

Organizational Change of the Nashville Fire Department:

Complying with the National Fire Incident Reporting System



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Fire departments throughout the country respond to medical and emergent crises. With every incident, the departments are required to write reports documenting their findings. These reports can prove valuable for legal defense, quality improvement, or funding justification. The Nashville Fire Department is required by state law (Tennessee State Fire Marshall's Office, 2024) to submit the reports to the National Fire Incident Reporting System (U.S. Fire Administration, 2015; Tennessee State Fire Marshall's Office, 2024). While the department had the incident reporting policy in place for a while, recently it to became apparent how poorly it was performing compared to its peer jurisdictions (Kelton, 2023; Napier, 2023). This report will analyze the department's journey toward achieving 100% incident reporting in the face of culture and resistance using Kotter's 8 Steps of Change Management (Kotter, 1995; 2024). It will then discuss how the data is currently used within the department and suggest processes to further improve the quality of the data going forward.

Recommendations include:

Lower management (Captains), must buy in. More oversight is needed from their immediate supervisors (Caward, 2022; Hubbard, 2023). Implement a required signature from Captains on reports, establishing a first line of quality improvement. Finding a group of employees to be your early adopters and champions. Integrate Gen-Z into a early adopter coalition, their tech knowledge and desire for growth/inclusion could be a winning factor (Campbell, 2023; Sinek, 2020). Institute a fire reporting quality improvement team, giving continual feedback and training. Increase communication,

show how this data is helping the employees. Create short term wins and goals (Kotter 1995; 2024). Stay the course, do not give up until the changes are cemented into the department's culture.

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Nashville Fire Department

Located in Nashville, Tennessee, the Nashville Fire Department (NFD) is one of the top twenty largest fire departments in the United States for population size and number of emergency responses (Nashville Fire Department, 2024). Established as a paid department in 1860, the NFD traces its roots back to 1806 when a department of volunteers was organized during the incorporation of Nashville (Nashville Fire Department, 2024).

The Nashville Fire Department covers the 526 square miles of Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County responding to more than 150,000 fires, rescues, and emergency medical calls per year (Napier, 2024; Nashville Fire Department, 2024). The department is made up of 40 engines, 12 trucks, 4 rescues, 32 ambulances, and numerous other units spread across 40 fire stations (Fire News, 2024; Lamb, 2024; Napier, 2024; Nashville Fire Department, 2024).

The Department is comprised of more than 1,400 personnel with the mission “to provide high quality fire, medical, and rescue emergency responses and community support services to the citizens and visitors within Nashville and Davidson County, so they can work and reside in a community where an all-hazard response minimizes harm to life, property and environment” (Nashville Fire Department, 2024; Sain, 2023).

America Burning

On May 4th, 1973 the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control released a comprehensive study that detailed the fire issues that plagued the nation (Moore-Merrell, 2023; U.S. Fire Administration, 2019). “The America Burning report was a watershed moment in the history of the fire service and fire safety and prevention in the United States. It highlighted the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach involving government agencies, industry, and the public to address fire safety and it galvanized support for reforms” (Moore-Merrell, 2023). The findings of this study lead to establishing the U.S. Fire Administration along with the National Fire Academy under the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974 (U.S. Fire Administration, 2019). Later in 1979, the U.S. Fire Administration was moved under the newly established Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA, 2021; U.S. Fire Administration, 2019). Finally after the events of September 11, 2001 the Department of Homeland Security was created which unified FEMA and 21 other organizations (FEMA, 2021; Kruger, Gallagher, 2019; U.S. Fire Administration, 2019).

Numerous recommendations have been implemented since the America Burning’s comprehensive study was release in 1973 (Moore-Merrell, 2023). Specifically, the passing of the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974 also authorized the National Fire Data Center (NFDC) under the USFA organization, to gather and analyze information (Kruger, Gallagher, 2019). The goal being to understand the magnitude of the nation’s fire problem, as well as to detail characteristics and trends (Moore-Merrell, 2023). The act further authorizes the USFA to develop uniform data reporting methods

while advising state agencies in developing data and reporting fire damage (FEMA, 2021). In 1976, six states piloted what eventually evolved into the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) (U.S. Fire Administration, 2015). NFIRS has two objectives -- “to help state, local, tribal and U.S. territory governments develop fire reporting and analysis capability for their own use” and “to obtain data that can be used to assess and subsequently to combat the fire problem more accurately at a national level” (U.S. Fire Administration, 2019). Since then more than 15,000 fire departments participate in NFIRS to date (U.S. Fire Administration, 2015). Each year almost 6 million incidents are added to the database making NFIRS the largest collection of fire department data in the world (U.S. Fire Administration, 2015).

Requirements and Benefits of NIFRS Participation

The State of Tennessee participates in the NIFRS system through the establishment of its own state database managed by the State Fire Marshall’s Office and the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency. Per state law (TCA § 68-102-111), all fire departments in the state of Tennessee are required to report every fire within their jurisdiction within ten days (Tennessee State Fire Marshall’s Office, 2024). All departments are required to participate. There is, however, no penalty for poor report quality or low participation.

While this data proves valuable in creating new best practices, standards, and laws on the state and federal level, it also has many local benefits. Data can be used locally to create new training and policies as new workplace conditions arise. The analysis also

can provide valuable information for appropriate distribution of funds and equipment. The findings provide proof required to receive state and federal grants. Lastly the data is valuable to law enforcement as evidence to provide a safer community for the residents as well as the fire personnel operating in the city.

Barriers To Change

The fire service is a honorable and proud profession, steeped with tradition and culture dating back hundreds of years. It is often said that the fire service is “100 years of tradition, unimpeded by progress (Bashoor, 2018).” The retired Fire Chief of Prince George’s County, Maryland stated, “while many vocations have lamented that phrase as a marker of their situation, we all know those people in the fire service who use “tradition” as the daily rallying cry to fight change, aka progress” (Bashoor, 2018). In all actuality, the fire service is very progressive in adapting to the latest technologies and seeking to evolve from performance critiques. However as in any organization, there will be those who resist change and stand behind tradition as sound logic and justification (Bashoor, 2018).

Incomplete Reports

Throughout the years, reports had been submitted with a varying degree of completion. In 2015, upper management within the NFD, began to take a closer look at the department’s reporting completion scores. Captain Kelly Napier was tasked with finding issues and exploring what improvements could be made (Napier, 2023). In December of

2016, Captain Napier was sent to the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland to attend the NIFRS Fire Program Managers Course (Napier, 2023). It was here, that he discovered how abysmal the department's reporting problems were. As part of the training, each jurisdiction was asked to bring a sample of their reports. Captain Napier took over 22,000 reports representing the previous two to three months of emergency call reports. Of these reports, about 42% were rejected by the federal reporting systems due to incomplete or incorrect data (Napier, 2023). In addition to the poor reporting compliance results, it was discovered one department had a rejection rate of only 0.49% and the remaining departments were under 0.1% (Napier, 2023). Upon realizing the department's performance compared to its peers, management decided to prioritize this issue. Below, we will look at the NIFRS reporting change process as implemented by the Nashville Fire Department by aligning it with Kotter's 8 Steps of Change Management.

Using Kotter's 8 Steps for Leading Change

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency

There was complete buy in from the NFD administration once they realized the current state of the reporting. This proved to be a key component in starting and maintaining change in the department's reporting. As Kotter stated in his 8 Steps of Change Management, identifying and discussing potential crises or major opportunities is a key part of this first step (Kotter, 1995). Understanding the problem and unifying upper management to make a change was the difference between this movement and previous attempts at improving scores.

2. Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition

Once the direction was set, management tasked Chief Kelton and Captain Napier with developing the processes and training of the new initiative (Kelton, 2023). With a team established to create and manage the intricacies of the roll out, Chief Tomlinson said that they pushed the management of the program down to the mid level managers, the Assistant Chiefs (shift managers) and District Chiefs (middle level managers) (2024). Kotter stated that the guiding coalition should have “enough power to lead the change effort” and they should work together as a team (1995). As a team, the chiefs deployed the new OPG to the field personnel and the Assistant Chiefs set the enforcement standards.

3. Creating a Vision

The second step taken after Captain Napier's return from Maryland was the creation of a new Operational Procedures and Guidelines (OPG) (Tomlinson, 2024). The OPG solidified the direction and detailed the rules that would now be followed. Captain Napier stated that the program managers class he attended stressed the importance of having an OPG to drive the process of reporting (Napier, 2023). Kotter pointed out in his article that developing strategies was an essential part of achieving the vision (Kotter, 1995). Since there was no previous rule or directive for incident reporting, this was one of the largest steps taken in creating true change (Tomlinson, 2024). These first steps were the initial part in Lewin's change model. In this process, the old ways are “unfrozen” to create urgency, develop a new process, and communicate that so that people are ready to change (Connelly, 2023).

4. Communicating a Vision

Even though the reporting system was not new to department personnel, training was conducted to ensure that all personnel knew the newly established expectations (Napier, 2023). Initial pushback included some excuses of not knowing how to operate the software. Reiterating the message and repeating software training lessened some of the excuses and reminded department personnel what was expected. Training was again repeated in follow up training videos over the past few years. The vision was communicated through the new OPG, email, and in person by the District Chiefs (Tomlinson, 2024). Kotter recommends using every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision (1995). While the department has communicated the vision in several areas and reiterated it through training and emails, more could have been done. Adaption was slow with the most stubborn personnel and only improved with threats of penalty.

5. Empowering Others to Act on the Vision

Management also ingeniously instituted a rotation of the Assistant Chiefs through each shift. This way the strengths of each manager could be shared to all of the employees. Each shift functions almost autonomously. Over time, this allows the shift to develop different subcultures and traits. Rotating management allowed for a more uniform leadership style throughout the department (Tomlinson, 2024). The leadership also created a team to focus solely on this software program and increasing reporting performance. This allowed them to continually make changes and adjustments as needed to meet the goal. In my interviews with Chief Kelton and Captain Napier, they both spoke of continually looking for ways to streamline the system to make it easier and

faster for the personnel to complete their reports 2023). By making some fields required, automating as much as possible, and omitting unnecessary information they have been able to gather better information without imposing more time or burden on the employees (Napier, 2024). The middle processes of communicating, developing, empowering, and improving represent the change/transition phase in Lewin's model (Connelly, 2023).

6. Planning For and Creating Short-Term Wins

Kotter recognizes the importance of showing “visible performance improvements” and rewarding those who are involved in the improvements (1995). Unfortunately, this was an area that was not really included in the initial change rollout. Due to the mechanistic nature of the organization, decisions are more bureaucratic and top-down (Indeed, 2022). Being a government agency with a militaristic organization structure, changes are enforced instead of encouraged (Indeed, 2022) While some of the Assistant Chiefs would give daily updates to the crews on reporting completion scores and recognize the accomplishment of 100%, others would not. By rotating the Assistant Chiefs, however, they were able to spread the new habits and culture more evenly between the shifts.

7. Consolidating Improvements and Producing Still More Change

Upper management closely followed the progress and made adjustments to the OPGs. Chief Tomlinson stated that, initially, personnel were given until the next shift to complete reports (three days) (2024). However, issues were arising such as employees taking vacations or becoming sick and unable to complete their reports. Management decided

to amend the OPG so that all reports must be completed by the end of the shift (Tomlinson, 2024). While this was an unpopular move and more resistance was seen to this decision, it ensured that all reports were completed timely. At the same time, Chief Kelton and Captain Napier continued to refine and improve the system while keeping pressure on the managers to hold their employees accountable.

8. Institutionalizing New Approaches

These last few steps constitute Lewin's "refreezing" process. Even with the success, the department is still in the refreezing process (Connelly, 2023). Management's continual monitoring and attention to this issue is the fuel that has allowed this change to stick. Without their support, this effort would fail as it has numerous times before. Also, the continued support for the team running the software program allows improvements to continue. The consistent pressure and reminders are slowly allowing this change to become engrained into the culture.

The Results

It is often hard to show, with only a few years of data, how achieving 100% reporting has effected training or best practices. It may take several years of trends to encourage politicians to increase funding. However, one area utilizing this data immediately to make drastic improvements is the Nashville Fire Department's Fire Marshalls Office. The FMO enforces the city's fire codes on new and existing structures. It was discovered that the NFD responded to over 11,000 false calls from faulty or damaged alarm systems in fiscal

year 2022/2023 (Hutchison, 2024). The FMO was able to quantify this volume of runs at a cost of over \$1.46 million (Hutchison, 2024). However, that figure does not take into account the potential liability or danger that department members and the public experience running emergency during a response. The National Safety Counsel stated that, “in 2021, 198 people died in crashes involving emergency vehicles. The majority of these deaths were occupants of non-emergency vehicles (56%). Deaths among pedestrians accounted for another 25%, while emergency vehicle drivers represented 15% and emergency vehicle passengers accounted for about 3% of the deaths” (NSC, 2023). They stated that ambulances had a crash risk of 16.5/100,000 transports when using emergency lights and sirens (NSC, 2023). The FMO has written over 2,000 citation to date, taking numerous business and building owners to court for not repairing their alarm systems (Hutchison, 2024). If communicated effectively, I believe that every member of the department would agree that the cost of writing a report would be worth the extra sleep or even someone’s life because of reductions in false call alarms.

Vision for the Future

Now that the department has consistently achieved the quantity of reports, we now need better quality. Improvements in the report narratives as well as more detailed descriptions are needed. The FMO can only prosecute on the reports that have the correct and adequate information. With higher quality reports and narratives, further reductions in false calls could be expected. Improvements in public outreach through the PIO department as well as better education from the Training Academy could also be

achieved. This next section will discuss the eight potential errors that Kotter outlined in his paper, *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail* (1995). I will present solutions to achieve the desired transformational change that the department is seeking and discuss ways to prevent the department from failing.

Error #1: Not Establishing a Great Enough Sense of Urgency

After the initial realization, management has done well at maintaining consistency and pressure to achieve the desired change in NFIRS reporting. As long as upper management is able to continue the current course and see the need for increased quality, the department is heading in the right direction.

Error #2: Not Creating a Powerful Enough Guiding Coalition

Simon Sinek stated in his presentation, *How to Start a Cultural Transformation*, you must achieve 15-18% penetration to reach a tipping point (2020). Having upper and middle management's support as a coalition is great, more is needed. Lower management, such as Captains, must buy in as well (Caward, 2022; Hubbart, 2023). Typically, in our organization's culture, the reports are left to the newest and least experienced personnel. New employees are trained well but often lack experience. More oversight is needed from their immediate supervisors. Implementing a required signature from the Captain would establish a first line of quality improvement. The Captain would insure that the report is completed and could offer advice if critiques are needed.

Finding a group of employees to be your early adopters and champions will also help to encourage and spread the message. A great coalition could be found in the youngest and newest members of the department. Walter Campbell in his article *Adapting to Change: Working with Gen-Z in Law Enforcement and Fire & EMS Departments*, listed five ways that leaders could benefit from working with Gen-Z public service departments (2023). He stated that Gen-Z is tech-savvy, innovative, community-oriented, diversity-focused, and growth-oriented (Campbell, 2023). Communicate with these employees that they can be a part of a special innovative new team that could benefit the department and community. Also giving them the potential to grow faster, this has the potential to create an influencer base helping to facilitate change.

Error #3: Lacking a Vision

Just as the sense of urgency, management has a vision for seeing this change through. Continual innovation with periodic course corrections should be all that is needed to maintain the status quo and continue to grow.

Error #4 Under-communicating the Vision by a Factor of Ten

This is an area that management could continue to improve. With the tendency to make decisions and enforce new policies bureaucratically, little attention is given to communication and motivation. With the creation of a fire reporting quality improvement team, management could increase the level of communication. Giving continual feedback allows the employees to understand what management is looking for as well as giving them a opportunity to learn and grow. By showing how this data is helping the

employees and communicating the reasons, more personnel would begin to understand the purpose and get on board with these changes. Showing how the Fire Marshall's Office is using this data to enforce city laws on fire safety, making the buildings and citizen safer, as well as reducing the number of false calls that the department has to respond to. Showing employees that the time spent writing a slightly more detailed report could keep them from having to wake up for a 3 am false alarm. Using these detailed reports could also benefit the employees by allowing the Public Information Office to better educate the public and potentially reduce the amount of unneeded emergency calls. Lastly, better reports have the ability to highlight the need for more staffing, new equipment, or expanded services. They have the ability to justify more funding and win grants. Showing how their work in reporting is benefiting them will be key to changing the culture permanently and refreezing these changes.

Error #5: Not Removing Obstacles to the New Vision

This is also an area in which management has excelled thus far. Having a dedicated team to focus on this singular change and use their experience to make continual enhancements to the system is working. The addition of a quality improvement team as mentioned above would accelerate the ability to make further strides in removing new obstacles.

Error #6: Not Systematically Planning For and Creating Short-Term Wins

Creating short-term wins was an area that has historically been nonexistent. Breaking down the elements from our current quality of reporting to what we desire could be a

way to slowly and systematically create short terms wins. To this point, improvements in NIFRS reporting has been similar to the punctuated equilibrium model (KnowledgeBrief, 2024). From writing reports with few standards or enforcement, to writing new rules, to then learning new systems, to improving the systems, to amending rules, and finally achieving 100% reporting. If an incremental change model could be adopted for the transition to better quality reporting, improvements could be made with less resistance or possibly even unnoticed if gradual enough.

Error #7 & 8:

Declaring Victory Too Soon & Not Anchoring Changes in the Corporation's Culture

The department is on track for success in achieving it's change goals. By seeing that there are still improvements to be made and having a purpose for these changes, management understands that they are not finished. As long as management continues to support the teams monitoring and guiding our reporting program, make changes and corrections to OPGs when needed, and continues to move the finish line forward, we succeed in freezing these improvements into our culture (Connelly, 2023).

The culture of the fire service is what makes this profession so great. The history, tradition, and brotherhood cannot be matched by most organizations. If the NFD able to facilitate positive change in such a way that it becomes ingrained into our culture, there would be no limit to the success. McKinsey & Company advises to “use culture as your secret sauce” (De Smet, et al.,2021). The firm states that, “among the most successful companies, culture forms the backbone of organizational health and fuels sustained

outperformance over time: companies with strong cultures achieve up to three-times higher total returns to shareholders than companies without them” (De Smet, et al.,2021). The citizens need our culture to adapt and evolve into its best form, because their lives depend on it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, lower management (Captains), must buy in. More oversight is needed from their immediate supervisors (Caward, 2022; Hubbart, 2023). Implement a required signature from Captains on reports, establishing a first line of quality improvement. Finding a group of employees to be your early adopters and champions. Integrate Gen-Z into a early adopter coalition, their tech knowledge and desire for growth/inclusion could be a winning factor (Campbell, 2023; Sinek, 2020). Institute a fire reporting quality improvement team, giving continual feedback and training. Increase communication, show how this data is helping the employees. Create short term wins and goals (Kotter 1995; 2024). Stay the course, do not give up until the changes are cemented into the department’s culture.

Appendices

Appendix A:

America Burning - <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/fa-264.pdf>

Appendix B:

NIFRS Complete Reference Guide - January 2015 - https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/nfirs/NFIRS_Complete_Reference_Guide_2015.pdf

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