The role of gold and the gold commander

This chapter will examine the role of Gold, attempt to identify what makes an effective Gold Commander, and seek to establish the extent to which the interaction between Gold and Silver requires technical knowledge and understanding. The chapter will also explore the cultural component of Gold Command, and whether organisational culture places informal barriers in the path of direct entrants being accepted to undertake the role within the Fire & Rescue Service.

The author intends to define and explain the research question in the context of contemporary ideas and thinking, and to " develop a good understanding and insight into relevant previous research and the trends that have emerged" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003)

The Gold Commander is expected to exercise leadership, which traditionally would have been developed whilst operating at the operational and tactical level (following the normal career progression path). However, the recent appointment of senior managers within the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) who have joined as direct entrants since the introduction of new appointment and promotion regulations, which has allowed multi-tier entry (ODPM, 2004) will have evidenced leadership skills, which will generally have been developed as a result of working in other occupations.

As has been mentioned in a previous chapter, Adam Crozier is an example of a businessman who has demonstrated an ability to adapt and excel in different occupations, and exercise effective leadership with support from subject matter experts. With jobs as diverse as the Football Association and Royal Mail, is it possible that given an appropriate level of support, and a

nominal amount of training, Crozier could also demonstrate effective leadership as a Gold Commander?

A business leader may lead a team and make difficult decisions through an economic crisis, in the same way that the Gold Commander is responsible for leading their team, albeit remotely from the personnel who will be working at Bronze and Silver level. As it is recognised that " effective leadership processes represent a critical factor in the success of teams in organisations" (Zaccharo et al., 2001, quoted in Flin et al., 2008: 132), it is clear that the role of the Gold Commander in leading the team is vitally important to a successful outcome. The leader needs to be ' effective' in order to play a positive role in the resolution of an incident, and it is therefore necessary to define what ' effective' actually means, Oxford Dictionaries online simply states its meaning as " successful in producing a desired or intended result" (http://oxforddictionaries. com – accessed 24/11/10). However the measure of that success, and therefore effectiveness, is very subjective, indeed in the case of a tragic incident involving loss of life, the quality of the leadership may be subject to scrutiny by judicial review or public enquiry.

The Role of the Gold Commander

During an emergency it may be appropriate to implement strategic or Gold command, however the FRS will rarely instigate a Gold Commander solely for an FRS operation, which has minimal impact on other organisations. However, whilst a Principal Officer[1] may be the Incident Commander at a large, complex, or high profile incident, they will be operating at the tactical level when in command. In this situation Gold command is not applicable, although some co-ordination at Silver level is likely to be required.

If the same incident required a higher degree of interoperability and a Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG) were formed (HMG, 2009), it will require the attendance of a commander, who may be a lower ranking officer, but who nevertheless should have an appropriate level of experience and authority to act. This individual, formally known as the Fire Gold Commander, will set tactical parameters for Silver to operate within, and will not be expected to direct or take charge of operations on the actual incident ground. As soon as circumstances permit the Principal Officer should assume command, indicating that the positions are role related (ICS, 2008, p. 21-24).

However, the Police will routinely designate Gold Commanders, who will ' assume overall command and have ultimate responsibility and accountability for the response to an incident'. The Police Gold will have a secondary role to ' establish and chair the SCG in order to coordinate the emergency or major incident' (ACPO, 2009 p. 26). This would suggest a different expectation of the role of the respective Gold Commanders, with the levels of culpability/accountability appearing to contrast somewhat. If the Police Gold Commander is required to ' ratify and review the progress of Silver Commanders tactical plans' (ACPO, 2009 p. 25) and the Fire Gold Commander is required to ' set tactical parameters for Silver to operate within, and prioritise the personnel and resource demands' (ICS, 2008), the latter suggests a more ' hands-off' approach. This may explain why Police Gold Commanders appear to be more reluctant to accept direct entrants at the senior level.

1 Chief, Deputy or Assistant Officer

2 Gold Silver Bronze

Experiential Decision Making

The definition of an ' appropriate level of experience' as stated above is subjective, and clearly open to debate. It raises the question of whether the skills required for effective command at the operational and tactical level, are identical to those required for strategic command? Since 1985, researchers have been trying to establish how decisions are made during stressful non-routine situations, with Fire Commanders being of particular interest (Klein et al, 1993). The study of Naturalistic Decision Making (NDM) is concerned with how " experienced people, working as individuals or groups in dynamic, uncertain and often fast paced environments, identify and assess their situation, make decisions and take actions whose consequences are meaningful to them and to the larger organisation in which they operate" Zsambok and Klein (1997) (cited in Flin and Arbuthnot, 2002. p. 207). It has been stated that decisions made under stress do not follow traditional decision-making processes, and instead fireground commanders rely on their well developed sense of intuition (Gasaway, 2007). The amount of information required to make a decision will depend on the experience and intuition of the commander, and this has been referred to as ' thin slicing' by Gladwell (2005) which means making very quick decisions with small amounts of information, or the concept of " thinking without thinking", or " the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behaviour based on very narrow slices of experience".

Gladwell contends that thin-slicing can have its uses or can be a mistake. If one takes a small amount of information to generalise or make decisions in whole then decisions may be made that really are incorrect.

However, sometimes a small amount of relevant information is all that is required to make decisions and act. Gladwell hints that ultimately we should only rely on thin-slicing when our intuition has been honed by experience and training as " truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking". Clearly, the ability to ' thin slice' derives from experience of the situation or similar environment, where the commander has successfully or unsuccessfully dealt with an incident and can anticipate the next problem that may arise, which links to recognition primed decision making (RPD). The question of whether ' thin slicing' has its place in the SCG environment is debatable, as RPD is not usually associated with Gold level decision making, for strategic commanders may need to be discouraged from making decisions based on intuition, if a more analytical approach is more appropriate (Fredholm 1997, cited HMG 2008).

Flin and Arbuthnot (2002, p. 214) considered the fields of aviation, military and the police, and suggested that Incident Commanders (IC) may adopt one of four decision strategies, depending on their assessment of the available time and level of risk:

Recognition primed (intuition, gut feel) (If X then Y- little conscious effort need to retrieve Y)

Procedures (written or memorised) (If X then Y – conscious search)

Analytical comparison of the different courses of action available (If X, which Y?)

Creative (designing a novel course of action) (If X, have no Y, design new Y).

The decision strategies are based on " increasing levels of mental concentration, not just to retrieve information from the memory stores (long term memory), but to consciously operate on or think about the information retrieved (working memory)" (Flin and Arbuthnot, 2002).

Most of the studies involving NDM have related to decision making in dynamic environments where there is little time for the luxury of creative or analytical problem solving (HMG 2008). So how are prior operational and tactical experiences of a Gold Commander utilised, when faced with never before experienced occurrences such as the Buncefield Fire, the largest fire in Europe since 1945 which relied on creativity rather than prior experience to resolve successfully? (Wilsher, 2006)

If decision making is dependent on the experiences of the decision maker, it must also rely on the ability of the Gold Commander to be self reflective. If an individual is unable to effectively reflect and learn from their experiences, they will be unable to apply the learning to future events. Considering Kolb's experiential learning cycle (as shown in figure 1), it could be that they have twenty years experience, or one years experience, twenty times. So time alone is not a pre-cursor to being an effective Gold Commander, it's what has been learnt from the experiences during that time.

Figure 1 Kolb's Learning Cycle (University of Leeds 2010)

Leadership

One of the key responsibilities of the Gold Commander is to ' work with partner agencies' (ICS, 2008 p24). This will require a positive working relationship both before an incident occurs, as " true interoperability is built on mutual understanding, familiarity and trust" (ACPO, 2009). According to Goleman (2002: 51-52) relationship management relies on the most visible tools of leadership – including persuasion, conflict management and collaboration. More recently, this was confirmed by Bradberry and Greaves (2005), and of course collaboration, and to a lesser extent persuasion, are components of leadership which will often be tested in the Integrated Emergency Management (IEM) environment. Much research has been conducted to quantify the desirable attributes required for effective leadership (Kets de Vries 1993; Higgs 2002, Parry and Meindl 2002). Although there are many different types of leaders, people will often prefer to work with a leader who has outstanding soft skills. " Evidence increasingly shows that the higher one goes in an organization, the more important EI can be" (Kemper, 1999, p. 16). The Gold Commander should have developed self awareness, as the leadership of an organisation or team, can influence the work environment and affect everything from morale, to effective performance.

The selection and development of leaders is amongst the oldest of personnel functions (Fiedler 2001), but much of early leadership selection was conducted by birthright (Northouse 2007). Throughout the past century considerable research has been conducted into leadership which can largely be placed into three primary categories; leadership traits, leadership

behaviours and the situational context of leadership (Sashkin and Sashkin 2003).

Northouse (2007) states that " Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse. 2007: 3). Flin et al (2008: 129) suggest that leadership relates to the " personal qualities, behaviours, styles and strategies adopted by the team leader". They further suggest that leaders come in various forms, with some being task specialists, and others good with people. Trait theories of leadership were popular during the early to mid 1900s, and worked on the assumption that great leaders are born great (Sashkin and Sashkin 2003) and that by defining the necessary traits of effective leaders the secrets of leadership could be unlocked (Densten 2003). If leadership was a result of definable traits then it would be reasonable to expect that a defined list of those traits would have been found after over 100 years of research. This has not been found.

The main criticisms of the trait theories are that they fail to take account of the situational and contextual aspects of leadership, and many of the definitions of various traits are highly subjective (Northouse 2007).

The debate continues as to whether an individual must possess a definite set of characteristics in order to be a leader in any given situation. Some authors have suggested that the traits necessary for battlefield leadership would be effective in a school environment, dismissing the impact of the situation (Sadler 1997). Research indicates that there are varying opinions on the level of requirement of these very different qualities. Annotating these

qualities into a list form results in a comprehensive summation – but does the Gold Commander have to possess all, or just some of them? Conversely, if the list is not exhaustive and it is possible that someone might have other ' leadership qualities'. How does that equate?

Emotional Intelligence

Commanding an emergency clearly requires effective leadership, and by its very nature a dynamic incident will sometimes require an autocratic style, but is this always necessary? Is it the case that in the Gold environment, the application of softer skills is more advantageous, with Emotional Intelligence (EI) becoming a more important component?

EI was first mentioned in an unpublished thesis in 1986, and was the subject of a US article published in 1990, where it is described as " the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Mayer and Salovey, 1990). Since that time there has been a vast amount of research and published information on the subject of EI, evidenced when the author searched for books titled ' Emotional Intelligence" on the website of an online bookseller, returning a total of 9507 results (Amazon UK – November 2010). Goleman's original work is open to some debate as he seems to contradict his theory by suggesting that emotion is a biological reaction on the one hand, whereas EI can be learnt and developed. Whatever the case, it is clearly ' more art than science', as the interpretation of EI is subjective.

It would appear that the wide interest in the subject is due to the emerging recognition of the power of EI, both in terms of personal development, with the suggested opportunity to transform an individual's life experience, health and happiness, and for transforming the effectiveness of work organisations. The developing argument is that levels of emotional intelligence are inextricably linked to levels of performance, particularly in senior positions within an organisation, a viewpoint which is often repeated (Sparrow and Knight 2006).

Some organisations have embraced the principles of EI, including the Royal Air Force, which in 2002 completed a comprehensive review of leadership development, leading to the establishment of the RAF Leadership Centre. The centre's website informs that the RAF seeks a particular contribution from its leaders and lists nine attributes required for effective leadership.

The second attribute listed, is concerned with the possession of EI, described thus;

" Emotionally Intelligent – Self-awareness is one of the key foundations of effective leadership. Leaders who know themselves will be able to develop self-control and subsequently understand the needs of others. This will enable them to manage relationships at all levels better and remain calm under pressure. Thus individuals will be able to function as part of a wider team, invariably multidisciplinary, increasingly joint and often multinational, in the delivery of military capability" http://www. raf. mod. uk/pmdair/rafcms/mediafiles/1E8488F4_5056_A318_A8AB0AC2CFC4589A. doc. (accessed 29/11/10).

In 2006 the ' Centre for Leadership' was established at the Fire Service College. The strategy for the development of tomorrow's FRS leaders is enshrined within the leadership model ' Aspire' (HMG 2008) which has been developed in response to the identification of the importance of excellence in leadership. The model is underpinned by the FRS core values, linking transformational models of leadership, and guiding behaviours to influence leadership actions and results.

The Aspire model contains some elements which can be linked to EI, including;

Openness to Change

Situational Awareness

Confidence & Resilience

Effective Communication

The author finds it somewhat surprising that, whilst it is obvious that the RAF has recognised the connection between emotional intelligence and effective leadership, there is no direct mention of EI within the ' Aspire' Leadership Model and Framework for the FRS. This is somewhat disappointing

Notwithstanding the above, the FRS has recognised the value of people management competences, in addition to task competencies, and that both competency sets need to be included in assessing, training and evaluating effective incident commanders. "" The non-technical skills of an organisation's emergency response personnel are as important as their

technical expertise and knowledge and application of emergency operating procedures” (Crichton and Flin, 2001).

Competence

A dictionary definition (www. dictionary. reference. com) of competence is:

“ the quality of being competent; adequacy; possession of required skill, knowledge, qualification or capacity.”

Whereas Harvey (2004) describes it as “ the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities at a level of expertise sufficient to be able to perform in an appropriate work setting”

However acquiring skills are only part of the equation, for it is necessary to effectively perform a role as defined by Boyatzis:

“ Effective performance of a job is the attainment of specific results

(i. e. outcomes) required by the job through specific actions while

maintaining or being consistent with policies, procedures & conditions

of the organisational environment.” (Boyatzis, 1982: 12)

He further contends that maximum performance occurs when an individual’s capability is consistent with the job demands and the organisational environment. (Boyatzis, 2007: 2).

Figure 2 – Boyatzis’s model for competencies and effective performance

Boyatzi's model illustrates how an individual's personal values, knowledge, competencies and abilities contribute to performance in terms of the overlap with the job demands and the organisational environment. In simple terms this means that the bigger the overlap the better the performance.

For the purpose of this research paper, Flin's (1996) definition will be followed, which is " the ability to perform consistently within an occupation to the standards expected in employment".

The National Occupational Standard for a Fire Gold Commander working at the Strategic Level is EFSM 1 (www. skillsforjustice-ipds. com/nos/en/EFSM1. doc accessed 7/12/12). This standard details the technical skills and understanding which are required at this level. However, there is no mention of non-technical skills, as these are contained within the National Strategic Manager Personal Qualities and Attributes (CLG, 2009).

In the emergency services, competency requirements for key decision makers are still very much based on rank rather than proven skill or ability though there is a move to change this. In the FRS, there is a shift from " rank to role", where there is a role map of competences under the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) designed to be relevant to each level in the service. However, as with any cultural shift, it will take some time for this reality to assert itself through all ranks within the FRS (Devitt, 2009). The author finds it interesting to note that whilst there is a role map for Brigade Manager, strategic uniformed mangers within the FRS still prefer to title themselves, Chief Fire Officer. Does this perhaps suggest that the senior

leadership of the FRS are not culturally ready to embrace modernisation in its truest sense?

Culture

Organisational culture is a system of shared values, and beliefs about what is important, what behaviours are appropriate and about feelings and relationships internally and externally. Values and cultures need to be unique to the organisation, widely shared and reflected in daily practice and relevant to the company purpose and strategy. (CIPD, 2011). In simple terms it can be referred as ' the way we do things around here'.

The leader will be affected by the culture in which they operate, and its values, structure, hierarchy and rules will dictate how they are likely to command an incident, and ultimately whether they will be judged to be effective or ineffective (Devitt, 2009 p. 37). Devitt refers to the work of Reiner (1991) who studied senior police officers and identified four different types of Chief Constable, the barons, bobbies, bosses and bureaucrats. Reiner contended that their different leadership styles will be reflected in the culture of the organisation which may influence the Chair of an SCG, and thus the style and approach with which a strategic multi-agency response is operated. If the Chair of an SCG adopts the style of a ' boss, who controls mainly through authority not power, don't suffer criticism gladly, and see community policing as idealistic in the face of an overwhelming tide of crime', this will clearly affect the dynamics of the group Devitt (2009).

Chan (1996) undertook a study of police culture, and refers to Bourdieu's relational theory, which explains cultural practice as the result of interaction

between cultural dispositions (habitus) and structural positions (field), situating culture in the social and political context of police work. Sackmann goes on to describe the essence of culture as ' the collective construction of social reality'. Her cognitive model encompasses all forms of shared organised knowledge:

' the form of things that people have in their minds; their models for perceiving, integrating, and interpreting them; the ideas or theories that they use collectively to make sense of their social and physical reality' (Sackmann 1991: 21).

She classifies cultural knowledge within an organisation into four dimensions:

dictionary knowledge, which provides definitions and labels of things and events within an organization;

directory knowledge, which contains descriptions about ' how things are done' generally in the organization;

recipe knowledge, which prescribes what should or should not be done in specific situations; and

axiomatic knowledge, which represents the fundamental assumptions about ' why things are done the way they are' in an organisation.

Axiomatic knowledge, often held by top management, constitutes the foundation for the shape and future of the organisation. These may be adjusted or revised from time to time as a result of critical evaluations or growing experience. Sackmann sees cultural cognitions as being held by

groups rather than individuals. These cognitions are socially constructed, and may be changed or perpetuated by organisational processes through repeated applications. In time, these cognitions are imbued with emotions and acquire degrees of importance; they also become ' habits' of thoughts that translate into habitual actions. With the FRS implementation of the modernisation agenda under the National Framework (although this has recently changed with the election of the coalition government), some senior fire officers are reluctant to readily accept that direct entrants or non-operational staff may be effective at undertaking a Gold Command role, whilst a number of Police Gold Commanders have expressed their opposition to the idea, as evidenced by the author's research..