we don’t select [volunteers] or interview them”, “we accept the people that come knocking on our door basically”. “We don’t refuse people because you don’t get them knocking on your door that often, especially in the smaller communities.” “It’s much easier for people to walk away...they don’t need to come and get the money...”

Some participants noted that they no longer had the opportunity of having their brigades voting to accept new recruits. “...a few years ago, you had to have new members voted into the brigade, by the majority. All of that seems to have gone by the window.”

Equity and discrimination

Participants reported difficulties balancing the demands of safe and effective firefighting with legal obligations to ensure equal opportunities to all members.

Participants said they believed they had a duty of care to brigade members to ensure that members’ own safety was not compromised. They also argued that firefighters expect their colleagues to be able to rescue them if they get into difficulties. It was claimed that this conflicted with the desire of some volunteers to be given a firefighting role even though they might lack the strength and/or the experience to back-up their colleagues. One participant feared that he could not overtly exclude such volunteers from firefighting roles for fear of legal claims of discrimination. “So I leave it buried and I make sure that that person isn’t put into a position where that’s going to be a problem. I don’t like having to do that; but we have to do it; and we all come across different issues like that.”

Some talked about the heavy burden of processes for resolving claims of harassment or discrimination. One participant recounted his experience of having allegations of harassment or discrimination brought against him and a fellow officer which he described as entailing 12 months of administrative and legal proceedings, and worry about harm to their reputations.

Some felt that TFS management did not adequately support volunteer officers when they needed to negotiate difficult issues with individual volunteers, such as deciding who is, or is not, suitable to go away to fight major fires like the Victorian bushfires.

Less problems in more remote areas

One participant, who had first-hand knowledge of several brigades, thought that many of the challenges of managing brigades diminished the further the brigade was away from large population centres. “The further you get out of the city, there doesn’t seem to be the issues. It’s harder to get volunteers. You don’t have people knocking on your door; ... everyone works as one, and I just, I hear this quite often ... the further you get away...”

The volunteers’ “glass ceiling”

Participants discussed whether volunteers were leaving because they encountered a lack of opportunity for advancement. There was a widespread perception that volunteers were not being given the opportunity for leadership above the level of brigade chief. “Volunteers are not being given the opportunity... once he’s got to brigade chief, the IMT teams and things like that, that’s a fairly hot issue through the Association at the moment. Members are not getting the opportunity to..., it being career-run, virtually, you go out to an incident. After the first day it’s pretty well run by the Incident Management Team, out of here, and that’s what a lot of blokes is starting to jump up and down.”

Participants also complained that their experience and local knowledge of long-standing brigade members was not utilised by incident management teams. “You talk about retaining volunteers. This doesn’t sort of set a good example to someone that’s been there 12 months, 18 months, three years, if they see that people who’ve been there longer are being treated like that. They’ll go and find something else to do with their spare time.”

Other participants took the more accommodating view that, even though an Incident Management Team and associated strike teams and field commanders tended to overwhelm the local brigade during a large fire; their assistance was both needed and welcome, and at the end of the day it was still the local brigade chief who signed-off on the firefighting operation.

Fire & Incident Reporting System

Participants reported that they sometimes found themselves staying back to complete fire reports after everyone else had left. They reported the feeling of loneliness associated with this situation; “OK guys, see you later, I’ve got to do this. Next thing you know, there’s a brigade chief sitting there by himself, having to fill out fire reports.” This is an image which is hardly likely to attract potential brigade leaders to the role.

What is the leadership like in your brigade?

Participants were shown a slide outlining the results of survey questions asking about the leadership of brigades.

What is the leadership like in your brigade?

Most survey respondents thought brigade leaders were technically competent and safety conscious, but fewer survey respondents thought their leaders had good interpersonal communication skills or were able to deal effectively with difficult members.

Survey respondents were evenly divided as to whether their brigade elected a new brigade chief after two or three terms. Respondents who reported that their brigade chief rarely changed tended to be less satisfied with leadership quality.

Length of terms of office

Participants reported that, while in some brigades there is strong competition for senior positions, in others members show little interest in taking on the senior roles, particularly that of chief. Some participants said that they had accepted the position of chief reluctantly over several 5-year terms because no-one else was willing to take on the job. Some reported having to force other members to take on the role by refusing to stand for re-election.

Participants were supportive of limited length terms for brigade officers. Examples were given where the only way a long-standing chief could be replaced was through compulsory elections. "...you can get too long in the position, and I think you actually stifle the brigade."

Participants were asked how appropriate they thought the 5-year length of term prevailing in TFS was, compared with, for example, the 2-year term prevailing in CFA in Victoria. Many felt that, particularly for quieter brigades, the full 5-year length of term was necessary to give people time to prove themselves as a leader; "because you might have two quiet seasons in a row". Another participant observed; "I think 5 years is probably a good term, because it probably takes you about 2 years to get the brigade thinking along the lines what you want them to do, what your ideas are. Because you've got to eradicate the previous Brigade Chief's ideas. Because if they weren't really the best ideas for the brigade. Then you've still got those last 2-3 years to actually mould the brigade in the right direction so that when the next person takes over they've got a good program to follow. And that can be good if you've got factions in the brigade."

Administrative workload on chiefs discourages successors

Participants thought brigade chiefs were subject to an excess of paperwork, and that this acted as a disincentive to members who were potential successors. "You're forever filling out forms, or writing letters, or organising this – organising that; that a lot of the members see you as sort of saying, 'Well yeah, I wouldn't mind being Brigade Chief and wearing the red helmet out on the fire ground, this is great. But there's no way I'm spending 2 or 3 days a month, or whatever, fighting paperwork.' And that's the bit they don't want to get involved in, and I think a lot of us get stuck with [the role of chief] on that basis that we've done it, we

know how to do it ...” There was general agreement that most volunteers don’t want to complete fire reports.

Workload in small brigades

Some participants asserted that the load on brigade chiefs in small brigades was comparable to that of larger brigades. “Even though it’s a small brigade, we’ve still got that same load.” They also noted that; “the smaller the brigade is, the more you have to be dedicated. For example, I don’t drink at all around Christmas. And I have maybe one, maybe two beers at the maximum. And New Year’s Eve: in bed by ten o’clock.... I know that a good many of my people might have had a few beers, and you want someone that can drive the truck that can keep below .05, ...So at least we’ve got someone in the district that can start to supervise a fire at some point in that period.”

Succession planning supported

There was general agreement that a brigade chief should always have someone who can take over “when you ‘carc-it’”. One participant noted the value of having his son assisting him as brigade chief and “lined up” to take over.

Young or inexperienced brigade chiefs

Participants reported that they consciously supported very young or inexperienced chiefs from neighbouring brigades. One participant recounted the example of a brigade where the longest serving member had served for about 15 months, and the brigade chief had served only 4 months. “...we treat them [inexperienced chiefs] with a lot of respect to give them a chance to get their foot in, to try and get a hold of what’s going on.”

How important are these leadership skills?

Participants were shown the following slide outlining how survey respondents ranked the importance of specific leadership skills.

How important are these leadership skills?

Skills promoting teamwork, helping new members mix with others, and keeping members informed were rated highest by survey respondents.

Somewhat fewer survey respondents thought that disciplining members, managing discontent and factionalism, and holding members accountable for their actions were important skills.

Important leadership skills

Participants felt there was little to add to the list of leadership skills presented or their relative importance as rated by survey respondents. They did, however, volunteer that brigade leaders needed to have good listening skills and good communication skills. They did not elaborate further about techniques for exercising these skills, but talked instead about the broad underlying issues confronted by brigade leaders.

Balancing responsibility against political pressure

One participant identified what he thought was a fundamental dilemma for brigade chiefs/first officers, that they felt they were “serving two bosses”. “We have to satisfy TFS itself; management. And we have to satisfy our brigade members.” He argued that balancing the demands of the two parties could make the role of brigade chief “very difficult”. “...sometimes there are people who want to have a go at it. You’ve got to keep both parties happy. You can’t run your brigade like it’s a fun thing, I mean it’s a serious business, so you’ve got to do it by TFS standards. Now you’ve got to keep the members themselves happy in that area, otherwise they say “Oh well, stuff you! You’re out next time”.

They reported that this tension between responsibility and popularity was exacerbated by the shortage of recruits in two different ways. Firstly, many participants felt that chiefs could not afford to risk offending members for fear of reducing their attendance level or even losing them altogether. Secondly, chiefs from smaller communities felt they did not even have the option of refusing unsuitable applicants. “You do have to be tough on some people. ... we don’t go out and run a selection interview for these people. Some of them come with all sorts of backgrounds...”. “It is scary when you see people being elected simply on popularity, because they’re a fun guy, or whatever.” Participants noted that on occasions, TFS has intervened, sending out letters asking people not to vote for the most popular candidate, simply because they were a fun guy.

Participants felt that issues of popularity might be more significant in small country towns where family relationships and employer-employee relationships were more likely to occur

within brigades. “It’s always going to come back to popularity I’m afraid. I don’t know how you address it.”

Managing conflict

Asked about managing conflict, some participants said they wanted more support from TFS in this role. They felt that there were sections in the manual that dealt with managing conflict, but that this provided a set of procedures rather than cultivating appropriate skills among brigade leaders.

Participants were divided as to whether brigade leaders should be trained in conflict-management skills or should have access to someone external who could be called-in to manage conflict when it arose. “I don’t know if it’s skills you need; you need good backup in this building [state headquarters] somewhere that you can get to come and help.” Others thought there was a need for a third party to intervene in conflicts, arguing that where there is conflict between a brigade chief and a member, they know each other too well. “You need to bring in someone from outside who’s totally neutral.” Some participants suggested that this was the role for the TFS Volunteer Coordinator, but complained that they had little knowledge of this person. They felt that the need for a third party was particularly strong in rural brigades. “It’s quite feasible that the guy you’re going to counsel ... lives next door ... or is the main local employer and employs just about everybody in that brigade.”

Some participants felt that members of the District staff were not far enough removed from the brigade to perform this role. “District staff can be a bit too familiar with a brigade manager.” “You need someone totally removed that neither the complainant or the defendant has got a familiarity with.” “...by the time the field staff have got out there, they’ve probably heard one side of the story from the brigade chief or the officers, dealing with the firefighter who is causing the grief. So they’ve probably had their head filled with knowledge from one side of it only, and probably already got the decision half made in their mind... so it needs to be this person sitting in the office somewhere up here [state headquarters] that no-one really knows about.”

Participants acknowledged that the manual calls for conflicts to be dealt with at the local level in the first instance, and that to do this they would need to be trained for better conflict management skills. They perceived that it was impractical to rely on calling in a third party whenever there was any disagreement within a brigade. “You want to be able to manage it at your level first. If it’s unmanageable at your level, then you move up to the next step. But you get it sorted out in your brigade if it’s possible. And need to have the skills, or at least *some* training in those skills to be able to do it at a brigade level.”

Managing dysfunctional behaviour within brigades

Asked what techniques they currently used to manage dysfunction within brigades, one participant recounted a story about another brigade. “I had one brigade tell me that they’ve got formal and informal resolutions. The only difference is, for one they use boxing gloves, and in one they don’t.” While there is undoubtedly a degree of exaggeration in this anecdote, it probably illustrates that at times brigades feel very frustrated about the conduct of individual members, and that they draw upon a range of formal and informal tactics to manage this.

Participants complained that the Fire Service did not give volunteer officers enough training in the skills on how to manage internal dysfunction or its impacts on the community. They thought that some career staff may receive such training, and could be called upon to help resolve such issues. However, the point was made that brigade officers are at the frontline dealing the brigade and community relations. Where possible, the brigade officers need to be given the skills and training to manage problems on an on-going basis rather than depending on a senior officer based at Regional headquarters to make occasional interventions.

Discussion tended to focus on avoiding ‘incompatible’ people from joining brigades rather than managing dysfunctional behaviour. “If we’ve got new members turning up, we definitely wouldn’t sign them up unless we were happy with them. So we just would not do the bookwork. Whether that’s discrimination or not, we don’t give a bugger. Because there’s nothing’s been signed and they haven’t started.” Another reported using “a bit of a white lie, saying ‘sorry, the brigade’s full at the moment.’”

Others felt torn between, on the one hand trying to avoid recruiting problem members, while on the other, not wishing to exclude people from joining their local brigade. One participant reconciled taking a somewhat exclusionary approach by referring to the bitter experience of a nearby brigade. “A neighbouring brigade had a problem person, he was a huge problem, and I felt sorry for the brigade, and there was stuff burnt down everywhere. ...in hindsight they should not have signed him on.”

Perhaps the most constructive approach nominated by participants was to put new recruits on a probation period for several months. “It’s not just on their skills; it’s on how they act socially and mix, or how they actually work with the rest of the members.” “It also gives that member three months to see if they like us, and learn how to go about things.” “They might as well leave in three months if they’re not happy, than in twelve months. So it reduces all the bookwork and everything.” According to the TFS website, the organisation currently mandates a 3- to 6-month probation period for new volunteers unless decided otherwise by the Brigade Chief.

Conflict and difficult members in meetings

Participants described several types of disharmony in meetings and their approaches to responding to these situations. For some, the best response to outspoken members was to hear them out, and wait for them to finish. “...I think basically now the attitude in the brigade is, while he does bring up some really good points, I’m not disputing that, but I think everybody says, “Yeah, so and so is having a go again”, and sit there just waiting for him to finish...”

Others reported relying heavily on democratic meeting protocols to manage domineering or aggressive members at meetings. “We have a couple who endeavour, you know, to put their point of view over very strongly, and to a point where they’re intimidating. And if there are going to be votes on issues, they’ll want it to go their way.” Another participant commented, “It’s a problem when those people are members of your officer team too.” The first participant responded, “That’s where, if you’re in our position, you haven’t got a choice whether you want to be or not, you’ve got to be democratic.”

Factions

Many participants reported that factions within brigades were a problem. “I’ve got factions within by brigade, and their aim is ... they want to be officers or they want to be Leading Firefighters, and they try to form their own little clique and get three or four members over in their corner. And all they’re doing is creating a problem as a whole. ... To me the most important thing is that the brigade works together as one unit, not two or three separate ones. Now when you get these little factions, they do upset the rest of the brigade, and it’s difficult to break them up once you’ve got them in there.”

Other participants noted the resilience of factions. “We’ve all had that problem at some stage or other, I know my friend [name suppressed] had, and I have, and I inherited part of my problem from you.” [the speaker nodded towards another participant prompting general laughter.].

Familial factions

Anecdotal evidence from respondents to the Volunteer Leadership Survey reported problems in brigades that were dominated by a single family, for members who were not part of that family. One focus group participant reported; “Factionalism can be a big problem in a brigade, especially when you’ve got nearly [one third of the brigade coming from one family], and they feel that they need to be up the top; that they are entitled to be up the top. They can undermine all the good work you’re trying to do.”

Other participants offered a more positive view of brigades that are dominated by a single family: “...something about our brigade, and I think it certainly spreads elsewhere, a lot of our members are basically, it’s a family concern if you like...which means we very rarely get any, ...harassment and bullying – that sort of thing. Apart from my daughter yelling at me, or my fourth officer yelling at his father who’s the second officer. But ... that’s what I find. If we’ve got quite a bit of a family sort of a thing, we don’t have a lot of those problems, but eventually families are going to start running out, and that’s where we’re going to start having problems.”

The same speaker also argued that brigades dominated by a single family were able to operate more efficiently on the fire ground than brigades run under formal, hierarchical lines of command. “The other thing I find is, we’re not sort of what I call a regimented brigade where the Chief does this and the Second Officer does that, and you get to a fire and everybody waits for the hierarchy and so on. We go to a fire, and somebody comes up to you and says “Well what do you reckon”, “Yeah”, “Well we’re going to look after that section down there, [is] that alright?” “Yeah, away you go.”, and I have total confidence in these guys to do it. We don’t worry too much about ranks and all that sort of thing... I mean, the stuff on the shoulder doesn’t really count for all that much with us.”

Another participant described how the most active members of his brigade were himself and his son. “...that’s good and bad, because quite often there’s only the two of us at a fire. And that’s it for the whole district. So the district relies on us, totally. But we are rebuilding and building up. So, um, and we work well together, and we do work well together as a father and son; some can’t, but we do. We work at home together, we work on the fire together. And he’s a hell of a good gauge, because the more he screams at me, the more I’m losing the fire. And when he cools down I’m winning.”

Report on Focus Groups with TFS Brigade Chiefs

Overall, participants were philosophical about problems with factionalism, reflecting that such problems were not confined to the fire service, but were commonly found in other organisations.

How important are these brigade leader behaviours?

Participants were shown the following slide outlining how survey respondents ranked the importance of various behaviours among brigade leaders.

How important are these leadership behaviours?

Survey respondents regarded all the behaviours listed as important. The highest rated behaviours were: being honest, trustworthy, fair, and setting a good example.

The mid-ranked behaviours were: keeping skills and knowledge up to date, listening to people's concerns, keeping a sense of humour and balancing the demands on members of brigade versus work and family.

The lowest ranked behaviours were: promoting the interests of the brigade to TFS and other outside organizations, and developing a vision for the brigade.

Participants had little to add to the results as listed, however the following contributions about how to coax members to turn out offers some insights into the value of brigade leaders and the approaches they adopt in leading their brigades. A perennial problem for volunteer brigades is how to ensure that adequate numbers of members turn out to calls, especially those that are probably trivial or false alarms.

Encouraging members to turn out

One participant described a problem getting his members to turn out in adequate numbers. "When I have a call at 2 o'clock in the morning for an MVA or car fire, and only have one person turn up beside myself, it gets very difficult." The participant described how his brigade had been divided into three teams, with a team being rostered on duty every three weeks.

His approach was to call a full brigade meeting, setting out the problem, telling the brigade that he and his officers could not come up with a way of solving it, and asking the brigade, "How do we solve it?" "At the end of the day I think I won because I turned it around and I have a commitment from my brigade that each member is going to turn up at least 33% of the time." The participant felt that his apparent success was in part due to giving 'ownership' of the problem back to the brigade, saying, "Come on, we're one brigade. Let's try and work out the answer between all of us." "I don't think that as a brigade leader, that I'm there to dictate terms, I believe my job is to get everybody agreeing that this is the best way to do something, and then go and do it as a whole. I've got to get more smallish points that way, than me saying "You're going to bloody well do this, and that's the end of it. ... They say, "We're volunteers, get stuffed!"

Another participant expanded on the theme of volunteers not turning out in relation to false alarms from automatic alarm systems. "We have the same with alarm calls at the school. Because they go off so much, people get sick of it and think, 'Ah stuff it!' Especially if it's at 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning, they go, 'Oh, I'm not going to go there, it's a false alarm as usual.' But the ones that they don't turn up to, there's going to be one day where she's going to be going from one end to the other." A similar situation was described for motor vehicle

accidents (MVs). “People say, ‘Well, I’m not going to MVs because all we do is stand there and watch the police and the ambulance. Disconnect the battery; end of story.’”

Some participants blamed the text-based paging system noting, “People read what the message is and choose whether they’re going. This is the problem since these pagers” [were introduced].

Others blamed the tendency for a few members, who live close to the fire station, to get to all the calls. “...there’s a little bit of antagonism, I can see it starting, that it’s always these people, just because they live close to the station, they get to go to the fire.”

Participants were undecided on the best way to manage this. One participant suggested that, for the types of call that are commonly false alarms, where volunteers often choose not to turn out, the best option was for those crew members who do attend to re-page the call. “...it might mean that your response is slower, but it means that those people aren’t continually getting, if you like, pissed off because they’ve got to go to a non-event. ... I mean it might mean that you lose a bit of the structure, but at least the members will probably still stay satisfied in themselves with the commitment they’re giving.” However, they acknowledged that re-paging places additional pressure on the few who do reliably turn out. “That’s where the problem gets worse, because the three or four that do attend are the only ones that are going to do it, and they know it, and it just puts more and more pressure [on those few].”

A more conservative approach was to acknowledge that people who missed the first truck did not want to sit around the station for an hour if they are not going to be called-on to the fire ground. One participant reported addressing this concern by giving a firm undertaking to brigade members that he would assess the situation as soon as he arrived at a fire and promptly advise members back at the station if they could go home. “...the point is, they’re not there for an hour, twiddling their thumbs and doing nothing.” This approach demonstrates empathy with members’ other commitments and responsibilities.

Other participants were more pessimistic and philosophical: “But that’s the nature of volunteerism. I don’t think there’s any solution to fixing that sort of problem. ... I don’t think there’s any easy solution to people turning up to calls. ... If retained brigades are having trouble, and they’re getting a small token to do it, how do you think true volunteer brigades, who are getting nothing, [are coping]?”

Leadership demonstrated by career staff

Participants reported that some career staff had seemed to lack respect for volunteers. One participant recounted the case of a particular career officer who he said “caused more friction in the brigade than nearly all the brigade put together.... No doubt he’d had a lot of training. The way he did things wasn’t the way we did things. – we didn’t like his comments at all. Really serious! Quite pleased when he left, eventually.”

“He used to refer to “just vollies”, or “fern flickers”. ...and he just totally disrespected the way we do things”. The participant went on to explain that, as volunteers, they had priorities ahead of firefighting. “Firefighting is *his* first world. ... Now we are, first of all, people – we’ve got a world before we’ll go firefighting. ... our second world is fire, or our third or fourth world, not our first world”.

Report on Focus Groups with TFS Brigade Chiefs

Participants reported feeling demoralised by the attitudes they felt some career firefighters had towards volunteers, particularly given the sacrifices many regard themselves as making as volunteers. One participant expressed his feelings: “I’m a brigade chief for 20 years...my gift to the community is being a fireman. ...it doesn’t mean I’ve been a good brigade chief, but I’m always there. ... And for that we require some respect from the fire service. .” He conceded that since voicing concerns about the offense caused by a few individual staff members, he felt reassured by the perception that he was enjoying better access to management at headquarters.

It is no surprise that relationships between some volunteers and some staff are not always harmonious, and there is room for improvement by both parties. This report is confined by the data to the perceptions of volunteer brigade chiefs. The report on Interviews with Senior Managers (McLennan 2008) reported perceptions of senior career staff about relations between volunteers and career staff.

How important are training courses in these leadership skills?

Participants were shown a slide listing support among survey respondents for a range of leadership training courses under consideration by TFS.

How important are training courses in these leadership skills?

Percent of survey respondents rating each course as “very important”:

- People management skills (70%)
- Face to face communications (68%)
- Managing brigades (67%)
- Inducting and mentoring new members (65%)
- Developing teams (65%)
- Resolving conflicts and disputes (63%)
- Ensuring workplace fairness (63%)
- Supervising work groups (57%)
- Running meetings (43%)

Resolving conflicts and disputes

Participants said they wanted training to develop skills in conflict management, but also wanted access to neutral third parties who could come in to arbitrate with difficult disputes

Running Meetings

Brigades meetings are an important forum for the expression of brigade leadership. However, it was noted that survey respondents indicated least need for training in how to run meetings.

Focus group participants were specifically asked to comment on this result. They indicated that they thought the result reflected brigade members’ preference for a minimum of formality in running meetings, making training in formal meeting processes irrelevant.

Discussing the result, the facilitator asked, “I wonder if that means that people feel they’re on top of running meetings already, and don’t need to do [that kind of training] ?” A participant interjected, “...or they’re not interested in formal meetings, like a lot of brigade meetings, I imagine, they’re just sitting around a table like this, having a yarn, you know. Jotting down a few minutes, but nothing formal.”

Another participant suggested, “I think members generally get pretty bored if a meeting gets too formal and goes too long. Even again, with a meeting I had last week, it was bloody important, but they were more interested in getting the barbeque going. But I think in their eyes it wasn’t that much of an issue, you know they were basically saying well, “You’re the brigade chief, you look after it.””

Participants generally agreed that some members are not interested in the administrative and management aspects of their brigade. “Some members are really just truly members, where they just want the training and the firefighting, and they just lay back in the meeting. That’s their way, that’s what they’ve volunteered for.”

Several participants felt that their brigade members became more engaged in brigade business in a less formal atmosphere. “I think you get more out of people like we’re doing here exactly now today, than having a real formal chair and speaking through the chair, and all this stuff. I think you get people, oh well, venting their spleen a bit more, and will say a bit more, if it’s in this sort of a format as far as meetings go.”

Even those who reported that their brigade practiced fairly formal meeting processes, in fact described a fairly unstructured meeting. “Basically, we go through the minutes of the previous meeting, discuss any issues from there, and the floor’s thrown open, and every individual is asked whether they have any issues they want to raise. Rather than just the noisy ones making comments, everyone gets a chance.”

Asked how he went about consulting “every individual” this participant elaborated, “I think it’s best if you start from one side of the room and work to the other side of the room, and everyone’s got the opportunity to raise any issues. Because we know, that even in today’s forum, there are some that are more outspoken than others. So that you’ve got the opportunity to say something. Because it’s usually the quiet ones that most probably come up with the most important issues, but they need to get the opportunity to say it.”

Participants reported that members often tended to be more engaged outside the context of a brigade meeting. “The other thing I find is quite interesting after the meeting’s closed. They’ll be hanging around the room, and everybody’s having a few drinks, and it’s amazing some of the quiet ones, who’ve had nothing to say at the meeting ... and you can, without making it formal, you can get quite a bit of information and concerns coming out in an informal atmosphere.”

Informing members about brigade correspondence

An important activity in meetings is informing members of a brigade’s interactions with the outside world by tabling correspondence. Participants described various approaches to communicating correspondence among members ranging from open and informal to secretive and autocratic.

Participants described the secretive and autocratic approach as something they had observed or experienced with other brigade leaders in the past. “I know back in the old days before I became brigade chief ... the brigade chief that we had then ... was very secretive. This got read, and that got read at meetings, and everything else was carted back and forth to home. Unless you really nailed him for some reason, he’d only tell you what he thought you should know.” None of the participants admitted to using secretive or controlling practices themselves, nor did they indicate support for such practices.

Several participants stressed the importance of openness and inclusiveness in the communication of brigade business among members with statements such as: “There shouldn’t be anything the brigade chief knows that the members don’t know.”, and “We’re all on the same road, as I say, at the end of the day.”

Many participants reported that they used a fairly open and informal approach and felt that this was successful. At one extreme, “I don’t want the mail at my place, so I leave it at the station.” Participants agreed that this was common at many brigades.

Report on Focus Groups with TFS Brigade Chiefs

Others reported putting any correspondence on the notice board, and using word of mouth to communicate the flow of correspondence. In some cases such apparently informal processes were supported by more formal processes. “Yeah, that’s what we do. But we have a minutes book. Anyone can go back. We read the minutes of the previous meeting, at the next one. If you want to know about something, go and have a look.”

A range of more formal arrangements was described by various participants. At the less formal end, letters were passed around among the assembled members to be read out loud. “We’ve got letters, we’ve got such a small brigade, I just say about the letters for the month ...I’ll say to a bloke, “Would you read that out?”, and he reads it out, “And you read that out!” and then, “You read that out!” and it gives them the chance to be part of the meeting ... that helps ensure that they get the information.”

At the more formal end of the range, correspondence was tabled, albeit at weekly training nights rather than formally constituted meetings. “I make a point of tabling any correspondence I receive. We have training every Thursday, so every Thursday during training I’ll table it, I’ll give an indication what it is. I won’t read it out unless I consider it necessary to read it out. But I’ll table it, because that way they’re getting it almost the same time as I am , and therefore it’s not held on for any length of time and sort of old news.”

What are good ways to become a brigade leader?

Participants were shown a slide outlining how survey respondents responded to several modes of leadership training.

What are good ways to become a brigade leader?

For survey respondents:

Mentoring slightly preferred over formal training;

Training by external experts on leadership was favoured over internal training;

Residential training with overnight stay away from home was the least favoured option.

Mentoring

Participants were generally enthusiastic about the benefits of mentoring. Several participants noted that when they had risen through the brigade they were given little mentoring by their superiors. One participant, who had been a brigade chief for about 20 years, recalled “I know myself, I was sort of given few opportunities, but as soon as that brigade chief job came up, it was a whole new ball game to me. It wasn’t like I’d been slowly, progressed up into it, it was like, “there you are, you’ve got the seat; you handle everything the way you’ve got to handle it.” There wasn’t the skills training to be able to do that job.” This participant was asked whether he thought any mentoring he received had been inadequate. His reply was that rather than inadequate, mentoring for him had been non-existent. “No! Even from the brigade chief that was there, he never, you know took me aside and said, “You know, in a couple of years time I’m going to be moving out of the seat. Come with me and I’ll show you how I do things”. ... I mean he wasn’t ever going to do it, but that sort of mentoring I think will assist the next person in.”

Participants emphasised the special challenges of leadership in operational firefighting and the value of mentoring in mitigating those challenges. [Being] “a new brigade chief at a fire, it’s a bit scary you know. [If] someone can just stand supporting and you know, and say you’ll be right, you know, and start them off, it’s good for them.”

They noted that, even for people who exercise leadership roles in their normal occupation, leadership at a fire involved some special difficulties. “While some people in brigades may be leaders in their own work place, or in their own life, ... when it comes time to leading at a fire, there’s a few little factors chucked in there in the way they lead, which is always challenging.” Participants did not elaborate on what those ‘little factors’ were.

One of the challenges of leadership is the variability among brigades, the areas they serve and the membership. “...to some extent it varies according to the nature of the brigade you’re working for. I mean, you know, [name withheld] here, his brigade’s totally different to mine, you know the nature of the environment, the area that he’s looking after, plus the personalities he’s got in his brigade. We’ve all got different circumstances. What works for one doesn’t necessarily work with another.”

Other challenges are presented by the different circumstances of individual brigade chiefs. “...even though I’m brigade chief, I’m very rarely the first there on the scene, there to run the show. It’s just the fact that I live this distance from the station.... So ... I’ve got to have confidence in the guys that turn up. 99.9% of the time there’s never a problem. You go down there, “How’s it going? What’s happening?” ... “We’ve got this, we’ve got this, we’ve got this...”. “What’ve you done about it?” “I’ve done, that, that, that.” And “OK, fine. Do you want to keep going?” “Yep!” and I’ll stand back.” While another participant noted, “I’m the exact opposite. Because I’m the closest, I’m usually the first one there.”

Participants generally endorsed a leadership style in which the brigade chief trusts his officers and delegates operational leadership to them; but verifies their decisions and actions, and stands ready to offer support or intervene if needed. “...that’s the way it’s got to be, you’ve got to allow them to do their job, and have confidence in your people.”

Participants noted that mentoring does not necessarily have to come from within the same brigade. They gave examples of neighbouring brigades which had very inexperienced members and/or officers, and the way they had treated these new people gently and with respect to “try to bring them along”.

One participant summed up, advocating a combination two modes of leadership training; mentoring and formal training by external experts. “I think it’s got to be a balance between the top two [modes of training on the slide] to develop a leader. Mentoring, whether it’s the just your own station, by the field staff or by your neighbouring brigade; more Group exercises, and topped up with the specialist advice from people outside your brigade.”

Residential training courses

Participants were asked why they thought the survey had shown limited support for residential training courses, external to the brigade. They explained that they thought respondents assumed that this referred to the leadership courses offered to a very small number of personnel each year at the Australian Institute of Police Management in Manly. They noted that, with only one or two people per year being sent from among 4,000 volunteers in the state, “it’s going to be a long time before any of us will probably be on it. ... Probably the reason it’s least favoured is because no-one knows how it would work.”

Participants thought that, for some fields of training, delivery by subject-matter specialists from outside TFS would be beneficial. They recalled that, in the past, TFS had run a course called Lead, Manage and Develop Teams which had also involved a weekend residential component. They thought this course had been withdrawn when TFS moved to the Public Safety Training Package. They also thought people had found it difficult to stay away for the entire weekend. One participant suggested that people would find it easier to attend these courses by attending for whole days but returning home each night.

Relating satisfaction with brigade leadership to intentions to remain

Participants were shown a slide with results from the Volunteer Leadership Survey, and other BCRC surveys, showing that respondents who reported higher satisfaction with brigade leadership were also more likely to report intentions of staying longer with the brigade.

Relating satisfaction with brigade leadership to intentions to remain

Most survey respondents thought the leadership in their brigade was “very good”, and were satisfied with their brigade experience.

82% of respondents expected to still be TFS volunteers in 12 months, but 66% thought they would still be with TFS in 3 years time.

Survey respondents who were more satisfied with leadership and the volunteering experience, were more likely to anticipate being with TFS in 3 years.

The relationship between leadership, satisfaction and intention to remain

The diagram showed that, while most respondents expected to be fire service volunteers in 12 months, only about 65% expected to be with the fire service in three years.

Asked why they thought fewer volunteers expected to remain with the fire service in three years, participants suggested that people live increasingly dynamic and transitory lifestyles and are finding it harder to anticipate work or family commitments: “Three years time is a long call isn’t it nowadays, with work commitments and spouses’ commitments.”

Participants found it difficult to expand on this result other than to comment that it seemed to make sense.

Factors limiting involvement in TFS

Participants were shown a slide showing the two most prominent factors survey respondents had reported as limiting people's involvement in TFS.

Factors limiting involvement in TFS

Survey respondents reported:

- The perceived bureaucratic nature of TFS (24%)
- Competing work commitments (22%)

Perceived bureaucratic nature of TFS

Participants thought some respondents might perceive TFS as excessively bureaucratic because it tried to apply the same standards to all brigades and volunteers. They felt that the diversity of volunteers, brigades and the communities and landscapes they operated in made it very difficult to apply common standards. "...when you look at the demographics, the geographics, it's going to be very hard to get a set of rules, standards, whatever, to apply across the board..."

One participant noted that, in small towns it is hard to find *any* new volunteers. This shortage is exacerbated by Fire Service requirements for applicants to pass police checks and meet medical requirements. "I mean, I wish I had people coming in and wanting to join the brigade, and I was in a position where I could screen people, but at the moment, you get one new member; you've really got to take him."

We have noted previously in this report that some chiefs found the administrative aspect of brigade leadership burdensome. They also reported that other brigade members were discouraged from pursuing operational leadership roles because they observed the associated administrative burden on current leaders.

Fire & Incident Reporting System

The fire and incident reporting system (FIRS) and the records management system (RMS) were put forward by some participants as specific examples of bureaucratic tasks imposed on brigade leaders. To some extent the problem lay with the inherent detail required of the routine clerical tasks, but there were also comments about frustrations with the implementation of the reporting systems and the perceived poor adherence to process by TFS staff on occasions.

Several participants complained about the process of submitting reports. A common problem was that the call centre operators were not always available to accept fire reports, particularly following fires late at night.

One participant reflected on the paradox that, while the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) required that fire reports must be completed by someone who has attended at the scene, and this participant frequently did not arrive at the fire station soon enough to get on a truck and attend on-scene, he still found himself completing fire reports because he was the brigade chief.

Some participants described the process of providing FIRS information to the call centre operator as clumsy and tedious. They reported that the call centre would ask them a question and then read out all the possible response options; “on the telephone they ask you each and every question, so that sends me a bit mad. I’ve got a fire now outstanding, because I haven’t bothered to do it.”

Others were annoyed by the perceived variability in questions, depending on the operator at the call centre. “The thing I find is inconsistency with the operators in the AIR centre, over in Victoria. For the same incident, someone will ask you about 10 different questions, to what the person previous might’ve asked.”

There were also individual issues, such as the participant who disliked using the FIRS call centre because a disability made it difficult for him to use telephones. While this might seem like an isolated issue, the age profile of volunteer firefighters in Tasmania coincides with elevated rates of impairments among the general population².

A final critical comment about the FIRS system was that brigades did not get any feedback from the data they submitted such as summary statistics. “We did for the first round, I think, that was about it, for the first 3 months, we might have got a summary of how it was going, and that was the last we saw anything.”

Training

Many participants held the view that too much training was now being held at Regional training centres, and that more should be held on-station or locally if appropriate facilities existed. They felt that the need to travel long distances to training courses was an excessive imposition on volunteers and that it would be easier if the trainers and assessors came to brigades. They felt that many volunteers found it too difficult to attend the 2-day basic training course at the Regional training centre all at once, and that much of that course could also be conducted on-station.

There were also concerns that the centralised delivery of training imposed excessive delays between scheduled basic training courses. “People join the fire service to go and fight fires. We know you’ve got to be careful and they’ve got to have a fair degree of training, but they can’t get on a fire truck and go on a fire call unless they’ve got basic firefighting under their belt. And all they do is they keep coming back and asking me, and I’m sure others here, when are we going to do a basic firefighting course. Two, three, four, six months down the track, they still haven’t got it. And this is a real problem. Trying to maintain morale, when you can’t give them the training that they require to go and do the job, is very difficult.”

Concerns were also expressed about poor coordination among trainers, trainees and administrative personnel, with several reporting that their brigade members had turned up for training sessions where trainers had failed to show up. There were other examples of trainers turning up but few if any students turning up. There appeared to be breakdowns of communication on all sides. Some courses were cancelled by trainers because no course

² For example, approximately 6% of the Australian population suffers hearing impairment. The percentage rises with age such that 21% of the population aged over 60 suffers hearing impairment. The rate is higher among males and among farmers due to occupational exposure to machinery noise. Australian Bureau of Statistics (1993). *Disability, Aging and Carers: Hearing Impairment*. #4435.0 Canberra: ABS.

attendees had confirmed their attendance, and administrative personnel were blamed for not passing on information about attendees. On the other hand it was noted that sometimes high proportions of trainees failed to turn up for courses.

“...somebody needs get their house in order so training can be (better) administered I’ve got four brand new blokes there at the moment, all chafing at the bit to go.” “...that’s when you lose members, is when they do their basic, and they’ve done nothing else, and they’re still sitting there for 6 months waiting to get a fire call.”

There was a call for better planning and for defined programs of training to be made apparent to trainees: “...if we’re going to retain the people, I think we need to be able to bring them in and say, “OK, you’ll start here, and by there you will have gone through and done the basic, done the respired air, done that”, and yes, obviously there’ll be complications around that, but at least people get up to speed within a reasonable period of time.”

Participants wanted more transparency in the process of booking people into courses. Examples were given from the past of chiefs booking members into courses months in advance, but not hearing whether the booking had been successful until 2 weeks prior to the scheduled course date. “...people have got commitments coming up and whatever, and while I’ll tell them what I’ve nominated them on, there’s no guarantee they’re on that and they won’t know that until a couple weeks before it they get a letter to say they’re on the course, hopefully.... it would be nice to say, yeah you are actually on the list for that course ahead of that time, or something like that, just to make it visible.”

Participants noted that TFS had sent a letter to brigade chiefs asking them what training their brigades needed. Some participants regarded this as a positive initiative but were unsure whether all brigade chiefs had received the letter. They encouraged their fellow chiefs to reply to the letter to help TFS develop their strategic training plan.

One participant complained that the letter and feedback approach had not worked because the training plan that had emerged appeared to be weighted in favour of officer training and above. “...a lot of basic courses are not really there...”

Participants recalled that they used to receive a spreadsheet showing how many people they had trained in various accreditations, such as pump operation, and a printout saying where the brigade was lacking sufficient members with particular accreditations.

Participants discussed that, on the one hand they receive constant complaints from volunteers who say they’ve been trying to get onto particular courses “for ages” without success, and on the other hand when TFS runs courses, many of the volunteers booked to attend fail to turn up. Participants suggested that one possible cause of this was that some brigade chiefs were nominating people for courses without telling the volunteer in question. “...when the person got a letter they thought “Well, I didn’t put down for that.” And they decided, ‘Oh no, I can’t be bothered going’, and they don’t tell their brigade chief, and they don’t tell training services, so it comes back to the training college where they were meant to have 22 and they only had 9.”

Participants described how the Cambridge training centre started to over-subscribe participants for courses by two attendees (10%) to compensate for poor attendance. They

went on to note that this sometimes ‘backfired’ with the more popular courses such as chainsaw training, “Always a hot one!”, with too many attendees turning up.

One participant suggested that TFS consider offering the chainsaw course to volunteers as a small compensation for giving up their time to volunteer; “...at least they can then go and use that qualification in their own workplace, or to better themselves somewhere else.”

Competing commitments

Participants did not elaborate on the survey results about competing work commitments. However, they did move on to broader commitments, for example reporting that younger people seem to have too many other things they preferred to do; “[There are] probably around 1500 people plus [in our district], but we’re a small hamlet and ... the younger people seem to have more other things they want to do. We’ve had drives to try and get the younger ones, but they don’t [join].”

Participants reported that younger people arriving in the community are very transitory. “What we’ve found with the younger ones is that they don’t stay – in the district, you know they move in, they move out. You don’t hold them very easily. And it’s not anything to do with the brigade, it’s the fact that they’re moving.” Participants said they did not know whether brigade members who left the district transferred to the brigade in their new town or suburb.

Lack of activity

Boredom was identified as an important cause of turnover, sometimes by transferring to another emergency service organisation. There are members who have “done all their basic, their core lectures, what they want to do training-wise. They’ve put in all they can, 10 or 12 years, then doing nothing, so I do know of two who’ve gone and joined the SES, just to get another challenge, cause there’s nothing further, once they’ve reached their brigade-level management training level, there’s nothing for ‘em to do, so they just sort of stagnate, and they just want to move on and find something else to do.”

Disharmony in brigades limits recruitment

Participants noted that awareness of various types of internal dysfunction in brigades, including factionalism, found its way into the outside community where it undermined recruitment and retention. “The sad fact is that it flows out into the community that the brigade is having factional problems. It tends to deter people from wanting to become part of it, and I know people who’ve said they’d become part of the brigade if so and so wasn’t there. That’s because they’ve had troubles with that person and they don’t want to be in that environment.”

What would make TFS volunteering easier?

Participants were shown a slide showing the most prominent factors survey respondents thought would make it easier to volunteer with TFS.

What would make TFS volunteering easier?

Survey respondents reported:

- Mentoring programs (70%)
- One on one mentoring of new recruits (60%)
- Ability to catch up with training or assessment sessions at nearby brigades (50%)
- If employers were more understanding of TFS volunteering (40%)

Call rates and retention

Some participants thought it was easier to retain volunteers in a busy brigade than a quiet brigade because they thought calls kept volunteers interested. "...if you come across the other side of the fence and take [brigade name omitted], where the call rate is excessive. I seem to be able to retain members better, because we're always busy. There's always something going on."

Participants also thought large fires helped recruit new members. "We've had this discussion a few times. And, the thing that we say is, 'What we need, is a damn good fire.'"

Recruitment in small communities

Participants thought it was more difficult to recruit new members in small, remote communities due to the sheer scarcity of people. "It's very hard when you've only got a population of 200 in outlying areas, and all the people are involved in the football, the church, the cricket, the school, and the hall committees; they're in the fire brigade, everyone becomes one committee."

In contrast, participants thought that in relatively populated areas, brigades had a bigger base to draw on if they needed to recruit more members.

Smaller communities have more stable population better retention

Participants noted that populations in rural areas, while small, were more stable than in urban areas. They felt that in such communities recruitment was more difficult but retention less so. They felt that the main thing that kept volunteers in brigades in small communities was individuals' sense of commitment to the community.

Rural communities can grow if subdivision is permitted

Participants noted that in rural areas where municipal planning schemes allow subdivision, there is an inflow of new and younger residents into those areas. However, participants said

it was hard to attract new residents to join local fire brigades. ‘The trouble is, those people who are moving in have got absolutely no idea of volunteer fire brigades or anything like that. You know, “If something catches fire we dial triple 0 and a big red truck arrives.”’ Another participant reported, “Our area’s actually growing in numbers, but you don’t see them... you know they’re there, but we’ve got no mechanism in our community of putting the fire brigade in front of them unless there’s an incident or something.”

New equipment or facilities can attract new recruits

Some participants hoped new facilities or equipment might attract new members; “I’ve seen it happen [in another brigade]...they got one new appliance, and it went from a 1960-something Inter, to a new Cantor, and they picked up 3 or 4 new members straight away – just something new, and I just wonder whether what’s happened in Victoria [the February 7th, 2009 fires] will encourage more volunteerism - with people wanting to have a sense of belonging and getting involved.”

Other incentives for recruitment and retention

Some participants thought that incentives such as exemptions from the fire levy or rates or taxes would help to retain volunteers longer, and that this is likely to become a more important issue in the future.

Bibliography

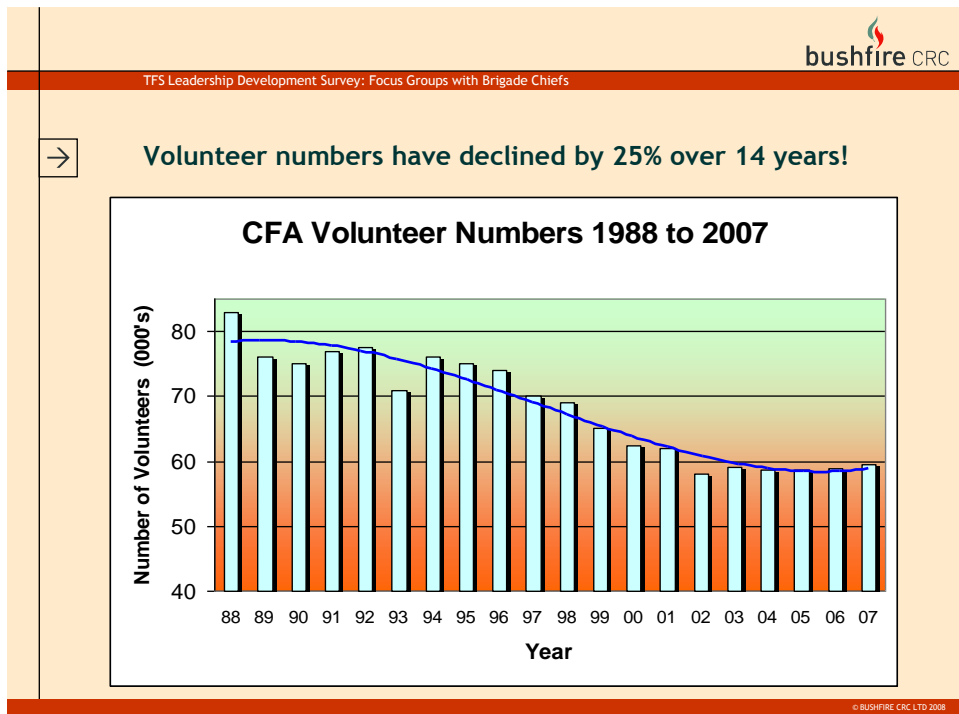
- Beatson, R., Birch, A. & McLennan, J., (2008). *Main Report: Survey of CFS New Volunteers*. Bushfire CRC, La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- Beatson, R., Birch, A. & McLennan, J., (2009). *Tasmanian Fire Service Report 1:2009, Preliminary Report: Volunteer Leadership Development Survey*. Bushfire CRC, La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- Birch, A., McLennan, J., Beatson, R., & Kelley, L., (2008). *Main Report, NSW RFS Volunteer Survey 2007*. Bushfire CRC, La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- Bryman, A. (2004). *Social Research Methods* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- McLennan, J., (2008), *Tasmania Fire Service Report Number 2008: 1, TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project Report #1 -Interviews with senior staff; focus groups with volunteers*, Bushfire CRC, La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- McLennan, J. & Birch, A. (2005). A potential crisis in wildfire emergency response capability? Australia's volunteer firefighters, *Environmental Hazards*, 6(2) 103.
- McLennan, J. & Birch, A. (2008), *Resignations by CFS Volunteers*, Bushfire CRC, La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- McLennan, J., Birch, A., Cowlshaw, S., & Hayes, P., (2008). *Maintaining volunteer firefighter numbers: Adding value to the retention coin*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Appendix A – Introductory PowerPoint slides

The following eight PowerPoint slides were presented to participants at each focus group session to introduce the significance of leadership quality in addressing recruitment and retention problems.

The slide features a background image of a bushfire with smoke and fire. In the top right corner, the 'bushfire CRC' logo is visible. Below the image, a red banner contains the text 'PROGRAM D3: Enhancing the recruitment and retention of volunteer fire fighters'. The main content area is light orange and contains a right-pointing arrow icon, the title 'TFS Leadership Development Project: Focus Groups with Brigade Chiefs', the name 'Adrian Birch' in red, his affiliation 'Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project, La Trobe University, Melbourne' in green, the heading 'Acknowledgements' in red, and the names 'Robyn Pearce, Lucas van Rijswijk, Tasmanian Fire Service' in green. At the bottom, there is a red banner with the copyright notice '© BUSHFIRE CRC LTD 2008', and a white footer area with the logos for 'CRC' and 'LA TROBE UNIVERSITY'.

During the introductory slide, a senior TFS manager welcomed the participants, thanked them for their participation and introduced the facilitator. The facilitator explained the purpose of the focus group sessions, and their role as part of the Volunteer Leadership Development Project. It was explained to participants that no identifiable information about them would be included in our report back to TFS, and that they could withdraw from the focus group at any time.




It was explained to participants that membership statistics reported by Australia's volunteer-based fire agencies suggested a trend of declining volunteer numbers and that the rationale behind the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project was to research ways of ensuring that adequate numbers of volunteers were maintained in the future. The above graph was displayed and it was explained that CFA data (McLennan and Birch 2005, and A. Martin, personal communication, July 28, 2008) were used rather than TFS data because they provided the longest and most reliable time-series available and were consistent with trends in similar countries like the US. However, it was noted that that these data were somewhat erratic in the first few years, suggesting some inaccuracy in record-keeping, and that part of the apparent decline might be explained by work to clean-out records of volunteers who had left some time ago. It was pointed out that during the past 5 years, the accuracy of record keeping seemed to have improved and that membership numbers appeared to have stabilised or started to increase.

bushfire CRC

TFS Leadership Development Survey: Focus Groups with Brigade Chiefs

→ **This decline has caused concern!!**



© BUSHFIRE CRC LTD 2008

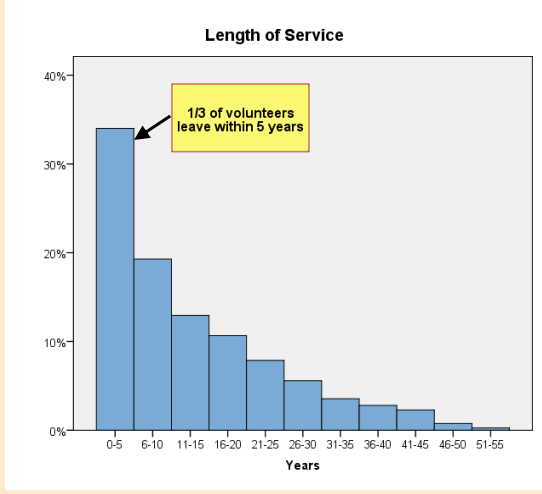
This slide was displayed briefly to inject some humour into the session.

bushfire CRC

TFS Leadership Development Survey: Focus Groups with Brigade Chiefs

→ **Turnover and retention**


Length of Service



Years	Percentage
0-5	34%
6-10	19%
11-15	13%
16-20	11%
21-25	8%
26-30	6%
31-35	4%
36-40	3%
41-45	2%
46-50	1%
51-55	0.5%

© BUSHFIRE CRC LTD 2008

It was explained that about one third of recruits leave the fire service within 5 years, and that overall numbers could be significantly improved by extending the average length of service of volunteers. Data from a survey of NSW RFS volunteers (Birch, McLennan, Beatson & Kelley 2008).




TFS Leadership Development Survey: Focus Groups with Brigade Chiefs

→ **Why do volunteers resign?**
(South Australian CFS Exit Survey)

1. Competing commitments of work or family (51%)
2. Moved out of the brigade area (38%)
3. Age and poor health (28%)
4. Dissatisfaction with the volunteering experience (25%)

© BUSHFIRE CRC LTD 2008

Selected results from the report (McLennan and Birch 2008) of an Exit Survey conducted with former Country Fire Service volunteers in South Australia were used to indicate that, while the main reasons volunteers resigned were outside anyone's control, a significant number left due to dissatisfaction with some aspect of fire service volunteering.



TFS Leadership Development Survey: Focus Groups with Brigade Chiefs

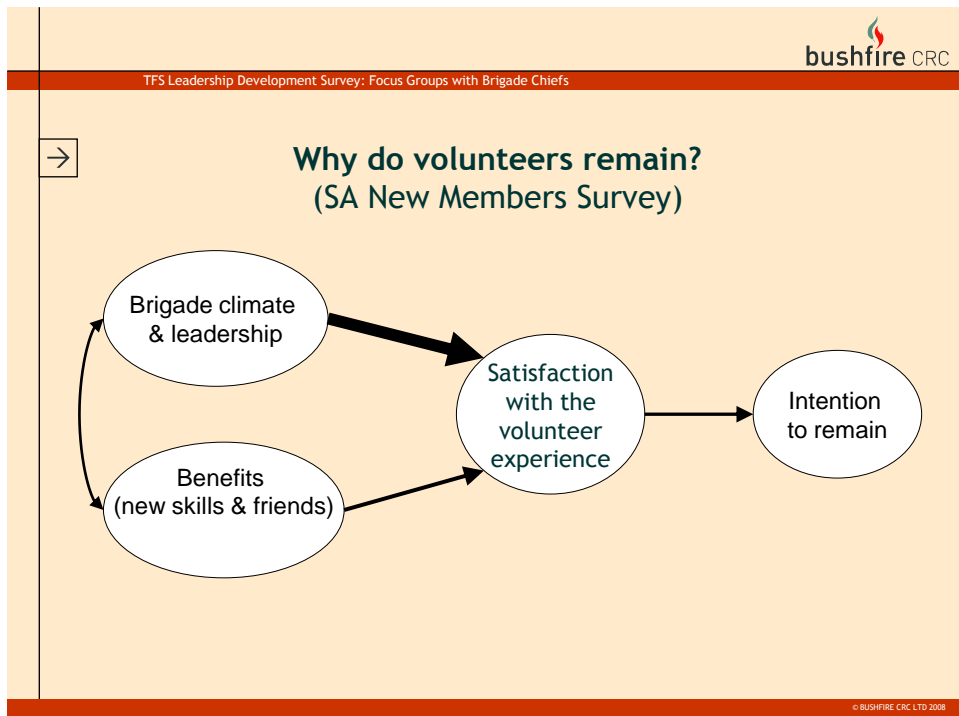
→ **What do volunteers enjoy least?**
(SA Exit Survey)

Free text comments:

1. Dissatisfaction with the volunteering experience (34%)
2. Time demands of volunteering (22%)
3. The nature of volunteer work (14%)
4. Bureaucracy, red tape, rules & forms to fill (12%)

© BUSHFIRE CRC LTD 2008

It was noted that the most common reason for leaving, given in free text comments to the survey, was dissatisfaction with the volunteering experience.



This slide illustrates the results of a Factor Analysis of data from a survey of new recruits in CFS 6-12 months after joining (McLennan, Birch, Cowlshaw & Hayes, under review). The Factor Analysis shows that the respondents who reported higher levels of satisfaction with their volunteering experience reported intending to remain longer with CFS. It further illustrates that the respondents who reported higher satisfaction tended to be those who reported a positive brigade climate and good brigade leadership, and to a lesser extent indirect benefits such as learning new skills and meeting new friends.



What can be done!

The research supports:

1. Training staff in volunteer management; and
2. Improving leadership training for volunteers



© BUSHFIRE CRC LTD 2008

The introduction concluded that the best available means of maintaining volunteer numbers was to increase the average length of service of volunteers, and that this could best be achieved by improving the climate in brigades through improved leadership and management.

The purpose of the focus groups with brigade chiefs was to gain their perspective on what constituted good leadership in brigades.

Appendix B – PowerPoint slides shown *during* focus group

The following eleven PowerPoint slides outline findings from the Volunteer Leadership Survey. The slides are self-explanatory, but for more detail, the reader may refer to the report of that survey (Beatson, Birch & McLennan 2009). These slides were presented progressively during the focus group session to prompt participants in broad topic areas concerning brigade leadership.

The image shows a PowerPoint slide with a light orange background and a dark orange header and footer. The header contains the text 'TFS Leadership Development Survey: Focus Groups with Brigade Chiefs' and the 'bushfire CRC' logo. The main content area features a title, a list of statistics, and a footer with a copyright notice.

**TFS Leadership Development Survey:
Conducted during summer 08-09**

- Mailed out to all TFS volunteers -
923 out of over 4,000 responded (approx. 20%)
- 83% male & 17% female
- Median age of 49 years
- Median length of service 12 years
- 90% born in Australia
- 81% employed
- Regions proportionally represented in sample

© BUSHFIRE CRC LTD 2008



What is it like being in your brigade?

Most were positive about their brigade experiences:

- Few reported experiencing bullying, harassment or discrimination
- General agreement that the atmosphere in the brigade was positive and new members were welcomed
- About half thought there were problems with politics and factions in their brigade
- About one third thought training was well planned or well organized.



What is the leadership like in your brigade?

Most respondents thought brigade leaders were technically competent and safety conscious, but fewer respondents thought their leaders had good interpersonal communication skills or were able to deal effectively with difficult members.

Respondents were evenly divided as to whether their brigade elected a new brigade chief after two or three terms. Respondents who reported that their brigade chief rarely changed tended to be less satisfied with leadership quality.



How important are these leadership skills?

Skills promoting teamwork, helping new members mix with others, and keeping members informed were rated highest.

Fewer respondents thought that disciplining members, managing discontent and factionalism, and holding members accountable for their actions were important skills.



How important are these brigade leader behaviours?

The highest rated behaviours were: being honest, trustworthy, fair, and setting a good example.

The mid-ranked behaviours were: keeping skills and knowledge up to date, listening to people's concerns, keeping a sense of humour and balancing the demands on members of brigade versus work and family.

The lowest ranked behaviours were: promoting the interests of the brigade to TFS and other outside organizations, and developing a vision for the brigade.



How important are training courses in these leadership skills?

Percent of respondents rating each course as “very important”:

- People management skills (70%)
- Face to face communications (68%)
- Managing brigades (67%)
- Inducting and mentoring new members (65%)
- Developing teams (65%)
- Resolving conflicts and disputes (63%)
- Ensuring workplace fairness (63%)
- Supervising work groups (57%)
- Running meetings (43%)



What are good ways to become a brigade leader?

- Mentoring slightly preferred over formal training;
- Training by external experts on leadership was favoured over internal training;
- Residential training away from the brigade was least favoured.



Relating satisfaction with brigade leadership to intention to remain

Most respondents thought the leadership in their brigade was “very good”, and were satisfied with their brigade experience.

82% of respondents expected to still be TFS volunteers in 12 months, but 66% thought they would still be with TFS in 3 years time.

Respondents who were more satisfied with leadership and the volunteering experience, were more likely to anticipate being with TFS in 3 years.



Factors limiting involvement in TFS

- The perceived bureaucratic nature of TFS (24%)
- Competing work commitments (22%)



What would make TFS volunteering easier?

- Mentoring programs (70%)
- One on one mentoring of new recruits (60%)
- Ability to catch up with training or assessment sessions at nearby brigades (50%)
- If employers were more understanding of TFS volunteering (40%)



Do you have any questions about the focus group process?

