Leadership in crisis: developing beyond command and control

Dr Christine Owen, Cameron Scott, Richard Adams and David Parsons document a leadership professional development program and summarise some notable challenges for future delivery. Ⓡ

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses new demands facing emergency management leaders and reflects on one of the professional development initiatives for leaders in emergency management conducted through the Australian Institute of Emergency Management (AEMI). Since 2010 approximately 200 people have participated in the professional development program 'Beyond Command and Control: Leadership in Crisis'. This paper reflects on the key intentions of the program and discusses the insights gained and the learning challenges identified for future leadership programs that may be offered in the broader emergency management sector.

Introduction

Emergency management leaders confront demands far more complex than those historically faced by their predecessors (Murphy & Dunn 2012). Disasters are anticipated to become larger, more complex, occur simultaneously and in regions that have either not experienced the natural hazard previously or at the same intensity or frequency (IPCC 2012, Yates & Bergin 2009).

There are other changes afoot. Tighter interdependencies between social, technical and infrastructure systems mean that the need for co-ordination in emergency events has moved beyond traditional emergency services organisations to actively include the public and private sectors and non-government organisations as well as others. In addition, managing within a chaotic emergency environment can reinforce a traditionally reactive and commanding *modus operandi* of uniform culture.

Traditionally emergency services organisations are structured hierarchically with clear command-and-control arrangements. Dominant and collectively-held beliefs of emergency services organisations often establish social identities with clear boundaries and stereotyping (Owen 2013, Kimmel 2008, Lois 2001). However, in striving to collaborate with non-

emergency stakeholders there is a need to build network relationships and alliances and horizontal co-ordination mechanisms among peers rather than vertical control mechanisms among commanders and subordinates (Bharosa, Janssen & Tan 2011, Ostrom 2010). The implication for leadership development is that there is a need to overcome the tendency for reacting within narrow frames of problem solving. These demands require changes in cultural identity. This sets up new challenges for the development of leadership capability (Lagadec 2009).

Leaders need to create the background conditions where team members and other personnel can share, refute and calibrate information to build 'collective meaning structures' (Kruke & Olsen 2012), particularly when there are signals that things are problematic. This is critically important if individuals and teams are to build capacity to collectively recover.

There is a need to train at 'the edge of chaos' (Renaud 2012) and to build capability in what Marcus, Dorn and Henderson (2005, p. 129) call 'meta-leadership'. In discussing terrorism preparedness in the US they asked the question: '*If leadership, as traditionally understood, is working to build the capacity within organizations, then what different brand of leadership is necessary to get beyond that silo thinking to achieve the cross-agency coordination of effort required?*' These challenges extend beyond organisations. More attention in across-agency professional development that facilitates relationships, as well as the skills required, is needed.

Unusual business or business as usual?

In a workshop held in 2009 titled 'Unusual Business or Business as Usual?' emergency management stakeholders from a range of jurisdictions came together to contemplate the changing emergency management landscape and its implications for both leadership and professional development. The continuing trends in emergency events since 2009 have borne out the question posed at the workshop: 'Were the kinds of emergency events that had happened up until then unusual – or a sign of a major shift?'

One of the conclusions reached at the workshop at the Institute was that, in terms of building a leadership professional development agenda, it was important *not to confuse command and control with* leadership - as these represented fundamentally different things.

Leadership beyond command and control

In 2010 a professional development program called 'Beyond Command and Control: Leadership in Crisis' was launched at AEMI. Inaugurating this program, the Institute presumed leadership programs must provide opportunities for personnel to think deeply about their own practice. The curriculum intentions were to *'challenge participants to explore their own leadership styles and rethink traditional models of leadership in the context of a rapidly changing environment'*. The course syllabus noted that *'while the traditional command and control models provide a framework for managing incidents, a legislated command role does not provide the intangible elements of leadership or necessarily facilitate an adaptable and flexible approach to a non-routine situation'*.

As future leaders, participants need to look beyond incident management structures as the only solution to every problem and to build capability in communication and managing relationships, including political ones.

Since 2010 a total of 13 courses have been conducted. It is timely to reflect on the key intentions of the program and discuss the challenges that have arisen so that future leadership professional development programs may build on these insights.

Course rationale

The program attracts senior and emerging leaders in emergency management who have or will have roles that require them to work beyond the operational context and who need an understanding of strategic crisis leadership. The intention within every course offered is to bring participants together to allow cross-jurisdictional and agency collaboration and networking. The program is conducted over two and a half days.

Participants are advised that they would not find 'how to' scripts to help them become better leaders. Rather they need to reflect on:

- communication patterns in the face of ambiguous and uncertain conditions

- cognitive biases and other error traps that can impede decision-making when under stress and to understand the neurophysiological mechanisms that lead to bias

- values based on personal and institutional culture and how these enable and constrain communication

- acting ethically in the face of adversity

- what constitutes the background conditions needed so that others can work effectively.

Underlying theoretical foundations are drawn from neurophysiology and decision-making. These include human factors and cognitive biases in decision-making as well as communication and cultural aspects of crew resource management developed in other related safety-critical domains (Flin, O'Connor & Crichton 2008). It is important for participants to understand the inter-relationships between human dynamics and organisational performance as well as to highlight the responsibility of leaders to teach, enable, model and to inspire fluent, amicable and effective relationships.

The program draws attention to power gradients in organisations (Flin, et al 2008) because of their pervasiveness in quasi-military organisational structures. These can be excessively prominent—and they can be dangerous. Power differences intensify the interpersonal risk faced by people who want to speak up with ideas, questions, or concerns. Leader actions thus may affect whether or not people are willing to speak (Edmondson 2005). The interpersonally safe route is to remain silent; but this is perilous. Not speaking up can protect individuals from personal confrontation. An inhibited, uncommunicative culture can harm the team (or the organisation as a whole) and magnify operational risk.

When high uncertainty avoidance is combined with high power distance, the upshot may be a culture of inflexible, unresponsive behaviours. These may be dependent on automated systems and an unwillingness to take personal responsibility or to make personally-responsible judgments. Leaders must guard against this sort of suppressive stagnation. They must be prepared to make the 'hard, right' call over the easy option. The idea that leadership should be less about domination (manifested in hierarchy and authority) and more about collaboration and building effective working relationships in a climate of open communication and trust owes much to the ideas of crew resource management, where strict seniority systems can overshadow and overpower the importance of responsible individual judgments and partnership.

The program includes a simulation designed to encourage participants to focus on decision-making processes and not the actual decisions made *per se*. Research into simulation (Rouse & Boff 2005) suggested that a fantasy scenario would give the best opportunity for this type of outcome. The two-hour simulation exercise includes a number of critical decision points that have to be agreed by the group before progression to the next stage. The focus in the simulation is on allowing participants to reflect later on their decision-making processes, including the assumptions that they make and the communicative tensions that these create and how they are resolved (or not).

Having completed the program 13 times the authors (who have all been involved in the majority of course deliveries) reflect on the insights gained from delivering a professional development program such as this, which includes some of the outstanding learning challenges participants have faced. These challenges are outlined and discussed so that future facilitators of leadership programs may capitalise on the insights.

Learning challenges

The feedback provided from participant course evaluations suggests that in many respects the program met its intended goals. Initial changes in the course program included moving away from personality trait inventories as these seemed to be used by participants to justify existing behaviour and were invoked to reinforce existing stereotypes. Changes include increasing the extensiveness of the exercise debriefing. A number of learning challenges were also observed by course facilitators. These include challenges in assisting some participants to think critically and to engage in deep reflection. There is also a challenge in assisting participants to overcome being distracted by the obvious rather than attending to less obvious but critical information. Similarly, participants get caught up in the moment of action and find it difficult to step back and think rather than to keep acting and reacting. Finally there are challenges to be overcome in assisting participants to speak up effectively.

Capacity for reflection

Not all participants walked away from the program happy and satisfied with what they had learned.

The following comment from one participant *'If you wanted us to think strategically, you should have told us'* suggests a need for two things. First, that leadership development programs build on the learning that has previously been offered. It is also not realistic to expect that change can be brought about simply through enrolling in a short external (to an agency or jurisdiction) professional development program. In need of attention are internal organisational processes that include examining the cultures and structures in emergency services organisations. It is important that all education and training opportunities (not just leadership ones) build capacity in critical reflection and in critical thinking. There may be insights from other international programs addressing these needs. Critical thinking has been described as 'active, persistent and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions for which it tends (Kiltz 2009, p. 9). Second, it suggests that there is a need to coach some participants in the use of these skills with feedback. Cherry (2014) discussed the need for frontline leadership programs to coach participants when they are under pressure and facing complex and uncertain conditions to be able to 'describe what they are seeing, not what they think they are seeing, to "look again" and check their first impressions and to use plain, concrete language to describe what they have not seen before' Cherry (2014, p. 33).

Captured by the tangible

The simulation exercise showed there was a consistent tendency for participants to become overly focussed on the tangible (e.g. physical resources) at the expense of information or intelligence, which is subsequently overlooked or not followed through. This is interesting given that a common belief in emergency management is that people say they 'need more information' in order

to make good decisions. Coaching is needed to assist people to shift cognitive gears to focus on collective sense-making and to maximise the information that is at their fingertips rather than to become distracted by 'the tangible'.

It is interesting to note that of the 26 groups that have participated in the simulation exercise (two groups for each time the course was conducted), never once has anyone suggested that the group organise its labour according to an incident management system such as the Australian Inter-Services Incident Management System (AIIMS) or indeed suggested any other strategy to formalise decision-making. Is this an indicator that commonly used incident management structures are not sufficient for addressing novel and managing the unknown in crises?

Overcoming dysfunctional momentum

When emergency responders are engaged in a socio-cultural context where social pressure is high to 'get the job done' there is a tendency to get caught up in the moment and want to act. The desire to be doing something influenced the communication patterns within the groups, such that there was a tendency towards optimistic bias and to selectively filtering information to suit a proposed course of action. It was interesting to reflect how easily emergency management groups get caught up in this momentum. This is the same momentum that has been implicated in tragedy. In 2013 in the US, 19 firefighters died attempting to control a wildfire. While the Serious Accident Investigation Report acknowledged that noone will know the decision-making processes of the team that day, the investigators did conclude that 'a culture of engagement and a bias for action is part of wildland fire-fighter identity' (Arizona State Forestry Division 2013, p. 47). While this engagement often leads to success, in this case it may have contributed to tragedy.

In Australia, this tendency to want to act at the expense of thinking things through and assessing what can be called 'weak signals' warning of danger has been a 'can do' cultural norm. The urgency to act can lead to what Barton and Sutcliffe (2009, p. 1331) term 'dysfunctional momentum'. They suggest that momentum in action, in and of itself, merely implies a lack of interruption in the tasks at hand. However, when individuals or teams continue to engage in a course of *failing* action, (i.e. action leading to undesired or incomplete ends), this becomes dysfunctional. One of the keys to overcoming dysfunctional momentum is speaking up. This is because speaking up acts as a reminder to stop and think about the bigger picture and to test assumptions to recalibrate planning and action. The proposed plan and the current action may be appropriate to the demands of the event. However acting with 'dysfunctional momentum' represents considerable risk.

Two critical social processes are important in enabling dysfunctional momentum to be overcome. The first is giving voice to concerns and the second is the way in which leaders actively seek alternative perspectives from followers. These communication practices appear to

stimulate interruptions and to reorient the actors involved. However these skills also need practise and feedback.

Speaking up effectively

There is more work to be done in assisting participants to speak up about a concern clearly and effectively. Part of the program uses an exercise designed to assist participants to recognise an awkward moment and to apply a graded warning protocol as a means of managing the authority or power gradients frequently found within uniformed cultures. Many of the examples invoked by participants involved a subordinate wanting to bring something to the attention of a higher ranking officer. Only in half the cases was the communication delivered effectively to draw attention to the issue at hand e.g. *'this is unsafe. I'm not going to take my crews in there. We need to find another way'* as opposed to a less effective *'I'm not going to do it. Find somebody else'*. More practise is needed to address these limitations and to assist all team members to take responsibility for the 'hard right' thing to say and do.

Insight does not guarantee change in practice

If, in the words of Lao Tzu, *'the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step'*, then it is also imperative for change to occur that allows steps to continue. This program suffered from the problem facing many professional development initiatives—that people are taken out of their social *milieu* and given opportunities for insights, then are left to it with no ongoing support. There is an urgent need to establish supportive (physical or virtual) communities-of-practice that allows people to try out their new skills and continue to develop changes in their practice. This is particularly so in facilitating ethical practices that might be at odds with the *status quo* of cultural norms. This is hugely significant since, as things stand, leaders are held to account. In fact, they are often 'hung out to dry,' pilloried in the press or the boards of inquiry. But beyond the occasional intervention of a professional course, there is nothing in the way of formalised, constructive support.

In the simulation, confronted with the need for an agreed decision, participants frequently misinterpreted information provided, in order that they might justify a particular course of action. Cynically, this can be called decision-based evidence making. But behind the satire, is truth. Decisions, made under time pressure and under the surveillance of a team, are often known to be misguided. But equally as often these are decisions capacitated by team members who do not have the language to express concern. In fact, it was observed that rather than express concern, people will disengage; sometimes to the point of physically stepping out of the group's circle. Only rarely have leaders allowed their teams to challenge or contest ethically-significant decisions. Rarely do leaders act deliberately to muzzle their team members. They are often the victims of unconscious habit due to decades of acculturated practice in command and control. Properly responsive, enabling and responsible leadership lies beyond.

Conclusion

Reflecting on a significant professional development program that supports findings by Murphy and Riggio (2003) and Salas and colleagues (2012), this paper acknowledges effective leadership development needs sustained effort in coaching and in supporting leaders to develop their own confidence in seeking alternative perspectives and divergent views. In the current context these programs become even more important. In reviewing a range of post-event inquiries Murphy and Dunn (2012) concluded that in many countries and in many significant events there has been a pattern of leadership failure:

> *'The failure is seldom one of character, but inevitably a lack of preparation and understanding. Leaders, and their teams, are unable to effectively apply their knowledge and skills to a situation that is either so novel, or of a scale that is beyond their experience and conception.'* (Murphy & Dunn 2012, p. 2)

Murphy and Dunn (2012, p. 7) go on to suggest that classic leadership training, though effective for routine events, is less successful in the case of novel or what they call 'out of scale' disasters. The changing landscape suggests that these out-of-scale disasters are becoming more frequent. Illustrating this point, the Yarnell accident inquiry report (Arizona State Forestry Division 2013) noted 19 firefighters perished wretchedly, perhaps because they were acclimatised to high temperatures and low humidity. The report notes that many in the emergency services business are becoming desensitised to 'weak signals' because of their frequency.

> *'People in the desert southwest may become desensitized to high temperatures and low relative humidity during certain times of year ... In other parts of the country, these kinds of predictions are rare; when they do occur, they constitute "strong signals." Like car alarms in an urban neighbourhood, repetition of strong signals resets the cognitive baseline for what is "normal." There is also danger that a firefighter may become desensitized to extreme fire behaviour, based on an old mental model that extreme fire behaviour is rare. One SME said, "The unusual is now usual – the scale of fires today is extreme. That's what's normal now." Another said, "This fire went from wildland to WUI (Wildland-Urban Interface) within a burn period. This is part of the new reality. The new normal is extreme fire behaviour."'* (Arizona State Forestry Division 2013)

Desensitised to the strong signals of deteriorating conditions, the firefighters ignore these signals at their peril.

Submersed in a rich inherited culture, emergency services personnel risk a similar fatal insensitivity. Over time leadership philosophies and behaviours come to be non-constructive. But they come as well to be familiar, comfortable and not easily changed.

It is important to acknowledge that leadership programs are only part of a strategy for developmental

improvement. Leadership practices within organisations also need to tackle challenges like power gradients and to address entrenched practice and cultural issues. Acknowledging that institutional relevance depends on institutional renewal, this paper suggests the need to think about leadership, beyond the proverbial language and practice of command and control. Power gradients, part of the furniture in most places, must be interrogated so responsible individuals can appreciate and play their part in strict seniority systems. Rather than dominance, ideas of collaboration should inform the curriculum.

Ideas like this provide particular pedagogical challenges for future providers of emergency management leadership programs. These ideas, for example, are unlikely to be addressed in a program of distance course work. The leadership discourse depends on discussion. The practice of leadership demands practice. There needs to be mindfulness of the powerful unquantifiable benefit that comes from face-to-face exchange.

This paper has provided some insights into this program. It has identified a number of challenges that future facilitators may find useful. Documenting these observations contributes to the foundation knowledge needed for this important and worthy cause.

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