

## **New Zealand Fire Service**

### **National Commander Paul Baxter**

#### **UFBA Speech**

#### **Welcome**

**E aku rangatira - tena koutou katoa; E hoa ma, nau mai haere mai ki Te Whanganui a Tara!**

To the many leaders - I acknowledge you all; Friends, welcome to Wellington!

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

#### **First up...**

...I want to talk about the Fire Service's first principle – and my personal priority – and that's safety.

I am happy to say that since I spoke to you at last year's conference, no one has died in the line of duty. Every firefighter and staff member should rightly expect to be able to go home at the end of a day's work, and that has happened.

But sadly, nearly a thousand firefighters suffered injuries of one sort or another in the same 12 months – 10 of them serious injuries. In 119 cases, firefighters were off for more than seven days. Significantly, 14 firefighters suffered psychological harm as a result of their work.

The recent safety summit, which was a first for the Fire Service, demonstrates our commitment to safety. All sections of the country's fire services – volunteer, career and rural firefighters – were represented, along with our partners from Police, ambulance services and Defence.

It is vital now to disseminate the messages from the summit to regions – to get the message out to individuals and brigades – and I'm delighted many of the attendees have started to do that.

Without getting into specifics, I would say the key messages to communicate are:

- We need to recognise workplace safety and wellbeing are not a “strategic priority” or a slogan on a poster, but must be at the heart of how we think and act.

- We need to learn from mistakes and continually challenge ourselves to do better by adapting and improving how we work.
- We need to change our beliefs, attitudes and values on safety and wellbeing.
- We need to make support services – such as counselling and psychological help – more available in response to the high-stress situations our people increasingly face.
- We expect a high level of commitment from all of those in leadership positions.
- We need to adopt a zero-harm approach to workplace safety – that is, we need to regard all injuries as preventable, not as the inevitable consequence of our high-risk work, because accidents “don’t just happen”.

For those who were not at the summit, here is a snippet of what happened.

Our recent safety culture survey shows we’re doing well, but that we could do better.

The number of responses was excellent – more than three and a half thousand, which was our highest ever and a reason in itself to celebrate. The survey, for those of you who don’t know, looked at the attitudes of staff and volunteers to on-the-job safety – in all its aspects.

We scored best on the way senior leaders demonstrated the importance of safety, but worst on how we fairly and consistently corrected safety practices that weren’t up to scratch.

Bullying, for the record, was shown to be very low. I will expand on this later.

We intend to use information from the survey to change our game.

## **Fire Services Review**

We’ve heard from Minister Dunne, and we’ve heard from Fire Service Commission Chair Creech about the changes coming up in the sector. But I’d still like to recap on what I see as the key features – even though I’m sure many aspects of the change were signalled to you during the discussions and consultation preceding Cabinet’s decision this week:

- We will create a single, new organisation.
- This bringing together of 53 separate organisations will be a merger, not a takeover.
- We will get a clarified mandate for what we do – and also the protection to do it.
- Communities will get a voice through the formation of regional committees of influence.
- Our volunteers will get stronger support.
- Problems with our funding system will be sorted out.
- We will be able to improve our culture, and this will be helped along by the fact the merger will bring together different cultures.
- Finally, the new organisation will be responsible for implementing the changes itself under the direction of the new Board.

### *Big changes, but no change*

The review heralds big changes in the management of our business, but it won't alter the fact:

- We still have to fight fires
- We still have to extract people from vehicles
- We still have to run fire safety campaigns, and
- We will still have to keep up our training and maintain our equipment.

In other words, on a day-to-day basis, things will go on much as they have.

There will, however, be changes in the way fire services are managed. I'm determined that those changes will result in improvements in service delivery. It will ensure we maintain high levels of professionalism. It will also offer clearer career paths for our people.

In summary, the review will bring change, but not to the fundamentals.

### *We don't know everything yet*

The fact is, right now we don't have answers to all the questions you're sure to have. What I can say is that we'll keep you informed throughout the process of change – and, importantly, as soon as we get clear ourselves.

Equally importantly, we'll be seeking your input and views throughout the process – as we have done in Vision 2020, a Fire Service initiative I will mention in a moment.

This is a once-in-a-generation change. Things won't happen overnight. The broad direction has been set. It will take a transition team to flesh out the specifics – a team that will report to me and the new Board.

Specifics include such practical considerations as uniforms, structures, fleet livery, branding.

The fire services family will grow in size. As I've said already, this is a merger of 53 organisations. It's not a takeover. Again, the details of that relationship – the reporting lines, the organisational structure and so on – will have to be worked out in coming months.

It will be an exciting time. Remember that most of this is what you have asked for. I urge you to see it as a challenge and an opportunity, a way to think anew about how we work and organise ourselves and how we can do that better.

I ask you to keep doing the great work you do while we make the changes required by the Government.

## Vision 2020

The Fire Services Review is about changes in the future. Our Vision 2020 project is about change right now.

We've seen for a while that we need a more structured way of improving our performance – and one that involves our own people far more than in the past. We've wanted to build communication and trust with volunteers and career staff – a more open and honest interaction, in other words.

Vision 2020 got that process going. We talked to about four thousand people up and down the country. We held nearly 240 meetings with groups of people – people at all levels of the organisation – and listened to what they said: what was good, what was bad, what could be improved, and how it could be improved.

Since I spoke to you last year in Tauranga, we've achieved a lot.

We've had a busy year:

- Safety is improving on all fronts. You have all stepped up, injury rates are down and people are taking it seriously – as I said, everybody went home safe:
  - We have researched international best practice and it is confirming we are doing well
  - Our peer-support programme has been independently assessed and strongly endorsed.
- We have completed a review of our approach to risk reduction and fire safety and are now developing new tools and resources.
- We have implemented our new volunteer leadership communications framework – hopefully you will have already attended some of these face-to-face meetings and be seeing an improvement in sharing information. We are now working on a similar framework for career staff.
- We have greatly improved our communications team function to improve communication to you and our stakeholders.
- We have increased the number of trainers in the regions to support you.
- We are well into delivery of first-responder training for 58 first-responder-classified brigades.
- Our medical response agreements with ambulance services have contributed to reduced response times to the critically ill and improved survivability rates.

I now want to tell you about the 12-month plan, and what we've achieved so far:

- We've gone out to tender for replacement IGC radios that will be more reliable than current models.
- We're well under way with changes to volunteer TAPS programmes to make them more practical. The Qualified Firefighter TAPS programme, which once struggled for numbers, is now oversubscribed.
- We're moving to more accessible online training that is more relevant to the type of callouts firefighters respond to. This will be particularly valuable to volunteers.
- We've laid the groundwork to install free Wi-Fi in half of all volunteer stations, and we will be looking at how to get it to the rest.
- We have been upgrading ICT equipment at volunteer stations, and by the end of next month 120 stations will have the latest gear and faster internet speeds.

Please note that copies of the latest version of the Vision 2020 action plan and bulletin are available in the foyer, so take them with you when you leave. The action plan will also be published on FireNet, and the bulletin will be sent to all stations and brigades in the next couple of weeks.

## **Inclusiveness**

The Fire Service is a family. Family members are supposed to treat one another with respect and care, and generally speaking that's what happens. In many cases we support each other well and celebrate the good times and are the first to step up and help each other in the not so good times, like the many emails and messages of support I have personally received over the recent media attention on bullying in the Fire Service. But it's not always the case.

### *Bullying and inappropriate behaviour in our brigades*

*What I want to say is important, but I do not want it to sound like a lecture or to be condescending in any way because I know the great majority of our people get this, but it has to be said ...and it is, as the Minister noted, the elephant in the room.*

We need to treat one another a little better. I'm talking about bullying. Some of you may have seen the recent TV3 programme on bullying in the Fire Service. Much of it was distorted and wrong. There isn't bullying among 92 per cent of our people, as alleged. But there was a grain of truth in some of it. We do have bullying. Admittedly, not many cases – just a handful at any one time – but it is enough to be a concern. One case of bullying is one case too many. We're in the caring business after all – we there to help people in need – so surely our colleagues are the ones we should have the most concern for?

We have a policy on bullying and I want to reassure you that we enforce it vigorously. But more to the point, I ask you all to think about how you behave towards your colleagues. Because many of the bullying cases we investigate turn out not to be about bullying but

rather are about a breakdown in personal relationships. Hence my earlier point about respect and care. Good management has a part to play here in nipping such friction in the bud. Ultimately, however, it's about each person putting personal rivalries and differences to one side. In other words, to put the interests of the community and the brigade first.

We need to make our family a more diverse and inclusive one because in today's society, the one-size-fits-all approach does not work. We know that more diverse work groups and organisations perform better by allowing more viewpoints to come together to give better solutions. We need more women among our ranks. We need more young people. We need more people from different ethnic backgrounds. Everyone has something different to add, and we want as many strings to our bow as possible, but most importantly I want people to be safe and feel included.

### *Mind the gap*

Many of you may have seen this well-known image in London's underground. It reminds travellers on the Tube to beware of a possibly large gap between the platform and trains.

This safety warning can, I think, be an analogy for the gap between how people in our brigades have acted – and still act – and what is acceptable in society and the workplace today. Put another way, it's the gap between what some generations and individuals have found acceptable and what others do not find acceptable. What was okay in the past is not necessarily okay now.

So I say to everyone:

- Mind the gap between what a group of male-only colleagues might joke about and what women in the workplace might find appropriate or acceptable. Ask yourself: would you be happy with your own son or daughter being a member of the Fire Service?
- Mind the gap between old racist comments and jokes and what today's multi-cultural society regards as humorous – I can assure you those old jokes aren't funny.
- Mind the gap between the direct, perhaps sometimes even forceful, directions on the incident ground – which are perfectly appropriate and legitimate – and the different sort of inclusive leadership called for around the station and at meetings.
- Mind the gap between the old Fire Service – where the boss know best and you did as you were told – and the new Fire Service, where we value everyone's contribution and where all opinions are valued and respected, even if we don't necessarily agree with them or adopt them.

If you mind the gap yourself and make sure others also mind the gap, you won't fall into the hole, as some of our people have.

## *Fire Service culture*

A lot has been said about the culture in the Fire Service, and in fact it features in the Minister's Cabinet paper on the Fire Services Review.

I have a view on our culture, or more correctly the many cultures that can be found in the Fire Service today. There is the volunteer culture, the career culture, the rural culture, the big city culture, the provincial town culture, the small rural community culture, the head office culture ... the list goes on.

What I know is that we should be really careful not to lose the good things about our culture and what has made our organisation so strong, so valued and so respected by New Zealanders, the aspects that have allowed us to keep the public's view of us as the most trusted and respected public organisation in the country.

What are these vital characteristics I'm talking about? Well, probably the most important is the willingness of individuals to volunteer their time, without prospect of reward, to help others, to help their communities in times of need. It could be as dramatic as our response after the Christchurch earthquakes. It could be saving lives. Or it could be the myriad low-key ways we help out that hardly rate a mention in the next day's newspaper.

After the recent *3D* current affairs show, I received many, many emails of support. People assured me they thought we were on the right track. That was great feedback, and I really appreciated it. I hope those emails were from brigades where everyone is treated with respect, where everyone is encouraged to participate and where leaders provide a safe and inclusive environment.

But equally, I don't think we should put the blinkers on and imagine it's all sweetness and light, and there's no problem. I have heard from others and have seen first-hand the sort of bad behaviour that should have no place in our service. It's not nearly as bad as reported in the likes of *3D*, but make no mistake, it does exist.

For the record, however, let me make clear what sort of behaviour constitutes bullying, and what does not. We take our cue from WorkSafe, which says bullying is "repeated and unreasonable behaviour [and] includes victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening a person".

A single incident of bad behaviour is not bullying. It takes a pattern of such behaviour, although of course a single such incident could be repeated and so should not be ignored. Strong, direct language is not bullying. Nor is forceful leadership – in the right circumstances.

So my plea to you all is this: don't let it be your brigade that is next in the headlines. I also say to all of you, whether senior or junior in rank: stand up, speak out and make sure your colleagues or fellow volunteers are not treated disrespectfully. I can't emphasise enough how vital it is to cultivate really open, safe and inclusive brigades where every member feels valued and respected, whether a new recruit or an old hand in the business.

When I leave the Fire Service I want to be sure that it is in better shape than when I started and I hope you do too, so I ask you to be the person who is prepared to stand up and be counted to ensure our place is a better place to belong to and work in.

I sincerely applaud the UFBA for the conference agenda this year that really "floats the boat" on diversity and inclusivity – which means more women, more people from different cultures, more younger members, and a more inclusive and safer workplace.

### *Bringing different skills to the mix*

If we widen the pool of people we recruit among, we may well find that our efforts to boost membership numbers bear fruit. There's no doubt some brigades are facing real difficulties in this regard. Doing more of the same won't give us a different result. We need to try something new. I urge you to think about trying to make your brigades more inclusive and diverse. At the very least, your brigades' membership will reflect the reality of your local communities. And that will in itself create more support for brigades' activities. There are already some great examples out there among brigades.

I reiterate my commitment to achieving this outcome. I also say: if you have no support in your brigade, if you have sought in vain for help or action from your senior managers, then contact me personally. I assure you of my support and that any matter will be dealt with fairly and as quickly as possible.

## **Urban search and rescue**

I would like to close on something really positive.

It might seem self-evident to you here today, but we're not just a firefighting service. We're an all-hazards emergency response service, and this year our capabilities grew further with the United Nations international classification of our urban search and rescue team.

We've had that capability for a while now, based at centres in Auckland, Palmerston North and Christchurch, but now we have international confirmation that we're up to world-class standards.

I think I and you can justifiably feel proud of this "heavy" classification – heavy meaning we can provide the full suite of responses in the event of natural disaster such as earthquakes overseas.

Part of that feeling of pride stems from the fact we passed with such flying colours. According to the UN classifiers, we didn't just pass – we actually set, in their words, a new gold standard for urban search and rescue.

I mention all this for the following reasons.

- First, the Christchurch earthquakes brought home to us the importance of a self-sufficient and strengthened USAR capability.
- The second is that the earthquakes highlighted our need to be able to respond in kind when neighbouring countries in the region face similar tragedies.
- Thirdly, there is every likelihood we could face similar challenges in the future. The Asia-Pacific region, of which we are a part, experiences three-quarters of the world's natural disasters each year, but has only a fraction of the world's response capability – so we need to be able to lift our contribution.
- Fourthly, we put a huge amount of work into achieving this classification. As New Zealand's co-chair of INSARAG's Asia-Pacific region this year, I know that accomplishment was well received.
- And fifthly, and most importantly, this success proves that the people in our emergency services – and I include this audience – are capable of great things, world-beating things. We can achieve so much, and I'm hopeful, and very optimistic, that we can replicate that kind of performance when we implement the changes outlined by the Government this week.

## **In closing...**

Can I thank you all for your contributions over the past year and reiterate my commitment to you to keep you as informed as possible as we go through this period of change. It is, after all, the biggest reorganisation of the service in 40 years. I doubt we will get everything 100 per cent right on the first go, but I'm very determined we try.

I ask you all to see the change as the best possible step forward for the communities we serve, through the brigades we belong to.

Tēnā koutou

E noho ra