

Climbing Ladders

After 15 years you have to wonder why comment is still being made on a vocational development system that should be so well embedded into the fire and rescue service that normally it would have evolved into a second or third generation. Especially since for the past decade the whole educational and development programme of the UK has seen serious government investment and intervention that continues on an almost daily basis, most recently with the Further Education and Training Bill.

Indeed there are some who would hesitate to use the word training in the modern FRS fearing they may be perceived as old school or at least off message in terms of the respect required for individuality that drives the current Integrated Personal Development System. But IPDS is nothing if it fails to secure through training the practical competence for a technical service, which firefighting and rescue still represent. The FRS is still a operating in a technical environment not simply one of managerial competence.

Older versions of FRS training did vest a great deal of time in skill demonstration, they also required learning by numbers and subsequent expression of written knowledge. The late Progressive Training System was just that, taking an individual and progressively training him or her until management signalled satisfaction. Introverted, restricted in outlook, designed for known tasks and centred around the implicitly approved Fire Service College it was in many ways a success to its own aims. But it produced a fire service ultimately condemned as incapable of meeting the demands of our society.

Unfair as that summary maybe the PTS was consigned to history and so it was that change and the IPDS emerged. A change let us remind ourselves that started within the FRS where many Chiefs supported by their staff began to introduce personal assessments and individual development through external programmes as part of cultural shifts that followed recognised organisational best practice in personnel development like Investors in People and Charter Mark Awards.

Inevitably both in the FRS and wider world money came into the equation and workplace based assessments and in-house training using local educational or training providers became the flavour. The College role and fortunes waned, the big fire outfits shuffled around, working time was demanded for more pressing reasons and resources devoted to training were inevitably seen in a new light. Time spent every morning and evening on the drill ground and completing records, time studying and managing examinations, time developing and attending courses, all were reappraised to see if they were producing the goods. The collective wisdom was time was being wasted.

But 15 years on there are still unappeased voices that insist we are not there yet, that the IPDS is incomplete, lacks enthusiastic commitment and most worrying is not producing the new model FRS. Three issues appear relative to

The Integrated personal Development System - A Personal View

these concerns: competence *and* experience; understanding *and* demonstrable knowledge; skills assessment *and* external recognition.

The Faculty of Ownership

If we explore those issues we can see both the substance of doubt and the detail of solution. But let us start with ownership, by and for the FRS and in the context of one of the most developed FRS in the World. An FRS serving a society that is also one of the most technically advanced, urbanised and economically secure in the World. Indeed an FRS recognised as a practice leader in the whole business of fire and rescue management.

Original ownership of the Holy Grail of FRS vocational standards was vested not by statute but under the mutual consent of the FRS in The Fire Service College. The UK has never had an overarching FRS Training Agency, Board or even Doctrine, although there was a central fire brigades advisory board. The responsibility for keeping a weather eye on the outside environment; the FRS needs; and best practices in learning and education; was therefore left to chance. Centrally FRS training has studiously avoided the open world of higher learning, fearing the unknown or mental contamination we know not, having determined contributions from the wider education world could be bolted onto the FRS system. This had the consequence of ensuring the FRS remained outside best learning and development practice.

True, and thank heaven, there are now plans afoot to create a Centre of Excellence that will take part of that role on board but there has been a lost decade of full ownership of this critical issue. If that Centre to be a real success it must be more than a discussion forum, it must have substance and foundations that network beyond the internal partners and a role and function that explores, challenges and directs improvement. Similarly investment in College infrastructure, which has been most welcomed in recent years after again a decade of decay, is but a part of the solution. That same enthusiasm for investment has to be made in an openness of approach that will facilitate exchanges between professional and educational bodies. Commercial considerations and entities may need compensation and support if this is to really happen and underwrite a guarantee that the best learning approaches available are both introduced and exported from and to the FRS.

Competence *and* Experience

Experience is oft quoted as the missing element in IPDS, since climbing ladders no longer bash towers with the regularity of the chimes of Big Ben. It does rightly offend old school pupils to be told that their regard for experience under fire is over stated, not because they didn't realise that some of their time was misspent on the drill yard, but because the observation denigrates their professional standard. Horatio Nelson introduced drill because he wanted efficiency under fire, matelots who would, when scared witless, nevertheless continue to function. The military has continued that training tradition for the self same reason, when the action gets hot the individual

The Integrated personal Development System - A Personal View

stays cool, apt in battle and apt in emergency operations, but less so in the fire authority boardroom and gold command suite.

But that has not prevented the military from developing individual responsibilities and personal decision making to the highest level. Think of a young flying officer in a multi million pound strike aircraft, or that new second lieutenant leading an attack under hostile conditions, and that recently commissioned sub lieutenant in charge of the awesomely destructive warfare systems on a modern warship.

The difference between the military and FRS is perhaps summed up in one word, investment. Investment that ensures lessons and real time experiences are captured and then translated into useable hard facts and material to help the inexperienced safely gain knowledge of strategies, tactics and operations, which were successfully and unsuccessfully employed at previous incidents.

Frankly there is a wealth of experience in the FRS that is not being retained at anything like the pace it needs to be because of an absence of research and investment. The FRS is watching that experience run away into the sand of time. And when, as the case will be, in the years to come an unsatisfactory operational or managerial situation arises the question that will be asked is "Why was no action taken before that empirical knowledge was lost?" If we now wish to use our training and learning time better then investment is also required in technology and research. This can reduce the duration of learning periods whilst introducing extended experience in a safe failure environment.

The practical facilities of training establishments are also essential, not many facilities all over the place but a few very good ones that have good FRS accessibility. Whilst the FRS neither needs to own these facilities or manage them they do need to describe and detail what is required. The example of the urban search and rescue facility at the College is an exemplar case of such investment, in this case ownership and management has remained with government for the public good, but that is not necessary in every case.

Take also simulators of which there many non-FRS examples and one better-known commercial FRS marketed product. Simulators are the preferred training experience for warfare specialists and fighter pilots and we all can see why with millions of lives and billions of pounds at risk. But simulators need substantial investment, and not just in the expensive software programmes. The real investment is in capturing the detail and lessons of the past, of turning those stories into learning outcomes and producing virtual environments that feel and taste real. So realistic in fact that students end up with the dry mouth syndrome of an unforgettable experience because they were, even if very temporarily, performing on their ultimate mettle and afraid of failing. Every military student learns from the history of warfare and firefighters need a similar grounding.

Hopefully the FRS will not fight many more Buncefield's and Windsor Castle's but those experiences gained of Lancashire mill fires, Liverpool ships, Glasgow tenements, Midland heavy metals, Plymouth dockyards, Cheshire

The Integrated personal Development System - A Personal View

petrochemicals and even Sir Eyre Massey Shaw's London, will still infrequently occur. Shaw who believed a fireman's "*whole success depends on his getting in and remaining there*" when it came building fires, appears chronically outdated and psychopathically dangerous now but his legacy was to view the FRS as a business built on professional standards.

The FRS may operate largely at domestic fires, road accidents and deliberately set vehicle and rubbish fires, but investment in analysis of major incidents, to record the details and outcomes of decision time lines, strategies, logistics and tactics, is important corporate knowledge that must be retained. Relearning bitter lessons is unnecessary and if the FRS wants to shortcut experience then investment in the known alternative is essential.

Understanding *and* demonstrable knowledge

IPDS makes a very clear point that demonstrating underpinning knowledge is a requirement that shows the individual has an understanding of the subject established on solid principles and science. The demonstration of knowledge does not have to be universally replicable in every FRS and this absence of a unified system of assessment or verification of knowledge is a recurrent theme in discussions between professional staff. The removal of centralised FRS examinations it is thus argued at a stroke eliminated the opportunity to exercise control over an important development factor, the common standard.

Examinations invariably fill most people with dread, from school English tests to driving licences. Written examinations are the kind most likely to strike fear into the heart of all, requiring as they do sound preparation, an element of genuine surprise, a time limit on thought, eloquences of vocabulary, and abilities to both understanding the question and recall of the possible answer. Yet examinations remain the enduring symbol of education and learning systems everywhere, everywhere except!

Examinations may be partly oral or based on course work but the written element is unavoidable in technical and science subjects due to these two subjects having foundations of factual detail. An examination result is illustrative of understanding. Yes, a poor result can happen on a bad day, but the generality of having measurable assigned standards administered by a peer groups of competent seniors, has allowed parity of esteem across all professions. Given the FRS wanted to be less isolated, more main stream, innovative and open to a wider range of professional partners how surprising that when IPDS was set up with learning outcomes assessed in the workplace there was no measuring stick provided.

This really is a case of back to the black board. Not to create a process of promotion examinations but to determine what is underpinning knowledge and how it might be verified through examinations that are equitable throughout the FRS. The free movement of labour in Europe and the essential requirement to add capacity to the internal FRS skill range make for a compelling case to have examinations that are intelligently focused on the essential and desirable skills required by all FRS staff in the context of their

The Integrated personal Development System - A Personal View

organisational function. Without an appropriate examination system IPDS is an incomplete concept lacking suitability within the contemporary working environment.

The FRS is not a small family firm training relatives on the job but a large public organisation operating in the most testing of life safety critical situations. Nationally acceptable examination standards, whether you love or hate them, are needed but again, as with investment to maintain experience, the public sector doesn't have to own and manage an examination process. Professional bodies and non governmental organisations exist, like the Institution of Fire Engineers and City and Guilds, who already undertake this type of function and are there to be approached if pride can be set aside.

Skills assessment *and* external recognition

There is a view that inherently the FRS is perceived to be a skilled organisation and long may that be so. That perception may be more a product of the relationships and local communications that exists between FRS staff and those with whom they make contact under all sorts of circumstances, rather than anything more tangible since the FRS rarely fails the usual generality tests of response and helpfulness. The FRS however now finds itself more and more in situations where it is being asked to show that it has skills appropriate to an applied range of circumstances; circumstances that show technical, fiscal, personal and resource management, competencies.

The widely accepted UK model used to show professional standards of performance is parity of esteem obtained using the medium of external validation and approval. This is a point already well understood since no FRS worth its salt would employ a new member of staff without first traversing the details of a person specification to identify and then describe the essential skills required. The component of skills required clearly changes with role and function as is well evidenced by the now extensive number of professionals working alongside operational firefighters in the FRS and by the award to many in the FRS of external awards from professional bodies.

Unfortunately IPDS does not contain the essential external validation that would allow the conferring of parity of esteem so restricting transferability of skills and external professional recognition. There exist assessed components that enable accreditation of learning within other approved education and workplace competencies and whilst that is applauded, the exclusion of professional parity is a weakness. It is also potentially damaging because it contains elements of a lack of professional rigor in the eyes of other professions giving rise to the risk that some may consider unorthodox and untested methods are used to gain credence.

Changing IPDS so that this erroneous perception is dispelled need not be complicated. Models, like those for examinations, already exist and which, if adopted, would need little modification. The fact that the tasks of firefighting and rescue are technical activities aids this process because one of the major

The Integrated personal Development System - A Personal View

external recognition bodies in the World for technical competency is the UK Engineering Council.

EC-UK has three levels of member, Technician, Incorporated and Chartered Engineer, all of which are externally recognised and show transferable skills. EC-UK members operate globally, designing, installing, maintaining and managing, projects from the very smallest to the most complicated, they epitomise UK professional know how and technical competence. Furthermore the Institution of Fire Engineers, itself a full member of EC-UK, has already created a registration scheme for the FRS on behalf of UK engineering that would facilitate external recognition and bridge the current professional divide.

Evolution and Reform

In summary it has to be said that when IPDS started FRS modernisation did not exist. The planned for evolution was surpassed by the big bang of reform. The sound of the bang has now come and gone leaving training baby floundering a little but still in the bath.

Four steps are therefore suggested so that IPDS can progress into greater acceptability: a faculty for ownership; investment in experience; systematic examinations and; a bridge to external recognition. All of these are within sight and very attainable if desired. They would add substance without detriment to the very considerable effort already made and help complete integration of the FRS personal development system.

Dennis Davis

Dennis has for over 40 years been directly involved with the fire and rescue service and fire engineering. Recently appointed the Chairman of the Federation of British Fire Organisations he is an independent fire adviser. At Fire 2006 his contribution to UK fire was recognised when he received a Lifetime Achievement Award. As a former Chief Fire Officer in Cheshire, HM Chief Inspector for Scotland, President of CFOA and President of IFE and member of many national and international bodies connected with the advancement of fire safety and technical improvement he has extensive knowledge of many aspects of safety and public protection.