



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

Tasmania Fire Service Report Number 2008: 1

**TFS Volunteer Leadership  
Development Project Report #1  
-Interviews with senior staff; focus groups  
with volunteers**

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September 2008**

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## Executive Summary

- Senior staff in Tasmania Fire service identified a need to enhance retention of volunteers by improving the overall quality of leadership in volunteer brigades. A TFS Volunteer Leadership Development research project was developed in collaboration with the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Volunteerism Project team at La Trobe University.
- This Report describes findings from the first two components of the Volunteer Leadership Development Project: interviews with 12 senior TFS staff; and four focus groups with volunteers (23 participants, from 15 brigades).
- There was a high level of agreement between the two sets of findings concerning what constitutes: effective brigade leadership; less effective brigade leadership; key leadership skills; and leadership training needs.
- Overall, there appear to be three pathways to improving the quality of volunteer brigade leadership:
  1. Provide more extensive, more effective, and more flexibly-delivered training to volunteers in how to lead and manage volunteers.
  2. Develop and implement more effective systems of brigade governance and management.
  3. Train and enable District Officers and Field Officers to more effectively: (a) model good leadership behaviour; (b) instruct volunteers in effective leadership, and (c) support brigade leaders.

# TFS Volunteer Leadership Development

## Background.

Annual resignation rates for Australian volunteer-based fire agencies are about 6-10% of total volunteer firefighter memberships (excluding ACT RFS and NT Fire). Three recent studies have investigated issues potentially relating volunteer resignations to issues of leadership (McLennan, Birch, Cowlshaw, & Hayes, 2008\*).

1. On 396 exit survey returns from former volunteers, reasons given for resigning were: Work/Family needs, 51%; Moved from the area, 38%; Age/Health issues, 28%; Dissatisfaction with the volunteer role, 25%. A major contributor to Dissatisfaction was poor brigade leadership.
2. A survey of 514 new volunteers found that higher levels of Volunteer Satisfaction, and thus reported Intention to Remain, were associated strongly with being a member of a well-led, inclusive, and harmonious brigade.
3. A survey of 1,589 volunteers found that about one third reported negatively on aspects of volunteer/paid staff relationships: lack of consultation; lack of respect; unfairness, unhelpful interactions.

Overall, the findings suggest: (i) the importance of leadership as a factor to be addressed in order to minimise volunteer firefighter resignations; and (ii) a need for agencies to review how they approach issues of leadership, especially leadership training, in relation to their volunteers.

Concerns have been expressed about likely future negative impacts on emergency services volunteer numbers in Tasmania resulting from (a) changes in the State's economy, and (b) Tasmania's ageing population. One way TFS can counter these possible effects is to reduce the rate at which volunteers leave TFS—that is, boost retention. Some resignations are inevitable: those due to illness and disability, changed family responsibilities, and re-location due to work commitments. Some other resignations may be avoidable where brigade morale is high and member commitment is strong. The TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project was developed in order to enhance brigade climate and member commitment by improving the overall effectiveness of leadership in TFS brigades. A copy of the Project Description is at Appendix A.

*[brigade climate = 'what it is like for me to be a member of this brigade']*

This Report describes findings from the first two studies aimed at informing TFS staff and volunteers about current issues associated with volunteer brigade climate and leadership based on:

- (a) Interviews with senior TFS staff; and
- (b) Focus groups with volunteers.

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\* McLennan, J., Birch, A., Cowlshaw, S., & Hayes, P. (2008). I quit! Leadership and satisfaction with the volunteer role: Resignations and organizational responses. *Proceedings of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Australian Psychological Society*, Hobart.

# TFS Volunteer Leadership Development – Part 1

## Interviews With Senior Staff

### Background

As the first part of the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project, interviews were conducted with:

- The CEO
- The Deputy CEO
- Three Regional Chiefs
- A Deputy Regional Chief
- Six District Officers.

The interviews were conducted over the period 7 – 9 August 2007. Two interviews were conducted by video link. The remainder were conducted in rooms in the Hobart HQ complex. Three structured interview guides were prepared (CEO/Deputy CEO; Regional Chief/Deputy; District Officer), copies are at Appendices B, C, and D, respectively. Copies of the interview guides were sent to participants several days before the interviews in order to provide an opportunity for reflection prior to being interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded, and subsequently summarised.

Findings from the 12 interviews have been reported below in two Sections: I—interviews with the CEO, Deputy CEO, Regional Chiefs, and Deputy Regional Chief; and II—interviews with District Officers. The findings have been organised following the topic headings listed in the interview guides. As agreed with participants, no information linking individuals to responses has been reported.

## Section I. Interviews with CEO, Deputy CEO, Regional Chiefs, Deputy Regional Chiefs.

### **A. Important factors impacting on TFS over the next five years.**

- Informed by the media, the public will become increasingly sophisticated, TFS will be subject to more frequent and diverse pressures from communities and interest groups; the expectations of TFS for protection of life, property and the environment will continue to rise.
- Issues of employment are going to become more problematic for many volunteers.
- Baby boomers will be retiring and many will move to traditional resort locations.
- Budgets are likely to decline in real terms as other needs, like health and aged care, are given higher priority by government.
- There will be increased pressures for TFS to take on greater road rescue and first-responder medical emergency responsibilities.
- The environmental lobby will make risk reduction more difficult.

- There will be problems in some rural areas as farms are amalgamated by companies and the workforce shrinks, but risks will remain or even increase as pastures get converted to plantations.
- The risk-profiles of each of the Regions will become more diverse with population movements, growth in tourism, and changes in land use—including conversion of pastures to tree plantations.

### **B. Important factors likely to impact on TFS volunteer numbers over the next five years.**

- There will be increasing competition among the many Tasmanian volunteer organisations for the limited pool of volunteers. In the past, TFS has been well ahead of such rivals, but other volunteer organisations have learned from TFS and are getting better.
- TFS will have to concentrate more on community safety, but most potential volunteers will be interested in operational fire fighting.
- There are too many small brigades in the wrong places. These brigades do not have enough to do to keep volunteers interested and they drift away.
- More and more of our volunteer membership will run into age and fitness problems, especially in smaller rural communities.
- Difficulty in engaging younger people, the under 30s.
- The decline in remote communities with the loss of social capital.

### **C. Observations on how volunteer brigades function generally.**

- In each of the three Regions, probably 25% to 30% of brigades are struggling to stay active and viable.
- Volunteers overall have to manage increasing competing demands from their work and their families. Small numbers of very committed volunteers in brigades keep the majority of brigades doing a good job in spite of these pressures.
- There is a need to distinguish between brigades near large population centres, and smaller local community brigades. The members in the larger brigades like uniforms, badges, they love training, they like getting qualifications, they like going away on campaign fires. The small local community brigades just want to protect their local property and not be bothered by City Hall.
- Career staff/volunteer relations are an ongoing problem. This is especially severe with composite brigades. There are also problems where you have adjacent brigades and one has Retained firefighters and the other is all-volunteer and they turn out to the same incidents.
- In too many brigades there is executive management by the officers, with little debate or discussion involving the membership.

### **D. Wish list of changes to how volunteer brigades are organised and operate, obstacles to changes.**

- There is a need to implement a more strategic approach to best use of our limited resources. Historically, the Service was 100% reactive: every community needed a fire brigade. Since the 1967 fires the number of brigades has dropped by about 15%. It is probably better overall if this process of small, unviable brigades amalgamating

with adjacent larger brigades continues on an evolutionary basis. But this does present problems because of local community territoriality.

- We need to scale back on training demands on volunteers, use common sense, train only to the level of need associated with community risk.
- A good case can be made for establishing city-based reserves to help out in campaign fires to ease the load on local volunteers.
- We need to increase the number of women in brigades, especially as Active members.
- I would really like more volunteers to be more confident in their dealings with career staff, especially at incidents.
- I would like career staff to have much more to do with volunteer brigades so they understood what volunteers do and their issues better than most do at present.
- How can we convince new young volunteers that they are not '10 feet tall and bullet-proof'?
- Strengthen and improve our Junior program.
- Boost the level of administrative support from Districts to brigades to ease the administrative burden on chiefs and secretaries.
- More DOs and FOs so the number of brigades they have to supervise is reduced.
- More robust management systems in brigades so they can cope better when key people suddenly having to leave and move.
- More brigades with more women Active members. All-male brigades are much more likely to be problematic.

**E. What are the most important people management and leadership skills you believe to be most important in volunteer brigades?**

- A good brigade is one that doesn't cause grief for the District Office. A good leader, mostly, does not have any difficulties recruiting new volunteers.
- The core of good volunteer brigade leadership is the same as good leadership anywhere: commitment to the job, and credibility to the members.
- Charismatic local icons do not necessarily make good brigade leaders, but the election system means that they sometimes become brigade chiefs. Then there are likely to be problems.
- When a brigade is at risk of falling-over, the leader really needs to encourage, persuade, and emphasise the importance of working together as a team.
- There is a lot to be done in getting it accepted that a brigade, like any workplace, has to be fair in how it operates, acceptance of diversity continues to be a problem, especially in rural brigades.
- Willingness to delegate, promote teamwork.
- Really good brigade chiefs engage the membership, delegate, resolve conflicts, advocate for their brigade by keeping in touch with the Region, AND they have a strategic way of thinking about how to position their brigade in the community.
- Listening skills—many people who want to become chief want to use their telling skills.
- Being able to coach members in lifting their game.

**F. What important volunteer brigade leadership skills do you believe are most lacking?**

- What is most lacking is leadership training courses that are action-oriented: what and how to do it, how to recognise and address problems in a brigade.

- Containing discontent and factionalism, especially in larger brigades—I know of one brigade where there were three coups in a year! And each outgoing Brigade Chief undercut the incoming Chief.
- People management generally, but especially conflict management and resolution.
- Keeping the need for leadership succession planning in mind.
- Being able to establish realistic goals for the brigade.

**G. How might TFS career staff in Regions contribute more effectively to volunteer brigade leadership and management?**

- The District Officer is really the interface between TFS and the volunteer.
- We need to move more here. It is easier to teach technical stuff about firefighting and the like, so this is what we concentrate on. This has resulted in us under-dosing our District career staff in **their** training in volunteer supervision, management, and leadership. The result is that they are patchy in modelling the interpersonal skills needed for effective leadership. We need to first ‘train the leadership trainers’ in leadership.
- There is an unfortunate perception by political leaders that volunteers are cost-free.
- There is a need for more support staff in District Offices to free-up time so DOs and Field Officers can get out to brigades more. Fire Management Plans are particularly time consuming.
- The challenge for District staff is getting the right balance between supporting brigades and brigade leaders, and being seen as interfering in the running of the local brigade.
- We need to get better at our District staff identifying leadership talent in their volunteers and cultivating it.
- District staff can play a key role in establishing better relations between brigades and local land management agencies.

## Section II. Interviews with District Officers

**What developments over the course of the next 5 years or so are likely to have major impacts on TFS in this Region and how it meets its community protection and safety responsibilities?**

- Longer and more severe fire seasons in the east.
- More rigorous OH & S driven training requirements.
- Demands for more extensive fuel reduction burns.
- Changes in land use—especially conversion of dairy farms to tree plantations.
- Population growth in communities surrounded by coastal scrub as retirees leave the city and move to what have traditionally been coastal resort towns.
- More development on urban-rural interfaces.
- New urban fringe communities being dormitory suburbs, with nobody available for weekday responding.
- Population growth due to increased mining activity.
- Growth in size of tourist resorts.
- Build up of fuel in parks and forests as land management agency resources are cut back.



**What are the most important factors likely to impact on TFS volunteer numbers in the District over the next 5 years or so?**

- A general disengagement of young people (<30 years) from serious volunteering.
- Greater training burdens forced on volunteers.
- Reluctance of employers to release volunteers from work to attend incidents. Made worse by economic uncertainties for Tasmania.
- The ageing population outside the big cities.

**What are your observations on how volunteer TFS brigades in the District function generally?**

- Need to distinguish the larger brigades from small traditional rural community brigades. The larger brigades are mostly fine, some have waiting lists. People volunteer because they want an interest outside their work. Members like to train and go away on campaign fires. Traditional rural brigade volunteers mostly don't want to give time to training and they don't want to travel to incidents away from the area.
- Most brigades have about 10-15 active members, a few have over 30. The ones with only about 5-6 members struggle.

**Can you think of a volunteer Brigade in the District which is particularly well led and well managed?-- What are the features of this brigade that made you choose it as an example of a well-led brigade?—What is about the brigade leadership that makes the brigade an effective unit?**

- The brigade functions as a team. There is a lot of delegation of responsibility, all the way down the line. The personality of the chief is important. He behaves just the way a CEO of a small business should. Keeps his finger on the pulse, talks to members, keeps them informed, talks to staff at District and Region, knows members' strengths and weaknesses. He makes sure members are involved.
- There is excellent communication within the brigade, information flows freely to all. Tasks are spread around the membership, but it is always clear who is responsible for what. There are disagreements to resolve, but people seem to always respect others. Most of the good brigade leaders are leaders in their jobs, so they bring this experience to their brigade leadership. They like people, and they like to listen.
- It is close-knit, but members are approachable and new volunteers are welcomed. There is an active social program involving families of members. The leadership is in no way authoritarian. The members are active in other community roles.
- It is a middle-sized brigade, about 15 active members. The officers are very experienced. It is a very well-disciplined brigade. You know there will never be any problems at fires.
- The chief is very highly respected because he knows his job. Equipment is well maintained. The chief is a strong advocate for the brigade, but has no problems with TFS Regional and District staff.
- It is a very democratic brigade. Members meet frequently to make decisions (about equipment and training mostly). Things are voted on, everyone has their say, but at the end of the day a decision is made one way or the other.

**Can you think of a volunteer Brigade in the District that you wish was better led and managed than it is currently? What are the features of this brigade that made you choose it as an example of a poorly-led brigade?—What is it about the brigade leadership that makes the brigade less effective than you would like?**

- There are problems with composite brigades. There can be an adversarial stance between career firefighters and volunteers.
- Characterised by selfishness about leadership—“I want to be the brigade chief”! The officers are defensive toward the members, pull rank when challenged rather than discuss issues. It seems that training centres on how to obey the rules. There is a lack of empathy or respect toward the rank and file members.
- Poorly led, a one man band. There is no delegation, just a rigid hierarchy. The chief has been the chief since forever. He is in his 70s. He is authoritarian, not approachable, not interested in new members, nor in new ideas, nor in new technologies and new approaches to firefighting. He is the one with all this experience, he knows.
- No one is really interested in training, a lot of the members are shift workers, the officers are reluctant to organise training. So they are not confident, and really not able to do a great deal.
- The brigade was effectively hijacked. The new chief doesn't want to actually do anything, doesn't want to actually lead the brigade, it has become more or less just a drinking club
- It is a “dead” brigade, effectively. The chief hoards information and does not pass it on to the membership. There is no training plan. The members hardly ever meet. There is nothing on the brigade notice board, there are no manuals or handbooks at the station. The chief and the officers actually insulate the brigade members from TFS

**Anything else you can say about differences between effective and less effective volunteer brigade leadership and management, as you have observed these?**

- The good leaders advocate for their brigades. They ensure that equipment and facilities are up to scratch
- It is generally true that you have the best leadership in the bigger brigades. There is more talent to choose from, and the standards are set higher

**What are the kinds of people management and leadership skills you believe are most important for those in volunteer brigade leadership positions?**

- I think being able to resist falling back into an adversarial stance when things are not going the way you would like in the brigade.
- Most officers tend to focus on brigade tasks. They fail to appreciate the importance of communication, keeping the membership informed about what is happening. Task knowledge is simply a prerequisite, you have to have it to be a good officer. But then you need people skills to make the whole thing work. You need to be able to spot conflict early and resolve it.

- Being able to be fair in how you treat the members. You need to be comfortable with people, comfortable in interacting with the members. You need to listen. It is important to appreciate that volunteers have jobs and families, it is important to try to include families in brigade activities. You also need to be able problem solve, especially when members are at odds with each other.
- Being able to communicate with your members and relate comfortably to them. It helps if you appreciate that you have to keep learning yourself about how to be a good officer, especially how to delegate and how to make people accountable.
- The challenge is in striking a balance between necessary discipline and having fun. Being approachable is important.
- I think that good brigade leaders are kind of born. I mean they acquire their leadership skills along the way through their work experiences and they then bring these with them into the job as chief.

**What are important brigade leadership skills which you believe are most likely to be lacking?**

- Delegating tasks.
- Managing your time so you are able to lead the brigade effectively.
- Keeping the focus on how well the brigade is going, not focussing on yourself as the chief.
- Trying to maintain interest of your members in training.

**How might TFS career staff in Regions contribute more effectively to improving brigade management and leadership?**

- Making sure that brigades are aware of the training opportunities that are available and encouraging members to come forward to undertake these training courses. That's all we can do.
- Our main problem is lack of time to actually get out there to brigades, to give them support without seeming as if we want to take over.
- Explain what training courses are about and the importance of training and encourage volunteers to take advantage of the courses that are available.
- It is important to keep tabs on how brigades are going, especially when they get a new chief. You may be able to give the new chief some support while he feels his way into the job.
- The more interaction you can have with brigades the better. The real problem is volunteers' time constraints, and constraints on our time.
- When a chief indicates that they may need some advice our assistance, you give it. I try to make myself as approachable as possible and encourage chiefs to keep in contact.
- I think that the Service needs to get cleverer at ways to deliver training so the volunteers can take part.
- The Lead Manage Develop training course is there for people to take.
- The Volunteer Association is a problem. Many of the delegates take a hostile stance toward TFS staff, them versus us. I am encouraging some of the better chiefs to seek office in the Association.

### **A concluding observation**

Perhaps one of the most interesting issues arising from the interviews with District Officers is the apparent great diversity among them in how they see their role in improving the quality of brigade leadership.

## TFS Volunteer Leadership Development – Part 2

### Focus Groups with Volunteers

#### Introduction

An Information Sheet was mailed by TFS Regional Staff to a selection of brigades located near to Launceston, and near to Cambridge (east Hobart). Brigades were invited to nominate up to two representatives to participate in focus group discussions concerning leadership in brigades. A copy of the Information Sheet is at Appendix D.

Four focus group meetings were held: two at the Launceston Regional Headquarters at Youngtown on Saturday, 28 June; and two at the TFS training complex at Cambridge on Sunday, 29 June. The times were 1100 – 12.30; and 13.30 – 1500. A light lunch was provided for all participants.

A copy of the Focus Group Guide is at Appendix E. There were 23 participants in all; groups ranged in size from 4 to 8, and 15 different Brigades were represented. All four sessions were audio-taped. The recordings were transcribed. Participants' transcribed contributions to all four were grouped according topics. The grouped statements were inspected for common themes, and the themes are summarised below. The findings are organised as follows:

There are seven Sections, corresponding to the major topics, in order, listed on the Focus Group Guide:

- A. Features of a good brigade
- B. Features of a poor brigade
- C. Characteristics of a good brigade leader
- D. Characteristics of a poor brigade leader
- E. Must-have brigade leadership skills
- F. Training in brigade leadership
- G. Career staff and brigade climate and leadership.

Within each Section, several themes are identified, based on groupings of participants' responses.

Within each theme, dot-pointed verbatim responses by participants describing the content of the theme are listed.

Note that all four focus groups generated discussion which was both lively and thoughtful. All groups made a point of wanting me to appreciate that while they offered some critical observations in response to my questions, they very much value being TFS volunteers.

Over lunch on both days, "morning group" participants expressed appreciation that TFS had organised such a program and provided an opportunity for them to express their views about brigade life and leadership to a neutral listener.

## **Volunteers' Views on Brigades and Brigade Leadership**

### **Section A: Features of a good brigade**

#### **Brigade values and orientation**

Members regard their brigade as part of Tasmania Fire Service.

Members are committed to the brigade:

- They come to training if at all possible.
- They make themselves available for turning out to incidents as much as possible.

The brigade governance is progressive:

- New ideas are considered on merit.
- The brigade is “not a drinking club dominated by males aged over 60”.
- Elections are fair, open, transparent, and honest.

The brigade is active: turns out when called to assist other brigades in other areas and districts.

The brigade is well-respected by the host community generally.

The DO values the brigade.

#### **Brigade Climate**

There is a good balance between discipline and acceptance; a good brigade is:

- Disciplined.
- Organised.
- Fair.
- Transparent in its decision making.
- Has a spirit of equality and egalitarianism.
- There is a sense of comradeship.
- Harmonious – difficult members are managed rather than excluded or ignored.
- Non-blaming.
- The probation period is taken seriously.
- Has a diversity of members: ages, backgrounds, “a good percentage of women”.
- Inclusive, open, welcoming of new members, supportive of members.
- There is a lot of friendly interaction among members at training and meetings.
- The membership is reasonably stable, low turnover.
- Has an organised social aspect, which includes families of members. During campaign fires families are kept informed of crews' whereabouts and experiences.

#### **Brigade Leadership**

- There is a turnover of brigade chiefs after two or three terms.
- Officers are experienced and capable.
- The officers are good communicators.
- Volunteers' time is valued.
- Unsafe behaviour is not tolerated.

### **Training is valued and well-organised**

- There is a planned training program which is reviewed regularly so as to meet the needs of the membership, the training needs of new volunteers is given high priority.
- Training sessions are well organised and run to time.
- You learn really useful and interesting things [stated by younger males and women participants].

### **Section B: Features of a poor brigade**

#### **Inward-looking, lacks a sense of mission to the wider community:**

- Don't train, don't care.
- Don't want pagers; only interested in protecting their own property and nearby, won't respond to out-of-area requests for assistance.
- Don't meet with, nor cooperate with, other brigades.
- Don't have anything to do with other agencies: SES, Ambulance, Police.
- Equipment is not well-maintained.

#### **Poor brigade climate:**

- Morale is low.
- There are cliques, they don't welcome newcomers, shut people out; make it really difficult for women to volunteer as Active members.
- Previous leader, who was doing a good job, left the brigade after a coup and now bad-mouths the brigade making it hard to attract new members.
- An old man's drinking club.
- Older, long-serving members do not follow discipline, safety is compromised on the fireground.

#### **Poorly led:**

- An autocratic, punitive, blaming approach to leadership, and/or:
- Favouritism toward some members at the expense of others, based on friendships rather than brigade needs or members' merits, or:
- Weak, ineffectual laissez faire approach where problems (involving the membership and/or equipment shortcomings) are ignored.

#### **Poorly managed:**

- There is no training plan.
- Training sessions and meetings are disorganised and result in members' time being wasted.
- Equipment is not maintained, nor replaced when necessary.
- Facilities are poor compared with other nearby brigades.

#### **The leadership group lacks integrity:**

- The officers are elitist, view themselves as superior to the rank and file members.
- The officers are power hungry.
- There are cliques, there are favourites who get nominated for training and are nominated to go interstate for campaign fires.

- The brigade is dominated by members from one family, who run the brigade as if it was a family possession.

## Section C: Characteristics of a good brigade leader

### **Models good leader behaviour**

- Regular attendance at brigade activities.
- Pull his/her weight rather than pulling rank.
- Intervenes on the fireground if members are not pulling their weight or acting in an unsafe manner.
- Plays it safe if there is a question about crew safety at a wildfire.
- Prepared to intervene if a conflict between members seems unlikely to resolve itself.
- Manages up: an advocate for the brigade at the District Office, maintains contact with Regional staff.

### **Creates a positive brigade climate:**

- Exercises common sense in making decisions affecting the members.
- Balances discipline and 'fun'.
- Delegates and distributes task and rewards across the membership, does not micromanage unnecessarily.
- Holds members accountable for their responsibilities.
- Develops leadership skills in others—especially the officers.
- Fair and impartial in dealings with members.
- Demonstrates respect for members—does not publicly humiliate members.
- Is non-blaming, gives useful and constructive feedback on sub standard performance.
- Is aware of members' strengths and weaknesses and takes these into account when assigning tasks and responsibilities.
- Keeps all the membership informed of what is happening, all correspondence is available for inspection by members.
- Listens to suggestions, gives them a fair hearing.

### **Knowledgeable and skilful**

- Knows TFS procedures, standards, and requirements and ensures that these are followed, educates members about these procedures.
- Leads meetings well, ensures that speakers stick to the point and that meetings run to time.
- Tackles the hard decisions and gives honest feedback.
- Makes time to develop own skills associated with brigade leadership.
- Is a good instructor and teacher.
- Is prepared to ask the DO for assistance in tricky brigade management situations.

## Section D: Characteristic of a poor brigade leader

### **Contributes to an aversive brigade climate:**

- Generates a climate of fear.
- Blames.
- Is critical.
- Fails to delegate.



- Fails to show respect for volunteers on the fireground: e.g., arrives later and takes over with no regard for the first-on-scene members and the procedures they have put in place.
- Publicly humiliates members at training or on the fireground.
- Is unfair, plays favourites, excludes some members from participation in brigade activities, including training opportunities.
- Information is hoarded, passed on only to the chosen few.
- Betrays confidences.

**Lacks essential knowledge and skills:**

- Lacks knowledge of TFS procedures and requirements.
- Lacks people management skills, especially how to resolve tensions between members.
- A poor communicator.
- Cannot manage role conflict involving being a brigade leader versus dealing with a member who is a friend or family.
- Fails to hold members accountable: e.g., continuing to support a Training Officer who fails to organise a proper brigade training program.
- Fails to take action when needed to prevent issues from blowing up into major problems.

**Section E: Must-have brigade leadership skills**

- Good one-on-one and small group communication.
- Time-management: own, members, meetings.
- Resolving conflicts between individual members, and between factions.
- Good technical understanding of firefighting and related emergency response.
- Good knowledge of TFS procedures, especially those relating to discipline, finances, and safety.

**Section F: Training in brigade leadership**

- The need for training in leadership is not sufficiently appreciated by TFS.
- There is a totally false belief in TFS generally that good technical knowledge and firefighting skills translate automatically into good people skills.
- People management skills are undervalued and not assessed rigorously enough—RPL credit is too generous.
- Delivery of training is not sufficiently flexible to accommodate the demands of volunteers' jobs and families.
- Volunteers are seen by Regional Training as if they are career staff; that is, when a course is offered the assumption is that the volunteers will automatically be available on that day and at that time.
- Need for self-discipline to be emphasised as a leadership skill: especially being able to hold back when you know to do the task better, but you need to let the member do his or her best and only step in where this clearly necessary.
- TFS does not really provide resources to help volunteers become leaders.
- There is no specific training available to help volunteers become effective officers.

- The Lead Develop Manage Teams training course is mostly ineffective: it is theory and of no help in developing confidence in how to actually lead, manage, and develop teams.
- LMD was flavour of the month two or three years ago, now it seems to have disappeared—does it still exist? Never seems to be offered.
- The whole system by means of which brigade members actually get accepted in training courses needs to be looked at, it is not transparent. It is a mystery how people get selected or rejected at Regional Training level.
- The whole training system seems incredibly cumbersome, slow, and unwieldy. Courses are offered, you apply, some four or five months later you find out if you've been accepted or not, and by that time, with two or three weeks to go before the course, your whole work schedule may have changed, you find that you're going to be interstate when the course is on. There has to be a better way. Couldn't things be speeded up by using the internet, say?
- We find in our brigade that the Region's training records are always wrong—they don't accurately show what courses a volunteer has done. Even when we send the corrected information they still don't fix their records.

## Section G: Career staff and volunteer brigade climate and leadership

### **Career staff generally**

- Too many still behave disrespectfully to volunteers, behave as if they (career firefighters) are some kind of superior beings—but things are better than 10 years ago.
- Are ignorant of volunteers' knowledge, skills and experience, especially in relation to wildfires (as distinct from structure fires), but many are very knowledgeable about structure fires and are happy to pass this knowledge on to volunteers.
- When they go on strike, training programs go down the gurgler!
- When paid staff go on strike they give volunteers a bad name by association.
- Volunteers get left to do the crap clean up and monitoring jobs after TFS career staff, Parks, and Forestry go home.
- A Regional web site that was kept updated on who was doing what job would be a great help. At the moment, everybody seems to be acting, and you never who you are supposed to contact.

### **District Officers and Field Officers**

- Often do not intervene soon enough or actively enough when things are going wrong in one of their brigades.
- Few monitor and mentor/support new, inexperienced brigade chiefs.
- Often do not know or understand what volunteers do: the commitments they have to their volunteering, their job, their family.
- Often do not appreciate what gets up volunteers' nostrils.
- Sometimes withdraw from volunteers, preferring to engage with paid staff.
- Good if your DO is approachable, and really good when the FO visits the brigade during training and gives feedback and input.
- One DO we never saw him from when he arrived to when he left—he was just a bloke at the other end of the phone.

- DOs generally wait for an invitation by the brigade chief to get involved in a brigade conflict. Trouble is, a failed conflict lasts a long time, has an ongoing history of its own.
- Equipment is dear to the hearts of most volunteers. Many think that some brigades are favoured by the District Officer over other brigades.
- We get about 30 calls a year. We've been promised a new truck for years. It is petrol not diesel, only a few people can drive it (no synchro). Every new DO promises to do something but we still have to turn out in the old truck. It is embarrassing when members of the public can run up a hill faster than you can drive when responding to an incident!

### **Wider organisational issues**

- A lot, maybe two-thirds of our calls are to motor vehicle accidents. We lose volunteers because of this.
- MVAs are especially hard on new members.
- I don't think we do Critical Incident Stress debriefing well.
- A little while ago we had a firefighter killed. This was really hard. The Critical Incident Stress Management team did not act. After repeated calls from our chief and the group officer they got in touch after about 4-5 days.

### **A Concluding Observation**

The volunteers appear to have offered a reasonably well developed and coherent picture. They are quite clear about what works (what they need and what is desirable in a brigade leader) and what doesn't work (what they don't need and dislike in a leader). Their perspective is generally consistent with the general literature on managing folk – the volunteers who participated do not appear to be asking for anything unusual or particularly exotic in relation to brigade leadership.

### **Things to Keep in Mind**

- The findings were generated by 23 volunteers, from 15 brigades.
- The brigades were all located near to Launceston or Cambridge (east Hobart).
- No brigades from small, remote, rural communities were represented.

### **Implications**

Bearing in mind the limitations of the focus group study noted above, the findings suggest five areas potentially worthy of follow-up investigation:

1. A review of the current TFS training offerings aimed at developing competencies associated with improved leadership of volunteer brigades. The current training module Lead Manage Develop Teams was deemed to be ineffective and inadequate by seven of the eight participants who had undertaken the course.
2. A review of the current means by which members of volunteer brigades advance to leadership positions. There was near unanimous condemnation by participants of the present system of, largely unregulated, elections. Options suggested included: (a) requiring aspirants to complete a suitable course of training before being eligible for nomination; (b) a process whereby a District Officer could veto an appointment

deemed to be unsuitable; (c) lowering the present maximum time period between elections for brigade chief from five to three years (note that in CFA, elections must be held every two years); (d) mandating a minimum period of brigade membership before being eligible for nomination to stand for election to a position of leadership; (e) setting a limit on the number of consecutive terms an individual could serve as brigade chief (the special situation of small remote rural brigades was noted as possibly warranting an exemption from such a requirement).

3. A review of the job descriptions of Field Officers and District Officers. There was near unanimous agreement among participants that at present the roles did not give sufficient priority to working with brigades and brigade chiefs to raise the overall standards of brigade leadership.
4. A review of the training provided to Field Officers and District Officers in competencies associated with volunteer brigade supervision and support.
5. A study of career staff attitudes towards and beliefs about volunteers.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to:

- Robyn Pearce for championing the Project.
- Jacqueline Fisher for organising the interview program and the focus group meetings.
- Adrian Birch and Peter Hayes for improving the initial draft of the Report.
- The TFS senior staff and volunteers who contributed their time and effort to the Project.

## APPENDICES

- H. Tasmania Fire Service Volunteer Leadership Development Project-Stage 1 (Revised May 2007).
- I. Interviews With Senior Staff Guide (1): CEO/Deputy
- J. Interviews With Senior Staff Guide (2): Regional Chief/Deputy
- K. Interviews With Senior Staff Guide (3): DO
- L. Focus Group Interview Guide
- M. Focus Group Information For Participants
- N. Focus Group Participant Consent Form

## Appendix A

# Tasmania Fire Service Volunteer Leadership Development Project – Stage I (Revised May 2007)

### **Background:**

Concerns have been expressed about the likely future impacts on emergency services volunteer numbers of (a) changes in the Australian economy and (b) Australia's ageing population. One way TFS can counter these possible effects is to reduce the rate at which volunteers leave TFS—that is, boost retention. Some resignations are inevitable: those due to illness and disability, changed family responsibilities, and re-location due to work commitments. Some other resignations may be avoidable where brigade morale is high and member commitment is strong. The TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project aims to foster brigade morale and member commitment.

### **Stage I Aim:**

To find out what kinds of leadership skills and qualities in volunteers need to be actively developed and fostered within TFS.

### **Methodology:**

A collaborative research project involving TFS personnel and the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Volunteerism Project Team at La Trobe University (Melbourne) will be carried out. Stage I will involve six activities:

1. Interviews by Bushfire CRC staff with TFS Senior Management: Chief Officer, Deputy Chief Officer; Regional Chiefs.
2. Interviews with District Officers.
3. Discussion with, and input from, volunteer Association representatives.
4. Four focus groups (6-10 members) with volunteers to canvass the kinds of brigade leadership skills they believe are desirable.
5. Mail/web based survey of TFS volunteers.
6. Interviews with (a) 30 Brigade Chiefs selected by TFS/Association to cover a range of locations, sizes, and types of Brigades; and (b) regional meetings with groups of Brigade Chiefs.

*Interviews with Senior Management Staff (1 above).*

These are to identify the kinds of leadership skills among volunteer members which will be needed in the light of likely developments in the organisation in the future.

*Interviews with District Officers (2 above).*

These will have a more behavioural focus. That is, DOs will be asked to describe examples of the kinds of brigade leadership behaviours which they have observed which they believe exemplify both very effective leadership behaviours and less effective leadership behaviours.

*Discussion with, and input from, volunteer Association representatives (3 above).*

Jim McLennan attended a TFS Volunteer Consultative Council meeting in Launceston on 25 August 2005. The general idea of the Project was received positively and Association members indicated their desire to participate in the Project. It is proposed to hold at least one meeting with Association representatives to seek their views on developing volunteers' leadership skills and to invite submissions, possibly in the form of (anonymized) case studies of brigades characterised by both higher, and lower than desirable, levels of leadership skills.

*Focus groups with volunteers (4 above)*

Four focus groups will be conducted, each comprising between 6 and 8 volunteers. The focus groups will be conducted in different parts of the state, and members will be drawn from different brigades. The focus will be on the kinds of leadership skills that they believe are desirable for Brigade leaders and which they believe should be developed in volunteers who are likely to occupy roles involving leadership.

*Survey of the TFS Volunteer Membership (5 above)*

On the basis of the preceding activities, a brief (single A3 sheet, printed both sides and folded) survey questionnaire will be developed. The questionnaire will seek the views of volunteers on a range of issues involving developing leadership skills. There will be wide consultation and pre-testing during the development process. The survey will go to all TFS volunteers. Respondents will be asked to (anonymously) indicate their rank or position in the organisation and their brigade. This will allow an analysis of responses in such a way that the collective views of volunteers who currently hold leadership positions can be compared with the views of volunteers who do not hold leadership positions. Respondents will also be asked to indicate their length of service as volunteers in order to allow the views of new volunteers to be compared with those of longer-serving volunteers. A web-based version of the questionnaire will be available for volunteers who would prefer this method of responding, rather than a written questionnaire with a reply-paid envelope.

*Interviews with Brigade Chiefs (6 above)*

Following analysis of the survey data, it is expected that a number of conclusions about leadership development will emerge. It is proposed to interview 30 brigade Chiefs, selected to represent a range of types of Brigades, concerning their experiences and views about leadership skills. In the course of the interviews, their reactions to the major conclusions emerging from the survey will be sought. In addition, so that all Brigade Chiefs have an opportunity to contribute to the project, a

series of Regional meetings of groups of Brigade Chiefs will be conducted across the State.

### **Reporting**

The Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project Team will prepare a Report, with recommendations for TFS. This Report will be in the form of an "Exposure Draft". It will be circulated widely for comment. The TFS/Bushfire CRC Leadership Development Project Team will undertake presentations and questions-and-comments meetings at several locations across the State. Following these, a Final report will be prepared which incorporates feedback generated by the Exposure Draft and meetings.

### **Later Stages of the Project**

Following preparation of the Final report, Stage II will involve a Volunteer Leadership Development program being constructed, and implemented. In Stage III, this Leadership Development program will be evaluated. The Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project team will participate in these later Stages as required.

### **Timing**

It is proposed to begin the interview program in July 2007. The survey will be conducted in April/May 2008 (so as to avoid the 2007/2008 Tasmania fire season). The Exposure Draft will be prepared by end August 2008. Meetings will be conducted in November 2008 and the Final report presented by February 2009.

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14 May 2007



## **Appendix B**

### **TFS Volunteer Development Project Stage 1**

#### **Interviews With Senior Staff (1)**

From your perspective as TFS CEO/Deputy, what developments over the course of the next 5 years or so are likely to have major impacts on TFS and how it meets its community protection and safety responsibilities?

What are the most important factors likely to impact on TFS volunteer numbers over the next 5 years or so?

What are your observations on how TFS volunteer brigades function generally?

Do you have a “wish list” of changes you would like to see in how TFS volunteer brigades are organised and operated, generally?—If so, what are the main items on the list?---What are the main obstacles to these changes being implemented?

What are the kinds of people management and leadership skills you believe are most important for those in volunteer brigade leadership positions?

What are important volunteer brigade leadership skills which you believe are most likely to be lacking?

How might TFS career staff in Regions contribute more effectively to improving volunteer brigade management and leadership?

Anything else that you think I should take into account in identifying the kinds of volunteer brigade leadership and people management skills needed, and how these skills can be developed and promoted?

## **Appendix C**

### **TFS Volunteer Development Project Stage 1**

#### **Interviews With Senior Staff (2)**

From your perspective as Regional Chief/Deputy, what developments over the course of the next 5 years or so are likely to have major impacts on TFS in this Region and how it meets its community protection and safety responsibilities?

What are the most important factors likely to impact on TFS volunteer numbers in the Region over the next 5 years or so?

What are your observations on how volunteer TFS brigades in the Region function generally?

Do you have a “wish list” of changes you would like to see in how TFS volunteer brigades in the Region are organised and operated, generally?—If so, what are the main items on the list?---What are the main obstacles to these changes being implemented?

What are the kinds of people management and leadership skills you believe are most important for those in volunteer brigade leadership positions?

What are important volunteer brigade leadership skills which you believe are most likely to be lacking?

How might TFS career staff in Regions contribute more effectively to improving volunteer brigade management and leadership?

Anything else that you think I should take into account in identifying the kinds of volunteer brigade leadership and people management skills needed, and how these skills can be developed and promoted?

## Appendix D

### TFS Volunteer Development Project Stage 1

#### Interviews With Senior Staff (3)

From your perspective as DO, what developments over the course of the next 5 years or so are likely to have major impacts on TFS in this Region and how it meets its community protection and safety responsibilities?

What are the most important factors likely to impact on TFS volunteer numbers in the District over the next 5 years or so?

What are your observations on how volunteer TFS brigades in the District function generally?

Can you think of a volunteer Brigade in the District which is particularly well led and well managed?-- What are the features of this brigade that made you choose it as an example of a well-led brigade?—What is about the brigade leadership that makes the brigade an effective unit?

Can you think of a volunteer Brigade in the District that you wish was better led and managed than it is currently (I do **NOT** need you to name it!)? What are the features of this brigade that made you choose it as an example of a poorly-led brigade?—What is it about the brigade leadership that makes the brigade less effective than you would like?

Anything else you can say about differences between effective and less effective volunteer brigade leadership and management, as you have observed these?

What are the kinds of people management and leadership skills you believe are most important for those in volunteer brigade leadership positions?

What are important brigade leadership skills which you believe are most likely to be lacking?

How might TFS career staff in Regions contribute more effectively to improving brigade management and leadership?

Anything else that you think I should take into account in identifying the kinds of volunteer brigade leadership and people management skills needed, and how these skills can be developed and promoted?

## **Appendix E**

### **Focus Group Interview Guide**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Volunteerism Project.

Research findings on recruitment of new volunteer

Research findings on retention—reasons for resignations

- (a) Conflict between volunteering and the needs of work/family.
- (b) Left the area.
- (c) Age/disability/illness
- (d) Dissatisfaction with brigade

WHAT IS A GOOD BRIGADE LIKE?

WHAT IS A BAD BRIGADE LIKE?

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD BRIGADE LEADER?

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A BAD BRIGADE LEADER?

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT SKILLS NEEDED BY A GOOD BRIGADE LEADER?

HOW ARE THESE SKILL DEVELOPED BY TRAINING WITHIN TFS AT PRESENT?

IN WHAT WAYS CAN CAREER STAFF CONTRIBUTE TO GOOD BRIGADE LEADERSHIP?

## Appendix F

### **Joint TFS – Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Volunteer Leadership Development Project.**

#### **Focus Group Meetings: Saturday 28 June (Launceston) & 29 June (Hobart)**

##### *Information for participants.*

Recent surveys of fire service volunteers in several Australian agencies have shown that brigade leadership and management issues are very important influences on whether many volunteers stay, or resign.

Most of this information has come from exit surveys of former volunteers. The Volunteer Leadership Development Project aims to find out what TFS could do to assist volunteers who currently hold positions of leadership, and volunteers who may be interested in taking on leadership roles in future.

Before the last fire season, 13 senior TFS staff members were interviewed individually about how they saw volunteer leadership development needs.

Now we want to hear the experiences and views of volunteers. Obviously we cannot talk with every TFS volunteer, much as we would like to! So Jacqueline Fisher (Executive Officer, Volunteer Support) has organised four “focus” discussion groups (2 in Launceston, 2 in Hobart) so volunteers from surrounding brigades can provide input on how they see volunteer leadership issues. Lunch will be available to all from 12.30 to 1.30. Each focus group will last about 90 minutes.

Each focus (or guided discussion) group will involve about 8 volunteers. The “Guide” will be Jim McLennan, from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Volunteerism Project at La Trobe University in Melbourne. He will put a series of questions to the group about leadership issues and note volunteers’ views. To save time and ensure accuracy he will tape record the session. However, when he makes his report to TFS Management, this will **not** identify either the group nor any individual. Jim will be the only person who hears a tape or has access to it. The tapes will be kept secure at La Trobe University for 5 years and then destroyed as required by the relevant privacy provisions governing University research. On the day, you will be quite free to cease taking part and to leave the group at any time—there will be no “penalty” for deciding you do not want to continue.

In addition to the main report for TFS, Jim will prepare a shorter summary, which Jacqueline will arrange for you receive. Of course, any additional thoughts or comments about volunteer leadership you have following the summary would be welcomed by Jacqueline as further input to the Project.

If you have any questions or would like more information contact Jim McLennan at La Trobe University in Melbourne: email [j.mclennan@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:j.mclennan@latrobe.edu.au) or phone 0438 096 548.

**Appendix G**

**Joint TFS – Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Volunteer Leadership Development Project.**

**Focus Group Meetings: Saturday 28 June (Launceston) & 29 June (Hobart)**

**CONSENT TO TAKE PART**

I understand that I will be invited to participate, with other TFS volunteers, in a focus group discussion of issues to do with volunteer leadership development.

I understand that:

1. The discussion will be tape recorded.
2. The tape will be stored securely in the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre Office at La Trobe University.
3. No one but Jim McLennan will have access to the tape.
4. Jim McLennan will prepare a report for TFS management staff summarising findings from all four groups which will not identify any participant, nor will it identify any one of the four focus discussion groups. He will prepare a short summary of findings which participants can obtain from the TFS Human Resources Volunteer Unit when the discussions have been analysed—probably in September 2008. Aspects of the report to TFS may be presented at scientific conferences and in scientific papers, no individuals will be identified.

**5. I can cease participating and leave freely at any time.**

I have read the above and agree to participate.

PRINT NAME.....

SIGNATURE.....Date:.....

[This form will be kept secure in the Bushfire CRC Office at La Trobe University and will be destroyed, together with the tape of the session, in 2013].