

GENDER

Making U.S. Fire Departments More Diverse and Inclusive

by [Corinne Bendersky](#)

December 07, 2018



youngvet/Getty Images

Picture a typical firefighter. Who comes to mind? If you imagined a white man, that's understandable: 96% of U.S. career firefighters are men, and 82% are white. This homogeneity is striking, especially when you compare it to the U.S. military, which is 85% men and 60% white, and local police forces, which are 88% men and 73% white.

Many fire departments recognize that their lack of diversity is a problem and say they're committed to increasing racial and gender diversity. "We have to diversify, because it actually improves our organization. It helps us address the needs of the public better," says Derek Alkonis, the Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACoFD) assistant chief. Ralph Terrazas, chief of the Los Angeles City Fire Department (LAFD), agrees: "[We] will provide a higher level of service to the communities we serve when the people of that department respect the culture, language and beliefs of the people within that community."

But what's the actual path for departments achieving more diversity? And if they do so, will their members embrace how it improves their organization?

Answering these questions requires a closer look at two factors: what firefighters' work actually consists of and what departments are currently doing to address diversity in their ranks. The answers suggest we need a new model for leaders.

What firefighters actually do.

Yes, they're fighting fires, which requires climbing ladders, hauling hoses, and carrying victims from burning buildings. But this is only a small subset of the job. In 2016, only 4% of emergency calls to which U.S. fire departments responded were actually fires. The majority (64%) were medical emergencies.

To succeed as a firefighter, stereotypically masculine traits like brawn and courage are simply not enough. Firefighters also need the intellectual, social, and emotional skills required to deliver medical emergency aid, support each other through traumatic experiences, and engage intimately with the communities they serve. In short, successful firefighters embody a complex mix of skills and traits. And yet, in my research on reducing gender bias and my work conducting training on general diversity and inclusion with fire departments, I find that, when evaluating fit and competence, firefighters tend to default to a reductive set of traits (physical strength evaluated through strict fitness tests, for example) that serve to maintain white men's dominance in the fire service.

This manifests itself in several ways. A common sentiment I've heard many times is, "I don't care if you're black, white, female, male, or polka-dot. All I care about is if you can do the job." But if this performance-based meritocracy were true, getting the job done would encompass a variety of skills and talents at which both men and women and people of all races and ethnicities could potentially excel. However, as Felix Danbold and I explain in our forthcoming research in *Organization Science* on gender bias in the fire service, "when the topic of female firefighters came up, the importance of physical strength was consistently and spontaneously invoked to justify the relative absence of women in the fire service, but the importance of compassion (a female-stereotyped trait) was rarely, if ever, brought up to argue for bringing more women into the profession."

We determined that this is because stereotypes about women's relative lack of physical strength and stamina have led to a widespread belief that departments have lowered their standards to accommodate female firefighters, thus undermining the integrity of the service and posing a threat to their colleagues and communities.

While many women firefighters *do* have the physical abilities to succeed as firefighters, those who are or have been a part of the LAFD and LACoFD have nonetheless experienced excessive, unrelenting scrutiny and skepticism since being accepted into the ranks in 1983. We heard comments like "I have to prove myself on every call, every time" and "Everyone expects you to fail." Women, more than men, reported being repeatedly drilled on the most physically-demanding tasks every time they were assigned to work with a new crew, no matter how many years of experience they had. One male Battalion Chief told us about a recent experience when a woman was assigned to his crew, and all five of the other men on the crew requested transfers the next day.

Black firefighters also have to compensate for stereotyped assumptions of inferior competence. Historically, this was especially true during departments' legally mandated affirmative action hiring periods. "When I was hired," said Brent Burton, LACoFD Captain, Recruitment Unit and former president of the Stentorians (the recognized employee group for black firefighters),

“people essentially told me ‘you’re an affirmative action guy, you’re not as good.’” Today, greater representation has reduced some of that performance skepticism, but black firefighters still face challenges with social exclusion and explicit racism.

The fire service’s challenges with diversity go beyond gender and race. Openly gay men are exceedingly rare in the fire service; the few who are out of the closet face severe social exclusion. Cameron Langhans, LAFD Captain I and Paramedic explains, “when I was married to a woman, I had the privilege of being seen as a straight, white man, and I felt the automatic inclusion that comes with those identifiers. Now that I have identified as gay, I have to prove myself all over again.”

Ultimately, most firefighters who are not heterosexual white men must be extremely resilient to overcome relentless scrutiny and exclusion in their careers.

What’s being done to increase diversity?

Many departments and industry groups are proactively trying to diversify and to change their culture to be more inclusive, particularly with respect to recruitment and promotion processes. In the mid-1990s, for example, the Stentorians created a promotion preparation program for its members to offset the insufficient mentoring black firefighters received in the field. “This is one reason why there is relatively equal representation of blacks throughout ranks of the LAFD” compared to the population of Los Angeles County, says LAFD Assistant Chief and former Stentorians’ president Kwame Cooper.

More recently, the LAFD and LACoFD, along with the LA Women in the Fire Service (LAWFS), the local industry group for women, have hosted events to help educate and prepare prospective female firefighters. “We identify women who passed the physical and written entrance tests and are now in the pool of qualified candidates who are waiting to be hired,” says Captain Burton. “Then we have our current women firefighters showing these interested women what the job is really like, and what they need to do to succeed.”

Throughout California, the departments that have most effectively leveraged these kinds of outreach efforts “integrate recruitment and mentoring of women and people of color into subsequent stages of the hiring process,” explains Dave Gillotte, LACoFD Captain and President of the Firefighters IAFF Local 1014. That means, for example, targeting qualified candidates from underrepresented groups to advance through the selection process. This differs from the more traditional method of relying on a random lottery from the general candidate pool, a place where women and people of color are underrepresented and thus have lower odds of being selected.

Together, these important efforts expose members of underrepresented groups to careers in the fire service and gives them helpful training and mentorship opportunities. Many of those who make it on to become firefighters also find a sense of community among members of their own underrepresented groups in organizations like the LAWFS and the Stentorians.

The problem is that none of these programs directly address the challenge of inclusion—that is, of being valued and having a sense of belonging, regardless of who you are. So how can we get more firefighters to recognize members of non-prototypical groups as being equally capable of success in the fire service?

Reframing the firefighter prototype

In my forthcoming research with Felix Danbold, we find that reframing the professional prototype of what it means to be a firefighter to emphasize the importance of *legitimate*, stereotypically feminine traits, like compassion, has promising effects on creating a more inclusive environment for women.

We had active-duty firefighters and members of the general public watch videos of a white, male fire captain describing the most important traits of a successful modern firefighter. When he listed compassion first, followed by team orientation and physical strength, viewers’ perceptions of female firefighters’ abilities and support for gender diversification policies were much more positive than they were when they watched him present those same traits in reverse order.

This, we believe, is a promising first step in increasing the perception of professional fit of underrepresented or undervalued groups. And we're starting to learn more about how the research can extend to practice in the form of a general diversity and inclusion training program I developed for fire department leaders that includes education on how biases and stereotypes affect the experiences of firefighters from underrepresented groups. While not revolutionary, these steps are vital. "Biases impact how we think and the decisions we make; we should be aware that they exist and how we manage them," says LACoFD fire chief Daryl Osby.

To minimize the potential effect of biases, fire service leaders need to convey transparent, consistent expectations and evaluation processes for establishing members' competence and trustworthiness. For instance, I coach fire captains to not only pre-determine the appropriate drills that *all* new crew members need to perform, but also how many times each task must be done correctly to be deemed acceptable. This can reduce the risk of shifting standards being applied to people from underrepresented groups about whom there is skepticism.

I also encourage leaders to elevate the value of skills that align with stereotypes about women and minorities through concrete actions. For example, to promote the social and emotional strengths commonly associated with women, one might look for ways to acknowledge and celebrate crew members who demonstrate what we call the "heart and soul" of a firefighter in the station and out in the field. Joviality — defined as "markedly good humor" and one that helps process emotional trauma — is a positive trait associated with black Americans somewhat more than with white Americans, so explaining that a jovial culture can increase crew effectiveness may reduce some of the skepticism about and exclusion of black firefighters. When you hold all department members accountable to excellence along the full spectrum of traits associated with being a successful firefighter, you help firefighters that don't fit the straight, white, male archetype and create more equal opportunities and inclusion.

To measure the effectiveness of this approach, I surveyed 138 chief officers and 1,096 of their subordinates in the LACoFD before training the chiefs, then followed up with 93 of the chiefs and 1,347 of their subordinates two months later. I found that, after this intervention, chiefs' were spending more time mentoring team members on social and emotional skills, more

strongly endorsed diversity and inclusion, and supported policies to increase representation of women. More compellingly, the subordinates evaluated their chief officers as better leaders following the training. They reported respecting their supervisors more, seeing them as better role models and mentors, and believing that they were more accepting of differences.

However, as L.A. Fire Commissioner Rebecca Ninberg notes, “changing the culture requires a long-term commitment to integrate it into the DNA of the department.” Thus, leadership training is only a first step; real change starts when leaders employ what they learned every single day. “Diversity goal messaging from the fire chief, consistent training, engagement of key department stakeholder groups, and the use of ongoing measurements of progress” are critical, says LAFD Fire Chief Terrazas. This helps the inclusive firefighter prototype spread through the ranks.

Most firefighters are probably unaware of how their status-quo perceptions about their profession reinforce bias and create unequal opportunities for peers from underrepresented groups. My research points to a more inclusive alternative. Hopefully, the departments that have implemented my training approach with will see continued improvement in their efforts to confront the diversity challenges of the fire service, and will serve as examples to others across the country, as well as different types of organizations that would like to become more meaningfully diverse. Perhaps most importantly, it will make a difference in the careers of talented and hardworking firefighters.

Corinne Bendersky is Professor of Management and Organizations at the UCLA Anderson School of Management. Dr. Bendersky is also the faculty director of the Human Resources Roundtable Association and is the founder of Morpho Leadership Development consulting.

This article is about GENDER

 Follow This Topic