

Getting the message: emergency management leaders talk leadership

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Abstract

There is a general view that emergency management leadership needs to adjust to a changing organisational context and a capacity to respond to heightened risks. Adding the voices of leaders into this agenda may assist that transition. This report details findings from interviews with 2 emergency management leaders with experience of leading through significant emergency events in Aotearoa New Zealand. Based on what these emergency management leaders say comprises good leadership, gaps in leadership practice identified include a need for critical reflection on the value of experience as a qualification for leadership and awareness of the importance of effective leadership outside the response phase of emergency management.

Introduction

Perspectives on how to improve emergency management leadership draw on a variety of evidence to convey a variety of messages. Changes in the organisational context of emergency management require the need to move away from ‘command-and-control’ styles of leadership in favour of open communication and collaborative leadership (Vaughn Jr. and Streib 2006). Learning from emergency events has informed areas of leadership weakness, including identification of specific competencies to be strengthened such as the capacity to balance decisiveness with flexibility and the ability to both inform and motivate responders (Kapucu and Van Art 2008; Murphy and Dunn 2008). Insight gained from providing professional development for emergency management leaders has identified a need to confront ‘unconscious habits’ and a tendency for leaders to favour ‘dysfunctional momentum’ over well-informed action or in-action (Owen et al. 2005). Leadership competencies have been proposed based on leader responses to predetermined

options (Van Wart and Kapucu 20). The broader understanding of the qualities displayed by effective leaders has spilled over to the understanding of emergency management leadership, while recognising the distinctive demands on leaders operating on the ‘edge of chaos’ (Boin et al. 2005).

Whatever the source of evidence, leadership matters whether dealing with routine, previously encountered emergencies or out-of-scale events. (Trainor and Velotti 2003). Leadership qualities must adapt to the different phases of mitigation, planning, response and recovery. This context is arguably another reason to draw evidence widely in assessing the state of emergency management leadership.

This report provides findings of interviews with leaders in emergency management who were involved with the responses to 3 ‘out-of-scale’ weather events that affected parts of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand in early 2023, collectively referred to as the North Island severe weather events (for a description of these events see Boshier 2023). This provides a cohort of managers with experience of leading through extreme events that overwhelmed the scope of prior planning and enables informed comment on effective leadership by those whose leadership has been tested. The aim was to determine what might be learnt about leadership in general rather than to evaluate their actions during the specific events. Existing reports provide evaluations of how well emergency management services performed during the events to which this sample of leaders are linked (Bush 2023; Bush 2024; Ombler et al. 2024).

The Aotearoa New Zealand context

Comment on the context from which the interviewed leaders are drawn is appropriate to gauge the relevance of their responses

to leadership in other environments. As elsewhere, emergency management in Aotearoa New Zealand essentially involves a small core of full-time emergency management professionals coordinating support from a wide range of other agencies (including police, fire, medical, local government, lifeline utilities and volunteers) to prepare for and respond to emergency events.

The *Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002* (CDEM)¹ establishes a national framework comprising the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and 6 regional Civil Defence Emergency Management Groups (CDEM Groups). NEMA acts as steward, operator and assurer of the emergency management system (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2023). CDEM Groups coordinate planning and activity across the '4Rs' of risk reduction, readiness, response and recovery; preparing communities for emergencies. CDEM Groups lead the response and recovery to local emergencies, while NEMA takes charge in the event of multi-regional and severe events.

As well as the oversight of NEMA, use of the Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS) 3rd edition (Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination 209) provides a standardised set of organisational structures, procedures and protocols that are designed to enable multiple agencies to work together. Countries including Australia have similar frameworks.

The decentralised structure places significant decision-making power at the regional level, to which all the interviewees were attached, which can enhance localised response efforts but requires strong coordination at the national level during large-scale events (Scott and Tarazona 20). Under-funding and under-staffing are long standing and continuing challenges with, for example, NEMA's capacity to oversee CDEM preparedness undermined by the frequent need to redirect resources to actual involvement in emergency responses (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2023). With a reliance on coordinating multiple agencies, failures to establish situational awareness and a common operating picture have been identified as weaknesses in Aotearoa New Zealand's management of emergency events (see Faafoi 208; Technical Advisory Group 208; NEMA 2024; Ombler et al. 2024).

The interviews and content analysis

Interviews were designed to gather participant views about what constitutes good leadership based on the leadership they had exercised and experienced during the 2023 weather events. The participants were recruited by approaching CDEM managers known to have been involved in the responses to the 2023 North Island severe weather events and asking those managers to propose other participants. In total, 2 managers were recruited who all had held a leadership position during one or more of the 2023 events (in the study, advisors overseen by 3 of the

managers who were also interviewed but not included in these findings).

This study approach differed from other investigations of emergency management leadership that aim to identify the tasks and competencies associated with effective leadership (e.g. Boin et al. 2005; Van Wart and Kapucu 20). Rather than seeking to propose specific skills that need to be possessed, this study was concerned with leadership behaviour in terms of how leaders interact with others and how they deploy their skills. As far as possible, interviews gathered unstructured responses with a minimum of prompts or questioning to capture the authentic voice of the leader.

Using content analysis, interview responses were coded and grouped into one of 8 themes on the basis that a theme captures a distinct topic mentioned by multiple respondents. Table 1 details the themes and representative interviewee comments.

Theme: Roles and responsibilities

An understanding of the role and responsibility and that of the people leaders interact with is viewed as a basic starting point for good leadership. Clear job demarcations are favoured to give authority to act, provide ownership of tasks and to define the skills needed to fill a leadership position to ensure the right people are appointed to roles

Participants had no doubt about their own roles and responsibility, referring to the CIMS framework as helping to demarcate positions and give authority to act. Rather, the issue was highlighted as a problem when dealing with people whose responsibility was unclear. In particular, the actions of elected officials were highlighted as an example. One participant said:

There were monumental messes created in the heat of the moment ... in this case, coming back to what I said, it's about needing to have credibility and understand the architecture and the framework that you're working within.

Theme: Supportive and solutions-focused leadership

In a high-pressure, high-stress environment, it was recognised that staff get overwhelmed and being supportive of the team is critical for effective leadership. Support is shown by providing direction, reminding teams of the overall emergency response objectives, discouraging fixed mindsets and instilling awareness that situations can change rapidly. One participant said:

It's really important for leadership to sort of pull people back and say, 'hang on a minute, what are we trying to do here, we need to make sure that everything we're doing is working towards this big picture and we need to all know what the big picture is.

1. www.civildefence.govt.nz/strategy-capability/legislative-framework/cdem-act

Table 1: Dimensions and indicators of local health system resilience to disasters.

Theme	Codes*	Representative quotes
Roles and responsibility	1, 3	'When you are working even in the CIMS framework, you the controller be a controller ... as a controller, you need to understand that we've got those risks at the moment. Those are your responsibilities and I can [support] but I need [you] to understand where you sit.'
Supportive and solutions-focused	4, 26	'People need to feel supported when they respond to an event. I think one of the massive roles of someone in a leadership position is just to actually look after everybody and sort of instill the sense that we've got this.'
Relationships	5	'It's about your relationships and ability to establish rapport. If you're someone who has to be acting at leadership level, whether it's formal or informal, you need to provide advice.'
Decision-making	22	'You want someone who's really good at making decisions and making calls under really high pressure with little to no information.'
Wellbeing	35	'If you're not looking after the welfare of the team, then the team struggles.'
Communication style	6, 19, 25	'The main thing is to get information out early and then match the appetite with your output and ideally get ahead of it. You do that by recognising where people are at.'
Directive style	24, 29	'There is a really strong school of thought, and I can see that it's necessary that in a command centre, you need command, also when in a control centre you need control, you do need to have that command-and-control type approach ...'
Phases of responses	12, 13, 14, 15	'Leadership is required throughout, I think. The better way to sum it up would be the style of leadership that's required differentiates through the entire response cycle.'

*Explanation of how codes are allocated and amalgamated into themes are expanded in Conley (2024).

'Leading from the side' is seen as a preferred leadership style and seen as enabling others to perform by getting alongside them and participating in problem-solving to get things moving with the goal of raising team performance. The need to tailor support to the characteristics of the group was noted in the study. People drawn into an emergency response for the first time need direction as to how their skills can be applied in an unfamiliar context. A leader appointed from outside to add resource to a local team may need to build respect and confidence and show support by sharing the workload than they might when leading a home team. One participant said:

When you deploy, you don't have the core knowledge ... so you need to defer to the people who have been there before. Even if they were doing a terrible job, which they're probably not, but even if they were, they know more about what's going on than you do. You've got to defer to them. So, what I would tend to do is get alongside the person and say, 'Okay, look how I'm here to help. What are you most in need of?'

Theme: Relationships

Separate to supporting staff, establishing relationships and rapport with individuals was highlighted by participants. Leaders talked about displaying knowledge, clear communication, stressing people's strengths and not trying to take over other people's roles as rapport building techniques. One participant said:

It's about your relationships, and ability to establish rapport. If you're someone who has to be acting at leadership level, whether it's formal or informal, you need to provide advice.

Theme: Decision-making

The conditions under which leaders during emergencies make decisions and how they respond was critical to effective leadership. The general context in which decisions are often required mark leaders out. One participant said:

A lot of decisions and calls being made off limited information and things that need to be decided or done very quickly.

Two responses to the decision-making challenge highlight a willingness to take inputs widely and the willingness to pivot as new information comes to light. Participants said:

It wasn't made by this one person in a room by himself ... He was talking to his function managers, he was talking to Iwi, he was talking to everybody. He got all the information that he could possibly get at the time, and he was like, Alright, let's do it.

If I'm making a decision based on the best possible information I have at the moment. If an hour later someone comes in and goes hey we've just had people on the ground this is actually not that and so on and so forth. I'm not going to double down, like, no this is what we're doing. For me that new information that's come in there completely changes the whole reason we made that decision in the first place. So, you ... kind of need to pivot ... and the ability to be able to do that and do it fast, I think is a really good skill to have.

Theme: Wellbeing

A human element to emergency management leadership is caring for the emotional and physical health of team

members. This received comment as something to attend to and as a weakness in some leaders. One participant said:

I've worked with leaders in response, not necessarily in my function, but you can tell that they are absolutely wearing themselves ... they're trying to have that hero mentality and won't regulate themselves and their teams underneath them do the same, and then everyone gets burnout.

Theme: Communication style

Participants elaborated on the need to communicate directly with team members, favouring standup briefings and open forums and keeping information as simple as possible. One participant said:

I like to establish, like, open forums and relationships that mean that having discussions is easy, I don't want to bark orders at people. Also making sure that you consider the full range of people that might need something.

While open and collaborative communication is endorsed, participants acknowledged that communication may need to be recorded to allow for review of the actions taken. One participant said:

The key thing that comes up in every inquiry and after-action review, is that everything which influences your decision-making needs to be documented.

The need for clear, concise and orally communicated information was also mentioned and related to how affected people may have reduced ability to process messages and think clearly when in high-stress situations. It was discussed that leaders need to provide clear direction and create space to allow people to process information at their own pace. One participant said:

It's one of those things where our brains don't think clearly and so the leader needs to be that voice of reason, try and keep all 3 sailors rowing in the same direction.

Theme: Directive style

While comments suggested leaders are converts to a collaborative leadership style, participants also endorsed a directive style of leadership when circumstances require a forceful approach. The need for quick decisions and immediate response justify a directive style, akin to command-and-control. However, the participants acknowledged that people will respond differently to being commanded. One participant said:

Everyone will respond differently, [to a directive style]. Depending on how they feel at the moment ... if you've ever had someone who's totally flustered by the whole thing, that person will probably respond really well to a style of leadership that is like 'okay, I'm in control and we are in control, we're going to be providing good stuff and good directions here.

Directive leadership is described as needing to be fair but not at the expense of remaining approachable and is best used as part of a larger shift in leadership behaviour. While comments support a sensitive use of directive leadership, it was suggested that some followers may be accepting of the style such as people from a military or police background. One participant said:

In emergency management, what you have is people whose day jobs are something completely different and who are suddenly being plucked from a business-as-usual space, which is not command-and-control and then going into an emergency control centre, we're suddenly expected to operate quite differently.

Theme: Phases of response

Given the context of these interviews, the responses focused on leadership during the immediate response phase of emergency events. When asked about leadership over the full cycle of emergency management responsibilities, there was a consensus that leadership behaviour should adapt to the prevailing situation. One participant said:

I think once people get into a bit of a rhythm ... you can change your tact a little bit, because once the incident has reached its critical mass, I mean, it ain't gonna get any worse, right? You know, when the rain stopped or the waters are receding or whatever. We still know that we've got that completely cut off base and that. We can think more around the logistics and in-depth sort of thing.

Broadly, there was agreement that while a directive style of leadership can be justified when decisions need to be made quickly to minimise risks, once the situation has stabilised there is scope for more collaboration and openness.

Implications for leadership development

Participants in this study endorsed a generally collaborative style of leadership including the willingness to seek continuous input into decisions with an awareness that leaders need to be prepared to change course as the situation develops and information improves. This finding endorses much of what is generally presented as good practice. While these findings are for a group and do not assess individual leaders, there is a consensus in the responses.

Related to leadership development, 3 gaps in responses gathered in this study suggest areas worth attention. First, in the context of roles and responsibility, there was reference to experience as being the basis for taking on responsibility and exercising good leadership. There was little or no mention of training and professional development even with respondents acknowledging that

gaining experience is hard when emergency management responses are infrequent. The implication is that experience trumps any other source of learning. One participant said:

Working in the academic space, you know, there's only so much that book learning will do for you in this kind of thing. I mean, I'm from an academic background, so my approach to learning things is to sit down and read stuff ... That only gets you so far, because until you apply it won't embed itself into your mind, it's that whole thing where you retain the information that it's useful for your brain to know.

Such outlooks underscore the challenge for providers of training and development to overcome a view that experience is an innately superior form of learning. It also points to the use of experiential training methods that puts trainees in simulated real-life situations (see Johnson 2017 for further discussion of experiential methods for leadership development).

Second, the status afforded to experience identifies a risk that encourages too much emphasis on past events and actions and over confidence that emergencies progress in familiar ways. Recourse to past experience can become a risk when assumed familiar emergencies develop in unanticipated ways (see Murphy and Dunn 2018). Ideally, as well as reference to the value of experience, these interviews would have elaborated how experience had changed a leader's behaviour, improved their ability to develop situational awareness and avoid the 'dysfunctional momentum' as identified by Owen et al. (2015). We cannot say that these are not happening among managers, but it appears the value of such learning should be given more emphasis.

Third, leadership during the recovery phase of an emergency response may justify further attention. While participants endorsed a shift to collaborative leadership styles during the recovery phase, there was little evidence of thinking about how else leadership during recovery differs from that in the initial response to an emergency event. Others have pointed out that political and economic factors are more apparent during recovery due to the damage incurred to communities and infrastructure, indicating a need for leaders to be skilled in negotiating funding which, in turn, can require engagement with a wide range of agencies (Johnson 2017). This shows the need for strategic leadership that recognises that recovery continues for significant periods after an event and introduces inconsistencies in the effectiveness of the disaster response without an alignment of visions and influence to secure resources. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the need to strengthen capacity for recovery leadership has been identified and, to recognise that this, leadership needs to be present from the outset

(Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination 2019). While the study sample was small, the interviews tend to endorse this recommendation.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken believing that the voices of leaders tends to be missing from discussions of how emergency management leaders need to adapt to the changing environment in which they operate. It opted to engage with leaders in an unstructured interview to avoid prompting responses that would direct respondents to our conceptions of what might be good leadership practice. The approach has revealed a set of leaders with a view of good leadership that emphasises a supportive style of leadership, based on relationships rather than authority, a capacity for decision-making and problem-solving under pressure, maintains staff wellbeing and that recognises the importance of effective communication. As well as these qualities, knowing when to revert to a directive leadership style emerges as another aspect of good leadership. Clearly there is still scope for variation in the precise understanding of leadership qualities, but the broad consensus revealed by the interviews does suggest a starting point for leadership development that assumes an acceptance of a collaborative style of leadership. By omission, the interviews also suggest 3 areas in need of attention: openness to ongoing leadership development as important alongside experience as a qualification for leadership roles; encouraging reflection on experience to develop a recognition that familiar responses may not work in future events, and strengthening awareness of how leadership needs to adapt as disaster response moves to recovery.

Developing from the latter point, further research could build on this study by investigating how the understanding of good leadership practice varies according the 3 main phases of an emergency response (initial, containment and recovery). This would clarify awareness of how the phase of the emergency response can affect leader behaviour and the skills that need to draw upon. Questions specific to the phase of a response could also open discussion over the need for and ability to make a transition in leadership styles.

Acknowledgments

This study was approved by the Southern Institute of Technology Human Ethics Committee #2024/32 (Leadership styles during disaster events).

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