

Community Recovery In Buxton After Black Saturday

CASE STUDY of Mark Somers' Approach (Written by Emily Hedger, WHGNE)

THE CONTEXT

Buxton is a small town located 104 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, with a population of approximately 400.

The area surrounding Buxton was severely impacted by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, with the neighbouring towns of Marysville, Narbethong and Granton devastated. In the immediate aftermath of Black Saturday, Buxton was isolated: communications had been 'wiped out', and roadblocks meant that residents who had left the area could not immediately return. With no telephones, radio or internet, community members initially struggled to determine the full extent of the disaster. In the following weeks, Buxton had no power or running water, and nearby fires continued to pose a threat to the community.

Confronting social, medical, transportation and logistical issues, the local Buxton CFA mobilised quickly to institute a range of community management and recovery measures. Community meetings, CFA 'hot debriefing' sessions, and local management of the recovery effort succeeded in 'diffusing' tensions, and restoring some measure of calm and unity to a traumatised community.

The experience in Buxton points to the need for local leadership, local capacity building pre-disaster, and local coordination of the recovery effort in the aftermath of disaster. It also suggests a growing imperative for individuals and communities to be equipped with the *practical* skills and knowledge necessary to respond effectively to such a disaster.

THE APPROACH

Gender equity is an important part of each stage.

Supporting the CFA ('Hot-Debriefing')

On the morning following Black Saturday, Buxton CFA conducted an immediate 'stop and check'. The homes of CFA members were checked and secured. The focus shifted, temporarily, from taking care of the public, to taking care of the members. In order to cope with the challenges to come, the Officer in charge of the Buxton Brigade was conscious that the team needed to be focused, comfortable, and 'on the truck', not distracted by what might be happening at home.

In the ensuing weeks, these 'hot-debriefing' sessions became a feature of the CFA's internal management strategy. Sessions were generally run twice daily (morning and evening), to provide an outlet for ongoing tensions. While members were initially resistant to the idea, the Officer in Charge opened-up discussions by offering beers, and expressing his own fears and frustrations. Honest and open dialogue was encouraged, even when it led to heated debate.

Facilitation, ground-rules and time-limits were essential. All members had the right to be heard, but also the responsibility to listen when another member was holding the 'pen'. Ultimately, the group, which included anywhere from 20-40 participants,

managed itself through 'peer control', and the process became a key tool in diffusing tensions and managing emotional exhaustion.

Roadblocks

The roadblocks erected around Buxton posed significant problems. Resident fire fighters were needed to support the in-town crew, but those who had exited the area were prevented from returning. Food supplies were ultimately needed and, in one case, the roadblocks had separated parents from their children in the area.

The CFA initially applied orange dots (the only thing readily available) to car mirrors as identification. Later, unofficial CFA DSE ID Cards were issued to authorised people. An 'arm-band' system was eventually introduced, so fire fighters and their families could be identified at roadblocks. The fire truck, as a clearly recognisable and authorised vehicle, was used for medical and food transportation purposes. Operating within the coroner's exclusion zone for 32 days, the local CFA needed, and assumed, responsibility for authorising specific residents to return to town.

Community Meetings & Information Provision

Rumours were rife in Buxton in the aftermath of Black Saturday, and with limited communications and limited information, they fuelled community fear and anger. External CFA fire-presenters, who attended the first in a series of community meetings, were unable to address issues of direct concern to the local community.

Thereafter, the Buxton CFA convened a community meeting at 5.00pm each day, facilitated by the local Officer in Charge. All available information was provided to residents, from weather reports to Strike Team action plans. Wherever possible, the Officer in Charge sought out new information, in order to be able to confirm or dispel the circulating rumours.

Local leadership, and strong leadership, was of central importance. Residents wanted answers and information from a person both known and trusted, who was directly engaged in supporting the community. The meetings were well-received, well-attended (200 people initially attended, then this number reduced), and succeeded in diffusing a great deal community anger: 'it went from being an angry crowd, to being a very grateful crowd'.

Community meetings were run daily over a series of weeks, and were only concluded once an exit-strategy had been prepared, providing residents with 5 days' notice of the intention to conclude.

Counselling & Support Services

The external counsellors and support agencies that entered Buxton in the aftermath of the fires, offered different approaches and received a mixed response.

Those who initiated contact with community members by offering practical assistance (e.g. making coffee, cooking the barbecue) were well-received. Those who assumed too much intimacy on first contact by asking 'How are you feeling?' were seen as intrusive. The preferred question was 'What can I do?' Even in an emergency

situation, or perhaps *particularly* in an emergency situation, it was important to undertake some 'normal relationship-building', before initiating an intimate emotional exchange.

While many church representatives offered general support and counselling, some attempted to further a religious agenda. This was generally not perceived as useful.

Support services and Strike Teams who worked without appropriate consultation with the local CFA or community, caused frustration. While most Strike Teams were deployed by the local Officer in charge of the Buxton Brigade, others came in and 'just start doing stuff that was undoing the work that we'd already been doing'. In some cases, support services were offering 'to jump on the truck with us, saying 'We'll go with you and make sure you're okay on the fire ground'. This undermined the local CFA's existing coordinated efforts and, in some cases, was perceived as evidence of a voyeuristic curiosity in the events unfolding, or a desire to be part of things and 'have a look'.

Counsellors, support agencies and Strike Teams who worked in consultation with local CFA leaders, who kept the CFA advised of Strike Team plans and local conditions, and who worked in mindfulness of existing community relationships and recovery efforts, provided invaluable assistance.

Creating a 'Town Centre'

The Buxton Fire Station was quickly established as a central point of reference for community members. A medical clinic was established at the back of the station, portable toilets were transported to the site, counsellor's contact cards were made available, and both residents and external support services identified the fire station as the central location for information and engagement.

Knowledge, Leadership & Agency

In addition to social and emotional trauma and tensions, Buxton confronted the practical problems of waste-management, food and medical supply issues, and power outages.

Many of the strategies applied to address these issues relied on both strong leadership and individual agency. Agency could only be assumed, however, where people had the knowledge of 'what to do' and the skills to do it. Tasks such as transporting portable toilets from a local building site to the fire station, providing medical treatment, burying 60 ton of dead fish from the local Trout Farm, assuming control of community meetings, taking whatever measures necessary to obtain information, and giving instructions to police at roadblocks, required not only the ability to take leadership, but also a belief in the right, responsibility and capacity to do so.

The success of the CFA's recovery effort points to the need to build community capacity, self-reliance, networks, and local leadership, but also the need to equip communities with the practical skills and knowledge to respond to a disaster.

The Officer in charge of the Buxton Brigade (at the time of the fires) advocates for comprehensive fire-training for individuals and communities, not limited to a 'stay or

go' fire plan. Individuals who are equipped with specific knowledge (e.g. Burnt out areas are safest in a fire emergency) are safer. Communities that are aware of the possible consequences of a disaster are not 'scared by too much information' but, rather, are both emotionally and practically equipped to respond. Communities that are asked to 'harden-up', to rely on their own resources, and are provided with realistic expectations of post-disaster response (e.g. CFA will not have the capacity to protect every property. Do not expect assistance for up to 3 days) are impelled to build and utilise their own resources and capacity. They are also given the *right* to act.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Preparation for Individuals & Communities:

- Promote self-reliance (e.g. See 'Harden-Up Queensland' campaign).
- Provide comprehensive disaster/post-disaster training to individuals and communities (not just CFA members). Equip individuals with practical skills and knowledge (e.g. Burnt out areas are safest in a fire emergency), rather than a fire-plan.
- Establish reasonable expectations pre-disaster (e.g. CFA will not have the capacity to protect every property. Do not expect assistance for up to 3 days).
- Build community relationships, networks and capacity before the disaster. Run Community Emergency Planning Groups to equip communities with strategies/practical tools for managing disaster.
- Establish appropriate methods of post-disaster intervention (e.g. local leaders may be more trusted and well-received than outsiders).
- Speak openly with communities about the consequences of disaster, the situations that are likely to arise, and the possible traumas. Do not hide behind confidentiality or fear of 'scaring' people with too much information.

Roadblocks:

- Establish an 'Identification System' (i.e. cards or stickers) for approved individuals and vehicles.
- Provide local community leader/s with the authority to approve particular entrants (e.g. fire fighters who are needed on-site).
- Provide appropriately trained police officers to diffuse tensions at roadblocks, and to work *with* local communities.

Communication & Information:

- Provide relevant local information to communities as early as possible.
- Conduct daily Community Meetings, facilitated by a local leader (CFA or other). Make Strike Team plans, area reports and weather reports available to local residents.
- Conduct daily (or twice daily) 'hot-debriefing' sessions for CFA members (and other emergency services). Allow members to voice their fears, concerns, divisions and resentments, but maintain timeframes and speaking/listening controls.
- Create a 'Town Centre' to provide residents with a central point for information, communication and engagement.

Counselling & Support Services:

- Offer practical assistance first (i.e. 'What can I do?' rather than 'How are you feeling?')
- Build relationships (even if time-limited) with community members before initiating intimate emotional conversations.
- Do not engage in religiously-based discussions unless they are invited/welcomed.
- Work in mindfulness of the local strategies, relationships and efforts already in place. Be guided by the advice and direction of local leaders.
- Be conscious that community members are engaged in practical efforts to restore/rebuild communities. Counselling/emotion-based conversation may not be appropriate at all times, or in all contexts.
- Be aware of 'counselling-fatigue'. If a large number of welfare agencies/support agencies have entered the area, residents may be tired of being asked how they're coping.
- Encourage peer support programs (both formal and informal). Community members may feel more of an affinity with the people who have experienced the disaster with them, than with outsiders.

Leadership:

- Encourage local 'ownership' of the disaster recovery phase. Equip communities with the skills, knowledge and capacity to lead their own recovery.
- Where local leaders and capacity exist, ensure external support services work in close collaboration with them, and are mindful of/guided by local advice and existing work/strategies.
- If the intention is to develop capacity and capability in communities, it would be wise to engage the new, soon to be announced, Emergency Management Victoria (previously known as Fire Services Commissioner) who will be able to disseminate these learnings to CFA, DSE, SES, and across all emergency services.