

CASE STUDY 8.

Enabling staff from 142 organisations to function as one: NSW Rural Fire Service and TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute



Left, Brett Storey, NSWRFSCentre, Tania Brine, NSWRFSCentre, Kerry Penton, TAFE NSW

Introducing NSW Rural Fire Service

The NSW Rural Fire Service (NSWRFS) is a state government department with approximately 700 employees and 70,000 volunteers whose primary task is to safeguard the community against fire hazards, particularly in rural and regional NSW.

In 2000 the State Government amended the Rural Fires Act 1997 which resulted in the transfer of over three hundred local government fire control staff in 142 local government councils to State Government employment. This transfer of employment took effect on 1 July 2001.

An ongoing challenge for the NSWRFS is to manage a geographically disparate body of staff and volunteers across culturally different areas of the state. Another significant challenge is to train staff and volunteer fire-fighters to world standards each year within tight time frames: that is, during winter.

Addressing NSWRFS's needs

In 1999 a relationship commenced between TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute and NSWRFS. Initially, the primary aim of staff training was the development of leadership and management competencies directly aligned to fire-fighting courses. More recently alignment was sought with Training Packages. Other training has included the provision of courses in Business Administration and Human Resources. Staff and volunteers were also trained in the Training and Assessment Training Package. Over the last few years some of the focus has shifted to training senior volunteers.

TAFE NSW offers services other than direct training. For example, in 2003 a member of TAFE NSW Riverina Institute staff was contracted to the Region West of the NSW Rural Fire Service for two separate periods of three months. On the first occasion the staff member completed the preparatory work to conduct a training needs analysis for seventy staff members across the region. The preparatory phase included analysing each position description and the position challenges and responsibility. Each of the competencies identified within a position was then aligned to competencies from a relevant Training Package.

On the second occasion the TAFE staff member conducted the training needs analysis and developed a two-year training plan to support the development of individual staff and then provided the overall region with information about training and development needs.

The training needs analysis mentioned above provided the opportunity for the Riverina Institute to give feedback to the regional management about potential areas for improvement in their business and communications processes. For instance, the issue of a NSWRFS manager needing to manage staff from remote locations was identified as a priority matter. Possible solutions were suggested to NSWRFS managers by the contracted TAFE NSW staff member.

Innovative TAFE responses

Training programs are designed through a consultative process to determine the appropriate selection of Training Packages to suit the needs of the staff from the NSWRFS. This process is applied at regional, state and district level.

There are two methods preferred by NSWRFs for the delivery of programs. First, there is a block release model where NSW Rural Fire Service staff attend programs for three or four days. Following completion of the block training, staff return to work to complete assignment tasks based on relevant and practical issues and problems associated with their workplace. This approach allows staff to gain appropriate theoretical background and then apply it to the workplace. Riverina Institute staff provide extra support by conducting workshops between these blocks of training, together with email and telephone support. This model applies to programs such as the Certificate IV and Diploma in Business (Frontline Management).

The second model - a blended approach - is used for the delivery of training in Certificates III and IV in Business Administration and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. It consists of a combination of workshops, the provision of recognition of prior learning services, and the delivery of gap training using flexible delivery materials and email and telephone support.

Internal cooperation

At a TAFE campus level, two departments (Administration Services and Management & Small Business) work together on a regular basis to align programs, develop timetables and provide support for NSWRFs. Other campuses in the Institute are involved with the delivery of programs for NSWRFs through the secondment of specialised staff such as from Human Resources.

Cootamundra/Young Campuses and Tumut Campus share a teacher of management and small business who is an integral part of the teaching and learning process for NSWRFs. Non-teaching staff are also involved in supporting the administration of the project.

Workforce development benefits

A major outcome of the partnership for NSWRFs is the involvement of TAFE staff in the development of a matrix of training competencies and qualifications across the fields of fire-fighting, front-line management and in-house training. The purpose of the matrix is for staff and volunteers to locate their current qualifications and identify further requirements for training which may lead to a new career or a promotion.

NSW Rural Fire staff, through TAFE NSW, complete qualifications such as the Diploma of Business (Frontline Management), Certificate IV in Business (Frontline Management), Certificate III in Business Administration, Certificate IV in Business Administration, Certificate III in Financial Services and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Many staff are able to use these qualifications to gain credit transfer towards other Training Package qualifications such as the Certificate in Public Safety (Firefighting Supervision).

TAFE staff capabilities

The partnership has allowed some existing TAFE staff to work in a commercial environment for the first time, where they are required to solve problems and work independently in the workplace. "Basically it made staff develop new strategies rather than referring everything to the Head Teacher," says Kerry Penton, Riverina Institute Head of Campus. She continues:

They absolutely love it. They find it really professionally challenging and what you then find is that they're actually a better deliverer in the classroom because their currency in industry has been enhanced. They know more about what's currently happening in industry and they can take it back to their classroom and often teach in a very different way. So, you actually get benefits on both sides of the spectrum.

The project also has provided Riverina Institute staff with the opportunity to identify the capacity to diversify and provide this type of training in other organisations. "The delivery methods of block release, gap training and recognition plus assessment strategies of work-based assignments are popular with employers," says Penton.

TAFE institute capacities

As a better understanding of the culture of NSWRFs developed, new programs were developed, customised and modified by TAFE. Programs are now customised to reflect that culture and, importantly, "client liaison meetings inform TAFE staff of the particular needs of the organisation," says Penton. She adds further comments about TAFE capacity:

The NSWRFs partnership has identified TAFE capacity to extend services into other organisations. The partnership has identified "niche" areas which can be built upon in the future including the extended use of recognition. A program and process were developed using the project as a model on how to use the recognition process.

Interview with Brett Storey, A/Manager, Learning and Development Systems, and Tania Brine, HR Strategic Resources Coordinator, NSWRFSS

Brett, when and why did your connection begin with Riverina Institute?

The relationship with the Riverina Institute started about ten years ago and it was designed then mainly for staff needing to achieve qualifications to match positions that they were already in.

At that time, one of our service standards was put out as an initial draft document requiring that by a specified time our staff needed to have qualifications that matched the grade or level of position that they were in. That was the catalyst for us commencing the relationship with Riverina Institute, and now it's quite a substantial relationship that we have with them.

It's been going roughly for 10 years now, and actually I am one of the original students of that initial program.

I imagine you have looked to TAFE to be more flexible and more responsive over that period. Have they been that?

Absolutely, since then we've developed more into providing our volunteers Certificate IV in Frontline Management. The way that we've been able to do that is still using the same block release components of leadership and safety run through TAFE Riverina. But they're also providing both online flexible learning through to both distance education packages, for completion of the remaining elements of the Certificate IV in Frontline Management and now for the Business Certificate. So they've certainly met our needs in that regard.

Does TAFE now understand your business well?

We have had two main TAFE Institute personnel running the programs for us, Peter Redman and Leanne McGrath, both of whom have had a very close association with the Rural Fire Service. Peter has been a volunteer with us for about that 10 year component, Leanne's husband is a volunteer with us. So they've been able to understand our organisation's culture and needs, designing programs that suit our needs.

Now beyond them and since our first program, the remaining TAFE people that have come on board to teach our programs have been able, through their relationship with Peter and Leanne, to build a very sound understanding of our organisation and culture.

What do you look for from the training besides the immediate skills that the trainees develop?

The components that we're after, or have been after, is more meeting our needs in providing in-house leadership training and certainly occupational health and safety training. Because we're so geographically dispersed across the state, it can be quite arduous for us to provide training programs that match our needs, from one end of the state to the other and as far west as Bourke and Cobar.

So for TAFE to be able to go through and actually put into place a mix of block release and online or distance education packages for us has been a godsend. It certainly saves us a lot of angst trying to put it onto our scope of registration and keep that up to date. And it's certainly allowed our staff to achieve qualifications to match their positions in business management and it has allowed us to focus on the specific task function of our core business, which is fire fighting.

What changes have you seen in the individuals undertaking the training?

Look there's a change in their perspective and their style of management. If I used the volunteers as an example, we see a lot of our captains who are the lead person in each of our brigade stations. We find the captains take on a different perspective on their leadership and their ability to relate to people who are under their command of control. They understand a lot of the policy procedures the organisation has to put into place and view it from a different perspective than where they were sitting in the training programs.

Tania, why did you start collaborating with TAFE?

I began collaborating with TAFE in about 2004 and I was the women's liaison officer for the service at that point. I was mainly looking at getting our women qualified in the Certificate III and IV in Business Administration. We were finding that a lot of our women working in administration actually had all the skills they needed, but they just didn't have a qualification to support them. So that was my main reason for coming into contact with TAFE. And since then I've run those programs every year, for about the past four to five years.

Is TAFE's impact measurable?

Some statistics for you: around about 2004 we had about 43% of our salaried staff with the qualification that they needed for their jobs. In 2008, we're at 77%. And it's basically due to TAFE, largely, and probably about 85% of our training is through the Riverina Institute of TAFE. We have 700 salaried staff, so I'm only quoting our salaried staff with those figures. There's a lot more to add on the volunteer side, but I don't have stats on that.

What do you value about TAFE's approach?

Just the ease of being able to call the Riverina Institute and discuss things like skill shortages, and identify gap training where you can have that gap training actually linked to a national qualification. It's been really great to be able to have the help at end of the phone straight away, and delivered, while we're here at Homebush in Sydney, rather than us having to go anywhere.

Are there other things you like about Riverina Institute?

Each year we have a meeting with the Institute, in Goulburn and discuss what we did last year and how we can do it better next year. It's really been beneficial just to see how we're getting a really professional level of training delivered, exactly the way we need it to be done.

From a HR point of view, have you seen staff gain extra benefits beyond the qualification?

Most definitely. By virtue of its fire fighting culture the RFS is typically a male dominated organisation, however it's great to see that as a result of training such as this I can literally count the female staff each year moving away from administration roles and into business, management and specialised roles. You can see in all staff - that is, not just the female staff - after having formal training and gaining that qualification that it seems to instil a certain confidence boost and staff end up seeing situations that arise in our ever changing environment as challenges that they can help resolve instead of issues that may overcome them.

From a basic HR point of view increases in morale lead to happier, motivated staff, increased productivity and decreases in sick days etc. Staff that are happy at work just benefit the organisation in so many ways and the RFS knows this, that's why they have invested so much time and money in their staff with training such as the programs run via the Riverina Institute.

Brett, are there other benefits that your organisation's been aware of from the TAFE input?

I'll just highlight some of the statistics behind the other components that Tania was talking about. We have about 71,000 volunteers - both active and support personnel - who are spread out all the way across New South Wales. The service standard that was put into place for us was to drive the need of the organisation to seek further development. Now that has been so successful that we have achieved Tania's 77% of our staff who have qualifications to match their positions. And that's continuing to increase as people seek further education.

Now what we find is people are actually seeking further development beyond that. So when we start running diplomas and advanced diplomas we may have 20 places on a program and we're getting in excess of 70 applicants for each of those programs.

How does that achievement compare with your past challenges?

Bear in mind that this organisation over the last 10 years has gone from approx 142 local fire districts to one. The enactment of State legislation - the Rural Fires Act 1997 as amended - enabled us to bring all of those 300 local government staff that were linked to fire fighting within each local council, under one umbrella with the development of the Rural Fires Act.

The other positive to the district staff transfer of 2001 was that the development opportunities for staff in 142 separate districts were limited and with the transfer to the RFS, it gave way to a whole range of opportunities for those staff such as transfers, career opportunities and professional development that simply wasn't available with them being in 142 separate councils.

The majority of personnel that we put in at the local government level didn't necessarily have other than their volunteer experience; they didn't really have a great deal of further development opportunities. So our relationship with TAFE has enabled our organisation to meet that staff development need.

Just how responsive is Riverina Institute?

One of my staff today rang Riverina to program a training and assessment upgrade course for our learning and development officers across the state and that's going to happen in four weeks time. So that relationship with TAFE has allowed us to say 'Well we need this program, let's get it put on' and Riverina Institute will meet that need each time.

Brett, are there other things about the TAFE relationship that you'd like to comment on?

We're really happy with the timeframe in which we can get training delivered and with the array of programs that we can get delivered quite easily. They're so far away from us really: we're in Sydney. We could easily go to a TAFE around the corner, but they just seem to be able to meet all our needs within our timeframes, and very professionally, and we just haven't had a problem with them. They're great.