The Complexity of Gender Diversity at Tasmania Fire Service

Interplay of Formal and Informal Leadership with Organisational Culture, Context, and Capability in the Tasmania Fire Service

The Tasmania Fire Service's (TFS) gender diversity challenge exemplifies the complex interplay between formal and informal leadership, organisational culture, context, and its profound influence on capability development. Formal leadership sets strategic diversity goals, while informal leaders such as influential brigade officers, exert significant social influence shaping day to day operational norms and behaviours (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Followership theory highlights the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, underscoring that followers' acceptance or resistance to change significantly impacts leadership outcomes (Kelley, 2008). Bastardoz and Van Vugt (2019) provide an evolutionary perspective, suggesting informal leaders tend to maintain the status quo to preserve their influence.

This duality creates a dynamic tension where formal initiatives to increase diversity encounter resistance embedded in longstanding cultural practices and informal networks, which perpetuate homogeneity and implicitly reinforce exclusionary norms (Ahmad et al., 2021). Within TFS, this manifests as informal social sanctions, hindering gender diversity initiatives perceived as threats to established power dynamics, impeding formal leaders' efforts to transform recruitment and promotion processes. Consequently, bridging this divide fosters trust and legitimacy in diversity efforts, while ensuring policies are effectively interpreted and implemented on the ground (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Additionally, indigenous leadership perspectives suggest the importance of leaders engaging authentically with diverse community values, strengthening cultural competence and operational effectiveness (Henry & Wolfgramm, 2018).

The culture within TFS reflects entrenched traditional masculine values common to emergency services, which act as implicit barriers to women's inclusion (Nicholson, 2008). Without embedding diversity as a core strategic capability, the organisation's adaptability and operational resilience are compromised, undermining its dynamic capacity to respond to climate change's increasing demands on emergency services, and engage effectively with Tasmania's diverse communities as described by Teece (2007). Moreover, diverse teams with women, outperform homogeneous ones in problem solving and innovation, further underscoring the strategic importance of addressing this capability gap (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

Cultural context shapes leadership styles and the implementation of organisational capability (George, 2015). TFS predominantly homogeneous culture constrains diverse leadership identities and narrows collective capability, limiting innovation and community responsiveness (Empson et al, 2023). Female representation allows the opportunity for stories about women to organically emerge, enhancing inclusivity at TFS (Yang, 2013). Therefore, addressing the gender diversity gap necessitates interventions targeting both formal systems, such as policies and recruitment frameworks, and informal cultural norms, which requires ongoing engagement and inclusivity efforts.

However, the change to a more feminine workforce can lead to an authoritarian leadership structure as an emotional response, further reinforcing cultural norms and hindering diversity (Garfield et al., 2019). Such a vacuum is illustrated by many survey respondents including one who said "I haven't seen a white, male career firefighter featured in any of the organisation's materials. The pendulum has swung too far the other way." (Broderick, 2025, p. 21).

This interplay of culture, context, and leadership aligns with Grint's (2005) concept of 'wicked problems,' indicating gender diversity cannot be resolved through hierarchical command but requires collaborative, adaptive leadership engaging both formal and informal stakeholders.

Recommendations for Enhancing Gender Diversity and Organisational Capability at Tasmania Fire Service

1. Establish an Inclusivity Task Force with Formal and Informal Leadership Representation

A key recommendation is to form an Inclusivity Task Force (ITF) composed of formal leaders (executive officers, HR), respected informal leaders (senior brigade officers, leading firefighters), and external stakeholders. External stakeholders must include Tasmania Search & Rescue Emergency Services, and Parks & Wildlife Service as state leaders for women representation in fire services, and inclusive management pathways, respectfully (Lohberger, 2025). Additionally, collaboration with the Victoria SES as the national gender diversity leader (VIC SES, 2023), while enhancing interconnectivity, communication, and sensemaking across intra-organisational and interstate lines (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016), enhancing TFS ability to sense and seize a broader range of opportunities in the future (Teece, 2007).

Using Eva et al (2019) multi perspective of collective leadership development, the ITF must begin with a socio material approach by ensuring the room is conducive to collaboration and all members are assigned time to meet equally, followed by an institutional approach to reconcile and redefine existing viewpoints. Finally, socio relational interventions to enhance communication between members. An equal proportion of women must be included, or an enabling leader to magnify marginalised voices to enhance ITF adaptive spaces (Uhl-Bien et al, 2017).

Launch could be with an organisational wide 24 hour hackathon, as well as quarterly, where brigades conduct collaborative idea generation to solve the diversity issue and select representatives. Selection, should include those behind the best ideas, so they can champion it through the ITF, with ITF decisions supported by the organisation. Furthermore, the task force could be adapted to address additional wicked problems encountered that require collaborative soft power including crisis events (Grint, 2005).

The task force would facilitate open dialogue, identify cultural impediments to women's inclusion, and co-design strategies addressing both structural and social barriers. This may include redesign of recruitment and promotion frameworks to actively attract and support marginalised candidates, moving beyond rigid traditional pathways (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017), implementing flexible working arrangements to further reduce structural barriers to participation, and enhance inclusivity by accommodating diverse needs (Eva et al, 2019), and design and implementation of continuous monitoring of diversity metrics and cultural indicators, with continuous feedback loops informing iterative changes and enhance ongoing improvements (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020).

Data transparency should be balanced with confidentiality to build trust, while progress reporting must involve the ITF, with diversity metrics incorporated into performance assessments and training modules to address assessed weaknesses and adapt to external changes (Teece, 2007). Diversity must be benchmarked against national standards in emergency services, with findings transparently shared to build accountability and collective ownership (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). This could include annual award ceremonies conducted by the ITF for individuals and teams identified as championing inclusivity and diversity, as well as the organisation for exceeding targets or national standards.

2. Develop Inclusive Leadership Training that Integrates Formal and Informal Leaders

Inclusivity enhances performance, cooperation, and fosters a compassionate learning organisation (Center for Creative Leadership, 2025). To address entrenched cultural norms and resistance, the TFS must implement inclusive leadership development programs targeted at both formal and informal leaders beginning with ITF members. Training must focus on enhancing individual cognitive and behavioural capabilities such as emotional intelligence, especially awareness of implicit biases, inclusive communication techniques, and effective conflict resolution, empowering leaders to role model inclusivity behaviours (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

The TFS must invest in leadership development programs specifically aimed at preparing marginalised groups for higher level roles within the organisation, by addressing the unique challenges faced by underrepresented groups in traditionally male dominated fields (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). High potential male candidates must attend to enhance awareness toward diversity issues. Additionally, develop structured mentorship, sponsorship and allyship opportunities for women, pairing them with experienced leaders to navigate organisational challenges and build leadership capabilities (Falls & Allen, 2020). This may also include potential under-represented recruits, to guide them through the application process, showcasing the TFS as an inclusive employer (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). These initiatives address the informal leadership dynamics by fostering networks of support and enabling women to navigate organisational hierarchies more effectively (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017), while providing male employees leadership development opportunities.

This systemic approach operationalises the long term strategic goals of diversity through specific immediate actions, to support the TFS's evolution towards a more resilient, adaptive, and community aligned organisation.

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