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# Post-disaster recovery: multi-agency leadership and co-ordination

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## 1. Abstract

Recovery is a vital phase in an emergency management and civil defence cycle aimed towards long-term community resilience. Leadership plays a crucial role in an emergency situation, especially in the response and recovery stages.

This research examines the post-disaster rural community contexts of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires to review the leadership that exists in such a complex post-disaster environment.

Soft leadership and more technical, task-based management skills are combined to establish the necessary characteristics for effective disaster leadership during a post-disaster recovery.

The conclusion is reached that the most effective leadership in a recovery environment combines traits targeted towards achieving the right actions with minimal delay.

**Keywords:** Leadership, post-disaster, Australian Bush Fires

## 2. Introduction

Given the events of the last decade and the predictions for the impact of climate change, one envisages a growing frequency and severity of natural disasters. Continuous improvement is required for the long-term resilience and sustainability of our communities.

Governments around the world use various, generally synonymous, terms for phases in the emergency management cycle. The New Zealand Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management (MCDEM) employs a risk management approach to deal with hazards. The integrated '4 Rs' strategy results in four

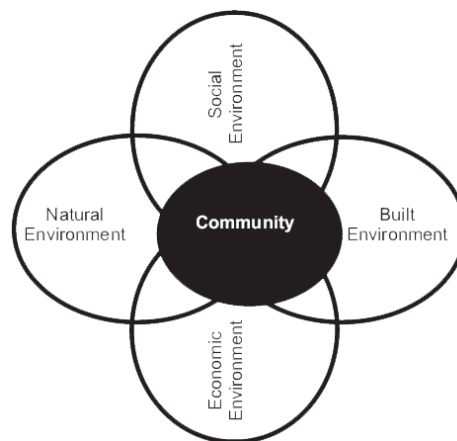
mutually inclusive phases consisting of reduction, readiness, response, and recovery. The objectives of the first phase are to identify and mitigate long term risks to life and property before the readiness phase which focuses on the preparation of operational systems and capabilities (MCDEM, 2008). The response phase encompasses the actions taken immediately before, during or directly after an emergency with the objective of saving lives and protecting property (MCDEM, 2008). Finally the recovery brings about the immediate, medium-term and long-term regeneration of a community (MCDEM, 2008). It should be noted that sometimes a distinction is made between a medium-term recovery and the long-term reconstruction effort. This paper focuses particularly on the recovery (and reconstruction) phase but also draws on similarities or extrapolation from the response phase.

New Zealand and Australian recovery arrangements both emphasise the importance of community acceptability and participation in recovery management. MCDEM stresses the importance of empowering affected individuals and communities to manage their own recovery.

The capability of communities, and partnering stakeholders and government bodies, to manage disasters depends, in part, on ‘a culture of self-help, community caring and leadership’ (MCDEM, 2005).

New Zealand’s holistic framework for recovery specifies four integrated, complex and dynamic components; these are represented in Figure 1. These correspond with the ‘Four Environments of Recovery’ within the Victorian State Emergency Recovery Arrangements.

The holistic approach acknowledges the importance of all community needs being met in a coordinated fashion (MCDEM, 2005). Figure 1 demonstrates this interaction between the community and the social, economic, natural, and built environments.



*Figure 1: New Zealand’s Holistic Recovery Approach (MCDEM, 2005)*

This research focuses particularly on the recovery from the Victoria Bushfires of 2009. Black Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> February, saw around 500 fires burning throughout the state of Victoria, across about 450,000 hectares. One hundred and seventy-three people lost their lives and over 3,500 buildings were destroyed

including over 2,000 homes. The subsequent fundraising appeal rose over \$375 million, mainly through the Red Cross.

While preparation and preliminary arrangements prior to a crisis are important, they are no substitute for leadership on the ground once the event has occurred (Martin, 2007). It is this leadership, at an individual level, right through to inter-agency and cultural levels, which are to be explored during this research.

### **3. Leadership in Disasters**

Literature focused within the area of disaster leadership is light and disaggregated. This is despite being recognised as one of the most crucial aspects of effective disaster response and long term community recovery (Martin, 2007; McCahon, Dewhirst, & Elms, 2006). This lack of attention may be due to the multi-faceted influences from a continuous spectrum of disaster leadership contexts; the vast number of stakeholders with differing perspectives (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008); and the complexity of such a dynamic topic involving both the hard and soft sciences.

Much of the research found is on topics that relate to or overlap disaster leadership; in particular these topics include emergency management and crisis leadership. However, much of the crisis leadership literature relates to dealing with corporate crises within organisations while emergency management tends to focus on the technical processes and systems for managers throughout the civil defence and emergency management cycle.

There is little dispute about the vital requirement for effective leadership within a crisis or post-disaster context (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008; Emergency Management Australia, 1997; Gharehbaghi, 2002; Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008; Martin, 2007; McCahon et al., 2006). However, the qualities that result in effective leadership are somewhat less determined amongst researchers.

While some research suggests that the key quality for effective leadership is fine technical knowledge and the ability to make sound judgements and rapid decisions, others suggest a much softer approach involving communication and emotional intelligence. While the emphasis in each literature is generally on one or the other personas, there is generally still recognition for the role the lesser favoured set of attributes has to contribute.

Kelly (2004) uses a model, based on Shackleton's leadership following a disaster on their voyage to Antarctica in 1914, when discussing crisis leadership. The model recognises the necessity to create optimism and build morale amongst people in times of crisis. The leadership ability to engender confidence by providing direction and inspiration results in enhanced positive intentions of followers (Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008) and subsequently a much more productive and effective recovery process.

Dr. Lester Levy (2007), Chief Executive of the New Zealand Leadership Institute, cites an ethical and moral framework as being absolutely vital for leadership. This is no different when placed in a disaster context. The fact that a nation as economically, socially and technologically advanced as the United States of America

took 48 hours to respond to a national disaster as severe as that of Hurricane Katrina has been recognised by some as a problem of ethical leadership (Fluker, 2005). This goes beyond just racial, political, social and cultural equality but explores concepts of integrity, empathy and hope (Fluker, 2005). Bardwick (2000) agrees, believing that leaders must act with dignity, being transparent and steadfast in distinguishing between right and wrong. Daft (2005) defines moral leadership by this distinction and subsequent 'right' action. However, integral to this leadership, is the requirement for moral courage (Daft, 2005; Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008). This is the courage to make the tough, but right, decisions in the context of the bigger picture, regardless of how popular the outcome may be. Examples may include the prioritisation of resources, delayed rescue efforts to save further losses, or long term risk reduction initiatives. Ultimately, leaders, or leadership, that act upon what is right helps build an atmosphere of honesty, trust, and integrity (Samson & Daft, 2009b). Recovery participation, decision-making and actions need a foundation of trust (James & Wooten, 2005). This means that effective disaster leadership requires an environment of trust built upon transparent, honest, and regular communication (James & Wooten, 2005).

In times of crisis, people look to both previously appointed leaders, such as politicians, and emergent leaders for information, safety and a sense of communal belonging; without communication this cannot be achieved (Seijts, 2004). Kelly (2004) cites effective communication as one of the key traits of 'The Shackleton Model' for crisis leadership. Optimism and morale, the need for which was mentioned earlier, cannot be achieved without good interpersonal and communication skills.

The literature is almost overwhelming in speaking with one voice on the importance for leaders in emergencies to be decisive and active (Bardwick, 2000; James & Wooten, 2005; Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008; Kelly, 2004; Seijts, 2004; Smallwood & Seemann, 2003; Tichy & Bennis, 2008).

Citizens yearn for and expect robust, proactive leadership following large-scale disasters (Martin, 2007). Indecision and inaction is perceived as weakness and consequently people's anxiety and insecurities are increased (Bardwick, 2000). In defining decisiveness, Kapucu and Van Wart (2008) emphasise the timely action resulting from a decision. Another key attribute for disaster leadership is task-based strategic thinking and problem solving (Emergency Management Australia, 2002; Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008). Emergency Management Australia (2002) outlines the basic recovery issues that will confront the recovery manager. This list revolves around establishing what services are required, how they should be provided, by whom, and when they should be withdrawn. It is issues such as these that need to be considered by someone with an analytical mind. These attributes are traditionally regarded as being more associated with the management than leadership persona.

The traditional approach to disaster response begins at the local level and then, as capacity is outstripped by requirement, the regional or state and ultimately national governmental agencies provide expertise and resources (Kweit & Kweit, 2006; Lettieri, Masella, & Radaelli, 2009). While this demand for resources gets

pushed upwards, Lester (2008) states that, for true collaboration to occur, each level of governance must still be respected within their realms.

During recovery the prescribed approach in Australia is very similar, with each level of governance ensuring that the level below itself has the required resources (Emergency Management Australia, 2002).

Emergency Management Australia (2002) promotes the use of a single regional level committee or agency for the co-ordination of the recovery effort. EMA also prescribes various committees at local, state and national levels to manage the recovery process at their respective levels as well as Local Advisory Committees to enable community input.

Lester (2008) states that there will be no true improvement to disaster response until organisations are transformed through the cultivation of 'collaborative leadership' from both within and outside the organisation.

#### **4. Methodology**

It was crucial to understand the civil defence and emergency management environment. The literature review focused on research regarding personal and multi-agency disaster leadership. The second component of the methodology was attendance at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australasian Hazards Management Workshop Series in Melbourne, 2009. This provided an open forum for discussion and collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Workshops attended were: Climate change adaptation, fire & emergency management (Workshop 1, 2009); The role of NGOs in disaster risk reduction (Workshop 2, 2009); Remote and rural communities in a changing environment (Workshop 3, 2009); and Developing effective emergency management within local government (Workshop 4, 2009). The third component centred on a case study of the Victorian Bushfires of 2009. The case study consisted of a one-week field trip to the disaster affected regions in Victoria in July 2009. Devitt and Borodzicz (2008), with reference to Yin (2003), adopted research using unstructured interviews based on guided conversations. It is this method of qualitative research that was adopted for this project. Interviews and conversations were held with academics and practitioners who had potential insight into the recovery process. This method was chosen as it is as close to naturalistic research without crossing ethical boundaries. The method allows for discussions to be had during the recovery processes before time and hindsight has forced judgement on these efforts (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008).

Interviews were held with practitioners from organisations that played important roles in the emergency management cycle in Victoria. To retain anonymity, participants are referred to by their participant number in this research paper. Valuable discussions were also held with academics in the relevant field. These interviews further enhanced the key attributes required of leadership in a post-disaster environment.

## **5. Leadership and Disaster: the Australian Bush fires case study**

In order to establish the necessary attributes of leadership it is absolutely vital to understand the characteristics of those being led. As such, during the course of this research it was important to come to terms with the rural community setting in a post-disaster environment.

There is significant variation in the structures of such rural communities (Smith, 2009) and each has different priorities and views regarding what money should be spent on and how they should recover following a disaster (P1 Academia, 2009). For instance, Marysville, a tourism-based town devastated by the Victorian bushfires, has had the requirement to restore commerce particularly emphasised in its recovery. Other affected areas have a much greater residential focus for recovery.

The variance in priorities and methods for recovery highlight that a 'one size fits all' approach doesn't result in the most effective recovery for a community.

Communities have an intense lack of trust in what are often termed 'post-event suits' (P1 Academia, 2009). These are generally regarded as the bureaucrats and politicians who arrive following a disaster to effectively 'deliver' a recovery. Often these people know very little about the local environment and community while they have very strict criteria to follow which fail to allow for diversity in and between communities. There is a strong resentment of this top-down approach, particularly in rural areas (Workshop 3, 2009).

Understandably there is a great deal of trauma amongst communities following such devastating events. People, who have never planned or built a structure in their lives, are suddenly confronted with far-reaching and costly decisions regarding their homes.

This is acknowledged by the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBBRA). While the authority wants to progress the residential reconstruction they recognise that some people, even six months after the events of Black Saturday, are not yet ready to make decisions (P2 Industry, 2009).

A question which arises uniquely in small rural settings is whether physical reconstruction should be occurring in the same location. While local expectations exist, pressuring decision-makers into proclaiming 'brick-for-brick' reconstruction, this leaves limited scope for future disaster risk reduction with regards to physical location in recognised hazardous areas.

When this question does arise, with the accompanying uncertainty, it results in a 'chicken and egg' situation. If no core businesses, such as supermarkets and petrol stations, exist then communities lack the necessities to re-inhabit an area. Yet businesses are unwilling to invest if there are no consumers or a lack of certainty around the sustainability of the consumer base. This certainty can only be provided by strong, decisive leadership.

Local governments in Australia set up the approach for response and recovery co-ordination (Workshop 4, 2009) However, they do not have authority or extensive resources; therefore they must engage with their communities.

This engagement is achieved through collaboration with various community groups. The need for existing local groups and associations, such as churches, service clubs and other organisations, to be utilised during times of recovery was emphasised throughout this research (Workshop 1, 2009; P1 Academia, 2009; P3 Academia, 2009).

The importance of utilising this non-governmental and volunteer surge capacity was acknowledged in the literature review (Vaughn Jr. & Streib, 2006). There tends to be a diffusion of leadership across these groups aimed towards providing opportunities for the communities to talk and authorities to listen. This ultimately enhances the community recovery process.

Most of these community groups have leaders, and they tend to be people that were previously involved in positions of authority whether in politics or private enterprise (P3 Academia, 2009).

However, generally, in Australia these groups do not have a command structure so the group progresses through collaboration (P3 Academia, 2009) and what appears to be a shared leadership style. This is regarded as necessary given what was found in the literature review noting Sahlin (1992), who describes how imposing a commanding hierarchy can have a negative effect on volunteer individuals.

Participant 4, one of around 60,000 volunteer fire-fighters in the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA), echoes this sentiment. He sees climate change presenting the potential for a contracting pool of volunteers to respond to an increasing number of events. While emphasising the necessity for a strict command and control structure during response, he refers to the need to adapt leadership to a much more shared collaborative style the rest of the time, in order to maintain and encourage volunteer participation.

The advantage of existing groups, for example Lions and Rotary clubs, and people who have existing roles within the community, such as local doctors or community leaders, is that they are known to the community. Many of the organisations are experienced in carrying out recovery-type tasks and seen as legitimate and accessible (P1 Academia, 2009).

In some cases, specific recovery groups were established following the bushfires, for instance the Marysville & Triangle Development Group. Community Fireguard Groups also tended to get together following bushfires to discuss the recovery.

In attempting to engage at the local level, Participant 1 (2009) states the importance of the government not attempting to 'create' a leader within a community. Whether by empowering an unpopular or prejudiced citizen or by imposing a leader on the community, the subsequent loss of legitimacy can be very detrimental to a recovery effort. Conversely, the identification and support of 'true' community leaders establishes legitimacy and the recovery is able to progress in a locally appropriate manner.

The leadership traits emphasised throughout this research were generally all focused towards achieving one thing: action, and particularly the *right* action. This supports the strong views in this literature review that cite the importance of concrete actions in providing hope, certainty and direction for affected communities.

Participant 3 (2009) highlighted the need for leaders to have connections through which they could call on resources and expertise. This was not something previously identified in literature. A leader's ability to make their connections work for them gives them a voice in their call for action. This can be achieved either through a position of authority or interpersonal relationships.

Participant 4 (2009), a fire captain himself agrees that connections are important, emphasising that much of the response to bushfire events is about personal relationships. He cites generally good relations between the Victorian response agencies and points out the formal mechanisms in place to facilitate communication.

Participant 1 (2009) describes effective leaders as being the ones able to make decisions that are in everyone's best interest. This is a trait of ethical leadership referred to earlier in this paper. It is important that these leaders represent a neutral stance and make open and transparent decisions whilst promoting opportunities for discussion and feedback within the community (P1 Academia, 2009).

Participant 5 (2009), an experienced project manager in disaster reconstruction, cites the requirement for leadership to demonstrate true empathy through instilling a sense of urgency and subsequent commitment to action and responsibility.

Dwelling on previous experiences, Participant 5 (2009) hypothesises that proximity between the affected areas and the recovery governance may be integral to establishing this urgency. In the case of the Victorian bushfires, he questions whether greater commitment and motivation would exist if the decision-makers' lifestyles were being directly affected as opposed to their being located within the Melbourne CBD.

This recognised need for empathy, reflects the views of Fluker (2005), Smallwood and Seemann (2003). In particular, it supports the need for this emotional intelligence to lead to concrete actions, crucial to providing direction, reassurance and ultimately a stronger community.

As mentioned earlier, combining all of these attributes is the ability to communicate effectively. Participant 4 (2009) acknowledges that it is very important to be able to communicate effectively with those working under you. In the recovery context, Participant 3 (2009) emphasises the ability to frame arguments and articulate messages through the media and in particular towards the government.

Competence within individual leaders and leadership cultures supports making the right decisions on which to act. Those leading a recovery effort must understand what it takes to rebuild a community and how communities can recover in the quickest and strongest way possible.

Examples of taking a pragmatic approach in leadership are illustrated by some of the subsequent actions of the Premier of Victoria, John Brumby. Whilst the Royal Commission of Inquiry was established to make recommendations into the handling of the bushfires, the next fire season was approaching. The Premier and his government were proactive in instigating a number of actions before hearing the interim findings of the inquiry.

However, it appears that this pragmatism and competence may not be a common trait in the recovery. There seem to be a lot of junior people that have been brought together from a number of government departments

to form the VBRRRA. The impression was formed that whilst there is a great deal of empathy and positive intention within the authority, it isn't being supported by ability and experience with regards to how to go about reconstructing devastated communities.

Whilst various state agencies have a role to play, the Victorian Department of Human Services is the main state government authority responsible for helping Victorians recover. The department, which administers financial support resources, is also responsible for co-ordinating the health resources such as councillors.

The department allocated case workers, who were trained social workers, to each of the affected families. This was an innovative strategy in the Victorian Bushfire recovery. While there has been an indication of various levels of competence between these personnel, in theory it does facilitate a number of aforementioned leadership traits. The case workers manage to provide a vehicle for two-way communication between the leadership and affected persons. In particular, this communication has the ability to demonstrate a degree of emotional intelligence in the recovery leadership.

In the week following the events of Black Saturday, the Premier of Victoria, John Brumby, set up the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority to oversee and co-ordinate the recovery.

Heading up the VBRRRA is former Victorian Police Commissioner, Christine Nixon. Her command and control background in an environment of politicians and damage control is very different from the rhetoric of community-based reconstruction. However, she has been noted for her visitations at all of the affected communities and this is vital for the demonstration of emotional intelligence and open, two-way communication.

Nixon provides the government with a figurehead, well-armed to protect a political image. Her background provides her with political connections and respect necessary for acquiring resources and expertise. Whether she has the knowledge as to what is required for a community recovery is unknown. While she has been described as being an inspiration, it is questionable how much this has turned into motivation and subsequent action behind the scenes.

The literature review explored the concept of independent agencies involved in single emergency management phases. The conclusion was reached that they do not fit into the intertwined and inter-agency approach that is required for long-term effective disaster resilience. Unlike agencies that maintain personal relationships throughout the '4 Rs', a new authority does not have the systems or collaborative relationships in place to chase, monitor and evaluate decisions or subsequent actions.

Research seemed to suggest that the setting up of a new authority doesn't fit in to a collaborative model. It does, however ensure political control and it seems that the recovery from the Victorian bushfires is a very centrally-controlled agenda. Such a strategy ensures that there is much less in the way of arguments and political problems.

Theoretically centralised decision-making and vertical command does enable the making of quick decisions, but they are not negotiated nor necessarily the right ones (P3 Academia, 2009). However, while there are

often strong calls for decentralisation, as can be attested to in the literature review, there are definitely cases and occasions for it, or at least to a certain degree.

Kapucu and Van Wart's (2008) recommendation for a mixture of localised and centralised decision-making was echoed by many throughout the research. They recognise the need for major, across-the-board decisions to flow down a vertical chain but also mention that leaders must act in a way to enable on-the-ground, area-specific problem solving and decision-making. This is achieved through personal empowerment of local responders as well as organisational and systemic adaptations.

Participant 4 (2009) agrees and, speaking in a response context, points to the necessity of command and control operations and states that in such a pressured situation as fire-fighting there is not the luxury available for people to question decisions. He also states categorically that there can be no question as to whether he has the authority to make decisions on the ground. Schauble (2009) cites both legislative and moral authority to make judgement calls that are in the best interests of his brigade.

In the context of a recovery the reasons for a combination of localised and centralised decision-making are different. While stressing the importance of localised information and decision in recovery, Participant 1 (2009) acknowledges that this is not always possible due to resource constraints. He cites that, subsequently, there is often a trade off between helping everyone and localised help.

Whilst the bushfire recovery seems to be very centrally controlled there is certainly the appearance of good intent and collaboration, but it is questionable how much of this is leading to co-ordinated follow through.

At a local level there does seem to be a great deal of collaboration and engagement amongst communities. However, there is also frustration with the consistency of communication and to what extent information is flowing in both directions to the appropriate people. At some point, collaboration needs to be directed and followed through with concrete action. It is this point that demonstrates the appropriate mix between the collaborative and vertical command structures.

Participant 2 (2009) says that the VBRRRA has been effective in providing resources to local councils to streamline the planning processes. Murrindindi Shire, the worst affected in the bushfires, is one of these. However there seems to be very little engagement with the private sector who, after all, will be performing the reconstruction (P3 Academia, 2009).

It is also questionable to what extent people responsible for the various 'recovery environments' are interacting. It appears that, for instance, the engineers are solely focused on the physical aspect while the health workers are only interested in social well-being. Functional silos fail to acknowledge the dynamic, overlapping influences that such aspects have on each other and results in a less than optimal recovery.

Research supports the impression that the bushfire recovery effort is generally plagued with unnecessary bureaucracy and consequently resounding frustration from agency down to community level. People on the ground seem irritated, wanting facilitation but very confused about processes and the bureaucracy at large. Little things, such as red tape, can be particularly frustrating to traumatised and astute disaster victims.

It is difficult to perceive much of a leadership culture within the bushfire recovery. It is a recovery that seems focused on public perception rather than concrete actions for those still uncertain about their future. Indeed it seems that people do not realise their right to lead within such a context, and it is hypothesised that the centralised political inclination tends to hamper leadership from within the agencies.

## 6. Conclusions

The research undertaken provided an effective vehicle to assess the necessary leadership culture and characteristics within a post-disaster recovery environment. It is critical to note that while these traits are usually associated with an individual they are just as applicable to a larger multi-agency leadership persona. The rural community setting was focused on in this research. It was found that there is significant variation between these communities in terms of their structure, their recovery priorities and their degree of resilience. This demonstrates that a 'one size fits all' approach will not work for an effective recovery.

In particular, the necessary leadership traits are all focused towards achieving the right actions in a timely manner. This disaster leadership combines softer attributes with technical management ability.

These softer leadership characteristics include: true empathy from a high degree of emotional intelligence; the ability to engender confidence and motivate followers; a strong ethical framework; and the encouragement of community participation by regular, transparent, two-way communication.

The technical aspects of leadership centre on appropriate competence, pragmatism, problem-solving and an ability to utilise existing connections to call up the right resources and expertise.

The structure of organisations can heavily dictate the ability to achieve this ultimate leadership within a multi-agency recovery. True collaboration manages to utilise non-government and volunteer surge capacity. A structure is required where collaboration with communities and agencies can be co-ordinated to result in decisive action. This will involve a degree of centralised decision making whilst incorporating local knowledge and participation.

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