

SPEECH:

Humility in action

Mark Croweller AFSM, Director-General, Emergency Management Australia presented at the Emergency Management Public Affairs Conference in May 2013.



Accepting inevitability and respecting the nature of the hazard

Australia has experienced severe to catastrophic natural disaster events for many millennia and they have become commonplace not only in our history, but in our music, art, literature, and our poetry. There is hardly a long-term resident of Australia who doesn't have a story about a bushfire, a flood, a storm or a cyclone. It seems a little odd then that if these events are so much a part of our history and our own personal experiences, why do we continue to be surprised by them, and perhaps more importantly, why do we continue to see our efforts to deal with them as inevitable failures? The answers have remained elusive.

The reality is that severe to catastrophic natural disasters are inevitable in Australia. The only variables are 'where' and 'when'. And on some days, it won't be the 'when', just the 'where'. For example, over the last 10 years we have experienced the 2003 Canberra bushfires, the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the 2010/11 Queensland floods, *Cyclone Yasi*, the 2011 Victorian floods, major flooding events in NSW during 2011, 2012 and 2013 and the effects of ex-tropical *Cyclone Oswald* in January 2013 along the Queensland and NSW coasts.

It is hard for us to hear and accept their inevitability because, in my view, as a nation we don't want them! Not an unreasonable proposition, but unfortunately they are not for us to choose.

The reality is, while ever the right atmospheric conditions prevail: a severe to catastrophic bushfire will go wherever it wants and burn for as long as it wants while ever there is sufficient fuel in its path; a cyclone will go wherever it wants, will generate winds as strong as it wants and dump as much water as it wants for as long as it wants; and a severe thunderstorm will form wherever it wants, will go wherever it wants, drop as much water as it wants in a concentrated area of its choosing and produce winds as strong as it wants.

As harsh as it may sound, our propensity as a collective society to not truly accept their inevitability has a number of negative consequences. It exposes in us a degree of arrogance and ignorance of their full potential to adversely affect us. This limits our ability to effectively prepare for, respond to and recover from them; limits our ability to learn from the experiences and to use our imaginations, creativity and innovation in preparation for the next inevitable event; and establishes the basis for a blame culture.

However by respecting their nature, accepting both their inevitability and our inability to choose them, we can make wiser choices about how we prepare, respond and recover from them. In other words, we can move our thinking from resistance to acceptance and then be in a position to take more positive, creative, innovative and appropriate actions in anticipation of the next severe to catastrophic event.

Uniting in the face of adversity

Natural disasters insist that we come together as a society to deal with their effects. Not only are severe to catastrophic natural disaster events inevitable, they are also immeasurably complex in their science (their causes), their behaviour (what they do), and their impacts (who and what they effect and how). In the face of such complexity, it is important to acknowledge that the primary motivation for most of us will be to do the very best we can within the current limits of our own external and internal resources. Our external resources such as fire trucks, flood boats, helicopters, and frontline personnel (as examples) will be severely limited in their effectiveness by the scale and intensity of the event and our own internal resources will be severely tested as these events take

all of us beyond our own knowledge, skills, experience and imaginations.

In the face of such inevitability, adversity and limitation, it is critical that we use all of our collective physical resources, knowledge, skills, experience, imaginations, creativity and innovation before, during and after the inevitable event to help solve the immeasurable complexity of problems that natural disasters present. It is this acknowledgement that underpins the need for unity.

Exercising humility

Having the capacity to accept the inevitability and complexity of severe to catastrophic natural disaster events, accept our individual and collective limitations externally and internally in dealing with them and accept the need to unify in the face of such adversity requires all of us to exercise humility before, during and after a disaster.

Humility allows us to surrender our own fixed view of the world and presents the opportunity to expand our thinking, genuinely hear the contributions and suggestions made by others, grant ourselves and each other permission to say 'we don't know but we'll find out', and perhaps most importantly show a genuine vulnerability that allows for true connection and relationship between people.

Humility also assists us in using our collective imaginations to bring to mind things that are not present to our senses; creativity to develop original ideas that have value; and innovation to put new ideas into practice. These attributes become very important when we realise that the knowledge, skills and experience gained from previous disasters, while helpful, will not be enough to prepare for the next disaster which will probably be more intense and have a unique set of characteristics not previously understood or experienced. The culmination of these attributes could be termed our 'collective wisdom' and is essential as we need to prepare ourselves for the 'next' event, not the 'last' event.

Showing compassion

The physical, emotional and psychological impacts of severe to catastrophic natural disaster events are not limited to those directly or indirectly impacted but flow onto every corner of society including: those called to respond, lead and manage; those called upon to report; and those who bear witness either first hand or through the many forms of media that exist within society.

If we accept that the primary motivation for us will be to do the very best we can within the limits of our own internal and external resources and if we grant ourselves permission to reflect upon our own emotional response in the face of such adversity, then we cannot but have a deep sense of compassion and

connection with all of those who are touched in some way by these events.

It is this sense of compassion that helps to alleviate our own emotional distress and motivates us to think beyond our own suffering and take actions for the benefit of others. The 'Mud Army' in Queensland, formed immediately after the Brisbane floods in 2011 is a powerful example of compassion in action.

Grant forgiveness

We will all feel to a greater or lesser degree feelings such as regret, remorse, anger and frustration. Understanding that we could not choose the event, that its severity went beyond our internal and external resources and knowing that we were motivated to do the best we could within these constraints, then we soon come to realise that there is so much more that we individually and collectively need to learn, but perhaps more importantly, that blame is futile.

In the face of such adversity most of us will reflect upon our own perceived limitations and forgive ourselves for those things that we did or didn't think, did or didn't say, or did or didn't do, and having reached some sense of inner peace about our own perceived limitations, we owe it to grant forgiveness to others for they have endured the same internal suffering.

To quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu *"To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanises you inexorably dehumanises me. Forgiveness gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanise them."*

The bottom line

Our ability to:

- truly respect the nature and inevitability of the hazards that we face
- unify from the highest levels of Government to the 'end of the fire hose'
- have sufficient humility to put aside our 'fixed view of the world' and bring together our knowledge, skills, experience, imaginations and our creativity to develop a 'collective wisdom' and act accordingly
- develop sufficient compassion to understand that no one who is directly or indirectly involved escapes some level of emotional impact, and
- be able to forgive ourselves and each other for any perceived failings in the face of such overwhelming adversity

allows us the opportunity to make the most out of a set of circumstances that we do not get to choose, but from which we can choose to learn and grow from, and genuinely alter for the better the outcomes that arise from such adversity in the future.