

The Case for Diversity

Dalal Smiley
Manager Equity & Diversity Unit
Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board, Melbourne, Victoria
Tel: 03 9665 4415
E-mail: dsmiley@mfb.vic.gov.au

PRESENTER: Dalal Smiley

Introduction

This paper argues that addressing diversity in an emergency service must begin with building a case for it. Why is it important? What benefits does diversity add to the role, functions and outcomes of an emergency service organisation? Using the MFB as a case study the paper explores the various challenges that hamper the diversity objectives and the strategies the MFB is using towards achieving a more diverse organisation.

The Case for Diversity

Why should an emergency service pay attention to its diversity profile and diversity competence?

There are legal, moral, economic, altruistic and self-serving reasons which are considered by the MFB as important objectives to adopting diversity strategies.

Reflecting the community we serve

The MFB is a public service organisation that serves a highly diverse community. It needs to regularly examine and assess its practices to ensure that they are not directly or indirectly excluding certain people from joining it.

A workforce that is dominated by one gender and one cultural background may give an impression to the community that the dominant group is the one worthy enough to be part of the organisation. A closer examination of the reasons that lead to the lack of success in attracting diverse applicants in enough numbers to make an impact on the composition of the MFB workforce can be attributed to:

- ⇒ The way society allocates certain roles to be more suitable for men than women which lead to an extreme under-representation of female firefighters in the fire service and consequently to a lack of role models for young girls to look up to.
- ⇒ Majority of firefighters report that the reason they decided to become firefighters was because they personally knew a firefighter who encouraged them to become one. This usually means that some communities such as newly arrived migrants or refugees are automatically disadvantaged due to their lack of connection and links to firefighters at a personal level.
- ⇒ Any attempt to develop or implement programs designed to address the imbalance of diverse representation in the MFB is strongly resisted and branded as "favourable treatment" of minority groups. This reaction fails to recognise the privileged position that is already enjoyed by certain sections in the community who have access to in-house information, encouragement, opportunity and preparation that they draw from their personal contacts or networks.

Furthermore, any sector that is dominated by one gender tends to be lacking such as the teaching profession which is currently attempting a number of incentives to increase the number of male teachers.

The Moral Obligation

There is a clear moral duty to embrace a commitment to equality, fairness and a discrimination free environment, processes and practices. The MFB is driven by a strong culture of protecting, saving, and rescuing the community and such principles do not sit comfortably with an organisation that continues to look, sound and feel very different from the community it is dedicated to serve.

Community Cohesion, Trust and Confidence

The MFB has to be seen to be working fairly and efficiently for all members of the community to build community confidence and engender trust, particularly in socially disadvantaged communities. Programs that assist disadvantaged members in the community to equalise their opportunity for job selection at the MFB are legitimate and even necessary.

Economic Reality

Australia has an ageing workforce and an ageing population. The pool of available young people predicted to be in the labour market is increasingly diverse. The MFB will be competing with the best organisations to attract the best people.

Legislation

The MFB is bound by a number of legislative requirements which render it unlawful to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, language spoken, religion, etc. Discrimination cases are costly and damaging to the organisation's image and reputation. With the introduction in Victoria of the Charter on Human Rights and Responsibilities, there will be pressure on the MFB to demonstrate that its rules, regulations, policies and processes are not in breach of human rights standards. Furthermore, it is far better for the MFB to be pro-active in leading change than having government imposed targets to force change to happen.

What are the benefits of diversity to the MFB?

There is ample evidence on the benefits of a diverse workforce in many services sectors in Australia.

Creativity and Improved Productivity

Diverse staff bring different perspectives, experiences, styles of thought, learnings and skills, attributes and characteristics which contribute to the richness and creativity of working in teams.

Diversity amongst firefighters means that the various roles and functions of a firefighter are enhanced by drawing on a diverse crew where skills and abilities complement and support each other.

We know that each individual is unique and therefore diversity is bound to exist amongst a crew of firefighters even when the crew members might be of the same age group, gender and cultural background. However, the scope of the diversity amongst such a crew would be narrower than if their diversity extended to more characteristics such as gender, age, cultural and educational backgrounds. Studies conducted on teams, measured their productivity, creativity and problem solving skills and the more diverse a team was the higher it scored on each of the measures.

Complementary Skills

Firefighters themselves speak of situations where they recognise how valuable it was to have a combination of different skills and attributes available in one team. Physical diversity amongst firefighters means that some are more suitable than others to perform a particular operation (e.g. accessing small and confined spaces, can be done by shorter and lighter people for example). Personality diversity means that some are more naturally inclined to be extrovert and communicate more easily with people to allay their fears and anxieties in an emergency situation such as a fire evacuation or rescue operation or emergency medical response.

Others might be particularly technically focussed and would rather focus on that side of the task and let others take care of other aspects of the operation. Firefighters from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds will find that their bi-cultural and language skills could come handy in situations where they encounter people from their own communities. In times of heightened anxieties, people draw a lot of support and reassurance to find that their helpers are people like them and with whom they can easily communicate and that their cultural norms are understood and respected. This is not to mention the benefits that culturally and linguistically diverse firefighters bring to their own crew, as they share their perspective, life experience, upbringing, migration, settlement, and general information about their own culture, heritage and traditions.

Diversified role of a firefighter

The role of firefighters in contemporary society has evolved to incorporate additional responsibilities to fighting fires. Today's firefighters participate in rescue incidents, emergency medical responses, community education, fire prevention advice and investigations, and anti terrorism operations. Such roles benefit from having a pool of firefighters from different backgrounds and therefore more equipped to interact and respond to a diverse community.

Dispelling Myths

What would firefighters lose if they were part of a more diverse crew?

Some firefighters have indicated their apprehension with the idea of having increased diversity amongst their crew for fear of losing the lifestyle and camaraderie that they are accustomed to. Increased numbers of female firefighters for example is interpreted by some as the cause for implementing changes to the stations environment; (e.g. private bathrooms, sleeping quarters, etc.) Or for some it means having to adjust their language and/or behaviour in front of women. In reality the changes to the environment and behaviour are not necessarily a result of increased number of female firefighters but a recognition of the importance of accommodating diversity needs in general. Privacy is not a female exclusive need but also a requirement and preference for many men as well. Being mindful of how one's language and behaviour affects a work colleague or crew member is not a female imposed regulation but a workplace code of behaviour expected of all employees. It is about extending courtesy and respect to each other in the workplace.

The first female firefighters joined the MFB in 1988. Due to their low numbers and the newness of their presence, the benefits of having female firefighters in the fire service have not gained a high profile yet. Increased numbers of female firefighters would assist firefighters in general to gain confidence in the competence and abilities of female firefighters. This observation is based on feedback from firefighters who have witnessed female firefighters on their crew and have gained full confidence in their competence and capabilities.

Have the standards for selecting recruits dropped to allow more females to make it through?

Standards have not dropped but are now defined to reflect what a firefighter really does on the job. This is not a recent trend but a regular process of evaluating the recruitment requirements in line with changes to the firefighter's role and the introduction of new technologies.

Is a female firefighter able to carry me out of a fire?

- Firefighters are trained to work in pairs and occupational health and safety requirements preclude a firefighter from single-handedly carrying out a person out of a fire.
- Some people are very heavy and even two firefighters will be unable to carry them out of a fire scene.
- Female firefighters are conscious of the physical requirements of the job, having had to train in preparation for selection. Therefore like other conscientious firefighters, they endeavour to maintain their fitness levels.
- Without on-going fitness tests it is not possible to determine who is or isn't fit and therefore working in teams is crucial for skill complementing.

Strategies for Change

In 2001, the MFB created an Access and Equity position and unit to look into improving the MFB's understanding of, and response to, diverse communities. Since then the MFB has implemented several strategies for change and a number of initiatives have been quite successful in raising awareness and increasing the organisational diversity competence.

Some effective work has been done in engaging with diverse communities; Multicultural and Indigenous as well as people with disabilities especially in the Community Education department. Furthermore, Employment Services have adopted a number of pro-active measures to address attitudinal barriers to diversity through their "Workplace Behaviour Visiting Program". They have also re-examined their recruitment process to ensure that it does not inadvertently discriminate against applicants on the basis of gender or cultural background.

The Operations Directorate has appointed four Multicultural Liaison Officers, one for each MFB zone. The MLOs role contributes significantly in building positive relations with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.

In 2003, the MFB instigated a gender equity program which led to significant work on the experiences of female firefighters and the way the organisation accommodates and responds to gender diversity.

In 2006, the MFB reviewed its work on diversity and the role of the Equity and Diversity Unit. The EDU drafted a diversity Framework that builds on the past achievements and takes the MFB further into adopting a strategic and more embedded approach to diversity management.

The MFB 2007 and beyond:

The MFB's diversity framework is underpinned by two key result areas:

- ✦ Inclusive and Accessible Organisation
- ✦ Inclusive and Accessible Services

An Inclusive and Accessible Organisation is one that is sought after by all groups in the community and is therefore reflective of the community its serves.

Inclusive and Accessible Services means that all groups in the community equally benefit from the MFB services and programs.

In order to achieve an Inclusive and Accessible Organisation the following key result areas will be focussed on:

- ✚ Recruitment
- ✚ Retention and Training
- ✚ Organisation's Public Image
- ✚ Internal Communication

In order to achieve Inclusive and Accessible Services the following key result areas will be focussed on:

- ✚ External Communication
- ✚ Community Engagement
- ✚ Physical Environment

The Diversity Framework will be operationalised through:

- ✚ A Disability Action Plan
- ✚ An Indigenous Affairs Framework
- ✚ A Multicultural Action Plan
- ✚ A Gender Inclusive Strategy

DIVERSITY FRAMEWORK

