



Making changes while respecting the culture of the fire service: tips for managers

The Netherlands Institute for Public Safety (NIPV) has conducted research to find out how managers and employees within the fire service view good non-operational leadership. Anyone interested in translating these insights into their own practical situation will find a number of relatable case studies below, as well as practical tips that will help managers get straight to work on this task.

Passion and commitment

Passion and commitment are defining aspects of the culture of the fire service and consequently influence leadership within the organisation. These same qualities also determine how changes are received and experienced:

- > **Passion:** the emotional bond people have with and the intrinsic motivation they feel in relation to the profession. For many firefighters, the work they do is more than just an occupation; it is a calling and an important part of their identity. Changes to vehicles, specialisms or working methods therefore not only have an impact on the work, but sometimes also on the individual. Factual arguments and emotions often become intertwined then.
- > **Commitment:** often stems from this passion and is expressed in a sense of responsibility for the work, citizens and each other. Firefighters therefore view changes through a critical eye and want to understand why they are necessary. This commitment is valuable, but can also give rise to discussion and slow down decision-making.

When changes are made within the fire service, managers must involve people by listening and explaining, take concerns seriously and, at the same time, steer a firm course.

In-depth information, further development and reflection

If you would like to find out more about passion and commitment – and the role they play – at the fire service, or about change at the fire service, please read the research report (section 5.1.3 and section 6.4.3) or the summary. If you are interested in reflecting on your own leadership together with your fellow managers, you can play the leadership game. Scan the QR code to go directly to the research report, summary and leadership game on nipv.nl/leiderschap.



Case study: Regional change, local practice

On paper, the new incident response strategy seems logical. The region expects it to increase effectiveness and improve availability. Around the coffee table at the fire station, however, people are seeing things differently. Colleagues are asking themselves whether the local situation has been taken sufficiently into account. The shift leader feels as if he is caught between two worlds: that of the organisation and that of the crew.



Tips for the shift leader



Bring local practical knowledge to the cluster commander's attention in concrete form

Collect examples from practice, such as risks and experiences, so that concerns can be discussed in concrete terms and not merely dismissed as an emotional response.



Acknowledge the value of experience, but keep nostalgia in check

Value the expertise and knowledge of experienced colleagues, but avoid being guided by arguments such as 'in the past we did it like this'. Allow colleagues with up-to-date knowledge (e.g. colleagues who have recently received training) to explain what is changing and why.



Try out a change together in practice

If possible, try out a change first, involve informal leaders and look for solutions to any issues together. Then demonstrate what benefits the change delivers, as visible results increase trust.



Seek support from the cluster commander in good time

If the resistance persists, involve the cluster commander. They can explain the change and the background to it, and also support your message. If necessary, ask for time and space to build support for the change.



Communicate a decision together with the cluster commander

Once a decision has been taken, clear messaging is needed from the management. Allowing yourself to be influenced by the crew's dissatisfaction will lead to a lack of clarity and weaken your own position.

Case study: Minor change, major resistance

What starts as a logical and straightforward change from the region's perspective soon takes on an entirely different meaning at the fire station. Colleagues begin to question the choices and resistance grows. The shift leader tries to explain the change and keep it on track, but comes under increasing pressure. What started out as a minor change develops into a conflict between the fire station and the back office.



Tips for the cluster commander

-  **Invest in the relationship before any issues arise**
Develop a relationship with fire stations and shift leaders. Know what is going on, what concerns people have and what a shift leader needs support with. Trust has to be built in advance, not only once tensions have started to rise.
-  **Invest in reciprocity**
Don't just act as the spokesperson for the region. Make sure you visibly offer value to the fire station. Help where possible, acknowledge what is being done well and address problems. This will help you build the crew's trust for whenever you need to ask something of them.
-  **Prepare sensitive messages together**
Discuss with the shift leader how you will explain the decision, what scope there still is and where resistance could arise. This will help you communicate the message clearly and with confidence.
-  **Stand visibly alongside the shift leader**
Make it clear that the shift leader does not stand alone. In this way, you will support both the content of the message and the shift leader's position.

Case study: The mayor intervenes

As a result of spending cuts, the question of removing equipment from certain fire stations has been examined. After careful consideration, it has been decided that station A will lose its second fire engine. However, even before the decision has been finalised, volunteer firefighters and local representatives contact their mayor and municipal council to express their concerns about the station's future and the impact on local safety. The mayor puts questions on the matter to the director of the safety region/the commander of the fire service. Before these discussions have even been held, the view has already taken hold amongst the local community that 'their fire engine is being taken away'. The change threatens to develop into an administrative conflict between the municipal authority, the fire station and the safety region.



Tips for the director of the safety region/ commander of the fire service



Involve the board of the safety region before the change takes on a life of its own locally

Inform mayors about changes and the possible impact on their municipality in good time. Also state which points are still being examined, what decisions are yet to be taken and when more information will be provided. In this way, you can avoid situations in which they find out about a change for the first time via fire stations, municipal councillors or the media.



Tell a concrete, local story

Explain not only why the change is necessary for the region, but also what it means for the municipality, fire station and volunteer firefighters concerned. Say what the impact will be on fire services and make clear what local knowledge and concerns were taken into account when weighing up the decision.



Organise communication right along the line

Prepare the communication with the cluster commanders and shift leaders. Agree on who will communicate with the fire station, the mayor and other stakeholders and make sure everyone is telling the same story. Give managers enough information and backing to deal with any questions and resistance.



Acknowledge the local significance of the fire station

A volunteer fire station is not just part of the regional firefighting organisation, but can also have a strong connection to the village or district concerned. Take this local significance seriously. At the same time, make clear what regional frameworks apply and why not every local wish can be accommodated. Within these frameworks look for custom solutions: standardisation where necessary, variation where possible.



Involve your managers, especially the shift leader, in advance

Gather together all the arguments for and against, paying particular attention to the passion, commitment and interests of the fire station. Consider alternatives and ask yourself whether, in view of the expected resistance, the change really is necessary or whether a custom solution would be possible. This will result in a carefully considered decision in which all interests, including those of the fire station, have been taken into account. You will also be prepared for the discussion that follows the decision and will be able to demonstrate convincingly that you have given the fire station due consideration.



Stand your ground if the pressure ramps up

Listen to the concerns of board members and firefighters, but don't allow those who speak up first or have the loudest voices to set the course. Offer professional advice, make the impact of possible choices clear and support the board of the safety region with the careful weighing-up of local, regional and administrative interests.

Publication details

These tips for leaders are based on the report 'Goed beheersmatig leiderschap bij de brandweer' ('Good non-operational leadership at the fire service') (NIPV, 2026). This report can be downloaded (in Dutch) from nipv.nl/leiderschap.

Netherlands Institute for Public Safety, September 2026