

Leadership in emergency services

by Julian Yates

One of the consistent themes as we approach the end of the 20th century is the call for effective leadership in organisations. Good leaders are seen as critical to meeting the seemingly unending processes of change and review that are impacting on society. Public and private sector organisations struggle to cope with rapidly changing conditions: giants of the past fall by the wayside while new giants emerge (how many of us picked either the collapse of the Soviet Union or the rise of Microsoft two years before the event, let alone a decade prior). The public sector in particular seems to have been singled out for sustained attention by the economic rationalists seeking to impose market driven solutions to problems.

The emergency services have not been isolated from these changes. Downsizing, contracting out, out-sourcing and performance indicators are terms most emergency services personnel have encountered at one time or another. Demand for service rises inexorably while budgets remain the same or shrink, or so it often seems.

These challenges place increasing demands on leaders in the emergency services to cope with and find answers to these issues. The leaders' performance may be critical to the continued effective functioning of the organisation and indeed to the holistic well-being of the organisation's staff. A poor or ineffective leader can do tremendous damage to an organisation and its personnel. The results of ineffective leadership can range from missed opportunities, poor operational or administrative decisions, reducing budgets, an alienated workforce or ultimately, the death of the organisation itself through closure or amalgamation.

The purpose of this article is to look at leadership in the emergency services using a new and refreshing paradigm championed by Alistair Mant (1997). My aim is to discuss the application of his paradigm to the emergency services using my experiences in Police, Fire and State Emergency Service organisations as the foundation for my views. To keep the article at a reasonable length, I have limited the discussion to Mant's approach and do not consider competing approaches or general leadership theories.

Mant argues that good leadership is the key to success and survival, both corporately and personally, as organisations move into the 21st century. He also argues convincingly that good leaders abound in most

organisations, but the systems and baggage within the organisations and society as a whole can prevent the skills of these nascent leaders reaching full potential. I will initially outline Mant's thesis, then apply two key concepts, transactional and transformational leadership, to the emergency services environment. Some suggestions on how the leadership potential that lies within the emergency services can be unleashed are then presented for consideration.

Before moving into the main parts of the article, I should point out that what follows is my interpretation of Mant's thesis—I believe I have interpreted it correctly, but this may not be so—any errors are fully my responsibility!

Alistair Mant and Intelligent Leadership

Alistair Mant is a management consultant who has worked for many years to help organisations improve the way they manage people and so in turn improve their business prospects. An Australian by birth, he learnt his trade through the school of practical experience, starting as a blue-collar worker on the Snowy Mountains Scheme (a major Australian engineering project) in the late 1950s and progressing through large corporations and academia. He has written a number of well regarded books on leadership, culminating with the publication of 'Intelligent Leadership' in 1997.

It is not possible to do full justice to Mant's thesis in an article of this length, but it is possible to present his key points. Mant's first point is not directly related to leadership, but more to how organisations and systems work. Using the metaphor of bicycles and frogs, he argues that organisations and the systems within them have characteristics similar to either one or the other. Now before you turn off and say what rubbish, please read on for a moment. Bicycles are systems or sets of components where individual components can be removed, cleaned, repaired and replaced and the bicycle will function as well or better than it did previously. A part of a bicycle can be removed and added to another bicycle without great difficulty. Frogs are also systems or sets of components but unlike bicycles, it is not possible (except with advanced surgery) to remove and replace parts of the frog without some damage

occurring. Up to a point the frog will tolerate damage, but once too much is removed or changed, the frog collapses and dies. Mant argues that too much modern management theory attempts to treat all organisations as bicycle-type systems—bits can be removed and replaced here and there to improve performance. While there are organisations or parts thereof that fit this description, many organisations are more like frogs—damage tolerant to a point, but after that they can collapse and become dysfunctional. Good leaders are able to see whether an organisation is frog or a bicycle and plan their strategies accordingly.

Leadership, according to Mant, has two complementary aspects, transactional and transformational, and is always based on one key foundation, authority (using the meaning 'knowledge or expertise' e.g. that person is an authority on . . .). I will outline each of these in turn in the sections below, attempting to apply them to the emergency services environment.

Before I do that, it is important to briefly discuss some of the impediments to good leadership identified by Mant. He is highly critical of the current trend to downsize or 'rightsize' organisations, irrespective of the actual needs of the situation. In his view, too many middle management positions have been done away with in the quest for flatter and allegedly more efficient structures. Two problems result. Firstly, in the new flatter structures, many subordinate positions may be receiving insufficient supervision by their managers. This can result in increased errors as mistakes are made and not detected in time (he gives the Barings Bank debacle in Singapore as but one example). It also removes the opportunity for subordinates to learn from and be mentored by their superiors, thus limiting their ability to develop their skills in a supportive environment. Secondly, the excessive pressures on the few top managers makes it difficult for them to remain in touch with issues at the grass roots level as they no longer have the time to do this nor the senior subordinates able to do it for them. As a result, it can be very difficult for junior staff to get their messages through to top management and top management can become out of touch with the operational realities.

Mant argues that there are many people in organisations with outstanding potential for leadership who are stifled by their separation from senior management. These junior staff may often have the solution to

problems but are unable to push their views through to an over-burdened senior manager. In some organisations, senior managers may be highly resistant to change. In these cases, the brilliant junior has little chance of being heard. Organisations and their top managers need to seek out and champion the unsung leaders hidden deep within the bowels of the organisation and ensure their skills are developed and applied to the challenges.

Group-think remains a serious obstacle to good leadership in all too many organisations. Mant is critical of organisational selection systems that result in the same types of people being appointed to senior positions. Their technical expertise notwithstanding, if all the senior management of an organisation have a similar background, then the risk of group-think is high and major problems may result. Mant presents various examples of the insidious nature of group-think and how it causes catastrophes. The Bay of Pigs fiasco is given as the classic example where although *all* of President Kennedy's advisers had private reservations, *all* supported the proposal to allow Cuban dissidents to invade Cuba because each thought he alone had concerns—the invasion failed miserably. Senior managers need to consciously recruit people with diverse skills and experiences to their ranks as this helps prevent group-think.

The final obstacle to good leadership identified by Mant is the presence of hidden psychological damage in people that may only come to light during periods of high stress. This damage may be irrelevant for people initially as they ascend the career ladder, but as stress levels increase a point may be reached when the damage starts to affect the person's judgement. Aggression, cowardice, bullying or retreating into a mental bunker during stressful situations are types of problems that can prevent a person being a good leader, irrespective of how skilled they may otherwise be. This problem is increasing as demands on senior managers increase, raising stress levels and bringing out previously hidden problems.

Transactional and transformational leadership

Mant divides leadership into two broad aspects or types—transactional and transformational (using work in J. McGregor Burns' *Leadership*, published in 1978). Transactional leadership is the art of building and maintaining transactions or relationships between people. The effective transactional leader has good communication skills and is able to persuade people to pull together as a team and work towards common goals. We encounter transactional

leadership all the time – at home, at work and at social gatherings. Transactional leadership often involves a personal relationship between the leader and the follower. Transactional leadership is not necessarily involved with change—a highly effective transactional leader may continue on a path established long ago for reasons long forgotten (and can be very good at continuing along that path despite evidence that it may not be a good path any longer). Transactional leadership is not necessarily linked to formal organisational structures—informal leaders abound, operating alongside formal structures. It is not unknown for senior managers to be poor transactional leaders.

Good transactional leadership is, in my experience, fairly common in the emergency services. They generally have training systems to equip leaders with the basic skills needed to communicate effectively, provide structured hierarchical systems to support them and to attract outgoing and dynamic people able to interact well with people from all backgrounds. The day-to-day work brings emergency services personnel into contact with people needing help in situations where good transactional leadership is critical to successful resolution. In the emergency services environment effective transactional leadership is often immediate, personal and direct. Mutual trust and respect features highly in transactional leadership in the emergency services, particularly at the team level where these characteristics are highly regarded. This trust and respect, however, can be absent or considerably reduced between the lower ranks and the executives of many emergency services. How often have we heard field operatives complain that the 'brass' is out of touch? Mant notes that this problem exists across industries as capable but restrained juniors become frustrated with entrenched senior managers unable or unwilling to see the world as it is (or the juniors think it is at any rate!).

Transformational leadership complements but is quite different to transactional leadership. It is also rather less common. The transformational leader is able to transform or change a situation by focusing on the outcome that is desired and presenting a path or plan to achieve that outcome. Transformational leadership, unlike transactional leadership, can also transcend space and time. Without descending into a mystical discussion of eastern philosophy, it is possible for a transformational leader to exercise leadership without ever having a transaction (in the two-way sense) with a follower. Plato provides an excellent example—although the ancient Greek philosopher has been dead for over 2000 years, his leadership on what constitutes the good

society, as expressed through his writings, continues to have effect today. Other examples of transformational leaders who, although long dead, continue to provide transformational leadership and inspiration today include Kant (German philosopher), Confucius (Chinese philosopher) and Galileo (Italian scientist). It should be noted that it is not necessary to be dead to also be a great transformational leader—the living can also do this! The point is that transformational leadership, unlike transactional, can go beyond personal relationships between groups of people and is able to exist in the absence of any direct relationship between people.

The transformational leader is able to stand back from the details and see the system or organisation as a whole. To use Mant's earlier bicycle-frog metaphor, the effective transformational leader can see the frog as a whole system, understanding the inter-relatedness of the parts that make up the frog and how it relates to the rest of its environment. The effective transformational leader is also able to plan where the frog should go to improve its situation or achieve its goals. Mant places great importance on the role of transformational leaders because they are the leaders able to generate the vision and strategies that will provide the solutions to the issues challenging organisations.

Transformational leadership is not as common in emergency service organisations as is transactional leadership. Indeed the structure and cultures of emergency services almost seem designed to obstruct the development of transformational leaders. The emergency services are normally highly structured, with formalised and rigid promotion systems and cultures that emphasise compliance and conformity. In the heat of emergency operations these structures and cultures are highly appropriate and may be critical to the safe conduct of potentially hazardous operations. To meet the challenge of a fast changing world, however, they may be dysfunctional for the long-term viability and health of the organisation. This is because they may act to prevent the development of effective transformational leaders. The cultures and hierarchy can combine to impose considerable inertia against change and can isolate senior managers from knowledgeable juniors.

Transformational and transactional leadership are not mutually exclusive. Although a transformational leader can be effective without a meaningful relationship with his or her followers, for most of us it is more pressing to transform the immediate situation that our organisation finds itself in

rather than being concerned with our ability to transform the world in a thousand years. To be truly effective as a leader for most people means being able to transact in and transform the workplace. Thus we, and our leaders, need to be able to use both modes of leadership—transactional and transformational.

Authority and leadership

In Mant's model of leadership, authority is the key foundation to any style of leadership and its absence is a recipe for disaster.

Authority is used to mean having a complete and comprehensive understanding of the field or subject matter concerned. It is the expert knowledge that enables the leader to make sound and ethical judgements or decisions that direct where the organisation, section or subordinate goes. Mant argues that faulty leadership is often if not always caused by poor judgement that in turn comes from having insufficient understanding or knowledge of the situation. People can be outstanding in their ability to provide leadership and gain commitment to goals that in the end prove disastrous to the organisation or individuals concerned. He believes that this occurs when a leader strong in transactional and transformational skills does not understand the situation and bases decisions on false premises. The poor understanding can result from inadequate intellectual skills or from isolation from the true situation or a combination of both.

Hitler provides a classic example of how an effective leader who lacks authority and hence judgement can cause enormous damage. Without question, Hitler was a very good transactional and transformational leader. He, almost singled handedly, convinced an entire nation to follow him and transformed a society from one mired in the depths of depression into a military, technological and industrial giant that took on the whole world and nearly won. Hitler, however, lacked authority and judgement. His moral reasoning was highly faulty, creating Nazi police state that was anything but a 'good' society. This reasoning also lacked pragmatic sense. By casting the Jews as scapegoats to be persecuted, he eliminated a valuable source of skills and other resources from Germany's inventory, directly weakening it. The loss of expertise when key minds fled was particularly critical – it must be remembered that many of the scientists essential to the development of the atomic bomb were refugees from Germany. The consequences of Nazi Germany developing an atomic weapon matched with an unstoppable delivery system (the V2 rocket) are horrific to contemplate. The persecution of the Jews also required the allocation of

considerable resources that could have otherwise been directed to the German war effort. His judgement was also faulty on a number of key occasions – the invasion of Russia and his overriding the professional opinion of his Generals on the conduct of the invasion almost ensured the eventual defeat of Germany.

How do leaders come to possess authority? Mant argues that there are several factors that determine whether a leader has authority. Firstly, authority is based on having a thorough knowledge and understanding of the subject area. This knowledge can be obtained through formal training, but must also include a sizeable chunk of practical experience gained through working in the field and learning the ropes and pitfalls the hard way. Authority also comes from having a broad outlook on life coupled with general curiosity about things in the world. Curiosity and the broad outlook provide the leader with knowledge of and awareness about things outside his or her professional sphere. This assists them visualise the complete picture and develop paradigms about where the organisation fits in the bigger system. Someone with a broad outlook and wide ranging knowledge, according to Mant will be better equipped to deal with complex problems than someone with only a narrow technical knowledge. A broad outlook also means the person is more likely to be aware of trends or events likely to impact on the organisation than someone more inwardly focused.

How does this concept of authority fit in the emergency services? If Mant is right, then the emergency services may have a problem. There is no question that the vast majority of emergency service personnel (and their managers) have a thorough knowledge of their immediate work. The emergency services, like the military, are usually very good at providing the skills and knowledge needed to do a good job. In fact the consequences of not providing the skills and knowledge are so serious (deaths and injury may result) that any deficiencies are quickly revealed and rapidly rectified. The emergency services also are good at providing supportive team environments where the new recruit is provided with plenty of advice and guidance.

Countering this, however, are a number of factors that tend to act against the development of leaders with broad outlooks and wide experiences outside of the specific professional fields. The emergency services often exclusively promote from within in a strict hierarchical system. Lateral entry to supervisory positions has been an anathema for many years, although it must be noted that this has started to change, although

when it does occur it normally involves recruitment of a person from a basically identical organisation, rather than someone with a totally different background. Emergency services also generally have a strong culture of compliance with organisational norms. When this is coupled with promotion from within, the result can be restriction on the range of outlooks and views possessed by managers. It can also lead to group-think as all managers may come from the same background and have much the same experience base.

The role of civilian positions in the emergency services also needs close attention. All too often they are second-class citizens restricted to narrow tasks outside core functions. The problem with this as an outlook is that it automatically assumes that they have nothing of value to offer outside of their particular task. This wastes an important source of wider experience and tends to limit the recruitment of first class staff to civilian positions. This particular problem can be very hard to address, as it may be a deep seated aspect of organisational culture highly resistant to change.

Improving leadership

If, as it seems, the emergency services have some inherent structural leadership problems, what if anything can be done about it?

There is much to be applauded in the emergency services. The organisations have developed to meet specific and challenging demands and successfully discharge their responsibilities daily in the most difficult situations. Clearly much must be working for this to occur. They are also very good at developing leaders to an extent; this too must be retained. It is vitally important not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

However, there are significant areas where improvement in the leadership capability of emergency services will enhance the working life of the people in those services and improve the ability of the services to meet the challenges of a fast changing world. This in turn will enable them to improve their service delivery to the community thus benefiting everyone.

Mant has suggestions for improving leadership that are highly applicable to the emergency services. I am unable to address all his suggestions fully due to space limitations, but I have teased out those I found most appropriate.

- A key requirement for good leadership is ensuring that the hierarchy of the organisation is appropriate for its tasks and that sufficient supervisory levels exist. Further, it is critical that supervisors are held accountable for the work of subordinates and that they have the skills and know-

ledge (authority) to supervise, advise and assist the subordinates. Removal of too many management layers is a sure way to create errors and omissions.

- Each person in an organisation must have a meaningful role where they are able to make a measurable impact on some aspect of work. In other words, everyone must have some ownership of some part of the purpose of the organisation. Fortunately this is normally not a major problem in most emergency services.
- The senior management must consciously seek out those outstanding junior leaders that can be found in any organisation and provide the conditions that allow them to develop to their full potential. Equally, they must provide the conditions that permit the competent employee who is not in the above category to also grow and mature and reach their full potential. Both are important as both can contribute great things. Developing these people includes providing opportunities to them to grow their skills in depth and breadth. The emergency services are generally good at the depth aspect, but often omit developing breadth of skills and outlooks. This latter aspect can be achieved through encouraging secondments to

other organisations, supporting tertiary education and providing a culture that accepts innovation and initiative. It also requires senior managers to become more risk tolerant to an extent—subordinates must be trusted to try new ideas with management standing by to advise and assist as needed.

Conclusion

Effective leadership is vital to the long-term success of any organisation. Change in modern society impacts on all organisations and demands leaders able to develop coping strategies, and motivate people to embrace and support those strategies.

The emergency services as much as any other organisation needs leaders able to exercise transactional and transformational leadership at all levels. These leaders must be knowledgeable in their field, but must also have a breadth of outlook that enables them to see the whole picture.

Although the emergency services are good at developing good transactional leaders skilled in their specific craft, their structure and culture tends to limit the development of transformational leaders with broad outlooks and breadth of experi-

ence. The absence of this aspect of leadership can limit the ability of emergency service organisations to cope with a rapidly changing environment.

Overcoming these problems requires commitment by senior management to the provision of conditions favourable for the development of transformational leaders—this may require changing the organisation's culture to make it more conducive for these leaders to prosper. It is also important that conditions permit all staff to grow to their full potential, even where they may not be potential chief executives.

If emergency service organisations are able to provide these conditions and generate effective transactional and transformational leaders with the knowledge to make good judgements then the organisation will be better equipped to meet a changing world and provide good service and good working environments.

Further reading

Mant A. 1997, *Intelligent Leadership*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards.



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For further information regarding registration contact:

Mr Bob Wardzynski

The Registrar PO Box 52 Briar Hill Victoria 3088

Tel 03 9432 1131, Mobile 0408 991 307

Fax 03 9432 3656

E-mail cessi@vicnet.net.au

The conference website is <http://www.vicnet.net.au/~cessi>