

Respond to the Right Priorities: Bring People Together for Important Common Purposes

Donald W. Mitchell

Novelist P.G. Wodehouse humorously portrayed the lightly populated English county of Shropshire as a sort of modern-day Eden where the worst thing that could happen to anyone was to slip on a banana peel while displaying too much self satisfaction. Wodehouse made sure that no bad happening created any lasting harm. In Wodehouse's novels, the character slipping on the peel was usually caught in the arms of the ideal character to fall in love with and marry.

With that happy perspective in mind, imagine Dr. Steve Worrall's good fortune to be the eldest of three sons in a Shropshire family living near the Welsh border in historic Shrewsbury. Surrounded by beautiful sights and a loving family, it seemed natural after secondary school to follow his father, grandfather and great grandfather by enrolling as an engineering trainee at nearby Rolls-Royce Motors Limited. Graduating as an apprentice engineer, he looked forward to a life of happy prosperity and predictability at the factory while enjoying being close to his family.

But the outside world soon threatened this idyllic plan. Rising petroleum prices hit British industry hard in the early 1980s, and the prospects for an interesting engineering career looked bleak. Dr. Worrall took an unprecedented step and decided to look for a career beyond what was offered by Shropshire's two major factories. He applied to the Royal Air Force as a military recruit and to the Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service as a firefighter.

After passing both entrance exams and receiving two job offers, Dr. Worrall stunned his family by becoming a firefighter recruit at a large cut in pay. It turned out to be a life-changing decision, one that led him onto a path toward responding to the right priorities for his life.

Four years of successful training, study, and exam taking qualified him to serve as a professional firefighter. Several promotions after that (following more training, study, and exams), Dr. Worrall wanted some broader personal development and he enrolled in a part-time MBA program at the University of Wolverhampton (U of W) in England.

Part of his reason for taking on this difficult learning challenge was curiosity about all the new terms that a friend and colleague had been throwing around since starting in U of W's MBA program. These terms had never come up at the UK Fire Service College where Dr. Worrall had trained, and he wanted to know more.

His MBA courses provided just the opposite of the sort of authoritarian, bureaucratic learning that English fire officers receive. As a result, Dr. Worrall had to learn how to research topics, marshal his arguments, and document his conclusions. Time demands were substantial in this part-time MBA program, involving ten hours of on-campus classes and thirty hours of preparation time weekly. He enjoyed the challenge and reveled in the team assignments.

After graduating with an MBA degree in 1999, Dr. Worrall took a sabbatical from academia. During that time, he decided to perform new research on managing the diverse cultures in the new multi-agency public-safety control centers (where fire, police, and ambulance dispatch services are combined into one location so that these safety teams can better cooperate to serve the public). Here's an example of a situation where control centers could make a difference: When a car crashes into a building and explodes in flames, fire fighters must stop the conflagration from spreading; ambulance crews need to provide first aid for the injured and take them to the hospital; and police officers can help by keeping curious people from getting too close to the fire, blocking the roads, and interfering with the fire fighters and the ambulance crews.

Dr. Worrall learned that the new multi-agency public-safety control centers were well designed to allow the equipment to work compatibly but little attention had been paid to encouraging good cooperation among the dispatchers. As a result, members of the three services distrusted and disliked one another. This troubled atmosphere reduced the effectiveness of dispatching help.

Finding little information and experience in the UK for how to improve inter-service cooperation, Dr. Worrall received a grant to look at shared-service dispatch centers across Europe. He traveled to Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Sweden to gain a better understanding of the issues and choices, and prepared a

report that was eventually assigned as course reading material at the US Naval Postgraduate School.

When the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington occurred in 2001, many fire fighters' lives were lost due to the fire, police, and ambulance services' inability to communicate with one another. Dr. Worrall decided he wanted to prepare safety services in leading cities to be better able to handle such emergencies. With that purpose in mind, in 2004 he enrolled as a doctoral student at Rushmore University.

He describes the benefits the university provided this way:

“My life experiences since leaving school have been like a box of chocolates. I inevitably will end up biting into what outwardly looks like a delicious chocolate only to find that hidden beneath that thin veneer of luscious milk chocolate lies coffee fondant or Turkish delight (*both of which I find disagreeable*).

“For me, attending the university has been akin to going to my favorite chocolate shop in the Grand Place Royal in the center of Brussels and requesting a box of those delicious chocolate Belgian truffles. I know what I am getting and every single one is relevant to my needs.

“And that is just like Rushmore. Every course I have undertaken has been relevant to my needs. No time is wasted. I have been provided with what I require, when I have required it. This way of learning, I believe, fits into life at a stage where one becomes more discerning in taste and is able to disregard at the outset facets of learning that are superfluous.”

Buttressed by a grant to study international radio interoperability practices and needs for safety services, Dr. Worrall began gathering information for his dissertation. His research travel sites included safety operations in Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Scotland, and the United States. Building on what he learned from his site visits, his Ph.D. dissertation became the foundation for an important report on how the UK should implement radio interoperability among its safety services, the first publication addressing this subject.

Since graduating, most of Dr. Worrall's radio interoperability recommendations have been accepted by the UK fire, medical, and police services. Unfortunately, national and inter-service politics have slowed implementation of the recommendations. Hopefully, the improvements will occur before too many more lives are lost because safety services cannot easily communicate with one another. Dr. Worrall has also helped organize other international studies of fire and civil protection services in Europe, studies that in 2008 were awarded the prestigious Lifelong Learning "Leonardo" Gold Award from the European Commission.

His zest for international collaborations continues. In 2008, he led two humanitarian aid missions to Hungary which provided fire trucks for volunteer fire fighters in the small town of Pilisvörösvár, located 20 miles north of Budapest.

Dr. Worrall generously credits his doctoral studies with having helped him learn how to perform excellent research, to write persuasively, to present his ideas well at international conferences, and to challenge convention successfully. In addition, he feels that his promotion to assistant chief fire officer was due, in part, to the quality of his dissertation research and writing.

The big payoff, of course, will occur when UK fire, medical, and police services are able to communicate better during some major emergency and the public and those who serve the public gain better results. When that happens, Dr. Worrall will know that his decision to leave mechanical engineering behind to blaze a new trail away from his family's tradition was the right one.

As the American poet Robert Frost penned in 1916,

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence.
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

What are the right priorities behind the choices ahead of you? Which road will you choose?

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