

COMMENTARY

DO THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND EMERGENCY MEDICINE PROFESSIONS REQUIRE A NEW LEADERSHIP THEORY?

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Leadership in extreme contexts, such as disaster response or emergency medicine, remains one of the least researched aspects in leadership and substantial effort is needed to progress knowledge in this critically important field (Hannah, S.T., et al., 2009a). In 2007/8, within emergency management circles and conferences in Australia, there persisted the notion that standard leadership principles and theories did not adequately explain the type of leadership demonstrated and required in organisations primarily concerned with emergency response. Typical perspectives voiced at many emergency management meetings have raised the following points:

- Leadership character is not made in crisis, but is only exhibited.
- Unless leadership surveys take into account the belief that particular traits and behavioural characteristics are better in different circumstances or organizations, the results will only produce 'interesting observations' and will not add to the development of a theory that is applicable to the field of emergency management.
- Effective leadership may actually be about the fit between person, organisation and emergency event type. This is because the relationship between a leader and their organization may cause conflict between leaders and subordinates.
- While different types of leaders may all function adequately in a particular leadership role, the potential for conflict is higher for some leaders.
- Effectiveness may be more important than conflict, so a leader focused on preserving harmony may be utterly ineffective in pursuing and completing tasks. The authoritarian, task-focused leader may be perceived as being 'unsuccessful' by their subordinates but they may be very effective in emergency circumstances where they get things done.
- Different leadership styles may be effective at different levels of emergency management. While we believe that an authoritarian may be required at the operational end, how adaptable does this person need to be?
- Informal high-level communication networks are not necessarily effective. Even when an established group of emergency management leaders have an established

information network and good collaboration this may not be used during a crisis and these relationships may suffer. There appears to be a communication disconnection during a crisis which cannot be predicted.

- The field of emergency management is so extreme that generalising from the known non-emergency management/leadership/psychology literature may not be possible.

These perspectives are not all in accord and argue for the consideration of trait, behaviour and situational or contingency theories in leadership assessments. While it is possible that these perspectives betray a lack of knowledge concerning standard theories, it may be possible that they are based on a sound understanding of leadership in practice arising from collective experiences in emergency situations. Some leading researchers in the field of extreme leadership are of a similar opinion in that they believe that leadership is uniquely contextualized in such extreme contexts where severe risks exist because extreme contexts create a unique set of contingencies, constraints and causations (Hannah, S.T. et al., 2009b). But they are against establishing a generalised theory for extreme contexts. Rather they argue that leaders who are effective in different organisations and contexts employ a fluid leadership style that adapts as required to suit the circumstances.

'In extremis' leaders who operate under conditions of extreme stress and exceptionally grave risk are perhaps fundamentally different from non-extreme leaders because they: i) are motivated by fear of death; ii) constantly scan for danger; iii) share risks faced by subordinates; iv) share a common lifestyle with followers; v) are highly competent; and vi) have a high level of mutual trust and loyalty (Kolditz, T.A., 2007). Kolditz acknowledges that he had mistakenly assumed that extreme leadership is unique (Kolditz, T.A., 2007). He revised his view when he later discovered that there were 'compelling parallels between leadership in 'in extremis' settings and leadership in elite business organisations that engage in high-risk enterprises with large amounts of capital.' However, the same could be said for leaders in health and normal business organisations. For instance, senior medical professionals face Kolditz's six conditions on a daily basis while leaders in business have to deal with more than losing capital. After all, the extreme emotions generated in a business environment can drive people to resignation, crime or suicide in the same

way that they can cause a soldier to desert, run away from a battle or shoot a superior officer.

A recent article by Hannah *et al.* on leadership in military and other dangerous contexts, argues that 'leadership is uniquely contextualized such that specific causations and contingencies occur which are not present in non-dangerous contexts' (Hannah, S.T. et al., 2010). This is equally relevant to public health contexts such as potentially volatile refugee situations. It points out that very little is known about how leadership operates in this context and elaborates on elements that contribute towards effective leadership in extreme environments. The authors promote two tenets: i) 'leadership is a complex and multilevel dynamic system of which any specific leader is only part; requiring various aspects of this system to be assessed to understand the causations and contingencies that different parts of the system impose on leadership processes,' and ii) 'dangerous contexts are dimensional and findings from one typology cannot necessarily be generalized to another.' Hannah *et al.* argue that the creation of a generalised model of 'business leadership' or even 'dangerous' or 'extreme leadership' would be scientifically invalid although certain traits would be common to effective leadership (Hannah, S.T. et al., 2010). Thus, a further question of interest that may assist in shedding light on emergency leadership is, 'Must leaders possess particular attributes and specific combinations of leadership skill sets to succeed in particular occupational environments or is a more generalised skill set required?'

There is no single accepted leadership theory which is indicative of the fact that identifying the relationships between leadership, situations, context and outcomes is a very complex and challenging endeavour. One possible conclusion is that there is a set of generic or common leadership attributes and skills that render a leader effective regardless of the type of organization, its financial orientation, who owns it, and whether or not it is involved with emergency management. While this appears to imply that there is no room to acknowledge contingency theories, this is not the case if one of the leader's attributes relates to contingencies. Contingency theory is important because the difficulty in applying leadership theory to emergency management leadership is that none of the theories were developed in an emergency management context. This has resulted in many workers in highly stressful and chaotic environments believing that the leadership qualities required in harsh working environments are different to those suited to environments that are stable and prosperous (McCormick, S. and Wardrope, J. 2003). The number of published articles that focus specifically on leadership theory in emergency management is limited. As such, there is currently contention as to whether emergency services personnel conform to the standard models or whether there is a significant departure between these two working environments to merit the development of a separate leadership theory.

Research in this area is important to consider because the opinions of emergency management practitioners stand in direct contrast with views expressed by leadership scholars who specialise in extreme working environments. On the one hand, it is thought that the pressures, goals and problems that arise in a particular line of work require a specific type of leader. Getting the correct situation-leader match is hypothesized to guarantee effectiveness in terms of getting the job done and meeting subordinate needs. On the other hand, it is possible that a generalised model of leadership is all that is

required because effective leaders owe their success to a fluid leadership style and a broad set of attributes and skills.

Notwithstanding these arguments, however, a further, somewhat contrary line of inquiry could also encompass the relative importance of leadership in extreme contexts compared to better training and better resourcing of organisations. That is, it is often assumed that better leadership will inevitably lead to better performance in all contexts, but this may not be true until response capabilities are exhausted, for whatever reasons, and/or the physical integrity of the organisation is at risk. It is conceivable that an organisation thrust into an extreme situation would not be at risk if the situational demands were well within the organisation's capabilities, skill sets, resources and response repertoire. Thus, it may not so much be the extremeness of the crisis at hand that is the issue, but how close the organisation is to its performance limits and survival threshold (whatever the context). In this sense, the role of leadership then becomes one of increasing both of these thresholds to another level of preparedness.

Therefore, while there is considerable scope for a better understanding of leadership under extreme duress, there is equally a need to understand whether there are more reliable, heuristic strategies in training, resourcing and organisational exposure that can deliver greater organisational performance and robustness in extreme circumstances. In this sense, extreme leadership, however we theorise it, will only become evident in extreme circumstances, after which it is labelled as "experience" - a quality that all members of the organisation now share.

Until we better understand the phenomenon of leadership in extreme contexts, resourcing, training and the acquisition of experience are our best heuristics for developing and designing emergency response capabilities. However this should not distract us from thinking more deeply about the psychology of those rare individuals who are able to lift others to levels of confidence and endurance that training and experience could never predict.

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