

Importance of developing leadership and standards within the fire and emergency services

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This article presents a discussion on some of the challenges facing fire and emergency service leadership. Most challenges are neither new nor unique to South Africa. In fact, in the United States of America, the 1966 Wingspread Conference on Fire Service administration, education and research highlighted twelve critical areas that impact on fire service leadership and planning. This article presents a discussion on these identified areas and will therefore attempt to achieve alignment through local reference and example.

The author concludes that the White Paper on Fire Service seeks to address certain shortcomings in current Fire Service legislation.

The author also identifies that legislative change may not necessarily ensure leadership in this sector, it may, however,

assist with the development of a framework and ultimately the professionalisation thereof.

Introduction

The direct material fire and life losses in South Africa continue to rise each year. Available records indicate that in 2017 alone, 5 283 fires occurred in informal settlements. The financial losses incurred during the Knysna fires of June 2017 alone exceeded R2 billion. This excludes the R180 million other household fire losses reported to the Fire Protection Association of Southern Africa.

Whilst writing this article, nine people perished in a fire in the Johannesburg CBD on Wednesday, 14 April 2021. The Charlotte Maxeke Hospital in the same city suffered a particularly devastating fire on Friday, 16 April 2021. Apart from severe structural damage, the hospital was closed for seven

days and resulted in the transfer of nearly than 700 patients to other facilities. This was followed by a wildfire on Sunday, 18 April 2021 in Cape Town, which decimated large areas of Table Mountain National Park and raised, amongst others, the Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which housed priceless African studies, collections, museum pieces and personal papers. Several other buildings, including the Rhodes Memorial Restaurant as well as the Mosterd's Mill dating from 1796, were also destroyed. Losses of this magnitude would indicate, then, that unfriendly fire is a major social and economic problem. Basically, the suppression effort is organised and financed as a local Government function.

The guarding of local Government mandates by Schedules 4 and 5 of the Constitution of South Africa makes it extremely difficult to bring into being any organised method for general improvement in any large segment of the fire service. The fire service, as a whole, lacks uniform standards of performance, educational achievement of skill. Many individual fire services have made excellent progress in technology, tactics and strategy, administration and organisation. However, this progress have been largely dependent on the calibre of leadership of individual fire chiefs and there is no assurance that this progress will continue or the standards be maintained when there is a change of leadership in a given fire service.

Often this struggle for progress is made under adverse conditions. The

economic base of the community may place such heavy demands on the service delivery funding available for all local Government functions that the financing of the fire function simply cannot be afforded at local level. Management systems enhancing the coordination of the fire function above local level must be considered. Without this coordination at a national or provincial level, it is difficult to maintain open lines of communication within the service itself so that improved methods, techniques and the systematic exchange of information and ideas can be facilitated. This deficiency in the service has been pointed out in the White Paper on Fire Services. Hence, we seem to have in the fire service nearly three hundred individual municipal fire service organisations at local, district and metro level, each trying to cope with the fire problem, uncertain of its responsibility, its jurisdiction and its level of competency to cope with the day-to-day problems that are related to the total fire picture. This has been recognised by a legion of studies and associated reports by many individuals, educational institutions and service associations. Some of the individuals who recognised the need for a comprehensive study in the area of fire service administration, education and research, participated in the drafting of the White Paper on Fire Services, which was approved by Cabinet on 27 May 2020, as a first hopeful step in trying to isolate and define some of the major problems, so that additional research and study could be given to problems with a high priority. It is hoped that once these problems are more clearly defined and understood, foundations, Government agencies and educational institutions will bring their resources to bear on the issue.

Some of the issues identified by David B Gratz in his book, 'Fire Department Management: Scope and method' refers to the 1966 Wingspread conference and remains relevant six decades later.



The devastating Charlotte Maxeke Hospital fire on Friday, 16 April 2021

1. Unprecedented demands are being imposed on the fire service by rapid social and technological change

I would go a step further and include environmental change under this heading. The proliferation of the wildland urban interface (WUI) exacerbated by climate change, resulted in the single biggest fire loss in South African history.

The scale of business and Government operations today, the complexity of modern technology and organisation brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the rapid increase in new knowledge, the population explosion, rapid growth of urban communities, need for efficiency and economy on the part of the commercial and industrial community to compete in our private enterprise system, particularly under the pressure of imports of our foreign trade commitments, require that fire executives and administrators be better educated than their predecessors and better prepared to understand and facilitate change. The mobility of individuals and whole segments of our society brings about societal change and behavioural patterns, which pose tremendous problems for the fire service.

The current lack of formal housing has resulted in an explosion of informal settlements never seen before. The erection of high-rise structures, large undivided commercial and industrial buildings and solid-wall structures in outlying

areas, brings to many small, undermanned and ill-equipped fire service problems of a magnitude never faced. The deterioration of central business sections and the transition of older residential areas help to create informal settlements. Technological changes in manufacturing processes, science, use of chemistry, alternative energy, etc, are confronting fire service with problems far greater than they can handle.

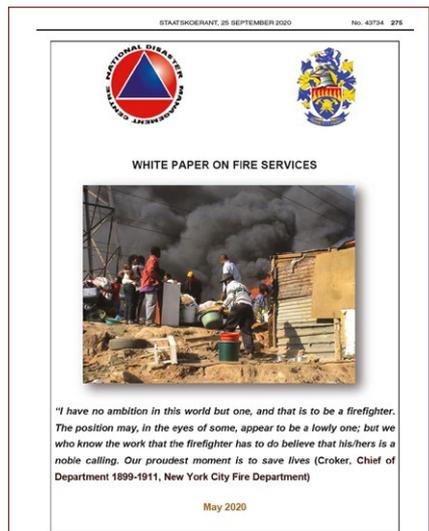
This societal, environmental and technological change should be thoroughly researched to determine causes and possible relationship to fire service planning needs.

2. The public is complacent toward the rising trend of life and property loss by fire

What are acceptable limits? Certainly, we have reached the limit insofar as crime is concerned and we are rapidly approaching the limit for traffic deaths. Society in general in South Africa seems to establish tolerable fire loss limits, which we are willing to accept.

The overall cost of property loss (structural and environmental) due to fire is estimated to cost the South African economy more than R3 billion every year.

The Burn Mortality rate in South Africa during 2012 was 8,5 per 100 000, greater than the world average of five per 100 000 and the African region average of six per 100 000. ▶



The White Paper on Fire Services was approved by Cabinet on 27 May 2020

3. There is a serious lack of communication between the public and the fire service

The average citizen's understanding of what constitutes fire protection seems to be very limited. This lack of understanding is also shared by those persons primarily responsible for protecting the public welfare, the elected and appointed Governmental administrators.

4. Behaviour patterns of the public have a direct influence on the fire problem

Fire frequency has been directly related to human activity. This is reflected in timetables as to when the highest frequency rate occurs during each 24-hour period.

The 2012 Western Cape Strategic Framework for fire and burn injury prevention provides an excellent overview of causal factors as well as the consequential frequency rates of fires in the Western Cape. Strategic_Framework_fire_and_burn_injury_prevention_web_13-01-2016.pdf (westerncape.gov.za)

5. The insurance interest has exerted a strong influence on the organisation of the fire service. This dominance seems to be waning. The fire service must provide the leadership in establishing realistic criteria for determining proper levels of fire protection.

The original concept of organising public fire protection in this country

was to minimise the conflagration hazard. This was originally initiated by the mutual assistance concept where all would share in any individual's loss. Public officials must become willing to accept criteria that are realistic and based on life and property protection without depending upon insurance rates as the primary guide. This whole area of evaluating today's fire protection requirements needs to be studied considering the many changes that are taking place in our society.

Following the Knysna Fire in 2017, Santam commissioned the report from the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Research Alliance for Disaster and Risk Reduction (RADAR) and the Fire Engineering Research Unit (FireSUN) at Stellenbosch University.

The report urged the insurance industry to help build the capacity of municipal fire services to deal with wildfire prevention and response. "Insurers can help by requiring policy-holders to undertake measures to reduce risk; for example reducing flammable materials and creating defensible spaces around homes."

Another key recommendation was that insurers develop more affordable insurance products for the so called 'missing middle', the households that are not

sufficiently impoverished to be supported by Government welfare but who are unfortunately not able to afford insurance.

The total cost of fire is difficult to measure in terms of economic losses because of the direct and indirect effects borne by the public, private sectors and individuals. Insurance financial data often refer to the tangible damage to property that refers to losses to which a monetary value can be assigned and direct effects of a fire ie damage of assets that occur at the time of the fire or fire-related disaster. The main items in this category include the total or partial destruction of physical infrastructure, buildings, appliances, furniture, equipment, means of transportation and documents. The intangible effects and indirect losses are not reported on due to lack of consistent and available data.

6. Professional status begins with education

The Gordon-Howell report suggests four criteria for defining a "profession".

- A profession should rest on a systematic body of knowledge of substantial intellectual content and on the development of personal skill in the application of this knowledge to specific cases.
- It must set up standards of professional conduct that take precedence over the goal of personal gain.
- It should have an association of members, among whose functions are the enforcement of standards and the advancement and dissemination of knowledge.
- It should prescribe ways, controlled in some degree by the members of the professional association, of entering the profession by meeting certain minimum standards of training and competence.

A systematic and deliberate educational programme leading to a broad knowledge base that is acceptable to the academic

The major wildfire on Sunday, 18 April 2021 in Cape Town, which decimated large areas of Table Mountain National Park and damaged several historic buildings



community is the surest approach to professionalisation. It is unrealistic to assume that every member of a fire service has a formal education (NQF 6 and higher). Therefore, levels need to be established within the profession.

A clear distinction must be made between fire service professional development on the one side and factors affecting fire service labour issues. A professional body should not and cannot become involved in labour issues.

7. The scope, degree and depth of the educational requirements for efficient functioning of the fire service must be examined

Many individual fire services do have specific educational and skill requirements, which must be met by existing fire service personnel. Virtually all trades, vocations, technical areas and professions have established minimum in-service training requirements. Continued Professional Development (CPD) programmes are sadly lacking at this stage.

8. Increased mobility at the executive level of the fire service will be important to the achievement of professional status

Mobility is present within virtually all professions. In the fire service, many restrictions have been established that limit mobility. Some of these archaic restrictions are individual conditions of employment and individual residential requirements. Others have been devised by local groups that limit mobility in any level in the fire service. If uniform knowledge and skill criteria were established on a nationwide basis, there should be no reason why mobility at the various levels in the fire service could not be facilitated. However, a comprehensive study needs to be made to determine specific ways in which increased mobility can be attained within the fire service.

9. The career development of the fire executive must be systematic and deliberate

As in any other professional field or quasi-professional field, the requirements for the fire executive

must be identified. Once this is accomplished, ways and means of individuals to meet the needs and requirements should be established. This gives rise to the thought of direct entry into the executive level of the fire service as well as coming up through the ranks of the service. Traditionally, in the fire service in this country, we have promoted men and women into higher ranks or higher levels and then attempted to train and educate the individual to meet requirements of the level to which he has been promoted. This is contrary to the practice in virtually all other professions and technical areas.

10. Governing bodies and municipal administrators generally do not recognise the need for executive development of the fire officer

The fiscally hard-pressed governing bodies and municipal administrators find it difficult to justify sending their fire executive to educational courses for long periods of time. This, it is felt, is partly due to recognition of the fact that there are no specific achievement levels established



The current lack of formal housing has resulted in an explosion of informal settlements never seen before

▶ in many of these courses and activities. It is felt that if various achievement levels or acceptable ends could be shown to governing bodies and municipal administrators, these groups would be more receptive to allowing fire executives to participate. The full scope and extent of the fire problem often is not understood by governing councils and municipal administrators because membership in governing bodies is generally transitory. The office holder generally is not in the same office for a long enough period for him to understand the full depth and scope of fire service organisation, operation, etc. Therefore, he must rely primarily upon his fire executives to justify their participation in educational and improvement activities. The fire executive then finds himself in a position without standards, without specific acceptable development programmes, hard pressed to justify to governing bodies and municipal administrators why his fire service people need to participate in extended educational activities. Executive development programmes will not be possible until the people responsible for policy and decisions recognise and support the development process.

11. Fire service labour and management, municipal officers and administrators must join

together if professionalism is to become a reality

If professionalism within the fire service is to be achieved, then professionalisation must be made a common goal toward which all fire service organisations, local Government associations and professional management associations can work. All must recognise that professional status begins with education. There is growing evidence of the emergence of a systematic body of a knowledge that can be applied to fire science and administration. Without this close cooperation and coordination in the development of such a body of knowledge, acceptance of the fire service as a profession will be slow and difficult. If professionalisation is to be achieved, studies need to be made as to ways and means for coordination and communication channels need to be devised and kept open, so that all organisations that have an interest in the fire problem, can work toward a common goal of professionalisation of the fire service.

12. The traditional concept that fire protection is strictly a responsibility of local government must be re-examined

A principle of fire protection that many fire service and governmental jurisdictions have had to learn the hard way is stated as follows, "It

is economically unfeasible for any single governmental jurisdiction to equip and man itself with sufficient forces to cope with the maximum situation with which it may be faced." The lack of understanding of this principle has caused many communities to be caught short of fire suppression resources. As a result, catastrophes have not been minimised as fully as possible. Many local governmental jurisdictions find themselves, in too many cases, too small to be large and too large to be small.

CONCLUSION

The author concludes that there are numerous challenges impacting upon fire service planning and leadership. The review of Fire Service legislation currently at the White Paper stage advocates a paradigm shift from response and operations-oriented approaches towards a fire risk management approach that prioritise fire prevention and safety.

This approach will ensure that prior to the promulgation of the revised fire services legislation, a clear policy framework for the function is in place for all role players to grasp the fundamental principles and policy direction underpinning the legislation.

While fire fighting services are provided at both local Government level and by designated services, this White Paper also clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities that both national and provincial Governments must execute in support of municipalities and other stakeholders involved in fire services across the country.

Strong systemic and deliberate leadership development is vitally important to ensure that the policy proposals in the White Paper are institutionalised. Failure to professionalise will force us to remain satisfied with incompetence and ineptocracy or mediocrity at best.

A list of references is available from the Publisher. ▲