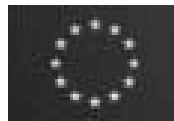


HIGH ROAD TO WORK ORGANISATION CASE STUDY

DUBLIN FIRE BRIGADE



Irish Productivity Centre

2001

Abstract

Dublin Fire Brigade as a unique part of the overall Local Authority of Dublin Corporation embraced in 2000/2001 an approach to change based on structural partnership arrangements linked to a formal agreement between management and unions. While the structural arrangements are now in place and some progress noted the initiative is at a very early stage.

HI-RES Case Study: DUBLIN FIRE BRIGADE

Sector

PUBLIC SECTOR – Dublin Corporation (Local Authority)

Key Words

Partnership agreements; trust building; role of trade unions in change; objectives; shared decision making; reward and change.

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1. Background Information

A primary influence on overall change in the public sector in Ireland is the partnership approach advocated and instigated at National level in a series of Agreements between the Social Partners and Government of which *'Partnership 2000'* and the *'Programme for Prosperity and Fairness'* are the most recent. The *'Partnership 2000'* Agreement had an explicit provision for advancing the modernisation of the Public Services through a partnership process and this was then further underpinned by the *'Programme for Prosperity and Fairness'*. It should be noted that agreed increases in pay are linked to the achievement of listed goals through approved partnership arrangements

Dublin Fire Brigade saw partnership as a new inclusive concept involving common ownership of the decision making process, and sought to tackle change through the direct involvement of each person in the Service. The approach adapted involved a framework and structures regarded as best suited to its environment and circumstances.

2. Drivers for Change

Undoubtedly the key driver was the supportive National scenario within which, over many years, a partnership approach has been advocated. This was allied to a strong drive for modernisation and change within the public sector generally, which had the support of management and trade unions alike; Dublin Fire Brigade while unique in its role is one of a whole range of public sector units in Ireland exploring and implementing change at the beginning of the new millennium. An important factor emanating from National Agreements in Ireland relating to change and partnership - such as the current *'Programme for Prosperity and Fairness'* - is the linkage of pay awards to the achievement of specified goals involving change and partnership. A clear incentive exists in units, such as Dublin Fire Brigade, to achieve agreed goals around nationally negotiated indicators as increases in pay follow.

3. Characteristics and Process of Change

The overall approach to change involved not only structural arrangements but also a commitment to learning, training and mutual support within an evolving process. Particular emphasis was placed on the avoidance of earlier negative experiences, which derived from an adversarial system of relationships. In addition to core structures it was accepted that the potential of techniques such as sub-committees, project groups and surveys could be exploited within the partnership ethos.

The creation of the new working climate was directly related to the need to improve quality, efficiency and service provision; such goals were in turn part of a National Strategy for the modernisation of the public sector in Ireland which however, while providing guidelines and support, leaves the implementation process to the actors at local level.

The following subjects were deemed of particular relevance to the partnership/change process:

- a) Measures designed to improve the performance and cost effectiveness of the Dublin Fire Brigade and the provision of a better service to the public.
- b) Major strategic proposals, and any proposal relating to the overall operation of the Brigade.
- c) Any change which could impact on the employment conditions of the staff.

For the workforce and Unions the new approach meant taking on board that management has overall responsibility for running the Brigade, based on statutory obligations to the City Council and Government Departments.

The Partnership Forum for Dublin Fire Brigade comprises management, union representatives and members of staff. Management selects the latter and Unions, from nominations received from interested staff members. Dublin Fire Brigade Partnership Forum consists of twenty-seven persons. The Forum meets monthly, has a rotating Chair and a Secretariat consisting of two persons jointly nominated who prepare agendas in advance of the monthly meetings and issue minutes. The Forum operates on a consensus basis but if agreement cannot be reached on any issue the Forum "agrees to disagree" and the issue could be referred to the Corporate Partnership Group - an umbrella structure in Dublin Corporation as a whole. Individual Fire Brigade staff and retired members may attend as observers at Forum meetings.

Sub-groups with clear terms of reference can be established by the Forum comprising management, union and staff representatives are, ideally, as small as possible. A sub-group may seek extra members if they deem it necessary, and that it is agreed by the Partnership Forum. Sub-group members are nominated for their expertise, experience or interest in a particular subject and can be from outside the Partnership Forum.

Each sub-group created selects a co-ordinator to take responsibility for organising meetings and contacting other members and brief written reports are issued with copies to the Partnership Forum Secretariat.

It is significant to note that time off formal work duties is granted to those serving on the Partnership Forum and on any sub- groups set up.

The objectives of the Forum are to:

- Identify Challenges and Opportunities within the Brigade.
- Heighten Awareness of the Partnership Process.
- Increase the Level of Trust Across the Dublin Fire Brigade.
- Create a Partnership Ethos between Management, Unions and Staff of Dublin Fire Brigade.
- Create an operating Partnership Framework.
- Agree Mechanisms to Verify Progress on Agreed Action Programmes.
- Establish better Communications in Dublin Fire Brigade.
- Achieve greater Transparency in Decision Making.

4. Obstacles to Change

The following obstacles are inherent:

- A degree of concern around the ultimate shape of partnership arrangements, particularly among those more used to a system based essentially on adversarial bargaining.
- Some management fears concerning any dilution or constraints on management practice.
- A view among some that the approach may be purely short term with a likely reversion to previous practices should the National impetus decline.

None of these concerns are surprising and simply reflect understandable reactions to the change process

5. Risk Analysis

The present approach to change and the partnership arrangements which have been created as a mechanism to help tackle that change in Dublin Fire Brigade - and in all equivalent Local Authority structures in Ireland - are linked to reward arrangements at National level such as those specified in the current *'Programme for Prosperity and Fairness'*. This could foster an instrumental attitude to change mechanisms linked to partnership whereby the approaches/arrangements are adopted in order to achieve the associated rewards rather than as an end in themselves. If however, the change and its associated structures and processes prove to be inherently valuable in themselves, then the present linkage may be of limited consequence and could simply be regarded as a catalyst.

6. Benefits of Change

While progress is at an initial stage it can be stated that a means has been initiated whereby management, unions and staff at Dublin Fire Brigade have agreed to tackle change issues on a consensus basis and are already ensuring there are no structural or resource impediments to participation in, or to the success of, the partnership process. It has been agreed to review at specified times the implementation of action programmes as set up by the Dublin Fire Brigade Partnership Forum. Such progress while modest at first sight is a total transformation from the purely adversarial climate which operated over many decades and which sought to resolve all issues within an adversarial climate using collective bargaining.

Conclusions

Given a National or central impetus for change in the public sector, local units, such as Dublin Fire Brigade in this instance, can create an operating framework to tackle the change process. Where the climate was previously based on a purely adversarial approach an initial agreement of structures and procedures along partnership lines can provide the central focus for the new initiative and joint groups, linked to the central focal point can be formed to tackle priorities. Time will assess how the recommendations and action plans formulated and agreed within the new partnership arrangements are implemented.

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