

ANZSOG Case Program

Riding roughshod: The removal of quad bikes from WA Emergency Services (TEACHING NOTE)

2017-191.2

Synopsis

In February 2013, Western Australia's State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers were stunned to learn quad bikes were no longer permitted for rescue and emergency operations, despite having successfully used them for over 10 years. Following a temporary ban in late 2011, the bikes had now been officially banned by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) which oversaw the SES. SES volunteers routinely used quad bikes for search and rescue work over difficult terrain or during natural disasters (such as tsunami), where they were considered ideal for distributing timely and effective warnings to communities in danger. But DFES had commissioned several risk assessments in 2011 that concluded quad bikes posed extreme and unacceptable risks, including rolling over onto the operator or flinging them from the machine. DFES proposed replacing the bikes with safer vehicles called All-Terrain-Utilities (ATUs), but the proposal was not well received by SES volunteers. The quad-bike ban ushered in the start of a contentious organisational change process that was riddled with breakdowns in communication and interpersonal conflicts. It also lasted significantly longer than the projected 12-month target. Indeed, from the time of the first external risk assessment in 2011, more than three-and-a-half years would pass before SES units received the replacement vehicles that would allow them to carry out their essential work (see Exhibit C to the case for a detailed timeline).

Epilogue

Since their implementation in 2015, ATUs have been used in numerous SES operations and training exercises. Despite reports that some vehicles still suffer from design flaws, many SES units have found them useful in search and rescue situations, and for transporting equipment. As an instance, a recent

This teaching note was prepared by Dr Ying (Lena) Wang (RMIT University), Belinda Cham (The University of Western Australia), Karina Jorritsma (The University of Western Australia) and Dr Wayne Gregson (The Department of Fire and Emergency Services WA) to support the teaching of *Riding roughshod: The removal of quad bikes from WA Emergency Services* 2017-191.1. The use of teaching materials is restricted to authorised persons.

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post on the Augusta Margaret River State Emergency Service (SES) Facebook page stated:

On Friday members of the Augusta-Margaret River SES unit participated in a search for a missing person near Pemberton. We deployed our all-terrain vehicle to search along narrow walking trails and winding forestry tracks. We navigated over logs, around logs, and even through logs, and covered over 40km of trails during the day. Our [ATU] performed perfectly and was unstoppable.

How the case was developed

The materials for the case were collected by one of the authors, who was placed at DFES for 3 months. During this time, a large number of internal reports, emails and other paperwork were gathered and analysed. Sixteen formal interviews were conducted with key personnel from DFES, SES volunteers and external partners. Interview participants were selected based on their roles in past events, as identified from the desk research. Additionally, informal conversations were held with various individuals. In sum, this case study gathered information from individuals spanning almost all business areas in DFES and relevant external parties. The information gathered also represented individuals from various ranks within DFES. This coverage provides a broad range of perspectives in unfolding the entire event.

Case audience

- Advanced undergraduate students in public management and business programmes
- Masters level public management and business administration students
- Middle and senior managers in the public sector.

Teaching objectives

- To illustrate the commonly-encountered challenges, issues and obstacles in a change journey at a public sector organisation.
- To highlight the importance of understanding, engaging and communicating with stakeholders in the change management process (especially stakeholders outside of the corporate, e.g. volunteers).
- To discuss how to effectively plan change and make important change-related decisions.
- To provide insights on how public sector and non-for-profit organisations that rely strongly on volunteers can effectively manage the relationships between corporate and volunteers.

Theoretical resources

This case study can be used for critical discussions around the topics of organisational change process and change readiness. It is recommended that the following readings are either set as pre-class readings or covered in class lectures so that students can apply these frameworks in analysing the case.

Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Kotter, J. P. (2007). *Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail*. Harvard Business Review, January: 96-103.

Perhaps the most seminal framework for organisational change, John Kotter's model on leading change provides useful insights in guiding organisations through the change process. In particular, Kotter suggests eight steps in creating change:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency.
2. Creating the guiding coalition.
3. Developing a vision and strategy.
4. Communicating the change vision.
5. Empowering broad-based action.

6. Generating short-term wins.
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change.
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture.

This model can help students identify what is missing in this particular change initiative, and to determine what actions could have made the change more successful.

Possible student assignments with suggested answers:

Based on Kotter's model, we propose a series of questions to guide students when they reflect on and discuss what happened in this case. These questions highlight the most critical issues as identified by Kotter's model.

1. Did DFES create enough sense of urgency for the change? What could have been done differently?

The sense of urgency was not clear to SES volunteers from the onset. Maybe the urgency was apparent within DFES: the leadership mandated safety as a key consideration, yet the same level of urgency was not established throughout the affected SES volunteer units. This is why SES volunteers were not on board with the need to change and felt that the safety issues with the quad bikes had been adequately mitigated by the training regimes they had developed over the years.

However, it should also be recognised that establishing a sense of urgency may be harder in this particular organisational context, as SES volunteers – although grouped under the DFES umbrella – share a unique SES identity. A historical divide exists between their organisation and DFES (see the beginning of the case) that makes for some natural scepticism about DFES decisions. Additionally, SES volunteers are the end users of the quad bikes and the individuals most affected by this change; thus, they perceive their views and voices to be the most important. These additional complications make it particularly important for decision-makers/change-makers to direct extra energy towards cultivating a sense of urgency from the outset. Without cooperation and buy-in from end users (SES volunteers) at the very beginning, it was extremely likely that this change process would run into obstacles.

While DFES did engage in some actions that would typically raise the level of urgency, the actions were not effective. First, DFES involved an external consultant to assess the quad bikes. Research suggests that a message generated by more than one source, particularly if external to the organisation, can communicate greater believability and certainty. But in this instance, the external consultant was perceived to have insufficient expertise and little genuine interest in understanding how the SES operated. The fact that the second assessment was conducted by the same person created further distrust. Second, DFES made a bold decision to immediately ban the quad bikes. While Kotter suggests that making bold, rather than modest, actions can challenge the status quo and remove complacency, if such a decision is not backed up by credible information and evidence, it can backfire. Resistance to change is created instead. Further exacerbating the situation here, the temporary ban was in place for too long (two years) before the new vehicles arrived. During this period, a vacuum of communication existed between DFES and SES, leading to heightened confusion and conflict.

2. Kotter suggests the need to build a guiding coalition to lead the change. Discuss the extent to which a guiding coalition was either created or operating effectively in this case.

Kotter suggests that in order to build a good guiding coalition that can make change happen, we need to find the right people, create trust and develop a common goal.

First of all, it seems that the DFES project team did not have the right expertise to make informed and intelligent decisions. Not all relevant points of view were adequately represented. While the individuals on the initial team had expertise in their own areas, there was a gap when it came to SES volunteer and Fleet and Equipment Services representation. Despite being end users of the equipment, SES volunteers were hardly involved in key decisions. They had little to no involvement in developing specifications for the ATU and transport trailer. Similarly, the Fleet and Equipment Services team were not engaged until two years after the initial ban, and one year into the procurement of replacements. Thus, issues that both these parties would have identified because of their respective expertise were not highlighted. Moreover, the opportunity to agree on a common goal early on was compromised. As a result, SES volunteers ended up with a new vehicle that didn't match their expectations, and Fleet and Equipment Services had to manage the replacement initiative (including dealing with build-related issues) without adequate knowledge of why previous decisions had been made. As summarised by an operations officer: 'Things like this indicate to me that maybe the team wasn't right in the first place to critically come up with an option for the future, taking into account all the operational challenges. All the things you would think were reasonable to consider at the time'.

Kotter identifies the need for a common goal. Here, it seems the goals being pursued by DFES and by SES volunteers were entirely different. There was no clear communication, let alone agreement, between the two parties on the need to change, nor on the purpose of the new ATU (i.e. some DFES individuals considered it merely replaced the quad bike, while SES volunteers expected it would be an improvement, offering more capabilities).

As already discussed under the previous question, the relationship between DFES and SES volunteers was beset by pre-existing tensions and trust issues. These were exacerbated by DFES's failure to include one or more SES representatives on the original project team, where they could have expressed the SES's point of view and acted as a bridge between the two organisations.

3. How was change communicated in this case? What could have been done better?

Communication is a critical element of the organisational change process; it can reduce uncertainty and ambiguity, and influence whether responses to the change are positive or negative. As has been mentioned, different goals and visions existed throughout this change process. This fundamental divergence made communication with the rest of the organisation particularly difficult. In fact, our independent desk research revealed that different names had been given to the same project. In some documentation, it was called a 'Quad Bike Replacement', while in others it was known as the 'ATU Implementation Project'. These two significantly different titles serve to illustrate the profoundly different goals and visions held by individuals and groups. To some, the ATU was simply a replacement, while to others, it represented a new capability in itself. Such small things suggest that the way the initiative was framed affected how different people perceived it.

At various points, lack of communication or inappropriate communication left people feeling uncertain and ambivalent about the change process. Groups and individuals both inside and outside DFES experienced feelings of frustration and uncertainty. Almost all groups at some

point felt that communication and information were inadequate. In particular, SES volunteers were not given sufficient information. At the start of the process, they were inadequately briefed about the need for and purpose of the change. After the second risk assessment was completed, DFES communicated nothing more for seven months. When the ATUs were finally delivered, it was not explained to volunteers why the vehicles lacked features they had requested.

Naturally, this pattern of communication brewed resistance and suspicion towards change within the SES. Resistance is usually a symptom of problems with the change vision or its communication, and how resistance is handled usually determines the fate of the initiative. Most of the time, individuals or groups who show resistance to change simply feel that their concerns haven't been heard by those leading the change.

DFES should have considered engaging multiple stakeholders from the earliest stages of the initiative, involving them in key decision-making processes and keeping them up-to-date with latest developments. This is especially important when delays occur, as delays allow ample time and opportunity for resentment and suspicion to build up in the absence of authoritative information. If an SES representative had been part of the guiding coalition, and if clear visions and goals had been set at the start of the process, that representative could have acted as an advocate and communicator of change to the rest of the SES volunteers.

4. Is DFES's job finished once the new ATUs are delivered? What could happen if DFES stopped there? What should DFES do after the ATUs are delivered?

As the last step in Kotter's change process suggests, change needs to be 'anchored' so that it sticks and becomes the new behavioural norm. In this case, the SES cannot revert to using quad bikes again. However, it is possible that they might not use ATUs as expected. For instance, volunteers might refuse to use the new vehicles at all due to their bad experiences of the change process, or might not use them properly because they were expecting the vehicle to offer different functionalities. Such possibilities show that this change initiative involved much more than just getting the vehicles to the SES's front door.

After change has been implemented, a support structure needs to be established to sustain the changes. In essence, it is important to keep supporting the reasons why the change was needed in the first place, and to make it easy for people to integrate the change into their lives. Changes that are sustained are more easily integrated into organisational cultures over time. Examples of how DFES might integrate the change from quad bikes to ATUs into the SES's culture include:

- providing appropriate and easily accessible training so SES units can continually train new volunteers on how to operate the ATUs; and
- developing a system for SES volunteers to report potential safety problems with the ATUs, and for them to be promptly investigated and rectified. Even though the ATUs are regarded as a safer option than quad bikes, continuously monitoring their potential risks would keep reinforcing the idea that prompted the initial change – DFES's concern about the safety of SES volunteers.

5. What should the organisation learn from this experience and what areas should it improve for future?

This case reveals multiple challenges for DFES, and suggests that successful change leadership and management is a continual improvement process. Below, we list several specific improvements we consider the organisation should make, but it is a far from comprehensive list. Instructors are recommended to encourage students to brainstorm other possible

organisational improvements, such as developing a better documentation and recording system; designating the change leadership team to drive through the entire process; and facilitating a more learning-oriented mindset within the organisation so that it is ready for change.

- ***Formalising the change management process:*** A formal change management process should be developed and implemented to allow a consistent methodology, set of tools and language to be applied to all change initiatives. It is also important that such a process is supported, utilised and promoted throughout all levels of the organisation.
- ***Encouraging deeper engagement with change efforts:*** Engagement with stakeholders during a change process needs to be genuine. In this case, a perception of inauthentic stakeholder consultation was widespread. While genuine attempts to engage with stakeholders occurred in pockets, a unified and consistent effort was lacking. Readiness for change must be built on a sound foundation of mutual trust and respect. In light of this, DFES should put in more systematic efforts to understand how change affects key stakeholders, both when planning for change and during implementation.
- ***Bridging cultural gaps between DFES and SES:*** This requires explicit and sustained effort. Specifically, the sources of conflict should be investigated in detail and an action plan developed to tackle the issues identified. From this case, it is clear that cultural differences between the organisations, and between the corporate and volunteer sectors, indeed play an important role in shaping people's trust, perceptions and behaviours.

Recommended further reading

Armenakis, A. and Harris, S. (2002). Crafting a change message to create transformational readiness, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 15(2), 169–183.

Ford, J. D., & Ford, L. W. (2009). Decoding resistance to change. *Harvard Business Review*, 87(4), 99-103.

Reichers, A. E., Wanous, J. P., & Austin, J. T. (1997). Understanding and managing cynicism about organizational change. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 11(1), 48-59.