

Declaring the environment in which our leaders work

To be a leader in the emergency management sector is complex. There are two distinct working environments:

- *Leading teams day to day*
- *Leading an emergency response*

Emergency management organisations have developed to meet specific and challenging demands and successfully discharge their responsibilities in the most difficult emergency situations. Clearly much must be working for this to occur. However, there is room for improvement in the leadership capability of emergency management organisations which will enhance the working life of the people in those organisations.

Tensions between the different kinds of leadership needed for each working environment has been spoken about for a long time. With increasing evidence of mental ill health across the sector it is time to address the systems and culture that inhibit or support leaders to promote mental health and wellbeing as they switch between these working environments.

A command and control approach is important in an emergency response situation, but this form of leadership is recognised as worst practice in terms of promoting good workplace mental health where evidence points to the need for a transformational style of leadership. This means that leaders in the emergency management sector need the awareness and capability to switch from one to the other and be able to make it clear when and why this switch is needed.

The need for leaders that can be both transformational (authentic) and command and control (authoritarian) creates a tension which the Learning Network identified as having the potential to impact on the wellbeing of frontline workers. This is not new.

Effective leadership is vital to the long-term success of any organisation. Change in modern society impacts on all organisations and demands leaders able to develop coping strategies and motivate people to embrace and support those strategies. The emergency services as much as any other organisation needs leaders able to exercise transactional and transformational leadership at all levels. These leaders must be knowledgeable in their field but must also have a breadth of outlook that enables them to see the whole picture. Although the emergency services are good at developing good transactional leaders skilled in their specific craft, their structure and culture tends to limit the development of transformational leaders with broad outlooks and breadth of experience. The absence of this aspect of leadership can limit the ability of emergency service organisations to cope with a rapidly changing environment. Overcoming these problems requires commitment by senior management to the provision of conditions favourable for the development of transformational leaders – this may require changing the organisation’s culture to make it more conducive for these leaders to prosper. It is also important that conditions permit all staff to grow to their full potential, even where they may not be potential chief executives. If emergency service organisations are able to

provide these conditions and generate effective transactional and transformational leaders with the knowledge to make good judgements, then the organisation will be better equipped to meet a changing world and provide good service and good working environments.ⁱ

The Learning Network discussed the need to declare this tension.

The contemporary emergency management sector needs leaders who can effectively and consistently lead in both the day to day and emergency response environments in a way that promotes and supports good mental health and wellbeing.

The conflicting leadership traits and competencies expected of our leaders in both environments include:

| Leadership traits and competencies required to promote a mentally health workplace | Leadership traits and competencies traditionally displayed / demonstrated/ required in emergency response situations |
|---|---|
| Emotional intelligence | Command and control |
| Employee engagement | Leads from the front |
| Trust building | Cares about results above all |
| Openness and transparency | Prioritises operations |
| Willingness to show vulnerability | Gives directions and orders |
| Collegiate decision making | Treats workers as lower in the hierarchy |
| Consensus building | Is decisive, without prior consultation |
| Self-awareness | Thinks they know best (and often do) |
| | |

ⁱ Leadership in Emergency Services Julian Yates published in the Australia Journal of Emergency Management 1999