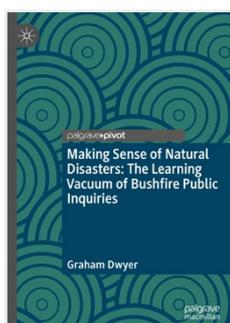


# Making sense of natural disasters: The Learning Vacuum of bushfire Public Inquiries



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This book analyses the processes and outcomes of public inquiries following 4 major bushfire events in Victoria being the Black Friday fires of 1939, the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983, the Black Saturday fires of 2009 and the summer bushfires of 2019 and 2020. Dwyer's analysis shows that, while public inquiries have yielded significant innovation and learning over the past 80 years, they have also given rise to a learning inertia, insofar as recommendations re-occur and the same issues remain unresolved.

The book poses 2 questions for investigation:

1. How can emergency management organisations facilitate collective learning after public inquiries that have been published and in, particular, does it give rise to lessons for the future?
2. What are the emotions that shape sensemaking in emergency management organisations after the findings from public inquiries have been published and do they influence learning?

The evidence presented for the first question is compelling and, while the answer to the question is not as well articulated, some very important observations are made about the nature of inquiries. The inquiries analysed have all framed the events as equivocal—that is where conditions were 'unprecedented', 'novel' and 'overwhelming'. For Dwyer, the purpose of the inquiry is to make sense retrospectively of what happened and in so doing, to reduce equivocality and provide an account of what happened and why to detect errors (single loop learning after Argyris & Schon 1976<sup>1</sup>). Meaning is later achieved through reconciling discrepant cues and interpretations through the social processes of sensemaking. Double loop learning occurs when these narratives lead to changes in organisational practice and values. Double loop learning only occurs for practitioners making sense of recommendations when the full meaning of the implications becomes

clear over time and through multiple iterations of sense making and sense giving.

Dwyer's premise is that while public inquiries are framed as an authoritative vehicle for public review they nevertheless are socially constructed phenomena and thus present a partial and incomplete view of what happened. Making sense of recommendations to enact after the inquiry includes an emotional toll on emergency services practitioners as they transition from events framed as novel, overwhelming and unprecedented and for which they are accountable back to their everyday contexts.

In interpreting these cues for learning, practitioners risk a culture of [organisational] entrapment. Emergency services managers become entrapped in certain aspects of organisational change that do little to enable these actors to plan for and respond to future fires. Dwyer quotes Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe's work where, through social defensiveness, managers become locked into certain lines of action and their subsequent justification. While the book does not provide answers as to how these blind spots to organisational change may be overcome, there is guidance for the future that includes less judicial ways of conducting inquiries to support accounts focused on creating meaning of what happened and less on blaming.

This is a particularly insightful and important book. It will be of interest to those involved in political science, public policy, organisational change and historiography. The final chapter in particular should be compulsory reading for those about to frame and conduct a public inquiry and all emergency services managers taking on leadership positions.

1. Argyris C 1976, *Single-loop and double-loop models in research on decision making. Administrative science quarterly*, pp.363-375.