

SHAPING THE NEW NORM: Wafa CONFERENCE 2018 EVALUATION AND QFES WORKSHOP SYNTHESIS



Celeste Young, Janine Taylor and Quinn Cramer
6.01.19



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Acknowledgments: We would like to thank all the people who participated in the survey and the QFES workshop. We would also like to thank Steve O'Malley, Donna Wheatley and the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC for their support and contribution.

Citation: Young, C., Taylor, J. & Cramer, Q. (2019), Shaping the New Norm: Wafa Conference 2018 Evaluation and QFES Workshop Synthesis, Women and Fire Fighting Australasia, Nowra, NSW.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report was undertaken to provide insights and outcomes in relation to aspects of the Women and Fire Fighting Australasia (WFAA) Conference, *Looking Forward, Looking Backwards: Shaping the New Norm*, in Wellington New Zealand 26–28 September 2018. It includes:

- A summary of responses from the online survey undertaken with participants who attended the conference.
- Synthesis of outputs from the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) *Diversity more than the eye can see: Challenging how we look at diversity* workshop curated and facilitated by Janine Taylor, Quinn Cramer and Michelle Young.
- Reflections from board members who have been long-term members of WFAA as to the past, the present and the future of WFAA.

INTRODUCTION

Diversity and how organisations become more inclusive has become a key focus across the Emergency Management Sector (EMS). However, this is a complex and at times difficult task. One of the key challenges is that the conversation surrounding this is not a single conversation, but multiple conversations that need to come together to create the holistic overview needed to support transformational change in organisations and the sector as a whole. Each conversation has its own nuance and specific focus, which needs to be understood if implementation is to be effective in that particular context. This is particularly important if the EMS is to achieve the goal of sustainable organisations for the future which authentically reflects and works with their communities.

Recent research undertaken by the BNHCRC has shown that most organisations in the EMS understand diversity primarily as being about men and women. Women were often seen from the point of view of a stereo type, and there was often little understanding of the intersections of different types of diversity, for example, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, gay women or women from indigenous backgrounds. It was not clear how these intersections shape the experience of the many women within the different organisations across the sector, or the specific needs that arise from this.

There were also indications that minority groups in firefighting services face specific challenges due to the entrenched historical and hierarchical nature of these particular organisations. This is further complicated by the different context of paid and unpaid members of these organisations, the communities they work within and where they are situated (urban, rural or remote) (Young et al. 2018).

If women firefighters are to reach their full potential in their organisations, women need to “feel valued and respected, have access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute their perspectives and talents to improve their organisation” (Diversity Council Australia 2015, p10). Organisations will need to create an environment where value and respect, belonging and connection, participation and contributions, influence and

opportunity, are available for all women to support this (Diversity Council of Australia 2015, p10-11).

Women and Firefighting Australasia (Wafa) are one of the key bodies providing both support and forums for discussion in Australia in relation to women in firefighting organisations. The Wafa conference is one of the key mechanisms through which they reflect on issues, evaluate how their agenda is progressing, and consider directions for the future. As such, they have a pivotal role to play in working alongside others to progress the overarching diversity and inclusion agenda across the EMS.

BACKGROUND Wafa

Women in Firefighting Australasia (Wafa) was established in 2005 as the Australasian Women in Firefighting Forum (WIFF 2005). Since that time Wafa has been steadily working to promote women in firefighting by working with organisations, fire services and individual members (Wafa website).

The objectives of Wafa are:

1. To facilitate and support women in taking an active role in defining and shaping the role of women in the firefighting and emergency services industries by promoting the expectations of and contribution by women to the sector.
2. To provide a channel for women, in conjunction with their colleagues in the industry, to:
 - foster and promote increased understanding and awareness of the contribution and capabilities that women bring to the firefighting and EMS;
 - create opportunities for frank exchange and discussion of the challenges, issues and opportunities for women in the sector;
 - facilitate change through solutions and actions cooperatively developed with our colleagues in the sector; and
 - generate opportunities for the development of knowledge and practical experience in roles of leadership and management.

Wafa is a unique organisation that provides a focal point for the issue of women who work and lead across all levels of firefighting organisations. As such, it has an important role to play in the broader EMS context. It also provides connection and support for women who work in the firefighting context. Their biennial conference creates a space for reflection and sharing of experiences between both women and men on the progress of representation and inclusion of women in firefighting. It also presents a unique opportunity for men and women working to further the agenda of women in the firefighting services and feed it into the broader diversity and inclusion agenda.

THE Wafa CONFERENCES

Wafa has run several highly successful conferences since the inaugural Women in Firefighting forum in Sydney in 2005. Since then conferences have been held in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane and most recently in Wellington, New Zealand in 2018.

METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYSIS

The outputs from the workshop were transcribed and coded into initial groupings. This data was then analysed using a grounded theory approach to identify key themes and groupings. Basic statistical analysis was undertaken with some exercises to ascertain weighting in relation to the responses.

Basic statistical analysis was also undertaken in relation to the survey outputs, and freeform answers were summarised under key themes that emerged from these responses.

Constraints related to this analysis are the small sample size which may be subject to bias due to the specific cohort. As a result, findings can only be seen as indicative of the broader EMS.

THE QFES WORKSHOP

"We need to think about the stories we tell... sometimes stories are told about us, our organisations, our industry.... We need to ask ourselves who is telling them and why are they being told?"

Janine Taylor, QFES

The workshop *Diversity more than the eye can see. Challenging how we look at diversity* was an interactive workshop delivered to 235 people as part of the Wafa 2018 Conference. Participants represented a diversity of roles from both paid and non-paid firefighting agencies from across Australia and New Zealand and were predominantly women. Participants worked in groups of 8-10 people to complete the exercises. The aim of this workshop was to explore diversity and inclusion using an "Appreciative Inquiry" storytelling approach as a way of identifying what is needed in relation to increasing diversity and inclusion in organisations. It also draws upon elements of mindsets, knowledge skills and behaviours (Diversity Council of Australia 2015, p6).

QFES WORKSHOP BACKGROUND

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a form of transformative management that uses a strength-based approach, which aims to develop a culture of self-determined and proactive change. It is a people-centric approach which uses mechanisms such as storytelling and values to create collaborative visions, which provide the pathway for action.

The principles for this approach were first outlined in 1987 by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. They saw organisations as “the result of human interaction and social construction rather than some underlying expression of natural order” (Cooperrider, Barrett & Srivastva 1995, p157), and this was not being accounted for in the pervading change management approaches.

AI has been the underpinning process for one of their key organisational change initiatives, QFES Transforms Through Leadership. This was “developed to ensure our leaders engage the positive potential of our workforce, paid and volunteer, and our many partners in creating the culture our department needs to strategically align with and support our change” and to develop “a progressive, inclusive and highly functioning department” (QFES 2017, p34).

A key part of this process has been the development of organisational values through a series of ‘conversational’ workshops across QFES. The telling of stories has been a key aspect of this process which has both enabled the sharing of experiences and also the building of a collaborative organisational narrative about what QFES is and what they wish to become. Most importantly, it has provided a tangible vehicle for connecting people to the human aspect of diversity so that conversations are able to move beyond the concept of numbers and difference to inclusion.

FORMAT

The workshop comprised of a combination of presentations delivered by Michelle Young and Janine Taylor which outlined the journey to date for QFES in relation to diversity and inclusion and a series of exercises using an Appreciative Inquiry approach.

Exercise 1

Individual stories were read out by members of the workshop. Participants were asked to reflect on these stories in groups and think through the following questions:

1. What are the stories of service that you are proud of?
2. What is the work that you do that energises you?
3. What is the industry currently doing that is right?
4. What are you willing to contribute and commit to?

Participants were asked to reflect and discuss Question 1 before notating responses to the following three questions.

Exercise 2

This exercise was undertaken using a template of a tree provided by the workshop facilitators.

Part A

Participants were asked to first consider what the qualities, traits and behaviours of an inclusive organisation are. They were then asked to write these in the top of the tree and

to categorise them into behaviours that are seen consistently, inconsistently and not at all consistent.

Part B

Participants were then asked to consider what systems, processes and actions might be needed to support the qualities, traits and behaviours of an inclusive organisation and to write these at the bottom of the tree.

The workshop then concluded with a presentation by Janine Taylor which explored the need to move beyond traditional notions of diversity and the critical role that inclusion, belonging and responsibility play in the process of ensuring effective implementation of diversity. It also gave a summary of the QFES Allies of Inclusion program.

OUTPUTS FROM EXERCISES

A total of 480 responses were solicited from participants across both Exercise 1 and 2. The responses had a relatively even distribution across the different exercises with Exercise 1 receiving 31%, and Exercise 2b 29%. Exercise 2a received a slightly higher level of responses with 40%.

RESPONSES FROM EXERCISE 1

Exercise 1 explored the motivations, current strengths and what people were willing to contribute to improve diversity and inclusion in their organisations. There were 150 responses to the three exercise questions. The largest group of responses was in relation to what energises you (57%) and the least what are you willing to contribute (16%) (see Figure 1).

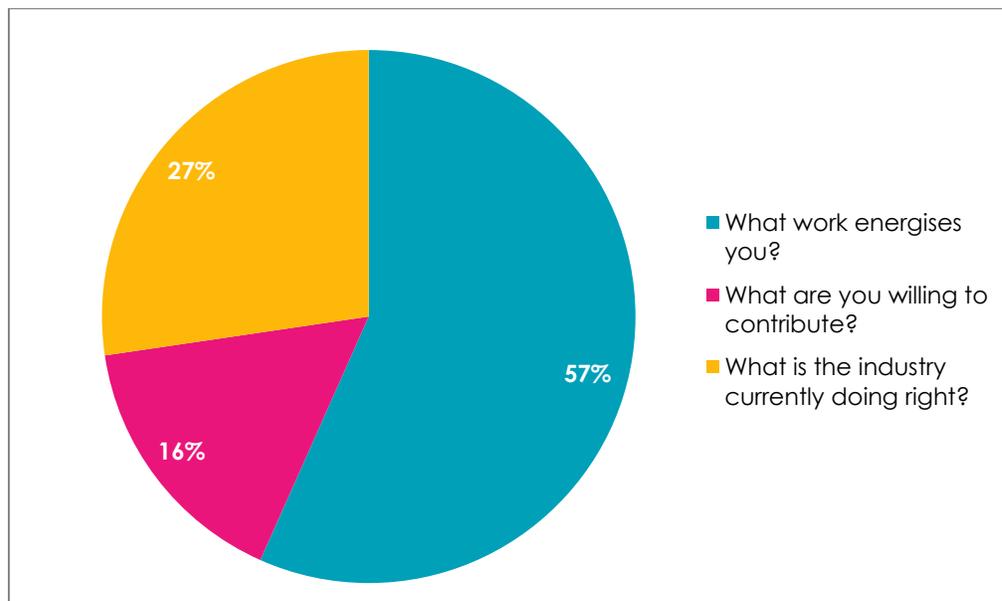


Figure 1: Responses to Question 1 QFES exercises.

These responses highlight one of the challenges which is the limited willingness or ability to contribute, and that response is still the key focus and motivator for many members of the workforce. This motivation tends to be more immediate and less strategic in its nature which can act as a barrier. The nature of inclusion is different to the one that is needed for response and it requires all members of organisations to contribute. However, there were also motivations such as connections, knowledge and community, which are aligned to this agenda and can be leveraged to forward this agenda.

WHAT IS THE WORK YOU DO THAT ENERGISES YOU?

This question solicited 85 responses across seven key themes (Figure 2). The top three themes were: Response activities (23%), Connections and knowledge (22%) and Community (20%). The smallest group pertained to organisational change (5%).



Figure 2: Number of responses in each theme category.

An analysis of the details provided in the “Response activity” theme found 50% related to helping people, and 30% to attending incidents. Other responses included services delivery, medical calls, saving lives and putting out fires (20%).

The “Connections and knowledge” theme found 37% related to training, 16% to connecting with like-minded people, and 11% to personal development opportunities. Other responses (36%) included:

- mentoring;
- workshops and leadership programs;
- sharing knowledge;
- networking opportunities;
- women’s network; and
- being at the WAFA conference and knowing men are there too.

In the “Community” theme, 82% of responses listed community engagement, other responses in this section were helping others and feeling like one makes a difference.

The “Leadership” theme had the most diverse responses with leading by example having the largest amount of responses (17%), which supports the need for authentic actions. Other responses were:

- sharing goals, working together;
- inspiring others to achieve;
- creating opportunity for others;
- getting people to view perspectives with a different lens;
- teamwork;
- challenging others;
- professionalism;
- being appreciated; and
- being in a privileged position that people look up to with the power to influence.

In the “Empowering children and youth” theme, 56% of responses related to empowering youth, with other responses focusing on planting the seed for young people and specific activities such as schools visits and recruitment of young people.

In relation to the “Visibility” theme, responses were: being visible, breaking down stereotypes, seeing the reflection of actions, seeing women in uniform and maternity options. “Organisational change” theme responses were: contributing to something, organisational visions, cultural change and inclusiveness.

WHAT IS THE INDUSTRY CURRENTLY DOING THAT IS RIGHT?

The 41 responses to this question reflected an opening out of the issue through increased acknowledgement of new issues. Reviews being undertaken and recognition of history and “looking at ourselves and exposing the dark spots and lighting them up” also supported this. It was also felt that transparency was present and that the sector was starting to “look forward”.

A focus on creating gender equality, fairer treatment of people and empowering women were also seen to be present. Specific actions that pertained to this included: a number of responses related to workplace and behaviours training sessions, the creation of diversity and inclusion groups, women on boards and also personal development and pathway opportunities. It was also felt that some in the sector were “leading by example”.

There were also responses that related to a changing focus on community and working with them. Also, the acknowledgement of the contribution that volunteers bring to organisations was one of the responses.

Following up on wellbeing of staff and gauging the psychology of people's wellbeing was also felt to be present. Accommodation of specific needs through female specific PPE and equipping and supporting front line staff were also nominated.

The creation of and support for networks was a strong theme, with responses reflected through the creation and support for:

- women in general;
- diversity inclusion gender and ethnic groups;
- forums like WFA; and
- sponsorship of networks.

It was raised at the individual level in one response that people were “supporting each other in every situation”; also that the sector as a whole was looking at how it could support women.

Communication was another theme with participants reporting people “having the conversation”, an opening up of communication streams and changing language.

It was also reported that there was an “appetite for change”, and one participant raised the creation of an “apology change”.

WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO COMMIT?

The 24 contributions to this part of the exercise showed the type of investment participants were willing and able to make.

Specific actions related to networks included: supporting women’s networks, participating in Australian Women’s Emergency Network and also “using networks like Male Champions of Change”.

Responses about specific support of others were also raised through commitments to mentorship, assisting new people at work and being active in furthering the career of other women at work.

Communication was also a key area with participants committing to:

- starting the conversation;
- being a voice for others;
- having hard conversations;
- speaking up and speaking out;
- listening; and
- giving feedback.

Commitment to development of self and others, through actions such as self-reflection, sharing, self-care and learning were also proposed.

Other actions that participants were willing to commit to included:

- allocation of time;
- stepping up;
- being on a board; and
- upholding the standards and leading by example;

- committing to the change; and
- challenging others' unacceptable behaviours.

RESPONSES FROM EXERCISE 2A: QUALITIES, TRAITS AND BEHAVIOURS

Qualities can be defined as “a distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something”. Traits are defined as “a distinguishing quality or characteristic, typically one belonging to a person” (Oxford Living Dictionaries). There is a subtle difference between the two and for the purpose of this exercise, they have been separated into attributes or characteristics of organisations (qualities) and characteristics or attributes of individuals (traits).

The third category is behaviours, which is defined as “the way in which a person acts or conducts themselves, especially towards others” (Oxford Living Dictionaries). In this category, we have also included action or activities that others would like to see from other people or the organisation.

The aggregated responses (Figure 3) highlight the current inconsistency across the sector in relation to current inclusion qualities, traits and behaviours, with 70% of allocations falling into the “Sometimes” category. This may also be indicative of organisations in the process of developing their culture, systems, processes and workforce they need to achieve inclusive practice.

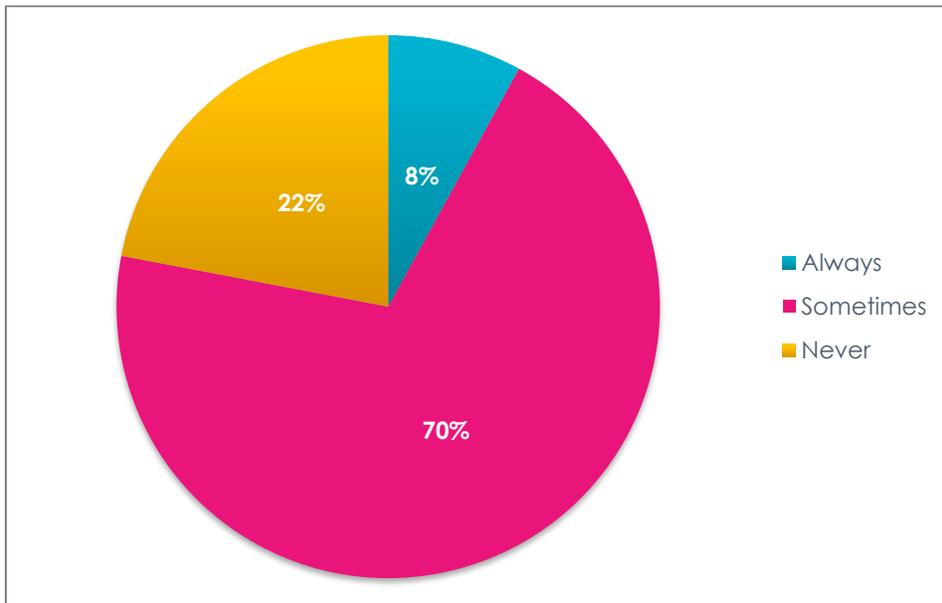


Figure 3: Aggregate responses for presence of qualities, traits and needs for inclusive organisations.

QUALITIES

Nineteen qualities pertaining to organisations were identified with 83 allocations being given in relation to these qualities (Figure 4). The largest single allocation was given to “Respect”. In relation to the categories, “Forward looking” had the largest representation in the ‘always’ category, “Respect” in the ‘sometimes’ category, and “Fully inclusive”, “Diverse” and “Have equality, free of bias” had the largest allocation in the ‘never’ category.

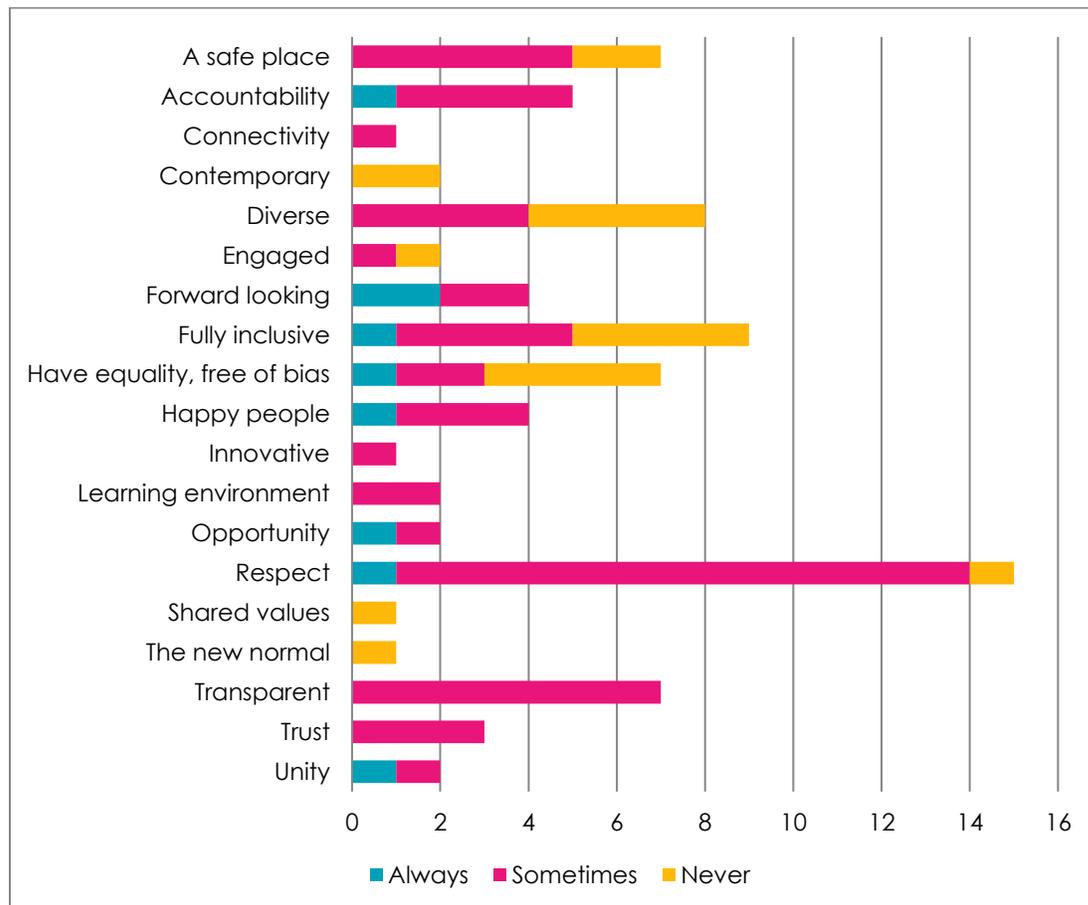


Figure 4: Identification of qualities and allocations in relation to presence in organisation

What is of interest in these responses is the predominance of respect which is a core part of emergency services culture. This quality is one that can act as an enabler or disabler, depending on whether it is being enacted in a command and control (don't speak up to those who hold higher rank) or inclusive manner (open dialogue regardless of rank). It is also notable that both “Fully inclusive” and “Diverse” had equal allocations in relation to ‘sometimes’ and ‘never’ categories, which may be indicative of the differing organisational contexts and the rate at which this is occurring within them.

TRAITS

Twenty three traits pertaining to individuals were identified and 63 allocations made by participants in relation to these (Figure 5). The traits of “Supportive”, “Accepting”, “Authentic”, “Open minded” and “Flexibility” were given the most allocations. In relation to the categories themselves, “Flexibility”, “Integrity”, “Open minded” and “Supportive” had equal allocations in the ‘always’ category. “Supportive” had the largest allocation in the ‘sometimes’ category. The largest allocation in the ‘never’ category was “Accepting”.

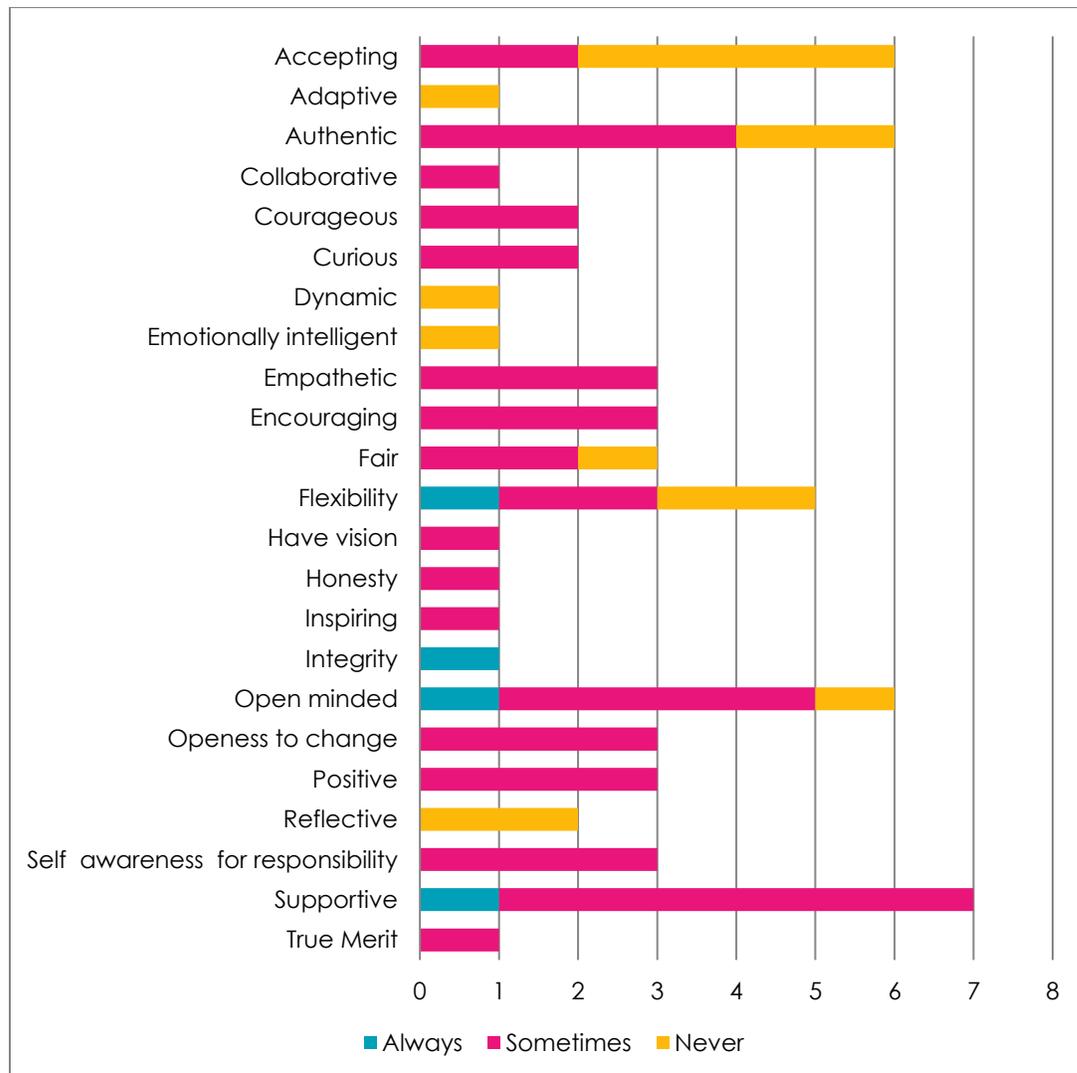


Figure 5: Identification of traits and allocations in relation to presence in workplace.

What these findings suggest is that individuals in some workplaces are developing or possess traits that could be useful for organisations seeking to improve inclusive practice. However, they also indicate that these traits are patchy and that they are not currently consistent across many organisations.

BEHAVIOURS

Twenty behaviors were identified with 83 allocations being made by participants in relation to these (Figure 6). “Good communication” and “Leaders who care” were given the most allocations. In relation to the categories themselves, the only allocations in the ‘always’ category were given to “Provide personal development opportunities”. In the ‘sometimes’ category, “Good communication” and “Leaders who care” had the largest allocations and continuous improvement, and “Good communication” had the most allocations in the ‘never’ category.

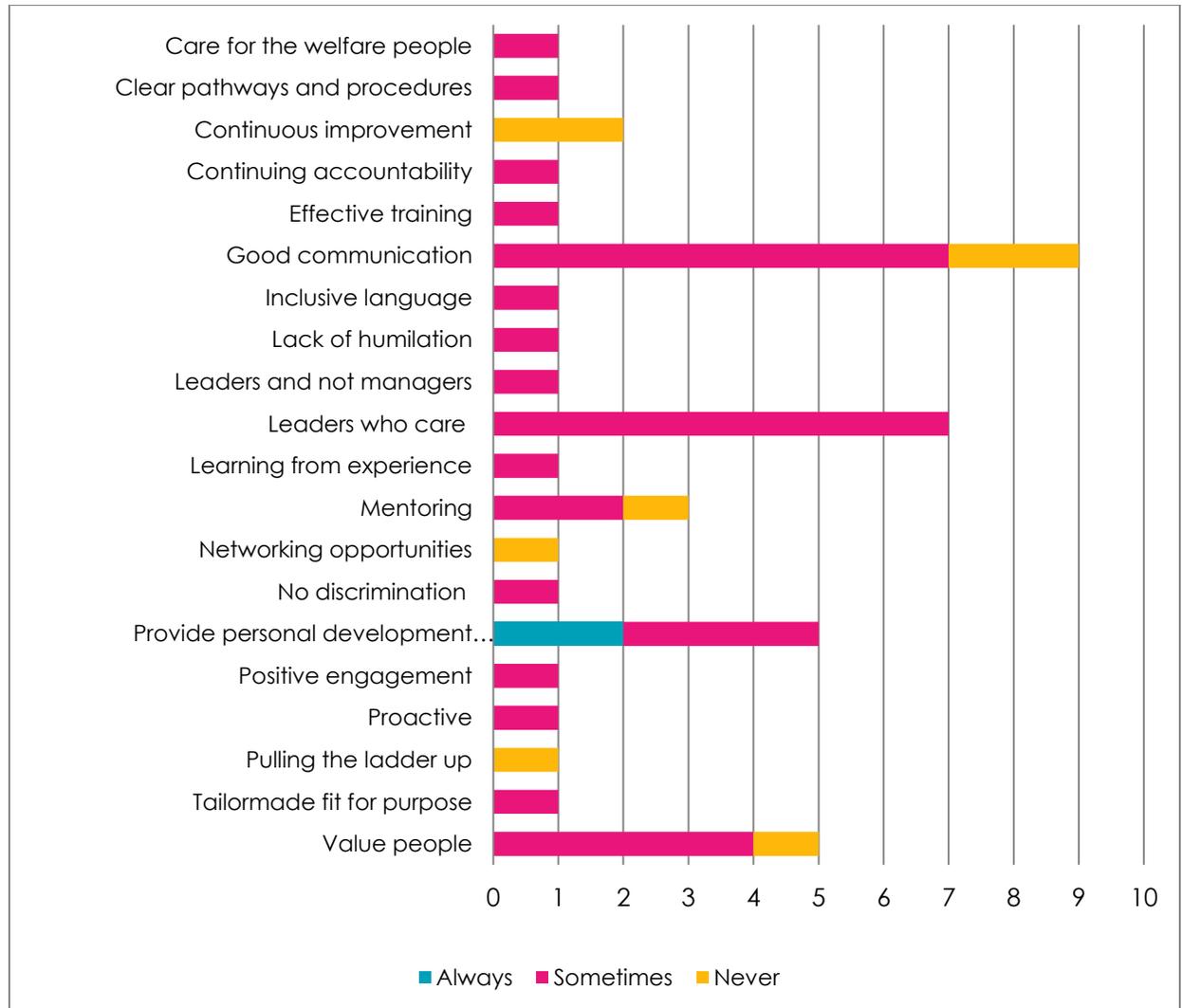


Figure 6: Identification of behaviours and allocations in relation to presence in organisations.

The focus on good communication and leadership reinforces the need to further develop these behaviours in firefighting organisations. It also supports the current focus of the sector on building greater leadership in this area through targeted programs.

RESPONSES FROM EXERCISE 2B: WHAT IS NEEDED FOR INCLUSION

Nine organisational areas (Figure 7) were identified and 57 subgroups were nominated to these areas, with 139 individual allocations made to these subgroups.

The largest group of the aggregated responses related to improving culture (23%), leadership (14%), governance (12%) and training (11%). This reinforces findings from previous research in this area, which has identified similar areas of need.



Figure 7: Identification of systems, processes and actions needed to support diversity and inclusion.

In relation to the subgroups the following was found.

Improving culture: 14 specific subgroups were identified. The largest group pertained to good, open communication (23%), acknowledging good work with others included (11%), addressing poor behavior and attitude (8%), actively challenging the culture (8%) and actively seeking feedback (7%). Other needs were:

- open door policy;
- increased visibility;
- consistency;
- mindfulness practices;
- active listening;
- feedback and reflection, not just online surveys; and
- team building activities.

Leadership: 8 specific subgroups were identified. The largest related to strong leadership (44%), clear expectations from leadership (11%), leadership accountability (11%) and leadership from the top down, bottom up (11%). Other needs were:

- authentic leaders who live values;
- diversity of leadership;

- leadership capability support;
- mentoring for leaders;
- mentoring leaders; and
- consistent approach by leaders to policy at all levels.

Governance: 7 subgroups were identified. The largest of these pertained to clear policy and procedures (33%), external auditors and reviews (25%), holding people to better account (13%) and accountability (13%). Other needs were wellbeing policies, clear chains of command, and information and policy disseminated in different forms.

Organisation: 7 subgroups were identified, the largest of these pertained to acceptable values in the organisation (36%), flexible work options (14%) and opportunities for all (14%). Other needs were looking out for isolated communities, transparency, better award systems and zero tolerance.

Training: 6 subgroups were identified. The largest of these pertained to the need for general training across the organisation (66%). More specific needs were for: unconscious bias training, emotional intelligence training, leadership training and to address all learning styles including adult learning.

Knowledge and networks: 5 subgroups identified were brigade forums, information sharing, continuity of support networks, support networks and buddy systems. Allocations across these areas were equal.

Procedures and processes: 5 subgroups were identified including cohesive logistics, national welcoming procedures, a more transparent complaint process, the same induction process for volunteers and permanent staff, and better HR reporting. Allocations across these areas were equal.

Career and personal development: 4 subgroups identified were personal and professional development opportunities, clearer pathways (including individual driven options), mentoring, sponsoring and coaching. Allocations across these areas were equal.

Change: 2 subgroups identified in this area were the ability to contribute to change at all levels and a better understanding of why the culture needs to change.

SUMMARY OF QFES WORKSHOP OUTPUTS

The outputs from the QFES workshop provide insight into the current status of firefighting agencies in relation to creating inclusive cultures that support women in the fire services. They also give insight into the motivations of some women who work within them. It also highlights the usefulness of storytelling as a mechanism for provoking thought and developing understanding.

As the participants were predominantly women members of the fire services, it also provided a unique insight into their experiences in the workplace and their specific needs. Of particular interest is the area of what energises you, which showed a high level of focus on community and young people as well as response activities. It is possible that

this is something that may be specific to this cohort and may or may not reflect differences in motivation related to gender. This indicates a need for further research in this area.

Responses also showed that the participants felt that their organisations were being supportive, and the development of networks, forums and sponsorship featured in this area. The low amount of responses in relation to what are you willing to commit indicate that this is an area that needs to be focused on if this agenda is to progress effectively.

The qualities, traits and behaviours exercise show a lack of consistency in relation to these being present in the workplace, with 'sometimes' being the most prevalent response. In terms of what was needed, these responses align closely with the current focus of the EMS in relation to improving culture and leadership; governance, training and organisation areas were also prominent. They also indicate the need to create value for difference through behaviours such as acknowledgment, communication, authentic actions and challenging the current status quo. These are consistent with other research findings suggested. Consistency and cohesion were also seen as an important factor.

CONFERENCE EVALUATION SURVEY RESULTS

An online survey circulated to participants following the conference received 42 responses. It asked the following questions:

1. How did you hear about the conference?
2. Looking back, what was your favourite moment?
3. Looking forward, how do you believe the Wafa conference will help your career?
4. What can we do to improve for 2020?
5. Would you recommend (this event) to a colleague?

Additional space was also provided to capture any additional comments in relation to the participant's experiences or observations in relation to the Wafa conference.

SURVEY RESPONSES SUMMARY

Forty-two completed surveys represented about 18% of attendees. There were 272 responses across all the categories. As most of the questions required freeform answers, this has been summarised into key themes that emerged which are highlighted by direct quotes from the survey.

HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE CONFERENCE?

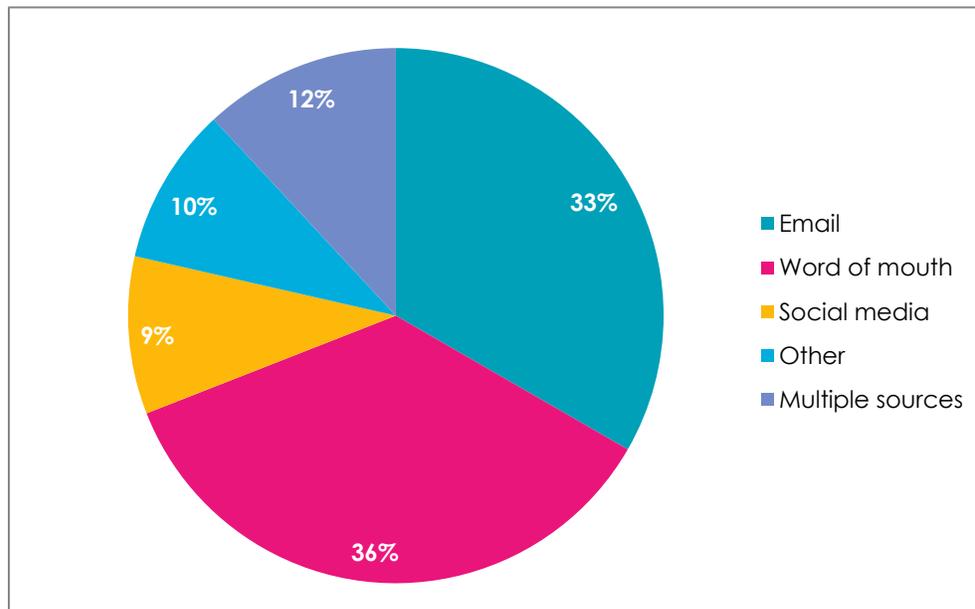


Figure 8: Sources from which participants heard about the conference.

The two most common ways people heard about the conference were "Word of mouth" (36%) and "Email" (33%). 12% of respondents had heard about the Wafa conference through "Multiple sources" which included "Social media", "Word of mouth" and "Email". 10% of respondents nominated "Other" but did not give details of what these other avenues were. 9% nominated "Social media" (Figure 8).

The higher number of responses relating to personal forms of communication (Word of mouth and Emails) may indicate that communication regarding the conference is still connected directly to the network group. This indicates an opportunity to leverage external networks more fully in the future.

LOOKING BACK WHAT WAS YOUR FAVOURITE MOMENT?

Favorite moments ranged across the broad themes of networking and sharing stories, and the positive, inspiring and thought provoking nature of the presentations and workshops. Meeting and being able to speak with others who share the same agenda was also a key theme.

Different presentations resonated with participants, with keynote speakers featuring strongly.

“Loved all the keynote speakers, they were all amazing and very inspirational!”

“I really enjoyed all of it. It was very inspiring to hear other people’s stories and how they overcome adversity to be leaders in their field.”

Multiple responses cited Kelly Martin and Alex Johnson’s presentations of their experiences as leaders. Katarina Carroll’s presentation also rated highly.

“Hearing Kelly Martin and Alex Johnson speak was amazing, I learned from them both to speak up and not be afraid.”

Cerisa Spieght’s presentation on tools for responsibility was seen as a particular highlight.

“Cerisa (CC) Speight and her presentation! Absolutely outstanding – please book her on the main stage next time so everyone can listen to her.”

Other presentations and workshops that were nominated were Tasmyne Harlen (*Lead like a woman*) workshop, Michelle Young (*Saving yourself while saving others*) presentation, Gillian Andrews (*Emotional intelligence*) presentation and QFES (*Diversity: more than the eye can see*) workshop.

Activities such as the conference dinner, speed networking and the hot sessions were also nominated with others stating, the whole conference as being their favorite moment:

“Everything, it was great to meet so many people and cover such a variety of topics.”

“I enjoyed bits of everything over the three days. I love at the end I just felt like I was given a boost.”

LOOKING FORWARD HOW DO YOU BELIEVE THE Wafa CONFERENCE WILL HELP YOUR CAREER?

Participants responded strongly giving the most detailed responses to this question. One of the areas highlighted as helpful was a sense of validation of worth within the workplace and what is possible, which was motivational.

"It has provided me with an insight and a newfound confidence that I can be me in this industry."

"Gave me a boost to motivate more women to join firefighting and even to succeed in everyday life, gave myself a boost in confidence."

"I have increased awareness of transformation issues and a better sense of my own agency to champion and achieve change. My research direction and theoretical approach have now been validated."

For others, the conference had direct impact on their actions in relation to their careers:

"I am motivated to be heard and advance myself."

"I have a clear objective. I have a meeting with my AM on the Monday after getting back, with pathways advice and suggestions. I made the appointment straight after Kelly Martins 'Be Brave' talk."

"It has already influenced my career, as I had an opportunity to put my hand up for a role that I am not a 100% fit for which I wouldn't have done previously."

There were also responses that outlined the contribution of the conference in relation to increased networks and connections to support activities.

"I have made so many connections at Wafa and solidified the existing relationships I already had. I know I have a group of women and men that I trust to count on for advice and support in the coming years."

"I am now contemplating having a career mentor. It has also been very positive in terms of networking".

"Hopefully with the connections I've made, I will be able to move closer to my goals".

The ideas shared were raised as enhancing work that participants were currently undertaking.

"I'm chairing a joint Diversity and Inclusion workshop for Canada/US Wildfire next March – I am taking with me a whole suite of ideas from the Wafa conference".

"I'm already using the information learned in my day-to-day work and home life. Passing on information and empowering other women. We are identifying other women and supporting them in their career decisions, placing them in front of

the right people and opening doors for more opportunity. For myself it is a cementing of goals, reminding myself that I am not a fake, that I can do this – pushing forward harder with how I want my work and home life to look.”

“Gaining knowledge from other, higher ranking women on their journeys will help me lay the bricks in my career path”.

There were also responses that showed how the reflective space provided by the conference had helped participants place where they were in their activities in helping to progress this agenda.

“I came away mindful of how far emergency services have come in this space and how far we have to go. I also left thinking that we are on the right path as far as attracting, retaining and promoting women in our organisation”.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE FOR WAFA 2020

The largest area of responses in relation to improvements, pertained to clarification of the hot sessions. In particular, it was felt that there was not a clear explanation of these sessions, which created a particular expectation which did not align with the workshops themselves. It was stated that it would be helpful for them to be more ‘hands on’.

“By the briefing of “bring a change of clothes and socks and bring your boots and wildfire jacket” I actually thought we were going to get wet and dirty. Talking to one of the men, he thought it would have been great to do a skills session. Basically find areas where we struggle and teach us ‘work arounds’ to make our jobs easier, etc.”

It was also suggested by one respondent that there needed to be “less sitting” and another that the days were long. In terms of focus, it was suggested that “WAFA needs to keep on the positive, and moving forward focus not dwelling on the past” and also potentially have more sessions that addressed volunteer needs.

There were also suggestions in relation to allowing change-over time between sessions of the main conference to allow for people to get there, as some people missed out on bits of presentations due to the tight scheduling. There was also one suggestion that related to the need to ensure that those with food allergies were adequately catered for during the conference.

There were also a suggestion that it would be good to have a session for volunteers, as they face specific challenges such as working mums who don't have time to move up the ranks. The encouragement of more men to participate and the “embracing” of them, was also raised.

WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THIS TO OTHERS

Ninety-five per cent of survey respondents would recommend the WAFA conference to others, one respondent answered no and another that they were unsure.

SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE SURVEY RESPONSES

The responses received on the feedback survey were predominantly positive and reflected the experience that the conference provided to these participants. They also illustrated aspects of direct impact, with participants stating they had taken specific actions as a result of being part of this event. The number of extremely positive responses for individual speakers also speaks to the strength of the program.

There are areas of feedback for Wafa to consider in relation to its next conference, particularly in relation to the need to rework the practice-based sessions and for more time for participants to move between sessions. It was also suggested that the conference needs to “stay small”. This raises a question for Wafa – how will they retain the connectivity, connection and inclusiveness of the conference in the face of a possible increase in demand? Others suggested that there needs to be more focus on the needs of volunteers in this area and also to encourage more men to attend.

The overwhelming response to whether people would recommend this conference to others indicates the strong support that this event has garnered. There is an opportunity for Wafa to build on this success for the future.

The take-home message from these surveys was that the conference created new insights and that the sharing of stories and knowledge amongst this cohort was empowering. In short, Wafa need to keep “doing what they are doing” and “keep evolving”.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Interviews undertaken with long-serving members of Wafa, described how Wafa has evolved from a small grass roots organisation to bring women in firefighting together to support each other and progress this agenda. It was clear from these interviews that initially, the organisation served as a safe space for women to talk about their experiences in the face of what was described as “a hostile environment”. It was also an inclusive organisation that brought together both men and women who wanted to support this agenda. One interviewee stated that “At the beginning I think people were angry because their experiences were not being acknowledged and they felt invisible”. However, it was felt that the conversation had evolved from this and become more focused.

Members also described the immensely volatile, personalized and political nature of the agenda and the resilience needed to deal with this. A common theme was the determination that women entering into organisations should not experience what others had previously. It was felt by some that there was work to be done in relation to developing better collaborative capability beyond the Wafa network and areas of the organisation to “bring it up to the next level”. There were different perspectives in relation to how members felt the agenda was progressing. Some felt the context and behaviours were changing both in areas of EMS and society, whereas others felt they

were still “fighting the same battles” as they were when it started. The general consensus was that there is still a lot of work to be done.

In relation to the future, members also reflected that Wafa had built itself to the point where it is now a recognised part in the EMS agenda with a growing membership. It was also acknowledged that there was now a need to formalise areas of the organisation to improve professional conduct. It was not clear what the strategic focus of the organisation would be in the future or where it now sat amongst the increasing number of EMS diversity and inclusion initiatives. One of the key challenges raised by all interviewees is that the administration is undertaken by members of the Wafa board, all of whom have full-time jobs. Concerns were raised in relation to how functionality could be sustained in the face of the growing demands being placed on the organisation. Key emerging needs outlined by interviewees included:

- dedicated resources to support the board and Wafa activities;
- a strategic vision and an implementation and business plan;
- more formalised governance; and
- building further collaborations beyond Wafa to support activities for its members.

It was clear from the interviews that the context surrounding the agenda of women in firefighting is felt to be changing and that Wafa is currently at a critical point. A ‘new norm’ is in the process of being established across EMS organisations in relation to diversity and inclusion, and women firefighters have a key role in this. The increasingly dynamic and cluttered diversity and inclusion agenda offers both opportunities and challenges. There is much for Wafa to consider if it is to capitalize on these opportunities and manage challenges as they arise.

CONCLUSION

The Wafa Conference can be seen as the culmination of both the changing agenda and the maturing of Wafa and its agenda. The feedback in relation to the conference was overwhelmingly positive and speaks to the unique experience that this conference provided and the strength of the network Wafa has built. The benefit of this is that the organisation now has the attention of the EMS sector and the potential to position itself to further progress its agenda. However, there is now also an expectation that future conferences will build upon this success, which will need to be carefully managed.

The agenda of women in firefighting is complex and does not exist in isolation of multiple other agendas that are currently driving transformation across EMS organisations. The QFES workshop findings provided an insight into the current status of many of these organisations from the perspective of many women who work within them. Of particular note from these exercises, was the lack of consistency in relation to what is needed in organisations to support this agenda, and also the need to build capability and capacity to support commitment to contribute. Much as these findings show the agenda is progressing, they also highlight that it is still not fully established and is vulnerable as a result.

Both the surveys and workshops highlighted the importance of sharing knowledge and storytelling as a mechanism for creating understanding in a way that connects diverse individuals to a common agenda, so they feel empowered. They also point to the difficulty that participants had in being able to think beyond immediate needs, and the lack of any tangible long-term vision of what success in this agenda looks like. This is not unique to Wafa and is something that will need to be addressed if it is to progress this agenda effectively. The findings have also provided a baseline for measuring aspects of diversity and inclusion practice, and have the potential to be developed further to provide a bottom-up measurement of progress in organisations.

There are legacy agendas such as previous trauma experienced which will need to be sensitively managed so that it supports those affected in a way that doesn't impede progress of the agenda. How this is acknowledged and articulated will be critical. It will also be important to ensure that both paid and non-paid aspects of the workforce are part of their agenda moving forward.

It is clear from the interviews with Wafa members that the next steps Wafa takes are likely to be some of its most important, and that additional support is needed. To determine their pathway forward, Wafa will need to consider carefully a number of issues which include:

- How it can leverage the opportunities it has created.
- If it will maintain its current focus and scope of activities or move to broaden these.
- Where improvements can be made in relation to future events in a way that is responsive to changes as they occur.
- How it will develop the dedicated resources needed to secure its future functionality so it can meet the demands and expectations of its members.

It will also need to plan carefully so that it builds on its strengths and maintains the trust of and connection across its membership during the next stage of its journey.

The Wafa conference provided a unique opportunity for people to come together to share experiences of women in firefighting in a way that allowed open discussion of women and men's experiences and to 'take the pulse' of this agenda. Wafa has created a safe space where participants reflected upon and connected to what has been, what is now and what the future might be. This is critical for the healthy progression of this complex and difficult agenda where women face specific issues as a minority in the firefighting context. Empowering events that are able to transcend the usual contentious conversations and provoke deeper insight into the myriad of issues associated with this agenda, are a rare experience. The feedback and outcomes reflect the success of this particular conference in being able to achieve this.

Wafa's has established its role as a voice for women in firefighting. This makes it an important part of the overarching EMS agenda, not only for the women they represent, but also emergency service organisations who are working towards a "new norm" where all forms of diversity are represented, understood and valued.

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