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Developing Leadership Beyond Command and Control

Program and summary

In 2010 a professional development program called 'Beyond Command and Control: Leadership in Crisis' was launched at the Australian Emergency Management Institute. Each session ran for 2.5 days and worked with 26 groups of senior and emerging leaders.

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 program largely met its goals, and four learning challenges were identified:

1. Capacity for reflection

2. Capacity to overcome focusing on the immediate and concrete

3. Overcoming dysfunctional momentum

4. Speaking up effectively

In general, this article is about helping leaders make better decisions during incidents by stepping back and being open to a range of ideas and information.   The goal of scanning and hearing different viewpoints, however, has clear benefits for building relationships with teams.

The article lends indirect support to the Leading for Better Mental Health program pilot such as:

*   using of WAVE to identify and coach on personal leadership style (rather than other tools like personality inventories)

*   the reliance on a peer discussion model to support learning practice and reflection

*   the intent to promote critical thinking about the role of power in building trust and communicating across hierarchy and rank

*   timing – taking a staggered and continuous approach, rather than a one-off session.

*   our hope that the participants will be interested in building a community of practice

Learning Challenges

1. *Capacity for reflection*

Leaders in the emergency services are skilled at responding, and less skilled at standing back and seeing the bigger picture – including the cultures and structures in emergency services organisations – and know how to examine it, and how to communicate it.

Future programs need to assist participants to think critically and to engage in deep reflection.   Frontline leadership programs should coach participants to 'describe what they are seeing, not what they think they are seeing, to "look again" and check their first impressions".

This is a big challenge, but important for decision-making (and I would add relationships with teams)

Issue 11, October 2020

Developing Leadership Beyond Command and Control

2. *Capacity to overcome focusing on the immediate and concrete*

Participants tended to focus on the here and now, and the clear and concrete which prevented them from noticing and processing less obvious but critical information or intelligence.

Future programs should offer coaching to assist leaders shift cognitive gears to maximise different kinds of information. This includes tuning into 'weak signals' and 'collective sense-making" by asking how the group is seeing things and making sense of a situation.

3. *Overcoming dysfunctional momentum*

The imperative to 'get the job done' is adaptive in emergency response work but can lead to 'dysfunctional momentum' (Barton & Sutcliffe 2009, p. 1331) when it comes at the expense of thinking things through and assessing 'weak signals'. In the simulation, the need for an agreed decision led participants to selectively filter information (or misinterpret the info provided) to suit or justify a proposed course of action. It appears that by being caught up in the need to react and act, leaders filter out information that, if weighed up, can lead to better decisions.

This impacts the team: staff do not feel they can speak up and often disengage, sometimes to the point of physically stepping out of the group's circle. This is not deliberate: leaders are rarely aware they prevent their teams from challenging or contesting decisions. They are socialised (unconscious bias) in a culture that prevents people down the rank from speaking up.

Future programs should support leaders to overcome dysfunctional momentum by learning to:

- encourage team members to speak up about a concern clearly and effectively

- actively seek alternative perspectives from followers

4. *Speaking up effectively*

Training and support should assist participants to:

- Recognise an awkward moment
- Support people in their agency to know how to communicate up the chain if there is something that needs attention
- Assist all team members to take responsibility for communicating things that go against the grain and so are difficult to speak of
- Deliver effective communication that 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'*)

General findings of interest:

- Formal strategies or systems (eg. the Australian Inter-Services Incident Management System/AIIMS) are not sufficient for addressing and managing ever more novel and complex incidents.

- Personality trait inventories are not helpful "as these seemed to be used .. to justify existing behaviour and were invoked to reinforce existing stereotypes".

Issue 11, October 2020

Developing Leadership Beyond Command and Control

- 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.

- Participants are taken out of their social *milieu* and given opportunities for insights, then are left to it with no ongoing support. This is the case for professional development initiatives in general.

- When it comes to working with leaders, formalised and constructive support is less common than reactive, punitive approaches. Leaders are "often 'hung out to dry,' pilloried in the press or the boards of inquiry" while interventions or professional courses are less common.