

**Extinguishing Injustice: Growing Equity, Diversity and Inclusion  
in Canadian Fire Departments**

**Abstract:**

**Purpose** - This paper evaluates the value and necessity of greater equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in Canadian fire departments. Rather than focusing on changing hiring practices, the paper seeks to highlight how leadership can implement a culture of EDI that will encourage all people to participate.

**Approach** - From a leadership perspective, this paper aims to show how EDI can improve firefighter teamwork and job performance while satisfying moral obligations to better represent Canadian communities. Strategies and their limitations for communication and culture change are discussed.

**Findings** - Leaders of Canadian fire departments can utilise organisational change models focusing on improved communication techniques and models to implement cultural changes needed to allow for more EDI. Specific recommendations based on business research into culture change, communication and EDI are outlined.

**Originality** - There has been little research or recommendations on increasing EDI in Canadian fire departments through cultural changes. Most existing literature is vague and tends to focus on hiring practices over an analysis of internal culture. This article provides analysis of best

business practices and applies them to the cultural context of fire departments to promote culture change.

**Practical Implications** - Recommendations to fire department leadership for cultural changes and communication are provided. Further, strategies and reasoning for why inclusive departments are more effective are given.

**Social Implications** - Creating a more inclusive culture in fire departments will lead to an increase in applications from people who have not typically applied in the past.

**Keywords** - Equity, diversity and inclusion, fire department, leader, LMX, ambassador, culture, teams

**Paper Type** - General Review

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## **Introduction**

Canadian public services have a moral responsibility to represent the populations they serve (McLeod and Harrington, 2017). Although Canada as a whole embraces the need for equitable representation across workplaces, fire departments are falling behind in recruiting candidates outside of typical hiring patterns (Daflos, 2019). The 2016 Canadian census reported women made up only 4.4% of the total population of firefighters across the nation (Statistics Canada, 2019). Recent Canadian studies indicate a disproportionate presence of those identifying as both white and male in fire departments (Bilefsky, 2021). While demographic changes cannot occur overnight, Canadian fire chiefs are acknowledging a lack of diversity in their departments. Addressing and changing the status quo continues to be a persistent problem.

The media has reported extensively on an exclusive culture in Canadian fire departments (Bilefsky, 2021; Daflos, 2019). Over the years, fire chiefs and city counselors have tried, with limited success, to change organisational culture and diversify the workplace (Stolte, 2020). High school recruitment and career-access programs that pre-hire candidates and then train them have been launched in various cities such as Toronto (King, 2016). Despite best intentions, these programs have experienced union challenges about offering preferential treatment to specific groups (CBC News British Columbia, 2007). Fire department leadership has the responsibility and power to drive the organisational changes necessary to create a more equitable, diverse and inclusive workplace (Afful, 2018). Through an application of change models and a focus on effective communication, leadership can commit to improving culture and create a more welcoming workplace where prospective recruits from different cultures, disabilities, genders and sexualities will feel more welcome to apply (Gonzalez, 2010; Kuppler, 2016).

Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is a policy by which organisations can guide their hiring and business practises to allow for a welcoming and transparent environment for all people (Ideal, 2022). The University of Toronto (2022) offers comprehensive definitions for EDI:

- Equity is the fair and respectful treatment of all people. Equity is the process; equality is the result
- Diversity is the demographic mix of the community, with a focus on the representation of equity-deserving groups
- Inclusion is the creation of an environment where everyone feels welcome, is treated with respect, and is able to fully participate (para. 1)

Fire services, like many organisational cultures, use core value statements to uphold inclusive workplace cultures. However, official documents from employers rarely guide employee behaviours (Burkus, 2011). By taking a proactive approach and working with firefighters to adjust the culture to align with EDI values and principles, leaders can move their departments forward together and effect meaningful change.

Numerous guides for increasing fire department diversity exist, including those published by the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (2020), the International Association of Firefighters (2022) and the International Association of Fire Chiefs (2020). Though many of these guides suggest ideas from organisational change models, the focus is primarily on *how* departments have resisted change, rather than exploring *why*. Stolte (2020) recommends programs should be combined with cultural changes; otherwise current and future employees will not feel valued in the workplace.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate and consider methods of promoting EDI in Canadian fire departments through cultural changes initiated by leadership. Whilst cultural changes are slow and can be difficult to implement, they offer sustainable organisational EDI goals (Schein and Schein, 2017). By increasing communication, it is possible for department leadership teams to create lasting and meaningful cultural changes to positively affect EDI and welcome a more diverse workforce.

## **Methodology**

A targeted literature review was conducted to apply business strategies for communication and cultural change into the context of Canadian fire departments. Research evaluated the impact of diversity on teams, cultural change models, communication and

leadership styles in business and firefighting. The Wilfrid Laurier University Libraries database, Google Scholar and general Google searches for news sources and business and firefighting periodicals were used to collect relevant information. Key search terms included: leadership, communication, culture change, business, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

## **Discussion**

### **The Impact of Diversity on Teams**

In their professional work, firefighters regularly employ collaborative problem solving and teamwork. Numerous studies show ethnic diversity creates more effective teams by challenging individuals' biases and objectivity to make better decisions (Rock and Grant, 2016). For example, according to Page (2017), increasing the ratio of women raises the collective ability of a team by increasing its capacity to read emotions—an invaluable skill set for helping those in crisis. Staffing fire halls to include a variety of disabilities, genders, races and sexualities places people who may think differently together, leading to increased innovation and performance (Rock and Grant, 2016).

The McKinsey & Company Institute researched and wrote three extensive reports on EDI with the most recent in 2020. This newest report expanded on the others and collected EDI data from over 1000 businesses across 15 nations (McKinsey & Company, 2020). One key finding was: teams that show higher levels of diversity systematically out-perform their competitors. Further, it concluded organisations which act with urgency to increase meaningful EDI initiatives will be better positioned to attract new and diverse talent.

Diversity of thought is a hallmark of effective teams (Reynolds and Lewis, 2017). Diversified teams make firefighters more effective while satisfying the moral imperative of being

inclusive (McLeod and Harrington, 2017). However, cognitive and identity (ethnic) diversity are not the same. Identity diversity drives innovation by making people interact with others who are unlike them—a process that makes people uncomfortable (Page, 2017). This discomfort can cause team members to apply a higher level of thinking to problems. Cognitive diversity is where people on a team think differently to solve problems, regardless of their age, ethnicity or other identity factors. This form of diversity is another driver of high-performing teams, where individuals can provide novel approaches to problems (Reynolds and Lewis, 2017). It is important to recognise and support both of these forms of diversity in firefighter recruitment, even where the latter is unseen.

Diverse teams lead to better problem solving outcomes, but only if the team is collectively held accountable for behaviours and strives to be more inclusive (McKinsey & Company, 2020). It is the leader's duty to foster a culture that encourages diverse voices and new perspectives not stifled by the existing cultural norms (Reynolds and Lewis, 2017). EDI initiatives need to be carefully prepared and rolled out only once employees understand their overall purpose (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Oosthuizen and Naidoo (2010) found that forced or disingenuous attempts to deliver programs for political or other means elicited employee disinterest and resentment.

## **Culture Change**

Geisler (2021) suggests EDI initiatives in organisations are directly tied to long-term culture changes. These changes can only be achieved when leaders make it their personal mission—relegating diversity goals to human resource managers are inadequate to promote

changes (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2009). Ellinas *et al.* (2022) recommend using business cultural change models such as Kotter's (1996) to increase EDI in organisations.

### ***Kotter's Change Model***

Kotter (1996) created an eight step process to guide leaders through successful organisational change by studying multiple companies and organisations: urgency, creation of a change team, strategy, communication, obstacle removal, short-term goals, momentum and sustainability. Change urgency is led by leaders who show a genuine interest in culture changes (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Kotter, 1996). Leadership teams curated to drive change must be able to demonstrate changes are possible and have measurable goals (leading indicators) to show it is happening. Employees should be invited to participate in discussions and have a level of ownership in the change process. Meaningful and engaging communications about the status and goals of culture changes show and celebrate the momentum of the drive (Kotter *et al.*, 2021). Removal of obstacles includes ensuring employees feel supported and safe to adapt to the new culture and the sustainability of the drive begets itself as leadership repeatedly relays the urgency and overall goals to change.

### ***Schein and Schein's Organisational Culture Changes***

Schein and Schein (2017) suggest that in order for meaningful cultural changes to occur, some outside pressure or force may need to be applied. In Canadian fire departments, pressure has been building from citizens and media concerned with a lack of ethnic and gender diversity (Daflos, 2019). Pressures for change can create opportunity but still require commitment and significant effort from leadership (Schein and Schein, 2017). Before any transitions can occur,

Kuppler (2016) asserts leaders need to identify what is discouraging diverse applicants. Schein and Schein (2017) further point out that once the pre-existing culture is challenged, leadership must implement a succinct and unambiguous plan describing the problem and how to fix it. Core values statements can act as important guides for behaviour but are not sufficient to initiate or maintain cultural changes (Burkus, 2011).

## **Communication**

Organisational culture changes are best enacted and led by purposeful leadership teams recruited and trained to reliably deliver messages and provide critical feedback on progress (Schein and Schein, 2017). In the context of fire departments, the leadership team is led by the fire chief and acts as the driver for change. Specific goals and terms used for changes involving EDI are important (McKinsey & Company, 2020). These must be clearly defined to the workforce. Oosthuizen and Naidoo (2010) note that sustainable demographic changes depend on “active engagement of employers, employees and unions in workplaces in identifying equity issues and agreeing on response plans to address them.” Messaging about changes should be seen as a form of organisational sustainability (Leonard and Grobler, 2006). Shute *et al.* (2012) recommend distributing EDI information utilising models such as Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action*, where focus is placed on intelligibility, truth, sincerity and appropriateness. Models such as this describe the value of leadership’s openness and transparency in communications and ensure information is mindfully geared to individuals at each rank. Rachele (2012) states communication models can be adapted further to allow space for marginalised voices to amplify and promote EDI values.



## ***Transformational Leadership and Employee Engagement***

Transformational leadership is a leader's ability to engage with followers and grow together toward a common goal (Burns, 1978). The ability to effectively connect and show commitment to change is contingent on showing authenticity (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Kotter *et al.*, 2021). Leonard and Grobler (2006) state transformational leaders' internal communications regarding equity should show the intent and goals of culture changes. Leaders act as facilitators who are willing to listen and learn from employees as opposed to managers of equity.

Goleman (2000) outlines a series of leadership styles and describes how people utilise different styles in different situations. Luthra and Dahiya (2015) suggest a leader's ability to effectively communicate with employees must change based on their style of leadership. Fire departments are paramilitary and leaders are trained to give direct orders in emergency situations, a form of coercive leadership. While this style of leadership may prove to be effective in emergencies, Goleman's (2000) research shows coercive leadership is the least effective for the long term motivation of employees. For culture changes, combining affiliative and visionary techniques can show that employees come first and cultural changes are in their best interest.

Witherspoon and Wohlert (1996) suggest employees should have consistent and direct access to information on culture change goals. They further recommend all employees should be trained in EDI and organisation specific communication techniques. Othman *et al.* (2017) assert transformative leaders who invite everyone to be a part of positive culture changes allow for communication both up and down ranks.

## ***Leadership Member Exchange (LMX) Theory***

Using Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) leadership member exchange (LMX) theory to ensure high quality relationships between leaders and their immediate subordinates, EDI initiatives can be communicated clearly and concisely. As leader-follower relationships evolve from being transactional to transformational, employees perform at a higher level. Leaders can develop communicative two-way or dyadic relationships with subordinates to show their interest in their growth. Stringer's (2006) early findings showed this relationship in an American fire department, where employees who experienced quality leader-member interactions were more likely to enact changes suggested by leadership. Creating a management team can include hiring new people and adding experts in areas the current leadership is lacking, such as experts in EDI and organisational change (Goleman, 2000). Once in place, teams lead by example and demonstrate *visibly* respectful interactions with all employees while actively listening to the perspectives of mainstream and marginalised groups (Dreachslin, 2007).

### ***Communicating in a Chain of Command***

Canadian fire departments utilise a chain of command system for performing tasks and disseminating information. Davis (1968) found oral communications were often altered or changed completely by the time they reached lower ranks due to a filtering process at each management level. Issues in understanding messages delivered from leadership to firefighters are no exception when this form of communication is used. Further, as a seniority based promotion is used, the leadership team may not have any input into who lower ranking managers are. This can be problematic if any individual in the chain of command alters or undermines messages, unconsciously or not.

To avoid logistical or other unanticipated problems with communication in a chain of command, and especially in matters of organisational culture change, leadership can create multiple opportunities to address and listen to employees directly. Acknowledging known issues or stressors that cultural changes may cause and succinctly outlining the goal can go a long way in establishing trust and buy-in (Schein and Schein, 2017). The overall message needs to be simple and addressed directly to the people who will enact the change (Myatt, 2012). Schein and Schein (2017) state changes in culture should not be viewed as optional, though it is important for messaging to avoid putting undue stress on employees. Leaders should be clear that while the workplace has problems, they are generally not created maliciously and can be repaired. Blaming can make people defensive and unreceptive to new information (Andersen, 2019). Instead, the focus should be on empowering employees to be agents of change in improving a culture that has been previously unfair or unsafe.

Leaders can visit fire halls, hold video conferences, or create a pre-recorded address. Kuppler (2016) proposes any communication options should encourage input from employees without fear of reprisal. Each of these communication techniques has issues. The former two strategies fail to recognise the command structure and firefighters may not be comfortable interacting directly with the leader performing the presentation. The last one fails to allow for timely or interactive employee input, an important factor in transformational leadership or LMX. All scenarios could be improved with anonymous post-interaction surveys to accommodate those who were unable, uncomfortable or unwilling to share feedback at the time.

### **Firefighter Ambassadors**

Front line firefighters are invaluable assets in assisting with cultural changes as they understand firehall culture. Schein and Schein (2017) and Kotter *et al.* (2021) recommend identifying individuals at each rank to openly act on leaders' behalf as informal ambassadors. Ambassadors are employees who already subscribe to the goals being promoted by leadership. Identification of those who are interested can be accomplished through official memos requesting volunteers or by word of mouth. They then can be utilised in both formal and informal training settings (Aguirre and Alpern, 2014). Stationing ambassadors strategically at different fire halls can provide role modeling and real time reminders of desired behaviour. Authenticity in representing and embodying the desired changes means these individuals have to act openly and not hide motives from their crew, emphasising that the intent is never to spy on or betray fellow employees to management. Ambassadors should be able to communicate concerns from fellow employees directly to the top, and thus assist in making local adaptations to how the change goals can best be achieved. This two-way communication allows leadership to assess and redirect efforts where needed (Aguirre and Alpern, 2014).

Any employee can act as an ambassador, but the urgency comes from people in positions of power or privilege who believe in and will drive change (E. Krepsstekies, personal communication, February 7, 2022). They must be the ones accountable for cultural change and avoid placing additional stress on already marginalised groups or individual people. Ambassadors can act as allies by challenging discriminatory comments or behaviour while amplifying the voices of marginalised people without speaking over them (Saxer, 2019). They are empowered to exemplify the cultural changes needed to rid the workplace of discrimination and actively promote EDI.

A positive and growth-based approach to formal training can demonstrate how valued aspects of fire hall community and culture may be leveraged to remove exclusivity (Katzenbach *et al.*, 2012). When trainers and experts fail to acknowledge or utilise the positives of existing culture, their messages are primed to elicit shame and apathy, potentially leading to contempt, backlash or opposition to the intended goals (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016). The role of peer-to-peer ambassadors in formalised training is not only important, it is effective. They provide local context to professionals, assisting them in delivering messages, and encourage learning through modeled behaviour.

Graen and Uhl-Bein (1995) also warn of the potential for leaders' offers of cultural change to be rebuffed due to existing peer interactions. If employees feel attacked, they may create an us-versus-them mentality (Aguirre and Alpern, 2014). Ambassadors can help mitigate this effect by having trusted peers who can lead the culture changes in fire halls. However, even with planning and communication, ambassadors will still need to be reflective in order to avoid the problems of inadvertently creating "in-groups" and "out-groups," exclusive sub-groups that can arise in teams (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 229). These sub-groups can undermine the leader's (or ambassador's) goals of moving all firefighters in the right direction.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Fire Departments**

#### **1. Train all leaders in transformational leadership/LMX**

Before culture changes can be rolled out to the fire department, all levels of leadership need to have training in methods that promote two-way communication. In the context of EDI culture changes, leaders should be prepared to lead by example; LMX and

transformational leadership training should be continued down the chain of command empowering leaders at every level to enact meaningful change; instruct leaders to be introspective and thoughtful about how they engage with followers and teach affiliative and visionary techniques in the context of culture change.

In departments that utilise seniority-based selection, leadership training is even more imperative as leaders are not chosen based on their ability to lead. Leadership and communication styles conducive to culture change can and must be taught to avoid problems with mixed messaging (Witherspoon and Wohlert, 1996).

## **2. Seek out internal collaboration**

Fire chiefs are obliged to clearly communicate how EDI should look, feel and sound like in a fire department. Departments should seek to include people of different genders, cultural backgrounds, abilities, neurodiversities, racialized communities, sexualities and their intersections; begin by soliciting the help of employees across all branches; garner interest among members by putting out bulletins, memos or other internal methods used for postings and create urgency by showing changes are necessary to increase overall performance and maintain department autonomy.

Guidelines and procedures for change should be developed in collaboration with leadership, all ranks below, the union and municipality. Any EDI cultural change goals must recognise and be built off of positive aspects of existing fire department culture (Kotter, 1996). How to achieve an inclusive culture can be outlined in targeted training and policies that provide easily accessible and relevant examples that speak to individuals at each rank (Kuppler, 2016).

## **3. Create the culture change plan/department policy**

The leadership team should collaborate and utilise researched culture change models with proven efficacy outlined above by Kotter, Schein and Schein or others to design a plan/policy and access resources created by McKinsey & Company, the International Association of Firefighters and others on EDI. The end document may be long and involve numerous meetings and/or hiring experts.

Once this document is created, it should be distilled into a few main points describing the end goal and steps to get there (Kotter, 1996). Further, EDI values should be embedded into as many areas of department policy as possible. For example, the use of standardised aptitude tests, a common practice in fire department hiring, can be inherently biased towards white males by failing to account for cultural differences in learning and thinking (Ricucci and Riccardelli, 2014). By expanding the assessment criteria on entrance exams with inherent bias in mind to assess creativity, fire departments can welcome team members with a broader definition of cultural and cognitive diversity.

Leadership should discuss the main points of the plan directly to as many employees as possible using communication methods described above; assume firefighters and staff will not be interested in reading the long form culture change/EDI document and be prepared to answer hard questions. If a question stumps your team, use it as an opportunity to fill gaps in plans/knowledge and be sure to *follow up* with the person once an answer is developed.

#### **4. Create an ambassador team**

Firefighters can no longer be bystanders or allow a culture that does not welcome all people to be perpetuated. Wagner and O'Neill (2012) recommend by engaging the current, constructive culture of taking pride in helping others, leadership can mobilize

firefighters to work actively against toxic discrimination. McKinsey & Company (2020) specifically includes the importance of openness and eliminating microaggressions as a part of the EDI plan. Ambassadors can be indispensable in shifting firehall and workplace conversations to become safer places for all members.

Ambassadors should be utilised at the very minimum for training purposes. While there is a cost involved with training people and potentially redeploying them to training positions, the risk of not involving peers in training is too great. Selection of this team should include individuals at all ranks and in all branches. Ambassadors can work to develop an awareness level of the need for EDI and the cultural roadblocks currently working against it.

## **5. Communicate, communicate, communicate**

Goals and measurable achievements should be transparent and communicated to ensure all staff are aware of progress or lack thereof. Provide employees with opportunities for input. The change model created will change over time as the department evolves based on budgetary, political and other constraints.

Continue to demonstrate quality LMX and transformational leadership skills. Ensure official communications are *planned* and include as many diverse perspectives as possible using communication models such as the theory of communicative action (Shute *et al.*, 2012).

Kotter (1996) recommends rewarding employees who exhibit or help with cultural changes. While this may not be possible in seniority based organisations, be creative in highlighting members' interest and efforts.

## **6. Maintain efforts**



Demonstrate the interest in culture change and EDI by continuing to prioritise efforts in everyday activities (Kotter *et al.*, 2021). This show of interest creates a feedback loop to the beginning of the change models' need for urgency. Continue to celebrate changes and keep EDI initiatives front and centre as an organisational goal equal to any other long term goal (Geisler, 2021).

### **Limitations in Practise**

While the goal of inclusivity is intrinsically altruistic, it is important to identify some problems with implementing any cultural changes. For example, the Richmond Fire Department has had some success with hiring more ethnically diverse firefighters, but it has not come without challenges. Their union claimed new hiring practices discriminate against white males (CBC News British Columbia, 2007). Proper communication and the explanation of benefits from leadership to staff can help alleviate employee's concerns.

People resist change for numerous reasons. Firefighters may be concerned about losing familiar and “good” aspects of their culture; acknowledging they have been a part of a discriminatory workplace can be a difficult and unsettling realisation (Kanter, 2012). However, as Burkus (2021) asserts, problems cannot be solved if people will not admit to having them. Wagner *et al* (2016) found Canadian firefighter recruits showed a lack of willingness to try new things as compared to a controlled group consisting of non-firefighters. This may make changes to the status quo even more difficult. Leadership's communications need to guide employees to see the parts of the culture that have created problems.

Changes have to be undertaken out of a genuine interest in promoting EDI. If leadership fails to demonstrate their goal is to better firefighters and the department, they will have

problems with acceptance of change (Schein and Schein, 2017). When leadership exhibits a lack of appropriate two-way communication between ranks or where messages are confused or altered, trust erodes and the leader's goal is undermined (De Meuse, 2009). Becker *et al.* (2005) found firefighters who experience poor LMX or defensive exchanges with leadership are more likely to act defensively and experience lower job satisfaction and burnout. Therefore, it is extremely important for leaders to work constructively with firefighters to show cultural changes are beneficial to everyone. Ultimately, if leadership's trust is called into question, the culture changes they were advocating may be subverted or lose ground (Aguirre and Alpern, 2014).

Leadership must be steadfast in their goals and able to adapt to internal pressures including budgetary concerns. Political and social pressures from outside sources may demand rapid change. City councils and other stakeholders should be cautioned that meaningful and sustainable cultural change can take years to be realised (Kotter *et al.*, 2021). In environments such as fire departments where leadership may not be in positions for long due to retirement or other opportunities, strong and developed leadership succession plans are imperative to continue EDI goals (Aguirre and Alpern, 2014). The resources and planning required to enact change can also be costly—from hiring new staff and consultants to the creation of new targeted outreach or cadet programs, such as *Camp Inspire*, in Edmonton (Konguavi, 2021).

## **Future Research**

This paper outlined recommendations to fire departments based on current business practices research. Recommendations are purely theoretical in nature based on best practices from the business world. Future research is needed in fire department contexts to provide more

substantive qualitative and quantitative results regarding the effects of various leadership styles, cultural change models and their corresponding effects on increasing EDI.

## **Conclusion**

The fire department acts as a team which promotes safety and mitigates harm in the community. Extending the definition of harm to include discrimination can clarify why EDI needs to be embedded in the purpose and shared goals of fire departments. Changing organisational culture is imperative for fire departments to evolve and maintain stronger applicant pools (McKinsey & Company, 2020). The risk of continuing the status quo could lead to a negative public image, funding cuts or other undesirable consequences for the fire department and its employees. These concerns and any others that leadership may have should be openly communicated to staff. Moreover, culture changes performed in house will be much easier for staff to enact than any changes forced upon departments by outsiders. It will also allow leadership to maintain control over their organisation. Fire chiefs must guide firefighters to be better at identifying and eliminating discrimination without shaming them. Ridding departments of discrimination will not destroy firehall culture, but it will benefit everyone in the fire department and the diverse communities it serves.

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