

Looking back, thinking ahead

In this special segment for AJEM's 40th anniversary issues, we interview past journal contributors about their early articles, what has since changed in the fields they work in, and their ideas and suggestions for the future of AJEM.

The V word

An interview with Dr Mark Crossweller AFSM

My first research paper in the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (AJEM) was 'How a change in thinking might change the inevitability in disasters' ([Crossweller 2015](#)). The paper explained why we should approach catastrophic disasters differently by changing the way we think about them. It was pivotal for me as Director General of Emergency Management Australia (2012-2018) and has shaped my thinking, my PhD, my writing and my speaking over the past 10 to 15 years.

When I look back now, the origins of that paper can be traced to a question Alistair Wilson asked me when I became Director General: 'What has your career taught you?' I had no idea how to answer. I'd never really stopped to think about it. When I did stop and reflect, what stuck in my mind was a nagging question: why do we think the way we do when we keep producing the same outcomes?

That thinking grew out of a succession of major events: the Canberra bushfires in 2003, the Victorian bushfires in 2009, the Queensland floods of 2010-11 and the Perth Hills fires in 2012. Looking back, we repeatedly lost public trust without fully understanding why. We had become overconfident in our capabilities, assuming we could handle anything. We couldn't.

What dawned on me was that we weren't prepared to admit we were vulnerable. Until we acknowledged that vulnerability, we couldn't have an honest conversation about the risks we faced or the limits of our capability. That realisation became the foundation of the paper. It was really my first attempt to say: we have a limitation. We look good up to a certain point. Beyond that point, we don't look very good at all.

When I did my PhD, I realised that when you get past the point of severe on the intensity scale, capability doesn't maintain itself. Up to that point, we've got more than enough fire trucks and helicopters. Although our policies and legislation don't work for everybody, they work for most people. Capability is relatively consistent because it exceeds the problem it's trying to deal with.

What I came to see is that there comes a point where the rules change and those systems reach their limit. When that limit turns up, impact starts going up exponentially while capability drops away. That is a space of great vulnerability.

That paper led me to consider what happens when we ignore vulnerability. My conclusion was simple: avoidable suffering follows. Vulnerability matters because it highlights future risks and gives us a chance to reduce them. We can ask: how do we reduce susceptibility and increase adaptation to minimise vulnerability? At the time, the sector, including AJEM, focused on hazards, mitigation and preparedness, but paid far less attention to exposure and the 'V word'. We tended to view vulnerability as a characteristic of disadvantaged people rather than a product of economic, social and structural conditions beyond their control. As a result, our approach to vulnerable people and communities was often paternalistic.

Over time, my thinking has changed a little, but it still fundamentally sits in this space of mutual vulnerability. It's a complex space that ultimately calls on leadership to be relational, to put themselves in the shoes of another and try to understand what it might feel like. The style of leadership that's required is not distant leadership or command and control; it's virtuous leadership that is prepared to entertain the prospect that somebody is suffering and enter their world to see what can be done about it.

I don't think we're as relational as we could be, but I think we're on the path. One of the positive developments I've seen over the years in AJEM is that the conversation has become much more sociological. Dealing with questions of gender and indigeneity, and particularly the spirituality of indigeneity and sense of kinship and connection to land, the Dreamtime, and all those wonderful philosophical insights to culture can only help us to walk that path of relationship. Relationship with land. Relationship with each other. Relationship with animals and the entire planetary ecosystem essentially.

I know it's a big statement, but that's the path we need to walk. I think we're starting to crawl down that road, but we've got to get off our hands and knees and get up on 2 feet and get on with it. Because time is precious.