

Developing Leadership & Management Behaviours - Becoming An Ambidextrous Organisation

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Abstract

The New Zealand Fire Service has developed a management competency framework to describe the organisation's desired leadership and management behaviours. The Service has used this framework as the basis for its leadership surveys and an accelerated development programme. In describing leadership, the New Zealand Fire Service has identified that the organisation has a preferred leadership style (command and control-based) and a less dominant style (organisational leadership). Its goal is to become an ambidextrous organisation (Tushman & O'Reilly 2002) in which both approaches are equally valued and can be deployed depending upon the context.

Over recent years, the New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS) has focussed on developing its leadership capability. As an organisation, the NZFS is typical of most urban fire services in that its leadership is largely promoted from within, has limited formal management training and most operational managers tend to have experienced only one working environment for their entire careers.

The concepts and approach set out in this paper are unashamedly based upon some relatively straightforward principles, namely that:

- the behaviours that underpin good management and leadership can be described in language that is readily understood;
- if provided with feedback in a non-threatening environment, most managers wish to, and are capable of improving their performance; and
- the qualities and aptitude necessary for effective leadership and management can be identified relatively early on in a person's career, and can be enhanced through careful career management.

When we examined our organisation, we quickly realised that, as you would expect, we excelled at operational or incident leadership. The training systems, operating procedures,

organisational structures, and the manner in which the Service shaped people, produced leaders who could command emergency situations that would challenge the best managers in the world. We described this as our dominant or preferred approach – one way to think of it is as analogous to being right or left-handed. The preferred approach is so natural and ingrained in us that we automatically approach any task by using the dominant hand or operating style.

Conversely, we found that our underdeveloped capacity was organisational leadership and management. We discovered that our structures and training systems themselves unwittingly contributed to accentuating organisational leadership as the least preferred or valued skill. The goal for us was, continuing the analogy of right or left handedness, to become an ambidextrous organisation where leaders could operate effectively in either operational/incident or organisational mode. This is easier said than done as the two modes differ so greatly (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Comparison between operational/incident and organisational leadership

Operational/Incident Leadership	Organisational Leadership
<p>Operating Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prescribed instructions, established approaches, largely predictable outcomes. <p>Roles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clearly defined roles, chain of command established. Ready acceptance of authority and compliance. <p>Authority</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Determined by rank. Overt and recognisable indicators of authority. Differing views not encouraged. Limited upward feedback. <p>Decision Making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Short timeframes. Clear start and finish. Limited numbers of variables. Facts can be assembled reasonably readily. <p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Standardised, readily available and fully controlled. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Few guidelines, unpredictable outcomes, no operating instructions. Frequently need to reinvent or develop approaches. ▪ Complex matrix management structures. Roles more fluid and changing. Expectations of consultation and involvement. Compliance cannot be assumed automatically. ▪ Determined by role and informal. May be separate from rank or exercised by those without rank. Needs upward feedback and a range of approaches. ▪ Long time frames. No pressure for a “three-minute size-up”. Factors are not always evident and may be complex and interrelated. ▪ Limited resources, competing priorities. Need to justify extra resources and to assemble project teams using “borrowed” resources.

Our culture and organisation structures conspired to reinforce the dominance of operational/incident based leadership. As with most fire services, we have:

- single tier entry;
- limited lateral recruitment;
- a large investment in operational command and control training;
- practical barriers that make it unattractive to move from the operational ranks into management;
- long, single-employer careers; and
- first-line supervisors who are generally not expected to exercise organisational leadership.

The approach that we have taken is more evolutionary than revolutionary. We have not sought to change the structures, recruiting systems and culture that has given rise to such a dominance of operational/incident leadership but rather sought to graft an organisational leadership capability onto the existing structures.

The main elements of our approach were:

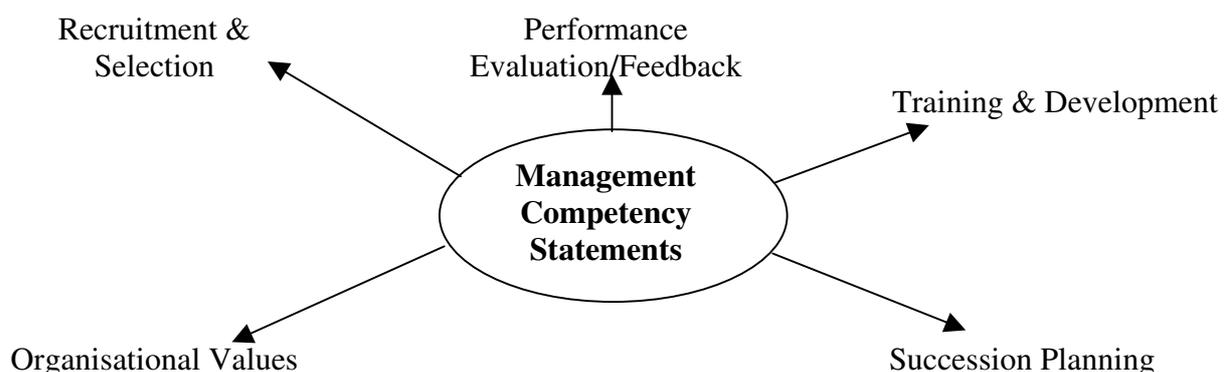
1. Describe the expected behaviours in a set of competencies

We found that there was no consensus as to what constituted good leadership and management. Our people lacked a concise explanation of what was expected and valued. By putting forward a succinct list of core competencies (appendix 1) we were able to describe a balanced set of behaviours that removed the confusion. For a workforce that was raised on clear operating instructions and policies, these management competencies helped to demystify organisational leadership and management. For the first time a manager could see a balanced range of descriptors of what the organisation expected of them. The process of developing these competencies was as important as the outcome itself. The competencies needed to reflect the values, language and future direction of the organisation. They needed to be debated, drafted and redrafted until they had ownership by senior management. Effective management competencies cannot be taken-off-the-shelf or purchased from a consultant.

2. Use the management competencies as a hub for human resources

The power of management competencies lies in linking or integrating them into the organisation's overall human resource systems. Figure 1 below illustrates the connections that can be drawn:

Figure 1 - Integrating management competencies into other human resource management systems



Actual behaviour change will not happen unless the competencies are re-enforced continuously and it becomes clear to people that this is, “the way that we do things around here”. By integrating these human resources systems, we promote a subtle message that if you conform to these behaviours you will benefit in terms of career advancement.

3. Provide feedback to managers in a non-threatening manner and encourage upward evaluation

A critical element in achieving a change in behaviour has been to introduce 360° Feedback, through a leadership survey based upon the management competencies. For an organisation steeped in operational/incident leadership, the concept of asking subordinates and peers for feedback was a daunting one initially. We found that by all the senior team undertaking the leadership survey together and demonstrating that feedback could be sought and received without fear, we were able to cascade the process further down the organisation. To date, almost all third tier management have voluntarily undertaken the leadership survey and our plan is to make the survey available for Station Officers over the next year.

It is evident to us that through skilled debriefing and by taking a strong developmental emphasis, our managers have, for the most part, enthusiastically embraced the feedback and are making moves to conform to the management competencies.

4. Pick tomorrow’s leaders and manage their careers and development as corporate resources

Too often we have invested in people for all the wrong reasons. Successful self-promoters or the proteges of senior managers have too often been the recipients of organisational investment or fast-tracking only for it to be found that they lack substance and fail to deliver when it counts. We have consciously moved away from this practice of talent identification in favour of a highly structured assessment centre based upon the management competencies. All staff who aspire to senior management positions have been provided with equal access to an assessment centre and only those who can demonstrate high potential are selected for an accelerated development programme that we call “Advance”. The programme is a mix of group work, individual development and exposure to opportunities for secondment and project work. The aim of the programme is to shape the skills and abilities of tomorrow’s leaders over a two year period so that they reflect well rounded organisational leadership and can be readily placed in a range of senior management positions. The first level of Advance is now in place and is targeted to tier two and three positions. The plan for next year is to introduce a parallel programme targeted at district management level i.e. the first level beyond that of a Station Officer.

5. Permit an “open door” approach to the careers of our leaders

In the past, our better potential people have sought opportunities abroad or in other organisations. Unfortunately, the prevailing attitude was to regard these individuals as lost to the organisation, or in some way disloyal. The reality was that we were at the time unable to provide them with the opportunities that they needed and by treating them as permanently lost to the organisation we were effectively shutting off the prospect of return.

We are beginning to learn that by maintaining some form of contact with these people and by ensuring that they are aware of future opportunities, there is more likelihood that they will return. This requires a conscious effort to describe their initial departure as part of a career development process in which another organisation will provide them with the career

opportunities that we cannot. The challenge lies in enabling transportability of some core benefits such as superannuation and ensuring that employment service can be recognised as interrupted rather than broken. Increasingly, our leaders are moving between and across our different agencies - we should be making this easier rather than more difficult.

6. Value organisational leadership

When exploring organisational leadership, we realised that there were practical barriers to our staff moving into leadership roles and at times we had not always valued our leaders.

The lifestyle, earning capacity and relatively “stress-free” existence that front-line firefighting provides, actively encouraged many of our better able people to plateau at Station Officer, or even Senior Firefighter level. We tended to underestimate the barriers advancement and failed to appreciate how these acted as disincentive for mobility. Secondments and temporary assignments have proven useful opportunities for our people to experience leadership roles while not fully ‘burning their bridges’ for a return to the frontline. So often these temporary arrangements have in fact proven to be stepping-stones into permanent leadership roles.

Too frequently management roles in the Fire Service have been undervalued and subject to a continuous sequence of restructuring while the industrial clout of firefighters’ unions have ensured that these roles are relatively protected from change. On reflection, we have not always created the sort of rewarding and relatively secure environment necessary for our best people to aspire to senior leadership roles.

We do not profess to have achieved any sort of leadership utopia in the New Zealand Fire Service and we remain much like the curate’s egg, “good in parts”. However, we strongly believe that by reinforcing our desired management behaviours we will, in the long run, become the sort of organisation that we aspire to.

References

Tushman M.L. and O’Reilly C.A., 2002 . Winning through Innovation, Boston. Harvard Business School Press

Biographical Details – Vincent Arbuckle

Vincent Arbuckle is the Director of Human Resources for the New Zealand Fire Service. Prior to joining the Service seven years ago, Vincent held senior human resource management roles in the private sector, including the financial, information technology and manufacturing fields. Vincent has tertiary qualifications in management and psychology.

Appendix 1

Management Competencies

Leadership

1. Articulates a compelling organisational vision for their team
2. Encourages staff to buy-in to organisational values and goals
3. Takes personal ownership of decisions made by senior management team
4. Takes personal responsibility for shortcomings and failures
5. Motivates and inspires staff to always do their best
6. Makes the tough decisions when necessary, with fairness
7. Describes clearly for people how their work fits into the Fire Service's overall direction and strategic priorities

Strategic Perspective

8. Ensures shorter-term objectives are tied to the broader strategic direction
9. Recognises the impact of broader issues and emerging trend on their area of responsibility
10. Sees the potential risks and flow-on effects arising from their proposed decisions/actions
11. Establishes plans for own area of responsibility that accurately reflect the Fire Service's strategic direction and organisational goals
12. Takes a Fire Service-wide perspective on issues, rather than thinking solely about their area of responsibility
13. Challenges others to improve and innovate

Managing Performance

14. Establishes clear performance expectations, goals and standards
15. Deals fairly and promptly with poor performance and makes it clear what individuals need to do to improve
16. Recognises and rewards good performance
17. Values and empowers staff
18. Fairly distributes available resources to meet essential staff needs
19. Keeps staff well informed on decisions and issues that impact on them

Encouraging Development

20. Personally puts time into coaching and mentoring staff
21. Creates an environment where staff feel comfortable discussing perceived weaknesses/development needs
22. Gives staff the encouragement, opportunities and freedom to develop their skills
23. Provides regular, constructive feedback to staff on their performance and progress
24. Actively encourages staff to develop their careers beyond their current role and team
25. Considers developmental needs, capability and workload when delegating work to staff

Relationship Management

26. Builds effective partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders
27. Takes into account the needs and reactions of stakeholders when making decisions
28. Takes responsibility for resolving issues with stakeholders
29. Encourages teamwork and co-operation across groups

Communication

30. Communicates sensitive messages or disagreements with tact and diplomacy
31. Brings conflict into the open and facilitates resolution
32. Encourages the expression of differing and opposing views
33. Communicates persuasively and convincingly
34. Expresses themselves clearly and succinctly
35. Treats people with respect and courtesy
36. Makes an effort to put people at ease when communicating

Problem Solving and Judgment

37. Sees the implications and consequences of decisions and actions that are not obvious to others
38. Systematically analyses and makes sense of complex and sometimes conflicting information
39. Reads the situation and looks at problems from many angles before making decisions
40. Decisions and judgments are soundly supported by all relevant facts
41. Thinks quickly and accurately on their feet and is not thrown by pressure
42. Accurately judges the impact of decisions on others (knows what to say and what to do, when)

Planning and Organising

43. Business planning decisions balance key priorities and Fire Service needs
44. Is an effective and well organised project manager
45. Reports on financial and resource utilisation are timely and precise

Self Management

46. Delivers on commitments
47. Constantly strives to make improvements to systems and processes
48. Demonstrates a high level of insight into own strengths and weaknesses and their impact on others
49. Accepts feedback without becoming defensive
50. Actively pursues self-learning and development
51. Performs in a consistent and stable manner, even in pressured situations
52. Acts ethically and with integrity
53. Is flexible and able to adapt to change