

**Putting Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) into Practice: An
Australian case study**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
University of Tasmania
(November, 2011)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people to whom I owe thanks for their assistance in the generation of this Thesis. I wish to first express my gratitude to my doctoral supervisor, Dr Mark Wickham, for his guidance, encouragement, and example over the period from October 2008. To my associate supervisor, Associate Professor Martin Grimmer, thank you for the carefully considered comments. To Associate Professor Mark Dibben, as Head of School, thank you for the manner in which you managed the corrections process.

The Tasmania Fire Service supported the research in a number of ways, and I wish to particularly acknowledge the continuing support and encouragement from Robyn Pearce and Steve Willing. I would also like to thank the case study participants for their generosity and co-operation, without whom there would have been no research possible. Also, I would like to acknowledge my friends and colleagues at the School of Management at the University of Tasmania.

To Jackie Donald, I am indebted for her support, encouragement and tolerance.

ABSTRACT

Since the publication of the Harvard Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) framework in 1984, there has been a significant volume of research on the link between the existence of HRM policies and organisational outcomes. However, there has been little development in terms of theoretical HRM models. There have also been calls for greater research into the mechanisms that link HRM policy and organisational outcomes. In particular, there is literature on the ‘what’ of SHRM but limited coverage of an integrated approach to ‘how’ SHRM can be effectively implemented.

This issue provides the research opportunity for this thesis. The study focuses the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) and its progress in developing a new HRM policy on managing performance that is centred on workplace feedback. A preliminary framework was developed based on the work of Guest (1987, 1997, 2002) that postulated four tests in a sequential approach to SHRM: linking HRM strategy to firm strategy (vertical fit); consistency across HRM policies (horizontal fit); effective implementation (managerial support) and outcomes (employee response).

The study was conducted as longitudinal embedded single case study with qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups gathered. Fifteen focus groups and seven individual interviews were held as part of the mid-trial review and evaluation of the workplace feedback trial. There were also thirteen key informant interviews held with executive managers, line managers and HR specialists over the period of the research.

In order to address the research opportunity, this thesis answers three research questions. The first question was: what are the relevant contextual issues for an organisation to consider in developing a new human resource policy? The answer to this question found a set of external

and internal contextual factors that influenced the TFS's approach in developing and implementing workplace feedback. The study found that the organisation's history, leadership style, and culture influenced the nature and manner of HRM policy development. The importance of maintaining a consistent approach was highlighted.

The second research question was: what are the challenges for the HR function in meeting the four tests drawn from the Guest framework? The answer to this question demonstrated the complexities and competing priorities for a HR function in seeking to achieve vertical and horizontal integration of HRM policies to achieve desired employee behavioural responses. Particular challenges identified included prioritising and sequencing of SHRM activities, obtaining consistency across HRM policies, the HR function maintaining credibility and visibility, and the importance of a consistent and sustained communication strategy.

The third research question was: how can an integrated SHRM process model assist a public sector organisation to design and progress towards implementation of a new HRM policy? The answer to this question indicated that the integrated SHRM process model can provide guidance on factors to be considered in developing a HRM policy in a dynamic environment. The longitudinal feature of the study contributed to the finding that the role of the HR function and its inter-relationships with executives, line managers and employees requires more prominence than SHRM theory has suggested.

CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES	xiv
TABLE OF TABLES.....	xiv
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	xiv
LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	xv
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 OBJECTIVE OF THE CHAPTER	2
1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE THESIS.....	2
1.2.1 SHRM LITERATURE: LINKING HRM POLICY TO PERFORMANCE.....	3
1.2.2 HRM POLICY DEVELOPMENT: USING AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK TO INFORM PRACTICE.....	4
1.3 BROAD RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY	5
1.4 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS	6
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
2.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER	9
2.2 STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	10
2.2.1 A PRELIMINARY FRAMEWORK (Guest's 'Four Tests of SHRM')	13
2.3 SHRM AND ORGANISATIONAL OUTCOMES	17
2.3.1 ISSUES AND TENSIONS IN THE SHRM/ORGANISATIONAL OUTCOMES LITERATURE	19
2.3.1.1 Correlation and causation.....	19
2.3.1.2 Cross-sectional and single respondent studies	20
2.3.1.3 Focus on firm performance as the level of analysis	20
2.3.1.4 Insufficient attention to qualitative research	21
2.3.1.5 Selection of performance outcomes	21
2.3.1.6 The impact of time-lags.....	23
2.3.1.7 Low level of transfer from research to practice	24
2.3.2 THE SO-CALLED BLACK BOX PROBLEM.....	24
2.3.3 THE CAUSAL MODEL OF EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE.....	26
2.3.4 SUMMARY OF SHRM AND PERFORMANCE LITERATURE.....	27
2.4 ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXTUAL FACTORS RELEVANT TO THE CASE ORGANISATION'S HRM STRATEGY	28

2.4.1	NATIONAL CULTURAL FACTORS	29
2.4.2	PUBLIC SECTOR AND SERVICE INDUSTRY CONTEXT	32
2.4.3	EMERGENCY SERVICES FOCUS	34
2.5	WORKPLACE FEEDBACK AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT	35
2.6	THE ROLE OF THE HR FUNCTION	39
2.6.1	ISSUES IN VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL FIT.....	39
2.6.2	THE ULRICH FRAMEWORK.....	40
2.6.3	THE COMPETING VALUES FRAMEWORK	45
2.6.4	HR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SENIOR MANAGERS.....	47
2.6.5	CREDIBILTY OF THE HR FUNCTION	48
2.7	THE ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS	49
2.8	EMPLOYEE RESPONSES	52
2.8.1	EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT	53
2.8.2	ORGANISATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOUR (OCB).....	54
2.8.3	EMPLOYEE ACCEPTANCE OF HRM PRACTICES.....	56
2.9	COMMUNICATING HRM PRACTICES	58
2.10	IMPLEMENTING SHRM	59
2.11	SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE.....	60
2.12	RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	63
2.13	CONCLUSIONS TO LITERATURE REVIEW	64
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY		65
3.1	OBJECTIVE OF THE CHAPTER	66
3.2	RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH DESIGN	66
3.3	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	68
3.3.1	ACCESS TO THE CASE STUDY ORGANISATION.....	69
3.4	THE CASE STUDY AS A RESEARCH METHOD.....	70
3.4.1	THE PURPOSES OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH.....	69
3.4.2	CRITICISMS OF THE CASE STUDY METHOD.....	70
3.5	THE SUITABILITY OF THE CASE STUDY METHOD IN THIS INQUIRY ...	77
3.5.1	THE LITERATURE REVIEW	77
3.5.2	THE TFS AS A UNIQUE CASE STUDY	78
3.5.3	SUMMARY OF THE SUITABILITY OF THE TFS AS A CASE STUDY	79
3.6	CONDUCT OF THE RESEARCH.....	80
3.6.1	THE SELECTION OF THE CASE	80

3.6.2	A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	80
3.6.3	THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CASE STUDY PROTOCOL	81
3.6.3.1	Combing the research purpose with the reserarch questions	81
3.6.3.2	The unit of analysis	83
3.6.3.3	Data collection.....	83
3.6.4	THE RESEARCH DESIGN.....	85
3.6.4.1	The pre-trial survey	87
3.6.4.2	Interviews	88
3.6.4.3	Focus Groups.....	89
3.7	THE CASE ANALYSIS	92
3.7.1	EDITING THE DATA.....	92
3.7.2	DATA CATEGORISATION AND CODING.....	93
3.7.3	DATA INTERPRETATION	95
3.7.4	VERIFICATION OF CONCLUSIONS.....	96
3.7.5	THE MODE OF ANALYSIS	98
3.7.5.1	Stage one coding	98
3.7.5.2	Stage two coding	99
3.8	DEVELOPING RESEARCH OUTCOMES.....	100
3.8.1	THE DESCRIPTIVE OUTCOME.....	100
3.8.2	THE EXPLORATORY OUTCOME	101
3.8.3	THE EXPLANATORY OUTCOME.....	104
3.9	CHAPTER SUMMARY	105
CHAPTER 4. CASE HISTORY		106
4.1	OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER	107
4.2	HISTORY OF THE TFS AND THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH.....	107
4.2.1	BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TASMANIA FIRE SERVICE (TFS)	107
4.2.1.1	The TFS and performance management	108
4.2.1.2	The Chief Officer	110
4.2.1.3	Appointment of a HR Manager	111
4.2.2	CORPORATE PLANNING OUTCOMES.....	113
4.2.3	ENTERPRISE AGREEMENT NEGOTIATIONS	115
4.2.4	STATE SERVICE COMMISSIONER‘S DIRECTION TO AGENCIES TO DEVELOP PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES	116
4.3	HOW THE RESEARCH PROCESS BEGAN.....	118

4.3.1	PRESENTATION TO THE EMT.....	118
4.3.2	ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE RESEARCH.....	121
4.4	THE REFERENCE GROUP AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRIAL	122
4.4.1	ESTABLISHMENT OF THE REFERENCE GROUP.....	122
4.4.2	PROCESSES USED BY THE REFERENCE GROUP.....	123
4.4.3	REFERENCE GROUP OUTCOMES	124
4.4.3.1	Principles to underpin workplace feedback	124
4.4.3.2	Key elements of the feedback system	126
4.4.4	RESOURCES TO SUPPORT WORKPLACE FEEDBACK DEVELOPMENT	127
4.4.4.1	Appointment of a Project Officer.....	127
4.4.4.2	Establishment and role of the Trial Steering Committee	128
4.4.5	COMMUNICATION STRATEGY	129
4.5	THE WORKPLACE FEEDBACK TRIAL	129
4.5.1	IDENTIFICATION OF WORK GROUPS.....	130
4.5.2	PRE-TRIAL TRAINING	131
4.5.3	PRE-TRIAL SURVEY	131
4.5.4	The TRIAL STEERING COMMITTEE.....	132
4.5.5	The MID-TRIAL REVIEW	133
4.5.6	The POST-TRIAL EVALUATION	134
4.5.6.1	How the evaluation was conducted.....	134
4.5.6.2	Report to the Steering Committee and Recommendations to the EMT.....	134
4.6	TOWARDS FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK	135
4.6.1	ROLE OF HUMAN SERVICES	135
4.6.2	IMPLEMENTATION OF COMPLEMENTARY HR STRATEGIES	136
4.6.3	DEVELOPMENT OF SUPPORTING NETWORKS AND MATERIALS.....	137
4.6.4	IMPACTS OF OPERATIONAL FACTORS AND INDUSTRIAL DISRUPTION.....	138
4.7	STATUS OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK AT END OF RESEARCH PERIOD	139
4.7.1	VARIABLE TIMETABLE OF IMPLEMENTATION	139
4.7.2	THE NATURE OF REVIEW SESSIONS.....	140
4.7.3	THE LINK TO TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT.....	140
4.7.4	CONFIDENTIALITY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION.....	141
4.7.5	FLEXIBILITY OF APPROACH	142
4.7.6	REPORTING EFFECTIVENESS OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK	142

4.7.7	POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS	143
4.8	CHAPTER SUMMARY	143
CHAPTER 5..	RESULTS PART 1: CONTEXT AND DEVELOPMENT... ..	143
5.1	OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER	146
5.2	NEED FOR THE TFS TO CHANGE.....	146
5.2.1	THE CULTURE OF THE TFS	148
5.2.2	LEGACY OF 1980S PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL POLICY.....	150
5.2.3	FEEDBACK ABOUT A LACK OF POSITIVE FEEDBACK.....	151
5.2.4	STATE SERVICE COMMISSIONER‘S DIRECTION (NOVEMBER 2002)....	153
5.3	DEVELOPMENT OF THE HR FUNCTION.....	154
5.4	IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL CHANGES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT	157
5.5	THE EMT AND DECISIONS ON WORKPLACE FEEDBACK	159
5.6	GENERAL ATTITUDES OF THE KEY ACTORS PRIOR TO THE TRIAL....	161
5.6.1	THE HR FUNCTION	161
5.6.2	SENIOR MANAGEMENT (EMT)	163
5.6.3	LINE MANAGERS	164
5.6.4	THE EMPLOYEES.....	165
5.7	LEADING UP TO THE WORKPLACE FEEDBACK TRIAL	166
5.8	CHAPTER SUMMARY	167
CHAPTER 6.	RESULTS PART 2: THE WORKPLACE FEEDBACK TRIAL AND ITS EVALUATION.....	168
6.1	INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES	169
6.2	THE MANAGEMENT OF THE TRIAL.....	170
6.3	THE PRE-TRIAL SURVEY.....	171
6.3.1	CONTEXT OF THE SURVEY	171
6.3.2	ANANYSIS OF THE DATA.....	174
6.3.2.1	General views on Feedback.....	174
6.3.2.2	General views on TFS	174
6.3.2.3	Experience with feedback in current position	175
6.3.2.4	Expectations of the trial.....	175
6.3.2.5	Concerns about the feedback trial	175
6.3.3	HOW THE RESULTS OF THE PRE-TRIAL SURVEY WERE USED	176

6.4	THE MID-TRIAL REVIEW	176
6.4.1	STRUCTURE OF THE MID-TRIAL REVIEW	176
6.4.2	OVERALL RESULTS FROM THE MID-TRIAL REVIEW	177
6.4.3	FACTORS SUPPORTIVE OF THE TRIAL	177
6.4.4	FACTORS REQUIRING FURTHER COINSIDERATION OR DEVELOPMENT	179
6.4.5	SUMMARY OF THE MID-TRIAL REVIEW	184
6.5	POST-TRIAL EVALUATION	184
6.5.1	HOW THE EVALUATION WAS CONDUCTED	184
6.5.2	OVERALL RESULTS FROM THE POST-TRIAL EVALUATION	185
6.5.3	POSITIVE FEATURES OF THE WORPLACE FEEDBACK TRIAL	186
6.5.3.1	Structure & nature of training	186
6.5.3.2	Simplicity & flexibility	187
6.5.3.3	Additional positive factors	187
6.5.3.4	Overall positive impact of the feedback trial	188
6.5.4	NEGATIVE COMMENTS IN THE POST-TRIAL EVALAUTION	188
6.5.4.1	Initial negative response to training	188
6.5.4.2	Delays in conducting review sessions	189
6.5.4.3	Lack of follow up	190
6.5.4.4	Insufficient priority given	191
6.5.5	THE EXTENT TO WHICH DIFFICULT ISSUES WERE DEALT WITH DURING THE TRIAL	191
6.5.6	OPERATIONAL MATTERS	192
6.5.6.1	Scheduling, length & location of summary meetings	192
6.5.6.2	Documentation (to facilitate meetings and to record outcomes)	193
6.5.6.3	Confidentiality and back-up systems	193
6.6	POST-TRIAL EVALUATION OVERALL COMMENTS	194
6.6.1	DEVELOPING A TFS SPECIFIC APPROACH TO WORKPLACE FEEDBACK	194
6.6.2	THE DEVELOPMENT AND RUNNING OF THE TRIAL	195
6.6.3	PERIOD OF TIME TAKEN	196
6.7	ROLE OF THE HR FUNCTION	197
6.8	ROLE OF THE EMT	198
6.9	ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS	199

6.10	MOVING TOWARDS FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK.....	200
6.10.1	COMMUNICATION OF TRIAL OUTCOMES	200
6.10.2	WHAT SPECIFIC CHANGES OR ADDITIONS WOULD HELP IN IMPLEMENTING WORKPLACE FEEDBACK?.....	202
6.10.3	WHAT ADDITIONAL INFORMATION SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN A PROCEDURE MANUAL AND LIST OF FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)?.....	203
6.10.4	RECOGNITION OF GOOD PERFORMANCE	203
6.11	CHAPTER SUMMARY	204
CHAPTER 7. RESULTS PART 3:TOWARDS TFS WIDE IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK.....		206
7.1	INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES OF CHAPTER	207
7.2	ROLE OF THE HR FUNCTION.....	208
7.3	ROLE OF THE EMT	213
7.4	ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS.....	216
7.5	EMPLOYEE RESPONSES	217
7.6	COMMUNICATION STRATEGY	219
7.7	OVERALL APPROACH TAKEN BY THE TFS	221
7.7.1	FLEXIBILITY OF APPROACH	223
7.8	TOWARDS FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK	224
7.8.1	EVALUATION OF THE WORKPLACE FEEDBACK APPROACH.....	226
7.9	CHAPTER SUMMARY	227
CHAPTER 8. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS		229
8.1	INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE CHAPTER.....	230
8.2	LITERATURE ISSUES AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE METHOD	231
8.2.1	USE OF SHRM LITERATURE REVIEW	231
8.2.2	CONTRIBUTION OF THE METHOD	232
8.3	RESEARCH QUESTION 1: CONTEXT	233
8.3.1	HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE.....	233
8.3.2	COMMENTS ON RESEARCH QUESTION 1.....	235
8.4	RESEARCH QUESTION 2: CHALLENGES FOR THE HR FUNCTION	236
8.4.1	VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL FIR IN THEORY AND PRACTICE	238

8.4.2	AIMING FOR A SHRM FRAMEWORK IN A DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENT	236
8.4.3	COMPETING VALUES IN THE PRIORITY AND SEQUENCING OF SHRM ACTIVITIES	239
8.4.4	THE HR FUNCTION OBTAINING AND HUMAN RESOURCES	241
8.4.5	EMPLOYEE RESPONSES	241
8.4.6	COMMENTS RELEVANT TO CHALLENGES FOR THE HR FUNCTION ...	242
8.5	RESEARCH QUESTION 2: CREDIBILITY OF THE HR FUNCTION	236
8.5.1	HR CREDIBILITY WITH EMT, LINE MANAGERS AND EMPLOYEES	238
8.6	RESEARCH QUESTION 2: COMMITMENT AND PERSEVERANCE.....	244
8.6.1	UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF HRM POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION	244
8.6.2	KEEPING FOCUS AND MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM.....	236
8.7	RESEARCH QUESTION 2: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN SHRM .	246
8.8	OVERALL COMMENTS ON RESEARCH QUESTION 2	250
8.9	RESEARCH QUESTION 3: AN INTEGRATED SHRM PROCESS MODEL..	251
8.9.1	THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	252
8.9.2	THE ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE (EMT)	253
8.9.3	THE ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS	253
8.9.4	EMPLOYEE RESPONSES	254
8.9.5	COMMENTS ON RESEARCH QUESTION 3.....	255
8.9.6	PROPOSED INTEGRATED SHRM PROCESS MODEL	256
8.10	IMPLICATIONS FOR SHRM THEORY AND RESEARCH.....	259
8.11	IMPLICATIONS FOR HRM PRACTICE	261
8.12	PARAMETERS OF THE RESEARCH AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	263
8.12.1	LIMITATIONS OF THE METHOD	263
8.12.2	HOW THE LIMITATIONS WERE ADDRESSED.....	264
8.12.3	THE TRANSFERABILITY OF THE RESEARCH.....	265
8.12.4	SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	265
8.13	CHAPTER SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	266
	REFERENCES.....	267