Responding to catastrophe

What we know from how social systems
behave in times of crisis

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When Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols set off a bomb in 1995 that killed 168 people in Oklahoma City, they also triggered a pattern of behavior that was well already known to many but had not been widely documented. This behavior was well studied before and since, and is now understood: it's the behavior of social systems in times of crisis or catastrophe.

Our understanding has improved in the time since due largely to the rise in the early 80s of complex adaptive systems theory.

We saw the pattern when Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin in December 1974, the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983 in south-eastern Australia, the World Towers and associated destructions on September 11, 2001, Hurricane Sandy in 2012, Manchester Stadium bombing in 2017, California forest fires of 2018 and 2019, the Christchurch Mosque shooting of 2019 and the Australian fires of 2020.

These and many other similar events trigger a set of behaviors in the social systems they impact that are described by some as self-organizing behaviors; they become self-organizing systems.

Structures, roles and ways of working that suit stable worlds are thrown out the door temporarily and people respond in totally different more flexible ways.

And these continue until the "police tape" is put around the scene, as the FBI did in Oklahoma City 2 days after the event. At this moment the highly responsive, flexible problem-solving behavior ceased.

In the years since we have come to use this term (police tape moment) to refer to that point in time when the pre-existing stable command and control way of working re-asserts itself and the highly engaged activity dies away.

At every level of society in every country of the world we are in such a period of self-organizing behavior, whether we chose to be or not.

The Coronavirus pandemic is uprooting and

changing so many elements of routine society, and placing burdens on governments, health care systems, businesses and individuals the likes of which none of us have seen in our lifetimes.

In the 25 years since the Oklahoma bombing we have come to be able to say in simple terms what a system responding in a catastrophe typically does and what it asks of those in leadership roles.

There have been many who contributed to this knowledge base but key among them was Myron Rogers.

There are 12 common characteristics of such social systems when they work well and the issues are addressed well.

Instant teams and purpose: People come together and work in teams, disband quickly and reform in new teams, each addressing an immediate pressing issue.

I found myself over the last week working in an instant virtual team comprised of members in Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Chile sourcing medical PPE for Australia's health care system and for that of southern Chile.

Sense of connectedness: All are contributing their part in whatever way is helpful within their local arena, with the immediate nodes with which they are interacting.

No time wasted on the trivial: What seemed important yesterday is no longer so for the crisis is so big and the matters so significant that so many other "big" things pale into insignificance.

I am seeing many normal bureaucratic approval processes put aside as decisions need to be made NOW and actions take NOW.

No manuals: In the situations mentioned at the start of this article many of the incidents, needs, conflicts, contradictions, dilemmas and choices of which they are constituted are not written down in any training manuals.

Training manuals, like battle plans, only exist until first contact with the event (or enemy). Improvisation, ingenuity and creativity are required for survival.

You work with whatever is possible: The tools you have in stable times are not available in crises or catastrophes. So, you have to work with what is at hand.

Just today I heard of a truck load of surgical masks and gloves being hijacked in southern Chile and surgeons in a local hospital using overalls manufactured for mechanics as surgical gowns.

Jobs are new, strange, different yet people also play in their position: Most of us in the workforce come into crises as members of organizations, occupying roles or positions. These do not go away, but the tasks we do, the jobs we do are strange, different.

For example, as these notes are typed an Air Traffic Controller in southern Chile is managing supply chain logistics of desperately needed medical PPE in a situation where the national health system is still in denial and acting as if we are in stable times.

Communication is wide open: In a crisis or catastrophe communication and information flow is instantaneous and goes in all directions, leap frogging chains of command for time is urgent
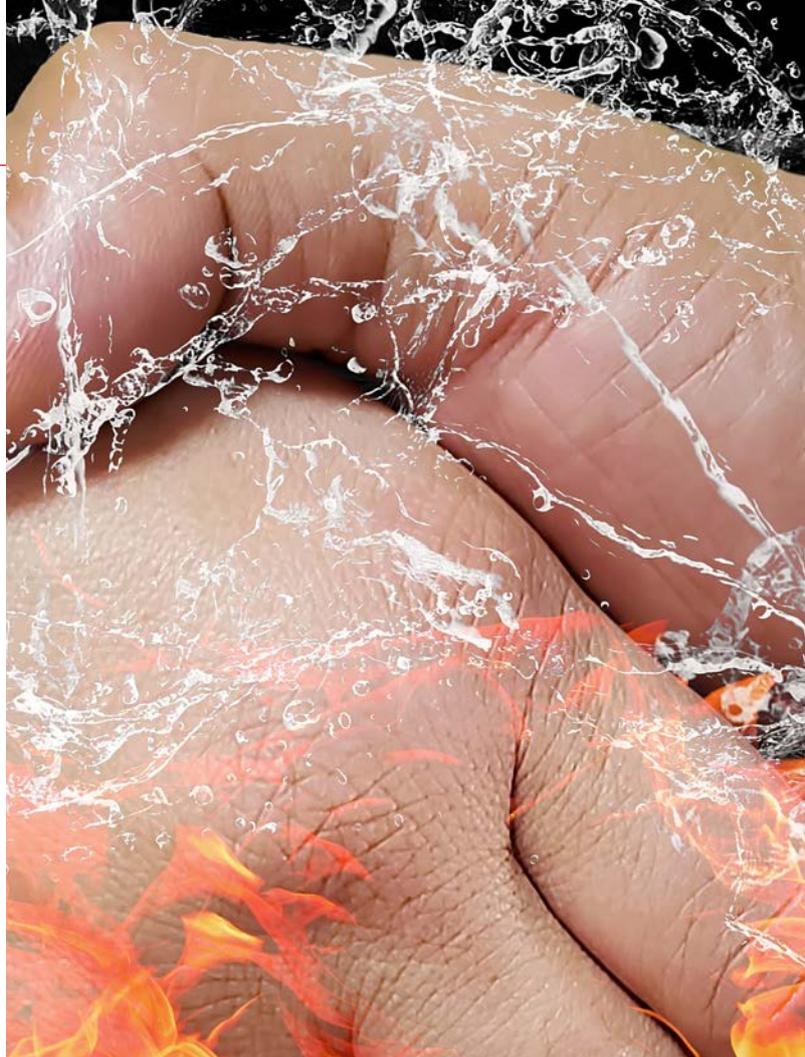
Leaders are distributed: In stable times leaders are usually identified by their title and we all know who is who in zoo, as well as our own personal place in that zoo.

In a crisis everything is turned upside down and leadership can be found in any part of the system, usually when an individual sees a need, steps up and takes on the responsibility for solving the immediate problem at hand.

Sometimes leadership is exercised by people outside the organization or community: in the 2013 Tasmanian bushfires the state Fire Brigade operated on a stable systems and stable world model for a number of days until they became overwhelmed and unable to respond to what was happening.

In that that space a female personal trainer and gym owner provided system-wide leadership in coordinating efforts using social media, thereby saving many lives and property.

Formal leaders easily play subordinate roles: Time and time again in such circumstances we see the CEO or another senior executive playing the role of ordinary

team member, pitching and subordinating themselves to whoever is providing the operational leadership at the time.

There's no risk - it's already a disaster: It can't get any worse (as is the case in Italy, Spain and the USA with the coronavirus spread at the time of writing) so all contributions are positive contributions.

This was very much the case in so many parts of Australia during the early 2020 bushfires. In times such as these overly analytic risk assessment is simply not a consideration.

Flood the system with high information flow: At times or crises or catastrophe the most precious commodity is ease of access to a rapid and timely flow of information. Thinking of the whole system as gasping for air (information) at such times is a useful metaphor. Information on these occasions needs to be thought of as like the air we breathe, to quote Dick Knowles.

The primary role of leaders is to keep providing context and meaning, frequently and deeply.

In such events, anxiety rises to unprecedented levels and this anxiety at times can drive precipitous actions and decisions, certainly distorted viewpoints and interpretations. In stable times, it is the role of leaders to provide context, background and meaning to those involved.

In the current coronavirus pandemic nowhere better has this been done by a national leader than by Jacinda Adern in New Zealand and no more pitifully than in the USA. The consequences of these two extremes are immediately obvious.

But this is not only the preserve of national leaders, it is the obligation of all leaders at all levels or all organizations.

Inside organizations, the regular Monday morning 10.00 am weekly briefing goes out the door at such times. So many precious and highly defended corporate rituals simply vanish in the hard light of immediate overwhelming need and reality.

All twelve characteristics described above come to the fore as well-intentioned committed professionals get blindsided daily by new incidents, new graphs, new events and new consequences.

Where does one turn to find models for catastrophe management that work and work

As per Kay and Goldspink (2015)

well?

I cannot recommend highly enough the work of Chris Fussell and Stanley McChrystal in their videos and two books entitled One Mission and Team of Teams.

As Fussell and McChrystal learned through special forces operations in the Middle East in combining two realities – the top down stable world of military organization with the high fluidity of self-organizing systems.

These learnings are finding a place in the Queensland Health Department as it responds to the emerging coronavirus reality.

A senior executive Keith McNeil (himself a medico and ex special forces operative) is leading the department's response and applying the learnings of Fussell and McChrystal in his thinking and teamwork.

He pointed out, as have Fussell and McChrystal, that a successful response depends on high quality valid information flow as close as possible to key decisions makers that builds a shared consciousness and creates a one team mindset.

McNeil said that one thing he is noticing is this crisis **"changing the whole health system before our eyes to operate with a one team consciousness"**.

In times of crisis or catastrophe there are some among us who expect leaders to act quickly with informed decisive action and one simple stable message.

This primitive expectation ignores the complex reality of chaos caused by the event at hand and totally ignores fluid and moment-to-moment changes in reality.

All leaders will fail to meet someone's or some group's expectations in such circumstances be they because the expectations are based on uninformed or fallacious thought or whether the system itself changed in the twinkle of an eye, as all chaotic systems are want to do.

At times like this it is the role of a CEO or team leader who, like the Captain in the left-hand seat of an aircraft, ensures the aircraft's flight through turbulent skies is as smooth as possible and with as much focus as possible.

Deeper than this though, the real role of a pilot is to provide safety for the passengers.

So, too, a CEO's role in such times is to provide existential and contextual safety to their workforce, and like a pilot to plan for an alternate landing field if the previous destination is no longer achievable.

On the face of it this may seem a paradox: these notes have described the rapid, chaotic social processes that happen in crisis or catastrophe, as well high malleability of roles, even when superiors play subordinate roles and leadership emerges spontaneously in a wide range of ways.

The CEO is not exempt from any of this, yet at the same time, like the Captain of a flight, the CEO is the source of safety for the workforce and needs to portray strategy, direction, and centeredness, to provide context and meaning and to talk of the future.

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