

# Effective Performance Management for Firefighters

## Developing a System for all Fire Agency Staff

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the methods used, the lessons learnt and the results obtained in the process of developing a performance management system for an Australasian fire agency.

No Australasian fire agency currently has a performance management system for its firefighters. In 2000, the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) committed to creating an organisation wide performance management system because management and employees requested it, and the State Service required it.

The primary objectives of the organisation were for:

- employees to be able to talk effectively about difficult topics across all levels and in all directions (up, down and across);
- employees to have honest and constructive conversations day to day (not once a year);
- employees to receive more consistent feedback on their performance; and
- supervisors and managers to receive feedback from their employees.

A reference group of a representative sample of employees and unions was established to find out what the people wanted. From their recommendations came principles regarding:

- confidentiality;
- simplicity;
- links to pay, promotions and discipline; and
- no surprises.

Based on these elements, a system was developed to provide the necessary skills, tools, confidence and expectations.

The system was trialled for a year using 25% of TFS in 10 varied work groups across operations and support divisions. Each work group adapted it to their own specific situation while preserving the core elements. The trial showed that the model was successful with some adjustments needed around communication, training, mechanisms for confidentiality and timing of feedback meetings.

The system is to be rolled out across the organisation in late 2007. We have identified what we will need in terms of messages, training, coaching and follow up order for it to succeed.

### Introduction

Managing performance is a challenging task in any organisation. Many organisations struggle to have effective systems in place that meet the needs of both the employee and employer. The reality is that in Australia in 2006, approximately 68% of organisations were contemplating changes to their present system, with 24% in the process of making changes<sup>1</sup> (Nankervis, A & Compton, R. 2006). Managing performance in a fire service is even more challenging given the culture, hierarchies and highly

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<sup>1</sup> Nankervis, A. & Compton, R. 2006. Performance management: Theory in practice? *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 44(1); 83-102

unionised nature of most fire agencies. Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) decided in 1999 that it wanted to introduce a performance management system. However, TFS recognised that a traditional performance management system would not work. The system needed to be tailored to TFS needs and support a culture based on feedback and communication rather than a prescriptive, measurement-based system. This paper outlines the reasons why a feedback system was required and how TFS and its employees developed, trialled and are currently preparing for the full implementation of this system.

## **A Bit of Background**

To start with though, a bit of background is provided about the role, nature and make up of TFS. In 1979, the Tasmanian Government passed the *Fire Service Act 1979* that enabled the creation of the Tasmania Fire Service as the operational arm of the State Fire Commission. This legislation integrated the previous rural and urban fire services to create a single entity responsible for responding to and preventing fire and related emergencies across Tasmania. The integration process took many years to complete, and the cultural impacts off this process are still evident in TFS today.

TFS currently has around 4800 volunteers and 460 paid employees. The volunteers are located in approximately 230 brigades on mainland Tasmania and a number of the surrounding islands. They undertake a mix of emergency response and community safety activities depending on the risks existing in their communities. Employees in TFS undertake a wide range of functions. The vast majority, some 300, are involved in emergency response, district management, training and community safety activities in career brigades. The remaining employees are involved in:

- developing and delivering community safety programs;
- emergency call and dispatch;
- appliance fabrication and servicing;
- communication systems development and maintenance;
- corporate services, including IT, finance and administration; and
- human resources functions.

The diversity of the organisation created a number of challenges in developing the workplace feedback system. Each work area has its own culture, expectations and set of capabilities that suggested a 'one size fits all' approach to workplace feedback was unlikely to work.

TFS and, to varying degrees, its employees have recognised the need for a performance management system for many years. During the 1980's TFS introduced a performance management system based on supervisor assessment that included a link to promotion. Unfortunately, this system was not seen as being transparent and lacked employee trust. As a result it ceased to be used. By 1998, a number of employees and managers working on the development of the State Fire Commission Corporate Plan identified that they would like to know how they are performing. As a result, a strategy to achieve this end was included in the Corporate Plan. To support the achievement of this strategy, TFS negotiated, and included in the 1999 enterprise agreement, a commitment to the development of a performance feedback system with the United Firefighters Union which represents firefighters and officers, communications officers and fire equipment officers. This commitment has been renewed in each subsequent agreement. In the following years, there continued to be an increasing demand from employees across TFS for a system that would enable them to receive feedback about their performance.

Employment in TFS is enabled by the *State Service Act 2000* which sets up the State Service and its agencies, and provides for employment powers and standards. Prior to the commencement of this Act, there was a requirement for agencies to evaluate the performance of employees, but there was not a requirement for a system to be in place to support this function. From 2001, it became a requirement of Heads of Agency to implement performance managements systems and evaluation mechanisms.

## **Developing the Workplace Feedback System**

In late 2002, TFS commenced the development of the workplace feedback system. Senior management commitment to this initiative was seen as being critical to the success of the system. It was important that a common aim and parameters were developed and owned by the Executive Management Team. Assistance was gained from an external specialist in this area from the University of Tasmania, Mr Simon Fishwick, who informed the executives about trends in performance management, success factors and pitfalls. From this session, the executives determined that TFS needed to develop its own system with high level employee involvement. The system would apply only to employees at this time, due to the unique challenges involved in managing volunteers. It was also decided that it would apply to all employees, not only those involved in emergency response activities. It would need to be trialled to test the approaches and iron out any bugs. It was recognised that system development would take some time, however the increased likelihood of success encouraged the executives to invest the time and resources required. They knew that, given previous experiences, TFS had one chance to get this system implemented and used. If it was mishandled, the trust would not be there for another system to be successfully implemented.

The development of the system was undertaken by a reference group drawn from workplaces across TFS. Nominations were sought through e-mail to all employees, outlining the aims of the project and the range of employees required for the group. A group of 19 employees from all levels and work areas formed the reference group together with a representative from the United Firefighters Union, the Community and Public Sector Union and the University of Tasmania.

The reference group met on four occasions over eight months to develop the system. The group determined the policy, principles and guidelines that should guide the system. They also developed the trial implementation strategy, including the communication strategies and project steps. One of the great successes of this process was that it highlighted the capacity of TFS employees to contribute positively, thoughtfully and in a balanced manner to the development of a system that was going to be personally challenging but beneficial at both personal and organisational levels.

## **Purpose of the TFS Workplace Feedback System**

When considering introducing a system of this nature, the first question that needed to be asked was, "What is the purpose of this?" For TFS, there were two primary aims identified by the reference group. They were to provide staff with regular and constructive feedback about how they are performing, and to provide staff with the development they need. However, TFS also understood that by implementing a system of this nature, it would enable employees to talk about issues effectively at any level of the organisation, and provide staff with the skills and confidence to address those issues. These outcomes were seen as being critical to overall TFS strategies aimed at improving the TFS work environment and the behavioural capabilities of the people.

## **Achieving the Purpose**

Research in the United Kingdom has shown that 80% of organisations expressed dissatisfaction with their performance appraisal system (Fletcher, 1993) <sup>2</sup> of performance management systems fail. Given this harsh statistic, how was TFS to make sure that the feedback system under development was not one of them? In order to be successful, TFS would need:

1. A system that is effective;
2. A system that people are happy to use;
3. Acceptance of the system by the people;
4. People actually using the system and the associated skills; and
5. Good links to other systems, e.g. learning and development, performance improvement, discipline

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<sup>2</sup> Fletcher, C. 1993. Appraisal: an idea whose time has gone? **Personnel Management**. 25 (9): 34-37

1. To create a system that is effective

In order for the system to be effective, TFS involved employees in the development of the system. After all, employees know the characteristics of their workplaces better than human resources staff. It would have been much quicker to develop a feedback system within the human resources area based on a system off-the-shelf and proceed to implement it. However, it is unlikely this would have been accepted by employees or relevant to the differing requirements of TFS workplaces. TFS also clearly defined what the organisation required from the system through the executives determining the parameters of the system and development process. Effectiveness was enhanced as a result of running a trial of the system that enabled employees to be trained, to use the system and to evaluate its success. Based on the outcomes of the trial, adjustments to the system are being made before the system is implemented across the organisation.

2. To create a system that people are happy to use.

For people to be happy to use the system, it had to be one that they could develop some trust in. The reference group identified a number of principles that would guide the implementation of the feedback system across the different work groups. A key tenet of the system was that general, ongoing feedback must occur in the workplace. There is no value in having a performance discussion once or twice a year and expecting an employee to value the feedback from their supervisor. Feedback must be timely, relevant and part of the normal daily work routine. In fact, TFS and its employees believe general feedback is more important to performance feedback than summary discussions. For this reason, supervisors are not able to raise issues during summary discussions that have not already been discussed during a general feedback – it is critical that there are no surprises. The feedback is also intended to be two – way so that the employee is also able to give their supervisor feedback on their working relationship and local work processes. This can then assist the work group to improve its overall performance. Another area identified as being critical to having people happy to use the system lay in maintaining the confidentiality of discussions. Specific guidance was developed to ensure that only that information that was agreed and/or organisationally critical could be released.

One of the reasons that performance management systems fail is that they are too time consuming or complex to use. The reference group recognised that TFS needed to keep the feedback system as simple and flexible as possible. In doing so, TFS needed to minimise the time commitment required, and the amount of paper work and preparation required. For this reason, flexibility was built into the system with a core set of requirements, but significant flexibility for work areas to tailor timing, forms, and format to suit themselves. One core requirement was that employees should be encouraged to evaluate themselves prior to the meeting and that the supervisor would take the same action. This should encourage open, considered discussions. All people needed to be skilled in having conversations and not making judgements – listening, exploring and understanding are critical to the success of these conversations.

The reference group also determined that TFS would not use ratings or measurement linked to objectives or key performance objectives. It was critical to develop the skill, capacity and trust in the system first, and have people at the stage where they can have skilful, meaningful conversations about the things that matter in the workplace. For the same reason, feedback is to be treated as a separate system to salary increases, promotion and discipline. It is very difficult for supervisors and employees to be honest with themselves and each other when the outcomes are tied to salary increases or disciplinary outcomes. Finally, the provision of ongoing training and development was identified as a critical outcome required for people to be happy and develop trust in the system.

3. To create acceptance of the system by the people

TFS and the reference group recognised that, whilst some employees and managers were passionate advocates of a feedback system, a large number would have little awareness or trust in the system. It was clear that it would be necessary to identify and communicate the benefits of the system through the development and trial phases. For those involved in the trial, this would be

reinforced during the training process. For other employees, regular communications were sent out either through e-mail or intranet, or for face to face communication occurred from group members. The communication strategies were designed to address any fears or barriers to acceptance. Wherever possible, influential people were targeted either for participation on groups or in group discussions. Another element in gaining acceptance was the significant investment in training. All employees participating in the trial received one day's training on giving and receiving feedback in addition to a session on how the feedback system works. Supervisors and managers received the same training as well as additional training in relation to applying the system from a management perspective.

4. To get people to use the system including giving and receiving general feedback

It is one thing to develop a feedback system. It is a new challenge to get people to use the system. Some of the initiatives taken through the trial phase to ensure that the system was used included ensuring senior management were seen to be supporting and using the system. It was also important that there was clarity surrounding who was accountable for the delivery of feedback at each level of the organisation. Following on from that, each person needed to clearly understand their role and expectations. One area that has proved challenging is developing effective reporting mechanisms, however this is critical to measuring and evaluating the system. Where it was clear that feedback sessions were not proceeding in the manner that they should, they were followed up to ensure that adequate support and coaching was available to enhance the chances of success.

5. Good links to other systems, e.g. learning and development, performance improvement, discipline

A feedback system cannot work effectively in isolation from other systems. The reference group specified that the system was not to be used for promotion, salary increase, the management of ongoing poor performance or discipline purposes. It recognised, however, that clarity would need to be provided about the nature of the relationships between feedback and these systems so that managers and employees would be working within a transparent system. On the other hand, the feedback system was always intended to be used for personal development purposes. Accordingly, a strong link to the learning and development processes was required.

### **Moving from Knowing and Developing to Doing**

As it turned out, developing the system with the reference group was the easier part of the task. The implementation of the trial process was significantly delayed due to other work priorities. TFS recognised the need to have a person to take carriage of the project and hopefully progress the trial in a focussed manner. At this point, Steve Willing joined the project and started to move the plans into reality.

At the final reference group meeting, a number of participants nominated their work groups to participate in a trial of the system. TFS also identified a couple of additional areas to ensure that all streams of work and geographical locations had representation. This was seen as being important to the credibility of the trial. Briefing sessions were held with all of the nominated work areas to inform them of the purpose of the trial. The work areas were asked to vote on whether they wanted to participate in the trial. Whilst there was scepticism in some work groups, in the end all of the groups approached decided to participate in the trial except one. As a result, the trial involved over 100 people across the state from operational and non-operational areas. In addition to these trial groups, two other groups also commenced using the system to demonstrate commitment and ensure understanding of the feedback system. These groups were the Executive Management Team and employees in Human Services division. The reference group felt strongly that these groups needed to participate in the trial, but shouldn't be part of the evaluation process as it was perceived they may unduly bias the outcomes.

In determining the trial participants within a work group, it was decided that a vertical slice would be taken in each work group so that the system would be tested at every level of the organisation. This meant that, where for example a platoon of firefighters was part of the trial, the officers responsible for that platoon at both middle and senior management levels would also participate in that trial group.

In order to manage the trial process, a structure was set up to encourage work group involvement. Each work group nominated a working party of up to four people – preferably two employees and two supervisory / management people. The role of the working party was to tailor the system to suit the group, co-ordinate communication and provide support and feedback to participants. One person was then nominated to represent the working party on a steering committee. Initially, it was requested that this nominee not be the work group manager in order to ensure active employee participation. In addition, the University of Tasmania continued their involvement through Simon Fishwick. Support was provided by Steve Willing, and senior human resources and operational managers.

As mentioned earlier, significant training was provided to trial participants ranging from 1.5 to 2 days. In addition, coaching support was provided by Steve Willing in Human Services. This support ranged from the provision of advice over the phone to meeting face to face with employees or supervisors to help them to plan their meetings.

The trial commenced in June 2005 following the rolling out of a 3 month training program. As workgroups were trained they were encouraged to commence holding feedback discussions. The trial continued until May 2006. Initially it was intended to be a 9 month trial only, however it was extended to 12 months in order to allow for two summary feedback sessions to occur in each workgroup.

### **Outcomes of the Trial**

Prior to commencing the trial, an evaluation methodology was determined. The evaluation was to be conducted by an external third party, Simon Fishwick from the University of Tasmania. The first step in the evaluation process was a survey conducted of all trial participants before they undertook the initial training. This survey assessed their past experiences and expectations. A mid-trial assessment was also conducted involving focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Following the end of the trial, a further assessment was conducted through interviews with working group members. An independent report was then prepared for TFS outlining the issues identified through the trial and observations for improvement of the system in the future.

### The Results

The results of the trial were very encouraging. There was clear support for the workplace feedback system and, in particular, for the way in which it was developed and implemented. As one employee stated “It’s been something that we drove and the organisation actually listened and took on board our views – first time in my experience with TFS this has happened”. Employees found it positive that the system was transparent and expectations were not set too high. They found themselves not only discussing work-based issues, but other issues that went to form more solid interpersonal relationships. Other positive results included the structure and nature of the training and the coaching support provided.

A number of areas for improvement were also identified, these included dedicating the time and resources required to keep the momentum of the project going, setting up more support mechanisms, ensuring the feedback discussions occur as scheduled and that senior management’s commitment to the system is more visible. Another key area of work is providing the follow-up on personal development plans to ensure that the agreed development objectives are being achieved. Participants also recognised that it was early days in the use of the process and, as such, there had been few difficult issues dealt with. It was felt that, as people became more skilled and confident in using the system, topics that are more difficult to discuss may be raised.

### **Full Implementation of the System**

TFS is now in the process of preparing for the full implementation of the feedback system. Competing priorities has again lead us to dedicate additional resources to this project with the temporary appointment of a fire officer to assist with the implementation process. Training materials, support

documents and manuals are under development. The current plan is for training to commence in workplaces in November 2008.

A number of the recommendations from the trial are being adopted in order to improve the system. Briefings with staff continue to occur to ensure that they are aware that the system is very much to become a part of life in TFS.

### **The Lessons Learnt**

The workplace feedback journey for TFS has been very valuable. It has not gone totally to plan though, particularly in the areas of resourcing and timing. There have been a number of key learnings from this process for the human resources team.

The importance of maintaining the momentum is critical. As mentioned earlier, this means making sure that the resources are there to support the project as far as possible. Unfortunately, there are always crises that get in our way, but we need to manage these to the greatest extent possible. Our implementation timeframes need to be realistic and regularly reviewed. It's fine to have goals for implementation, however they must be achievable or they lead to a loss of credibility in the system.

During the implementation we will ensure that the summary meetings commence at senior management level and are cascaded down. One of the disadvantages in having employee representatives rather than managers on the trial steering committee was that the managers were left out of the loop. The working parties focussed, understandably, on commencing discussions at their level and had limited capacity to influence upwards to ensure meetings occurred. This was a factor in management participation in the trial commencing after work groups, subsequently leading to a perception that management was not committed to the project.

Key successes in the process have been the high level of employee involvement and the flexibility of the system. The active participation of employees has contributed significantly to the development of a system that the members of the United Firefighters Union have now voted to have fully implemented in all work areas where their members work. The flexibility of the system enables each work group to be valued for its differences yet ensures that the key principles are being adhered to, thus supporting organisational consistency. Finally, the project to date has highlighted that our people genuinely want to receive feedback on their performance and want a system that provides that feedback to them in a fair and appropriate manner.

### **Summary**

The development and implementation of a workplace feedback system has been a valuable process for TFS. The organisation is now positioned to significantly enhance our behavioural capabilities. The training to be received by employees through full implementation will give them skills to more actively contribute to the workplace and manage behavioural issues. When coupled with a number of other strategies currently being implemented relating to harassment and bullying, and the implementation of agreed values and behaviours, TFS believes that the foundations are being laid that will enhance working relationships and provide a more satisfying working environment.