Bushfire CRC
Enhancing Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Project (D3)

Tasmania Fire Service Report Number 2010: 1

TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project Final Report

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

- In 2007 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 summarises and integrates finding from the four Volunteer Leadership Development Project studies: (a) interviews with 12 senior TFS staff; (b) four focus groups with volunteers (23 participants, from 15 brigades); (c) a mail survey of all TFS volunteers (923 respondents); and (d) five focus groups with brigade chiefs (49 participants).

- Despite differing methodologies and aims, there is consistency across the four studies concerning brigade leadership and leadership training needs. People skills of two kinds are fundamental: (a) skills which motivate, encourage, and develop potential; and (b) skills which contain the effects of: disruptive behaviours, conflicts between members, and factionalism. Training is accepted as necessary in both sets of skills. However, some scepticism was, perhaps, evident about the effectiveness of aspects of the current TFS training arrangements. Rather more positive views of mentoring and on-the-job training in leadership, compared with formal classroom type training, were expressed.

- Overall, in most brigades, the leadership is viewed favourably.

- There are good grounds for concluding that a *volunteer* leadership development program should be preceded by a review of the training provided to district *staff* in leadership skills, and supervising and supporting brigade chiefs.

- There was a generally accepted view that the present arrangements for developing volunteers' leadership skills did not meet the needs of brigade chiefs or those members aspiring to brigade leadership roles.

- Given the apparent level of support for mentoring as a means of developing leadership skills, it would seem desirable for TFS staff to review the training and guidance available to assist mentors in their roles.

TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project Final Report

Background.

Volunteer-based emergency services throughout Australia need to sustain adequate numbers of volunteers in order to protect the lives, properties, and assets of communities vulnerable to bushfires. During the period 2003 – 2005 serious concerns were raised by volunteer-based fire agencies about likely future adverse impacts of (a) changes in the Australian economy and (b) Australia's ageing population, on emergency services volunteer numbers [see McLennan, J., & Birch, A. (2005). A potential crisis in wildfire emergency response capability? Australia's volunteer firefighters. *Environmental Hazards: Human and Policy Dimensions*, *6*, 101-108]. The Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) recognised that it could do relatively little to influence directly the underlying economic and demographic factors potentially threatening fire service volunteering in the State; however it seemed that there was the potential to reduce the rate at which volunteers leave – that is, to boost retention. Research by the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism project team, particularly research involving (a) former SA CFS volunteers and (b) newly-recruited CFA volunteers, suggested that while some resignations are inevitable (such as those due to changed family responsibilities; re-location due to work commitments; and ageing, illness and disability), other resignations may be avoidable where brigade morale is high and member commitment is strong [see McLennan, J., Birch, A., Cowlishaw, S, & Hayes, P. (2009) Maintaining volunteer firefighter numbers: Adding value to the retention coin. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management.*, *24*(2), 40-47].

In May 2007 TFS requested the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (BCRC) Volunteerism Team at La Trobe University to undertake collaborative research supporting a Volunteer Leadership Development Project. A copy of the agreed-upon project description is at Appendix A. The project aimed to investigate the leadership needs of TFS, with the goal of: (a) enhancing brigades' climate [*brigade climate = 'what it is like for me to be a member of this brigade'*]; and (b) fostering morale and member commitment. The project involved four research activities:

1. Interviews by Bushfire CRC staff with TFS Senior Management: Chief Officer, Deputy Chief Officers, Region Chiefs and District Officers; *conducted 7 – 9 August, 2007; reported September 2008.*
2. Focus groups with TFS volunteers; *conducted 28 & 29 June, 2008; reported September 2008.*
3. A mail-out survey of TFS volunteers seeking their views on brigade leadership needs: *conducted December 2008 – February 2009; reported April 2009.*
4. Focus groups with Brigade Chiefs in each Region: *conducted 21, 28, & 29 March 2009; reported August 2009.*

This Final Report: (a) summarises each of the four research activities, and (b) provides an integrated overview of findings from the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project.

Part I: The Four Research Studies

1.1 Interviews With Senior TFS Staff

1.1.1 Introduction
As the first part of the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project structured interviews were conducted with:

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

1.1.2 Aim
The aim of this first stage of the Project was to identify the kinds of leadership skills of volunteer members likely to be needed to meet the organisation's needs in light of future developments, as understood by senior TFS staff.

1.1.3 Method
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 of these interview guides were sent to participants several days before the interviews in order to provide an opportunity for reflection prior to being interviewed. Most interviews lasted about an hour. All interviews were audio recorded, and subsequently summarised. Key themes relating to brigade leadership were identified.

1.1.4 Key Themes
Characteristics of effective brigade leadership

- The good brigade chief behaves just the way a CEO of a small business should. Keeps his/her finger on the pulse, talks to members, keeps them informed, talks to staff at District and Region, knows members' strengths and weaknesses. He/she makes sure members are involved in running the brigade. There is a lot of delegation of responsibility, all the way down the line.
- 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 members respect others.

Characteristics of less effective brigade leadership

- Selfishness about leadership—"I want to be the brigade chief"! Officers are defensive toward the members, and pull rank when challenged rather than discuss issues. There is a lack of empathy or respect toward the rank and file members.
- The brigade is a one man band. There is no delegation, just a rigid hierarchy. No one is really interested in training, the officers are reluctant to organise training. So they are not confident, and really not able to do a great deal.
- The chief doesn't want to actually do anything, doesn't want to actually lead the brigade, it is more or less just a men's drinking club.

- 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

Key brigade leadership skills
- 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 their community.
- Listening skills.
- Being able to coach members in lifting their game.
- Delegating tasks.
- Managing time so as to be able to lead the brigade effectively.
- Trying to maintain interest of the members in training.

Leadership training needs
- People management generally, but especially conflict management and resolution.
- What is most lacking is leadership training courses that are action-oriented and problem-focussed: what and how to do it, how to recognise and address problems in a brigade.

Challenges
- In each of the three Regions, probably 25% to 30% of brigades are struggling to stay active and viable.
- There is a 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. Members of small rural brigades mostly don't want to give time to training and they don't want to travel to incidents away from the area.
- 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 work and family pressures.
- Career staff/volunteer relations are an ongoing problem. This is especially so 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.
- 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.
- In too many brigades there is autocratic management by the officers, with little debate or discussion involving the membership.
- 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 small rural brigades.
- 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 a prerequisite, but people skills are needed to make the whole thing work.

1.1.5 Things to Keep in Mind

The interviews were conducted in early August 2007. There has been considerable organisational movement among TFS senior staff since then, and it likely that the organisation has made progress with many of the challenges noted.

1.1.6 Implications
Overall, the "view from above" was that there appeared to be three pathways to improving the quality of volunteer brigade leadership:

- Providing more extensive, more effective, and more flexibly-delivered training and development opportunities to volunteers in how to lead and manage volunteers.
- Developing and implementing more effective systems of brigade governance and management.
- Training and enabling District Officers and Field Officers to more effectively: (a) model good leadership behaviour; (b) develop and enhance effective volunteer leadership, and (c) support brigade leaders.

[A detailed account of the findings is in: McLennan, J. (September, 2008). *TFS volunteer leadership Development Project Report #1 – Interviews with senior staff; focus groups with volunteers*. Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project Tasmania Fire Service Report Number 2008:1. School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Bundoora – Copies available from TFS Human Resources].

1.2 Focus Groups With Volunteers

1.2.1 Introduction
As the second stage of the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project, four focus groups were conducted with TFS rank-and-file volunteers. Four focus groups were held: two at the Launceston Regional Headquarters on Saturday 28 June, 2008 and two at the TFS training complex at Cambridge on Sunday 29 June 2008. There were 23 participants in all, focus groups ranged in size from 4 to 8 members, and 15 different brigades were represented.

1.2.2 Aim
The aim was to obtain a sample of volunteers' views about the quality of leadership in brigades; the kinds of leadership skills which are desirable for brigade leaders (chiefs and officers); and the kinds of skill which need to be developed in volunteers likely to occupy brigade leadership roles. The material elicited was to inform the content of the proposed survey of the TFS volunteer membership concerning brigade leadership.

1.2.3 Method
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 focus group topic guide was prepared and displayed to each group. The topics were:

- Features of a good brigade
- Features of a poor brigade
- Characteristics of a good brigade leader
- Characteristics of a poor brigade leader
- Must-have brigade leadership skills
- Training in brigade leadership
- Career staff and brigade climate and leadership.

All four sessions were audio-taped. The recordings were transcribed. Participants' transcribed contributions in all four sessions were categorised according to topics. The grouped statements were inspected for common themes, and these were summarised.

1.2.4 Key Themes

Characteristics of effective brigade leadership

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: is 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.

Is 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.

Characteristics of less effective brigade leadership

Contributes to an aversive brigade climate:

- Generates a climate of fear: blames; is critical; publicly humiliates members at training or on the fireground.
- 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.
- 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; fails to delegate.

Lacks essential knowledge and skills:
- Lacks knowledge of TFS procedures and requirements.
- Lacks people management skills- especially how to resolve tensions between members; is a poor communicator.
- 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.

Key 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.

Leadership training needs
- There is need for a planned training program which is reviewed regularly so as to meet the needs of the membership.
- Training sessions need to be well organised and run to time.
- The content needs to be obviously relevant to the issues which arise in brigades.

Challenges
- The need for training in brigade leadership is not sufficiently appreciated throughout TFS.
- There is a false belief throughout TFS generally that good technical knowledge and firefighting skills translate automatically into good people skills.
- Delivery of training is not sufficiently flexible to accommodate the demands of volunteers' jobs and families.
- There is no specific training available to help volunteers transition to becoming effective officers.
- The Lead Manage Develop (LMD) 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.
- The whole training system seems incredibly arbitrary, 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.
- Region training records are often wrong—they don't accurately show what courses a volunteer has done.

1.2.5 Things to Keep in Mind
- The findings were generated by 23 volunteers (out of more than 4,000), from 15 brigades (out of more than 230), in late June 2008.
- Participants were self-selected and were sufficiently motivated about brigade leadership issues to give up half a day of a weekend.
- The brigades were all located near to Launceston or Cambridge (east Hobart).
- No brigades from small, remote, rural communities were represented.

1.2.6 Implications

Bearing in mind the limitations of the focus group study noted above, the findings suggested four 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 then 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.

[A detailed account of the findings is in: McLennan, J. (September, 2008). *TFS volunteer leadership Development Project Report #1 – Interviews with senior staff; focus groups with volunteers*. Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project Tasmania Fire Service Report Number 2008:1. School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Bundoora – copies available from TFS Human Resources].

1.3 Survey of Volunteers

1.3.1 Introduction

As the third stage of the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project, survey questionnaires were mailed to 4,238 TFS volunteers; 43 questionnaires were returned. There were 923 responses from the 4,195 questionnaires delivered (a 22% return rate).

Aim

The aim was to obtain a profile of the TFS volunteer memberships' views on a range of issues associated with brigade climate, brigade leadership. and training in leadership.

Method

A 4-page (one A3 sized sheet folded and printed both sides) survey questionnaire was developed collaboratively by Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project team members and staff from the TFS Human Resources unit. These were mailed to all TFS volunteers registered as members at the time of the survey (December 2008) together with a reply-paid envelope for return to to the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project team at La Trobe University, Melbourne.

Key Themes
Quality of leadership in my brigade

Analysis of the 923 questionnaires showed that 333 (36%) of those who responded held, or had previously held, a position of leadership: Group Officer; Brigade Chief; First officer; Leading Firefighter. In the findings described below, the results for "leaders" and "non-leaders" are shown separately. Table 1 below shows the percentage of leaders and non-leaders who **disagreed** with each statement about leadership in their brigade.

Table 1: Percentage **disagreeing** with each statement about leadership in their brigade

Statement	Leader	Non-leader	
A new brigade chief is elected after two or three terms	21	26	
The brigade officers are good communicators	9	16	x
The brigade officers deal promptly with trouble caused by any member	8	15	x
The brigade chief does not favour one individual or group over another	9	14	
The brigade officers give helpful feedback rather than blaming or criticizing	6	13	X
Past brigade chiefs avoid commenting on the current chief	11	12	
The brigade is not a 'one man band'	7	12	x
The brigade chief delegates tasks to officers and members	11	12	
If a brigade member needs to be corrected, the brigade officers do so privately if practical	6	11	x
The brigade chief intervenes in any dispute between members when it looks as if they cannot resolve it themselves	9	11	
The brigade officers are fair-minded	4	10	X
The brigade chief makes sure that members do what they are responsible for	7	10	
The brigade officers make sure TFS procedures are followed	5	9	x
The brigade officers make sure everything is well maintained	4	9	X
The brigade officers are skilled and knowledgeable	5	8	x
The brigade officers make sure that safe working practices are followed	5	6	
The brigade chief keeps in contact with District staff	3	4	

X = at least twice as many non-leaders disagreed with the statement compared with leaders.
x = almost twice as many non-leaders disagreed with the statement compared with leaders

The information Table 1 indicates that:
  (a) rank-and-file members are less positive about the quality of leadership, overall, in their brigades compared with the views of leaders;
  (b) the discrepancy between views of leaders and non-leaders is greatest in people-skills areas: communicating, resolving disputes, treating members fairly, giving constructive feedback;
  (c) enhancing brigade leaders' people-skills should be given a high priority in leadership development programs.

The relative importance of specific leadership skills

Table 2 How important are these brigade leadership skills?

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Don't Know	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
Promoting teamwork among brigade members	1.6%	2.3%	0.9%	16.4%	78.8%
Helping new members mix in with the brigade	1.4%	2.4%	1.0%	17.8%	77.4%
Delegating tasks appropriately	1.1%	2.4%	1.4%	18.4%	76.8%
Making sure members are kept informed about brigade issues	2.3%	2.5%	0.6%	18.7%	76.0%
Promoting the brigades needs at Group, District and Region	1.7%	2.3%	4.9%	20.8%	70.3%
Developing members so they can move into leadership roles	1.9%	4.7%	2.8%	21.8%	68.8%
Mentoring members	2.4%	2.5%	3.7%	23.1%	68.3%
Resolving conflicts and disputes among brigade members	1.6%	3.2%	3.6%	24.2%	67.3%
Involving members in brigade decision making	2.1%	3.7%	1.6%	25.7%	66.9%
Disciplining members fairly	2.1%	3.7%	5.8%	23.6%	64.8%
Managing member discontent and factionalism	2.4%	2.6%	7.9%	25.8%	61.3%
Holding members accountable for tasks they are responsible for	1.7%	3.1%	2.4%	34.9%	57.9%

Note that there were no meaningful differences between leaders and non-leaders in their patterns of endorsement of the importance of the skills listed in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, 'positive' skills such as *promotion of teamwork*; *helping new members integrate with the brigade*; *appropriate delegation of tasks*; *and keeping members informed about brigade issues* were rated important by over three quarters of respondents. It is perhaps interesting to note that items concerning the management of **negative** events were not as strongly endorsed as other tasks. *Holding members accountable*, *managing discontent*, *disciplining members*, and *resolving conflicts* were among the five least endorsed items, though approximately two thirds of respondents still strongly agreed that these were important skills. This is at odds with the high degree of importance given to conflict resolution and disciple by (a) senior staff; (b) volunteers in the focus groups; and (c) chiefs in their focus groups (Section 1.4). In discussion among members of the Bushfire CRC research team it was suggested that it was not surprising that the importance of conflict resolution and discipline related skills were rated relatively less important than the other more "positive" skills in a general survey of the membership, given that conflicts and discipline issues can be (a) particularly difficult and stressful for members of brigades, and (b) politically fraught for those in leadership positions. An alternative explanation is that rank-and-file volunteers and many leaders may believe that brigade chiefs more effective use of 'positive' skills may reduce the need for conflict resolution and related skills (Lyndsey Wright, 6 April, 2010).

Good ways for members to become good brigade leaders
Respondents were presented with a list of several different approaches to leadership development training, and asked to rate the extent to which they agreed each of these approaches would be useful. The distribution of responses is presented in Table .

Table 3 What are good ways for members to become good brigade leaders?

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Don't Know	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
Mentoring by more experienced members	0.7%	1.2%	1.5%	25.6%	71.0%
On-the-job learning as you move through the ranks	0.3%	1.5%	1.4%	26.9%	69.8%
Training courses run by experts in leadership and management	1.0%	3.1%	3.3%	28.8%	63.8%
Training courses run by the brigade	2.6%	4.3%	3.1%	36.5%	53.5%
Residential training courses away from the brigade	3.3%	8.7%	11.3%	38.5%	38.2%

As shown in Table , the types of leadership development perceived to be most useful were *mentoring by more experienced members*, and *on-the-job learning*. Training courses run by the brigade and residential training courses run away from the brigade were rated less positively, though the majority of respondents still agreed or strongly agreed that these methods were useful. Presumably, the time and other associated costs involved with this mode of delivery are sufficiently prohibitive to discourage quite a large portion of respondents considering such training. The views of those in leadership positions generally, and in high ranking leadership positions specifically, were no different from those not in such positions.

Relative importance of different training course topics

A list of several different leadership skills was presented, and participants were asked to indicate how important or unimportant they felt training courses in each of these skills would be. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 4, descending in the order of leadership training rated "Very important".

Table 4 How important are training courses in these leadership skills?

Item	Very Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Don't Know	Somewhat Important	Very Important
People Management skills	1.2%	2.1%	1.7%	24.6%	70.5%
Effective face-to-face communication	1.1%	2.9%	1.8%	26.5%	67.7%
Managing brigades	1.0%	1.7%	2.2%	28.2%	67.0%
Inducting and mentoring new brigade members	0.6%	3.0%	1.8%	29.3%	65.4%
Developing teams	0.6%	2.2%	2.9%	29.1%	65.2%
Resolving conflicts and disputes	1.4%	3.3%	2.9%	29.1%	63.2%
Ensuring Workplace Fairness	1.2%	3.1%	3.0%	29.8%	62.9%
Supervising work groups	0.7%	3.0%	3.2%	35.9%	57.2%
Running meetings	1.1%	7.5%	3.0%	45.1%	43.3%
Effective written communication	1.3%	7.4%	5.1%	43.1%	43.1%

As shown in Table 4, all the training topics listed were considered important. However, some courses were considered more important than others. Training courses in people management skills and effective face-to-face communication, for example, were rated "very important" by more than two thirds of the respondents, while training in skills for running meetings and encouraging effective written communication were considered" very important" by less than half the respondents— although still considered to be "very important" or "somewhat important" by more than 86% of respondents.

[A detailed account of the findings is in: Beatson, R., Birch, A., & McLennan, J. (April, 2009). *Preliminary Report: Volunteer leadership development survey*. Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project

Tasmania Fire Service Report Number 1: 2009. School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Bundoora – copies available from TFS Human Resources].

1.3.5 Things to Keep in Mind

- Comparison of the demographic pattern of survey respondents with that of the TFS total volunteer membership showed that volunteers who were, or had been, leaders were over-represented in comparison with the rank-and-file membership. Older, longer-serving volunteers were also over-represented.
- The response rate of 22% warns us that fewer than 1 in 4 volunteers made their views known. This response rate is consistent with all other Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project surveys of volunteer memberships across Australian fire agencies. Anecdotal reports suggest that poor literacy, especially in smaller rural communities, may contribute to lower than desirable returns.

1.3.6 Implications

The findings from the TFS Leadership Survey suggest that TFS volunteers generally evaluate the quality of leadership in most brigades positively. The results also suggest that there is a consensus in views about the sorts of skills and behaviours that characterize good leadership. However, there is also evidence that evaluations of leadership performance vary according to whether or not a volunteer holds, or has held, a leadership positions. Overall, those in leadership positions evaluated the behaviours of brigade leaders much more favourably than did respondents who were rank-and-file volunteers. Most respondents had very positive attitudes toward further development of leadership skills, and those in leadership positions did not appear to be any more, or less, supportive of such training. The areas in which programs to enhance the quality of leadership may be best focussed are: (a) communication and people-skills; (b) fostering positive leader-member interactions; and (c) management of conflict, factionalism, and brigade politics It may also be particularly useful for leadership development programs to include some consideration of whether a brigade may benefit from more regular rotation of leadership positions, and encouragement of succession planning. Finally, it may be useful to review the perceived burden of bureaucracy and administrative reporting that many leaders experience.

1.4 Focus Groups with Brigade Chiefs

1.4.1 Introduction

The fourth, and final, stage of the TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project involved five focus groups with brigade chiefs. Two groups were held at east Hobart and at Burnie, one group was held at Launceston. A total of 49 chiefs participated.

1.4.2 Aim

To augment findings from the survey of the volunteer membership by eliciting reactions and comment from a sample of brigade chiefs about the major issues involving brigade leadership which emerged from the survey described in Section 1.3.

1.4.3 Method

Following analysis and reporting of the survey of volunteers about leadership, TFS worked through the three Regional Offices to invite participation by brigade chiefs to one of two focus group meetings in each Region. Focus groups were scheduled for morning and afternoon sessions in Hobart (21 March 2009) and Burnie (29 March 2009). One session was scheduled in the morning in Launceston (28 March 2009). A total of 49 brigade chiefs participated. Each focus group began with a brief presentation summarising recent Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project research which linked good brigade leadership with enhanced volunteer recruitment and retention. Following this introduction, the actual focus group activities commenced. Over the course of each two-hour meeting, 10 PowerPoint slides were displayed. Each slide summarised a group of findings from the survey of volunteers. Participants were invited to comment on and discuss their reactions to each of the slides in turn. Each session was audio-recorded. The recordings were transcribed and analysed so as to identify key themes relating to brigade leadership raised by participants.

1.4.4 Key Themes

A preliminary comment

Mostly, when a slide summarising key findings from the survey was displayed, participants agreed with what was reported and seldom added new material. Generally, the discussion segued into issues involving: TFS records; training opportunities and arrangements generally; the administrative burdens on brigade chiefs; or "war stories" inspired by points on the slide. Overall, the reactions of the chiefs implied a strong endorsement of the main findings which emerged from the survey of the volunteer membership.

Characteristics of effective brigade leadership

- The importance exercising listening skills and being a good communicator was endorsed strongly.
- The value of succession planning, of having someone ready to take over, was endorsed strongly.
- Several participants observed that in small rural brigades there was often little option but for a brigade chief to continue several terms in office because no-one else would stand.
- The need to balance the competing demands of satisfying the administrative needs of TFS while minimising the demands on volunteers was noted. An alternative description of the issue was "a tension between responsibility and popularity".
- Opinion was divided as to whether brigade chiefs needed to be specially trained in conflict resolution, or should have access to someone external to the brigade who could take a truly neutral stance on the issues in question. A view was expressed that District staff should be able to fulfil this function but were often too remote and removed from brigades to do this effectively.
- The need for a meaningful probation period and review for new recruits was endorsed.

Characteristics of less effective brigade leadership

- Participants noted how difficult it was on occasions to deal effectively with a particularly difficult and disruptive member.
- There was general agreement that factionalism was potentially a serious problem for a brigade and was notoriously difficult to manage or counter.
- There was widespread agreement that an autocratic approach to being a brigade chief was counterproductive. Most participants believed that such approaches brigade leadership were now relatively rare, but it was common in the past.

Key brigade leadership skills
- Several participants identified a need for skills in conducting brigade meetings in ways that contained and managed disagreement and disharmony.

Leadership training needs
- Despite a difference of opinion about the issue noted above, many participants complained that TFS did not provide brigade chiefs and officers with enough training in how to manage internal division and conflicts with members of the wider community.
- There was enthusiasm for mentoring as a means of developing leadership skills. However, there was also a belief that this did not occur as often as needed.
- There was not a high level of support for residential training courses. However, there was support for leadership training by subject matter specialists.

Challenges
- Many participants were critical of the TFS Records Management System (RMS) and claimed that records problems associated with transfers and changes of status claimed too much of their time, and may contribute to reducing the commitment of some members.
- Managing and leading volunteers (as distinct from employees) presents particular challenges to a chief's authority.
- Several chiefs lamented the fact that for volunteers leadership opportunities ceased at brigade chief level. They claimed that volunteers had very limited opportunities to participate in IMTs and that their local knowledge was often discounted by IMT members.
- Completing fire reports long after the crew had gone home was clearly one of the least-enjoyable tasks of a brigade chief.
- Several participants commented critically about a lack of respect shown towards volunteers by some career staff. Some claimed that this lack of respect sometimes posed a threat to the morale of volunteers.

1.4.5 Things to Keep in Mind
Participants were highly self-selected. Given that participation involved giving up at least half a weekend day, those taking part were likely to feel strongly about particular issues. Also, there is a very human tendency for people in positions of responsibility to have long memories about incidents which were particularly vexing, and for some of these the original circumstances probably no longer apply.

1.4.6 Implications
The findings from the analysis of the five focus groups largely vindicate and support the findings from the survey of the volunteer membership.
- There was almost universal endorsement of the importance of the positive people skills: the need to listen; to communicate well; to delegate; to involve the membership; to develop the potential of others; to have a succession plan.
- There was also recognition of the difficulties posed by the negatives of brigade life: disagreement and conflict; factionalism; and the difficulties involved in dealing with "difficult" members.
- Several participants expressed a general view that there were insufficient training opportunities or support for chiefs in how to do the job more effectively.
- There was general acknowledgement that there were sometimes poor relations between staff and volunteers, and this posed problems for brigades.

Part II: Integrating Findings From the Four Research Studies

Introduction
The TFS Volunteer Leadership Development Project comprised four research studies: structured interviews with senior (career) TFS staff; two focus group studies; and a survey of the volunteer membership. Table 5 below summarises the findings from each of the four studies for ease of comparison and integration.

Integration
The summary in Table 5 suggests a reasonably consistent picture across the four studies (and the three methodologies). The structured interviews with senior staff and the focus groups with rank-and-file volunteers provided an account of what good brigade leadership is understood to involve: *pro-social attitudes and values*—fairness, openness, and respect; *effective people skills*—both 'positive' (listening, communicating, engaging, involving, delegating, and developing) and 'negative' in focus (conflict management and dispute resolution, and maintaining discipline); and *technical knowledge* about firefighting, brigades, and TFS requirements. Having said below that leadership research and theory has not been given explicit attention in the project, I am reminded strongly of the concept of *authentic leadership* proposed by Luthens and Avolio (2003, p. 243), which they describe as "...a pattern of transparent and ethical leader behavior that encourages openness in sharing information needed to make decisions while accepting followers' inputs". [See Luthens, F., & Avolio, B. J. (2003) Authentic leadership: A positive developmental approach. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.). *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* (pp. 241-258). San Francisco, CA: Berret-Koehler].

Poor brigade leadership is understood to come in two styles: (a) autocratic, hierarchical, secretive, punitive, and divisive; and (b) laissez faire, disinterested, disengaged, and inward looking.

The key brigade leadership skills are understood to be those recognised by leaders/managers generally as promoting effective teamwork while constructively containing and managing emerging dysfunctional behaviour by team members.

Leadership development should focus on *people skills;* not on technical knowledge, nor abstract theory. Training needs to be 'fair dinkum': well-planned, well-organised, and well-presented. The content should focus on important brigade and TFS issues, not on generalities. It must give serious attention to the 'nasties': dealing constructively with conflict, disagreement, disputation, factionalism, and discipline issues; as well as the 'feel-good' stuff: listening, communicating, engaging, involving, delegating, and developing members' potentials.

The challenges to developing volunteers' leadership skills are well understood. The major issues are: (a) the nature of the volunteer endeavour with volunteers having to balance the demands of their volunteering with the needs of their families and work; (b) differences across the State in the threats posed to communities and the nature of these communities, and sizes and needs of brigades; (c) the organisational difficulties faced by a volunteer-based fire agency with State-wide responsibilities, a scattered volunteer workforce, and limited resources; (d) tensions between the priorities of volunteers and career staff; and (e) the difficulties in delivering effective training to those who most need it in light of (a) – (d).

The survey of volunteers provided a profile of perceived brigade leadership quality and training needs. It seems that most brigades are reasonably well-lead. However, brigade leaders overall are

seen to be rather better at the administrative and technical aspects of leadership than at the people skills aspects. There appears to be some scepticism about the worth of conventional, classroom-type training in leadership. This may, perhaps, be due in part to what appear to be general perceptions of shortcomings in aspects of the overall TFS training arrangements.

The outcome of the focus groups in which brigade chiefs commented upon the major findings from the survey was essentially a strong endorsement of the validity of these findings. What the chiefs added was an emphasis of the potential destructiveness to brigade climate of disruptive individuals, factional divisions, and member conflict, and their needs for training and District/Region support in managing these.

Things to Keep in Mind
Behind the times?
I have no knowledge of events and changes within TFS concerning volunteer leadership since the research began in August 2007. Thus, it is quite possible that at least some of what is proposed in the next section:

- Is already under consideration.
- Has been considered previously and rejected.
- Has been considered, implemented, found wanting, and abandoned.

Leadership theory and research?
Over the course of the Project, and throughout the previous reports, there has been little reference to general research findings or conceptual ideas from the broad areas of management and leadership research and theory, for several reasons. First, TFS senior staff made it clear that their immediate needs were for specific information about the volunteer leadership situation in the agency and how leadership effectiveness could be enhanced. Second, the literature, both scholarly and popular, on leadership and management is vast and ever-growing. Resources simply did not allow a comprehensive review of the literature. Finally, there is a dearth of published research and theory which addresses leadership in volunteer-based organisations generally, and volunteer-based emergency services organisations in particular: some limited literature searches which were undertaken found almost nothing of relevance. [For a current overview of the general leadership literature see Avolio, B. J., Walumbwa, F. O., & Weber, T. J. (2009). Leadership: Current theories, research, and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *60*, 421-449].

Leadership or management?
Over the course of the Project, the term "leadership" has been used very broadly and the two terms "brigade leadership" and "brigade management" have been taken to be largely synonymous. However, in the general literature referred to above, the distinctiveness or otherwise of leadership behaviours as opposed to management behaviours is a matter of controversy. The position advocated here is that for most purposes "brigade leadership" can be safely used as an umbrella term which encompasses three related activities. First, *administration*. This is essentially concerned with ensuring that those governance, oversight, and reporting tasks necessary to ensure that a brigade is operating lawfully and in accordance with the legislative requirements of TFS are carried out. Second, *management*. This is primarily concerned with ensuring that a brigade is ready and able to respond to emergencies effectively and safely so as to meet its community protection responsibilities. Third, *influencing leadership*. This is needed when the brigade is confronted with unusual or demanding circumstances and members have to be ***influenced*** to achieve particular outcomes. For example, during brigade operations in hazardous environments; or when external circumstances change so as to threaten a brigade's viability; or when there are internal threats to brigade

cohesiveness and member morale through factionalism, or ill-discipline, and the like. [*cf* Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2005). What we know about leadership. *Review of General Psychology*, *9*, 169-180]. History indicates that it is the rare individual who excels in all three activities. Often, an individual leader compensates successfully for a relative deficit in one by delegating to others who are effective in that activity.

Implications for volunteer leadership development

- The overall health of brigade leadership in TFS is reasonably good. It seems that problem brigades are more likely to be found at the 'extremes' of brigades: (a) small brigades in remote rural areas where memberships are small and brigades struggle to find a chief; and (b) large brigades on urban-rural fringes where members are plentiful, demands on the brigades are not heavy, and the brigade becomes an arena for personal power and ambition contests.

- Paradoxically, a program of volunteer leadership development may best begin not with volunteers, but with *staff*. There appeared to be a recognition among regional and district staff of a need to improve the level of brigade leadership skills. Yet several of the staff interviewed reported that they had themselves received little or no training in leadership skills generally, nor in supervising or supporting brigade chiefs. There is also the reported problem of lack of respect shown toward volunteers by some career staff. It would thus seem most useful to begin by reviewing the adequacy of training provided to district staff in leadership skills, and supervising and supporting brigade chiefs, and remedying any deficiencies. There would seem to be little point in endeavouring to train volunteers to be better leaders if career staff are not equipped to consistently model effective leadership behaviours.

- The overall quality of brigade leadership could be enhanced by a concentration on basic interpersonal communication skills, beginning with the importance of "listening skills" as distinct from "telling skills". Beyond this, it seems clear from the chiefs' focus groups that there is serious need for attention to be given to managing dysfunctional aspects of brigade life: disciplining disruptive members; containing conflicts between members, and containing factionalism. These issues will probably best be addressed by a combination of improved training for brigade chiefs and providing training and guidance to district officers in ways of supporting and assisting brigade chiefs in their endeavours.

- There was a generally accepted view that the present arrangements for developing volunteers' leadership skills did not meet the needs of brigade chiefs or those members aspiring to brigade leadership roles.

- Given the level of support for *mentoring* as a means of developing volunteers' leadership skills TFS should review the present arrangements in place to train, guide, and support mentors in their roles and remedy any inadequacies.

2.5 Table 5: Comparative summary of the main features of the four research studies

Study	1. Structured interviews with senior staff [August 2007]	2. Focus groups with volunteers [June 2008]	3. Survey of volunteers [December 2008]	4. Focus groups with brigade chiefs March 2009]
Number of participants	12	23	923	49
Aim	To identify the kinds of leadership skills of volunteer members likely to be needed to meet the organisation's needs in light of future developments, as understood by senior TFS staff.	To obtain a sample of volunteers' views about the quality of leadership in brigades; the kinds of leadership skills which are desirable for brigade leaders and the kinds of skill which need to be developed in volunteers likely to occupy brigade leadership roles. The material elicited was to inform the content of the proposed survey of the TFS volunteer membership concerning brigade leadership.	To obtain a profile of the TFS volunteer memberships' views on a range of issues associated with brigade climate, brigade leadership., and training in leadership.	To augment findings from the survey of the volunteer membership by eliciting reactions and comment from a sample of brigade chiefs about the major issues involving brigade leadership which emerged from the survey.

Characteristics of effective brigade leadership	Like the CEO of a profitable small business: Talks and listens to members; maintains contact with Region. Involves members, delegates. Open communication among members. Members are kept informed. Lines of responsibility are clear. Disagreements are resolved. There is a climate of respect.	Models good leader behaviour: takes part in brigade activities, pulls weight rather than pulling rank; intervenes if ill-discipline threatens safety; intervenes in conflicts when necessary. Common sense approach: delegates, maintains accountability, fair, shows respect. Shares information. Is knowledgeable about TFS procedures and standards. Develops leadership potential in others.	**Quality of leadership in brigades**:
			  Overall, in most brigades the leadership is viewed positively.
			  The aspects of leadership which are seen as being most effective are the "technical" aspects: following TFS procedures; equipment well-maintained; knowledgeable about firefighting; emphasis on safety; maintaining contact with District staff.
				Listening skills, being a good communicator.
				  Having a leadership succession plan.
				  Balancing the demands on volunteers with volunteers' work and family commitments.
				  Dealing with conflict.

Characteristics of less effective brigade leadership	The leadership style is either *autocratic* (rigidly hierarchical, no delegation, information is restricted, there is a lack of respect toward members); or *laissez faire*:(little sense of purpose, little interest in training, little contact	Generates a climate of fear: is critical and blaming, humiliates members in public. Fails to show respect, lacks fairness, has favourites. Restricts information.	--Those aspects of brigade leadership which are seen as relatively (compared with the technical aspects) *less* effective involve "people skills": communication, conflict resolution;	Inability to deal with difficult, disruptive members.
				  Inability to deal with factionalism
				  Being autocratic.

	with Region).		fairness; constructive feedback.	
Key brigade leadership skills	Member engagement; delegation; conflict resolution; listening and communication; time management.	One-on-one and small group communication. Time management. Conflict resolution: individual and factional. Technical knowledge of fire fighting. Tfs procedures—especially discipline, finances, safety.	**Relative importance of leadership skills**: --Of 12 nominated skills, the top six ranked were: Promoting teamwork; involving new members; delegating; informing members; maintaining contact with Group, District, Region; developing leadership skills in others.	Conducting meetings in ways that contain and manage disagreement and disharmony.
Leadership training needs	People management, generally; especially conflict management and dispute resolution. Training needs to be organised so as to be: action-oriented, and problem-focussed.	A planned approach which is reviewed so as to meet current needs. Sessions well-organised and run to time. Content relevant brigade issues.	**Preferred training methods**: *Most:* Mentoring; on-the-job; training courses run by experts. *Less:* Training courses run by the brigade, and training course requiring travelling long distances to residential courses.	---Training in how to manage internal division and conflicts, and external conflicts with members of the community.
Challenges	The needs of small rural brigades and larger urban-rural interface brigades differ. Volunteers must manage competing demands of work & family, and turning out & training. Career staff/volunteer relations are an ongoing source of difficulty. There is a tendency for brigade officers to concentrate on brigade tasks rather than people issues.	The way that training, generally, is organised at Region does not encourage effective training. There is a lack of flexibility and failure to take into account volunteers' work and family commitments. --The Lead, Manage, Develop Teams training course is not seen as effective. Training in people skills takes second place to training in task skills.	--The lack of training opportunities for aspiring chiefs/officers.	--A lack of training opportunities addressing managing conflict and disharmony. Problems with training records at Region, and the RMS system generally. Balancing safety needs on the fireground and principles of equality of participation. A lack of respect shown by some career staff toward volunteers.

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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