

Shifting language in emergency management: from 'vulnerability' to 'authenticity'

Sharon Bourke

Gender and Disaster
Australia



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In the high-stress, high-stakes world of emergency management, where decisions can mean the difference between life and death, there exists a silent yet significant barrier to help-seeking of first responders: the perception of vulnerability.

Historically, the culture within many emergency services organisations has been one of stoicism and resilience, where admitting any form of weakness is often seen as incompatible with the sector's rugged ethos. This perception has created an environment where individuals, particularly men, may feel discouraged from seeking support due to the fear of being perceived as vulnerable. However, a shift to embrace the concept of 'authenticity' rather than 'vulnerability' could foster a supportive, effective and resilient workforce.

The stigma of vulnerability

The word 'vulnerability' often carries a negative connotation. It suggests weakness, an inability to cope and a departure from the ideal of the unflappable hero who can handle any crisis. This perception is particularly pronounced among men in these roles who are often socialised to equate emotional openness with a lack of masculinity. As a result, many may choose to suffer in silence rather than to seek help, fearing that admitting vulnerability could jeopardise their career, reputation or self-image. This stigma affects wellbeing and can have implications for team dynamics and overall effectiveness in crisis situations. Furthermore, first responders may experience difficulties at home, as expectations and stressors of the workplace are often incompatible within a family dynamic. Partners of first responders

often recognise distress in their loved ones but meet resistance or relegation if they suggest seeking help, which can contribute to stress in the home environment.

The power of authenticity

The concept of 'authenticity' carries a positive and empowering connotation. Being authentic means acknowledging one's true feelings, strengths and limitations without fear of judgment. It is about being honest with oneself and others and it allows for a genuine connection with colleagues, fostering a team environment based on trust and mutual respect. Authenticity can also allow for frank self-evaluation, nurturing individual growth and furthering an individual's experience of competency. In the context of emergency management, authenticity can lead to effective communication, better decision-making and a stronger and cohesive team.

Benefits of embracing authenticity:

- Improved mental health and wellbeing: By encouraging authenticity, emergency management organisations can create a culture where seeking help is seen as a sign of self-awareness and a desire for personal growth, rather than a weakness. This can significantly improve the mental health and wellbeing of personnel.
- Enhanced team dynamics: Authentic interactions build trust and understanding within teams. In high-pressure situations,

this can translate to improved communication, better collaboration and a stronger sense of camaraderie.

- Increased resilience: Authenticity allows individuals to acknowledge and address their limitations and stressors that assist coping strategies and increase resilience, both individually and collectively.
- Better decision-making: When team members feel comfortable being authentic, they are likely to share their true thoughts and concerns, leading to improved risk assessments and well-rounded decision-making.
- Reduced burnout and turnover: A culture of authenticity can help mitigate burnout and turnover by creating a supportive and sustainable working environment.

Challenges and consideration

While the shift from 'vulnerability' to 'authenticity' offers many benefits, it is not without challenges. Changing entrenched cultural norms and perceptions, especially in the emergency management sector, requires a concerted effort at all levels of the organisation. Leadership plays a crucial role in modelling authentic behaviour and creating a safe space for others to do the same. Training and education can also play a part, helping to reframe the concept of vulnerability and emphasising the value of authenticity.

Conclusion

The words we use to frame the concept of seeking help in high-pressure careers like emergency management matters. By shifting the focus from 'vulnerability' to 'authenticity', we can break down barriers, encourage supportive and resilient workforces and enhance the effectiveness of emergency response teams. It is about making cultures that value the strength in honesty, the courage in admitting limitations and the power of genuine human connections.