

Out of the Ashes

As Commissioner of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, Shane Fitzsimmons is determined to build a strong team around him, both on the front line and behind the scenes.

Images by Scott Ehler

Strong, dedicated Australians are the backbone of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS). When Shane Fitzsimmons was appointed to the role of Commissioner of the NSW RFS in 2007, he began to introduce a raft of changes, both culturally and operationally.

The CEO Magazine recently sat down with Shane to discuss the development of the NSW RFS, the passion of its volunteer workforce, and the future of the organisation.

***The CEO Magazine:* What prompted you to join the Duffys Forest Rural Fire Brigade at the age of 15?**

Shane: I think the biggest reason was that my father was already a volunteer for the Bushfire Brigade, as it was then known, and I would spend a lot of time there with him on weekends. I joined as soon as I could. Back then, you were allowed to join when you were 15; today, you've got to wait till you're 16, with parental consent.

I followed my father into the volunteer organisation because I enjoyed the camaraderie. There was always something to do, it was

a hobby-type bushfire brigade where members would meet and train regularly. Back in the 80s, the volunteers and brigades were not resourced in terms of equipment and infrastructure to the standard we see today. A lot of time was spent building, maintaining, and preparing the firefighting trucks and equipment. We bought our own overalls and personal protective equipment (PPE), and nothing was treated with fire retardants or purpose-designed as the PPE is today.

As a firefighter with nearly 30 years of experience in emergency services management, what do you think are the critical characteristics of successful leadership?

It's about having credibility, acting with integrity, establishing trust, and having a sense of commitment and empathy towards your team. It's all about people and being human. It's important to listen, understand, know, and relate to your people, and seek to understand what the challenges and the issues are.

How do you invite debate and engage with them?

That is always a challenging one. I think first and foremost you need

to set expectations, be very open and candid with feedback, as well as delegation and appropriate support. You need to allow people to make mistakes because if they're not trying to do things in new and different ways, then we all suffer.

Another essential aspect is praising and acknowledging very openly what is good in the organisation, what people are doing and achieving, and how they contribute. It's not just about those who are out there firefighting on the frontline; it's also important to acknowledge the army of men and women who are working hard behind the scenes to make sure that those people on the front line are doing their jobs as safely and as effectively as possible.

Working in such a high-pressure and high-responsibility environment, how do you ensure your team works effectively and collaboratively together?

Planning and preparation is a priority. You need to have structure and an appropriate policy framework. The architecture needs to be in place to ensure you are consulting, planning, exercising, and training >

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so that your workforce as a whole is continually developing.

Reflection is also crucial. After every event, whether it happens to us directly or happens in related fields somewhere else, we always seek to make sure that we learn from and appreciate the learnings of that experience so that we can do two things. We can continue with what was identified as being very positive and very successful, and we can also seek to address areas where there are weaknesses or opportunities for improvement. We can then build on those areas. I think we've got a very good history of demonstrating a willingness to learn.

What have been the major milestones for the NSW RFS since you became Commissioner in 2007?

In my time, the big focus has been around organisational governance and reform, particularly in the corporate side of the organisation, so the biggest changes have been related to transparency, governance, audit, compliance, and performance.

A huge focus has also been changing the culture and setting up professional standards. We examined the behaviours and attitudes of the organisation, set about removing out-dated prejudices, and continue to work hard to ensure that, as an organisation, our behaviours and values reflect modern society.

Technology has also been transformative in terms of the way we do business, as an enabler to what we do and how we do it. Obvious examples would be not just the firefighting technologies such as communication systems and aircraft, but also national policy changes in reviewing fire danger ratings, public information, warnings, and communicating with the community in times of difficulty. As an organisation, our accountability has increased in a very transparent and public way.

"I can absolutely and indeed unashamedly say that the NSW RFS volunteer is second to none in the world when it comes to providing fire and emergency services to the community."

- Shane Fitzsimmons



During my tenure, Australia experienced its worst bushfire disaster in Victoria when 173 people tragically lost their lives and more than 2,000 homes were destroyed. The NSW RFS was an integral part of a national effort to learn from that terrible tragedy. We did it in a collaborative way and we rolled out a whole host of changes to our systems and to the procedures we use to warn, advise, and engage with the community.

How has the culture shifted under your leadership?

There has been a dramatic professionalisation of the business. For me, professionalism is not about whether you receive remuneration for what you do, and clearly that's not the case with the NSW Rural Fire Service given our volunteer profile and the fact that 99 per cent of the organisation is volunteer-based.

Professionalism is about how you invest in your infrastructure and in your people, how they are trained and equipped, how they perform, how they behave, and how they deliver their products or services. I can absolutely and indeed unashamedly say that the NSW

RFS volunteer is second to none in the world when it comes to providing fire and emergency services to the community.

We have to make sure that everyone understands that they are accountable all the time, whether they are a volunteer or salaried, and that there are behaviours and expectations befitting the image of a member of the NSW RFS. Our members understand that they are accountable for their actions and behaviours and that they must align with the values and attitudes of the organisation.

We have taken on an approach of broadening our membership and providing a flexible membership model so we can demonstrate that everyone has a role within the NSW RFS. It's not just about the men and women out on the front line that hold the hoses and do the firefighting. There are people needed to help with logistics, radio communications, catering, and with education and community engagement to share public information and warnings.

Ultimately, we are a community-based organisation, so our diversity >

"Gaam Emergency Products has been associated with the New South Wales Rural Fire Service for 50 years. They are a professionally run organisation with an emphasis on their volunteers and the protection of the community and environment." - Ian Price, Business Manager, GAAM



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should be reflective of the communities in which we live and are seeking to serve and protect. You've got to have a look at the local community and attract the right people to join and properly represent those communities.

Looking at external partners, how do you work with suppliers and key partners to ensure the best operational efficiency?

We have a legislative framework that provides for a highly collaborative organisation. Whether it's fire-management planning and prevention or operational response, we have structures and frameworks in place that provide for regular dialogue and interaction with our partners.

Fire management across New South Wales is not just about the RFS and its volunteers; it includes other fire agencies and authorities, local government, farmers, environment agencies, public land-management agencies,

transport agencies, and utility agencies such as power and water. They are all part of the fire-management solution.

Investing in and engaging with partners, setting expectations, making sure they intimately understand the NSW RFS and our charter, and having the preparations in place through planning, exercising, and regular engagement forums is crucial.

In a business sense, we have good strategic partners with design and supply of our products, in our equipment and firefighting appliances, and protective clothing. Over the years, we have worked to develop and refine these tools, both with our partners and our volunteer workforce. We are a highly dedicated and consultative organisation.

Where do you see the NSW RFS going in the future?

We will continue to be flexible and adaptive. I think we're going

to see an increased diversification in our membership. There'll be continuing investment in technology and research, and using that technology to reach out to communities and gauge behaviours and attitudes. It's one thing to have all these systems and all these firefighting techniques, but how do they relate to what the community thinks and understands, and how they are going to behave before and during a crisis.

Having grown up in the organisation, I've been employed since the mid 90s and held a number of positions. I have been very fortunate to have both volunteer and salaried roles, converting what was basically a hobby and passion into a career. I am very privileged to hold the role of Commissioner, and be responsible for leading and looking after some of the most extraordinary men and women that you'll find anywhere in the world. ●

*"We have a great business relationship with the RFS. They are at the forefront of innovation and enhanced protection for their firefighters. We have developed a partnership focused on maximising protection and comfort for their most valuable asset, their volunteers."
- Simon Stewart, Managing Director, S&H*

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