

Women Leading Change

The ninth Networking Women in the Fire Service Conference (NWFS), “Women Leading Change”, was attended by over 350 delegates from all over the UK as well as overseas. Sponsored by Draeger, the Chief Fire Officers Association, Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service and the Fire Service Research and Training Trust, the event combined workshops and seminars on a host of subjects of special interest to women firefighters.

The weekend conference, which took place at the Fire Service College in June 2009, began with a one-day event entitled “Leaders in the Fire and Rescue Service – it’s time to influence, inspire and initiate change”. Held by Avon Fire and Rescue Service and designed to help recruit, retain and progress the careers of women throughout the Service, the session highlighted the need to take action and commit to making a real difference to the fire and rescue service (FRS).

Later that night NWFS Chair, Mani Gilbert-King highlighted the uniqueness of the event in front of a packed audience of women firefighters, many proudly wearing their uniforms and medals of achievement. “There is no other event that brings together so many women from across every level of the Fire and Rescue Service” she said. “For the first time we are proud to run a workshop for women already working at middle managers level and looking to progress further. This will be an opportunity for them to work together, learn together and build a support network for the future.”

She added “The need to offer advanced technical workshops for our operational staff has increased and workshops that offer career development, emotional intelligence and unlocking the potential are all fully subscribed.

Contact

Corporate Communications:
Burkard Dillig
Tel +49 451 882-2185
burkard.dillig@draeger.com

Drägerwerk AG & Co. KGaA
Moislinger Allee 53–55
23542 Lübeck, Germany

www.draeger.com

Trade press:
Lesley Ashburner
Tel +44 7753 824360
technology.house@dial.pipex.com

Dräger Press Service,
Technology House, 1 Friary,
Temple Quay, Bristol, BS1 6EA,
UK

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Looking around this room I can see the achievements, there are inspirational people everywhere.”

Delegates were then able to attend a variety of workshops of their choice. These included Leadership Development for Senior Women in the FRS and Principal Officer Exercise, a seminar based incident command exercise which was believed to be the first ever targeted event for women at a senior level within the FRS.

Practical workshops for operational staff featured fire behaviour training, domestic breathing apparatus and, amongst others, USAR (urban search and rescue), tactical ventilation and water rescue. Many of the delegates also attended workshops on personal protection, abseiling and fitness, as well as hazmat, women’s health, authentic leadership, full brain thinking and how to handle conflict.

Comments from delegates were extremely positive and covered everything from “Fire Behaviour Training was excellent. It was really useful and great to work with other women in breathing apparatus”, through to “So many inspiring women and interesting people in one place! I always come away from NWFS events standing a bit taller with my resolve strengthened”, and “A really great event with workshops which gave me the confidence to believe in myself and my capabilities”.

Jane McKendrick, Regional Sales Manager at Draeger, commented, “I was pleased to be invited to represent Draeger at this exceptional event. The women firefighters that I met do a tremendous job and it was good to hear about their experiences. They often work in isolated conditions and can sometimes be the only female firefighter at their station. I found Brenda Berkman’s screening of “Taking the heat – first women firefighters of New

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York”, to be empowering and it was very interesting to see how far forward the female firefighters have progressed to a level of equality. It was also a good opportunity to demonstrate how Draeger firefighting equipment has evolved to suit the diversity within the fire service. This includes adjustable backplates, flexible hip mountings and smaller 6.5L lightweight cylinders as well as small, medium and large facemasks. The three face sizes are really beneficial, not just to women but to every firefighter - not every face is the same.

Further information on the NWFS can be found at www.NWFS.net

Further information on Draeger is available from David Fenton, Draeger Safety UK Limited, Ullswater Close, Blyth Riverside Business Park, Blyth, Northumberland, NE24 4RG. Tel: 01670 352891, fax: 01670 356266, www.draeger.com.

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