

Who does the fire and rescue service call when they need help?

Your Service has come under the spotlight because of a major incident. The government is insisting on savings or cultural change. Disputes with unions. Perhaps you simply want an independent perspective on the status of your organisation. Sound familiar?



Daniel Cossio

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Almost every community on the planet has some form of emergency response; it's basic human nature to organise ourselves, from bucket lines to million-dollar trucks. The response to fires and other emergencies is universal, but having reviewed organisations worldwide, we can confirm that the methodology in dealing with them varies dramatically from place to place and no two Services do their job in exactly the same way.

Surprisingly, information on how counterparts in our industry operate and sources for independent advice are extremely limited. Try a Google search for Fire Service or Fire Department consultants and you will find that most offer fire prevention, legal compliance or engineering services, that they serve only a specific local market and are usually operated by retired officers.

In this era of massive open information, our industry does poorly: we don't share resources across borders, sometimes not

even across county lines! For example, only one textbook from the extensive IFSTA library has ever been translated into Spanish – 'Essentials of Firefighting'. In spite of the good intention, it wasn't properly proofread by Spanish speakers and contains some major bloopers such as references in Italian and a completely incoherent index.

It's only edition was published over 20 years ago, yet it is still the primary training guide in Latin America, which tells you quite bleakly where we stand in terms of global sharing of methodology.

Some organisations like the Institute of Fire Engineers (IFE) have made valuable networking efforts, but we are light years away from an international best practice database that is contributed to by every continent and available in multiple languages.

▼ **GES works with a team approach, hiring experts for each specific project. Below, one of our consultancy teams for the LATAM region.**



▲ **Consultants who practice what they preach ensure that their recommendations have a tangible impact. Above, the consultants put on their fire gear and show how the principles they taught are put into practice.**

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (US based) and the UK Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) have developed some international branches but, again, in a very limited capacity.

In 2007, Chris Gannon retired early from a career as a Fire Chief and Government Advisor to focus on reviewing and improving organisations worldwide and founded Gannon Emergency Solutions, now an internationally recognised name, providing review and reform in the industry, particularly in regions where these services are practically non-existent such as Latin America and Africa. I joined the company as an economist in 2010 to manage business development for Latin America and made partner in 2018.

We have been hired by organisations from 38 countries for a whole host of reasons. From developing policies and procedures and improving operational efficiency to a growing demand for cultural and transformational change projects.

Fire Chiefs often contact us when they need an independent viewpoint to support their arguments to local authorities. On the flip side, governments have also hired us when they want expert advice to identify what their Service 'wants' and what it actually 'needs'.

It is a strange fact that officials will often listen to a foreign opinion rather than their own public servants, seeing an international assessment as a more credible barometer.

So where do governments, local authorities or Fire Chiefs usually turn when they need an independent assessment of their organisation?

Here are some of the most common choices:

1. Internal review

These are usually stimulated by a crisis or major incident, demanded by the government and carried out by local officials. Having read many of these from around the world, they often result in knee-jerk investment in operations and assets. 'Shiny things' are commonly seen as a quick fix that appears impressive, makes the authority look responsive, keeps the FD happy and appeases the public, when in practice they usually fail to solve the underlying problems.

The value of improved policy, procedure or administration frequently gets overlooked. These types of reviews can be like applying a band-aid to a patient

needing surgery when a deeper, more comprehensive diagnosis is required in order to achieve genuine results.

The city of Johannesburg invested millions in a fleet of 150 new vehicles and 15 years later, just six vehicles remained operational among the 26 city stations. There were serious legal repercussions and public outrage ensued. If they had invested time to assess the situation more profoundly and developed systems to support the investment, the situation may have been very different.

2. Peer reviews

Those who opt for a review rarely go outside their national boundaries and usually believe that peer comparisons with a more progressive local department are the way to go.

A common practice is to invite senior officers from a neighbouring FD to inspect and report on the conditions. Clearly, this is not the most objective way of doing things, as globally, the Fire Service is still a very fraternal network where officers will avoid condemnation of their colleagues for fear of hypocrisy.

In England, it was only in July 2017 that the government agency responsible for assessing police forces extended its remit to include independent inspections of the Fire and Rescue Services (FRS). Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services – thankfully abbreviated to 'HMICFRS' – now assesses and reports 'on the efficiency, effectiveness and people' of the 45 county Fire Services in England. For the first time, the five regional Inspectors are not from a Fire Service background – prior to this, uniformed officers always supervised the inspection and audit of standards.

Who do English Fire Chiefs turn to for advice before and after the compulsory evaluation and improvement notices from the HMICFRS?

3. ISO ratings

In 1971, several American insurance groups merged to form the Insurance Services Office (ISO) and developed a system of rating Fire Departments called the PPC – Public Protection Classification. The rating ranges from 1 to 10, with '1' on the scale considered 'superior' and '10' meaning it does not meet the minimum standards. However, it isn't that simple.

An ISO rating is just one of several tools that property insurers use to help establish rates based on risk and its use isn't compulsory. In Departments that operate Emergency Medical Services (EMS), usually over three-quarters of the emergency calls are EMS related, not fires. The ISO rating does not analyse that capability, nor does it consider other non-fire-related activities such as motor-vehicle accidents. Therefore, it's not the most accurate indicator for an overall evaluation of a Fire Department.

4. What about the NFPA?

The NFPA is the most widely recognised and developed set of standards in the industry and many (particularly 101) are often adopted as a 'cut and paste' solution by many local authorities across the globe and incorporated into local legislation as the reference to be observed by residents, even



◀ Chris Gannon explains the new guidelines taught in a breathing apparatus procedures course, before entering the smokehouse with the team.

is getting good quality from its contractors. Volunteer or combination departments can participate, but only a few have done so given the costs and time commitment required.

6. External review

The few consultants who do offer review services are usually retired officers with experience limited to a career in one particular state or national emergency service. They recommend what they know and typically refer to models, codes and regulations from their previous employment.

Some organisations have hired commercial private-sector consultants with no connection to the fire-service industry. In 2010 for example, Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service in the UK hired the local University Business School to successfully evaluate and reconfigure risk management.

There can be value in contracting an impartial industry-external assessment, but most are statistically orientated and by not appreciating the full spectrum of issues that ultimately affect a response to the public, regularly fail to deliver practical or applicable recommendations. I've spoken to recognised international accounting firms who have struggled to understand, let alone solve, some of the mind-boggling Fire Service conundrums such as shift systems or standards of cover.

Unions in some countries have been highly critical of external reviews, accusing the process of being:

- Politically motivated, when commissioned by the government.
- Fraternally biased, when conducted by other uniformed officers.
- Lacking credibility, when conducted by an individual or organisation with no fire service experience).

A different approach

Precisely because there are so many complex and intricately linked components in running an FRS, it is crucial that any review be holistic and comprehensive in its approach. We have developed a very specific, unique and closely guarded formula for assessment, but there are some key general considerations to bear in mind before you decide on a review:

in non-English-speaking communities.

The NFPA standards serve very specific purposes that have great value in particular circumstances, for example 1710 and 1720 give some excellent direction on organisation and deployment of career, volunteer and combination Departments, but the NFPA doesn't publish a universal A-Z on how to operate and manage every single facet of a modern Fire Service.

5. Accreditation

In 1997, the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) was created in the United States to administer a new comprehensive evaluation program. This resulted in the creation of the 'Center for Public Safety Excellence' (CPSE), a partnership between the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC).

Despite the word 'International' being

quoted in all of these organisation titles, it is misleading, as they are almost entirely focused on North America; much like the 'World' Series in baseball.

The accreditation process involves a self-assessment and evaluation model encouraging each agency to determine community risk, safety needs and a standard of cover, along with evaluating overall performance against goals. In addition, the system establishes a method for continuous organisational improvement. The process is completely voluntary, time consuming and expensive. Very few FDs are accredited in the USA and of those, the majority are career departments or at Department of Defense (DOD) facilities for whom the CFAI system is mainly used to make sure the government

▼ Dan Cossio explains different approaches to vehicle rescue ops to a group of firefighters who then take turns practising them with hydraulic rescue tools.



1. Get the team right: For stakeholders to buy into the idea, the people commissioned to undertake the job must have the right balance of skills and experience for the task but also have credibility in the eyes of the people under examination. No one likes a group of strangers poking their nose into their business, especially fire departments that are very personal places to personnel.

The ideal blend of a review team should include members with significant experience in the industry, along with social, economic and commercial acumen. Having the right personality and a people-orientated approach is also a big ingredient.

2. Leave no stone unturned: Every aspect of the organisation itself, as well as some less obvious external factors, must be systematically evaluated and assessed. Sometimes the most unlikely issues can affect performance.

3. Approach sources strategically: Consultants that rely solely on feedback from service managers are not going to get the full picture. Giving all stakeholders a confidential opportunity to contribute to the study is essential. Firefighters rarely speak out in front of their bosses; everyone must be given a forum to express themselves. Candidness is key.

4. Don't cut and paste: Recommending North American or European methodologies, is not a guaranteed fix and often won't fit the need. We have encountered some excellent practices in developing countries where organisations with limited resources have developed ingenious, practical and effective solutions to community fire and rescue needs – solutions that would be beneficial to any organisation.

It's a fact that English-speaking agencies rarely make any effort to look at or accept models from other parts of the world, but when they do (such as Flashover methods from Sweden) it can revolutionise the way the job is done throughout the industry.

5. Implement realistic recommendations: It's important that reviewers study and understand all the underlying factors before reaching conclusions and only make recommendations that are realistic and achievable. Implementation is

fundamental – there is no bigger waste of time than investing hundreds of hours into a carefully crafted review, just to see the final report being filed. Reports must be made public and authorities and departments held accountable to a scaled programme of change.

A fundamental here is being able to offer the implementation of recommendations as part of the consultancy programme or as a subsequent improvement phase. A review team capable and willing to put their money where their mouth is is the best bet to avoid the hard work gathering dust and gains them credibility with the sponsor and their personnel. One of our main policies as a company is getting out of the office and into fire gear, to prove the principles we preach.

6. Keep costs moderate: It's not about spending a fortune. Many of the improvements in our projects have been achieved without any significant capital investment; simply sharing best international practice or seeing things from a different perspective can often stimulate positive change using the available resources.

Closing comments

Interschutz, the mega fire expo, hits Hannover, Germany in June this year. A stroll around its halls is like jumping into a sci-fi film: ARFF trucks that look and function evermore like spaceships and VR, AI, robotics and drones offering novel ways of training and fighting fires with less and less human risk.

▲ Ensuring that every angle of a fire department is analysed is key to understanding where the work needs to be applied. Many times, practical solutions can be incorporated with hardly any capital investment but to great effect.

Admiring these groundbreaking innovations in the technological side of our industry begs the question: Is the same level of attention being dedicated to evolving the organisational and human capital components of fire and rescue services?

Things are changing: there are fewer structural fires, climate change is affecting forest-fire trends, more people are living longer and primarily in cities – just a few factors that affect the way emergencies happen and how they need to be handled. Fire services can be stubborn and often slow to embrace change, preferring to focus on traditional areas of service delivery, while topics like prevention, efficiency, welfare and diversity often lag behind.

We are lucky to have the opportunity to evaluate all kinds of organisations across the globe but the one constant that we reinforce in all of our projects is that service to the community must be the driving force behind all decisions and activities undertaken by emergency organisations. They must keep pace and an independent review is a very valuable investment in helping to maintain or improve standards to meet the growing new challenges in a changing world.

➡ For more information, go to www.gannonemergency.com