Shared Leadership in Dangerous Contexts: The Implication for Emergency Response Teams

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Leadership has received much attention as a field of study (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010; Baran & Scott, 2010), predominantly in the standard organisational context (Baran & Scott, 2010), with an emphasis on the functional approaches leaders use to manage situations. In normal operation, the organisational context is characterised by relatively low levels of ambiguity, and information, resources and time available to enable adaptive responses.

In comparison to this, few studies have focused on leadership in dangerous contexts, characterised by high levels of complexity (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007) where ambiguity is high, and resources and time are constrained. High reliability organisations (Sutcliffe, 2011) such as police, fire and ambulance, continually face dangerous situations to their personnel and the public.

Hannah et al (2009) believe that leadership is uniquely contextualised in extreme contexts and that extreme contexts have characteristics that create "*unique contingencies, constraints and causations*" (Hannah et al, 2009, p.898) that will influence leadership in this context, in comparison to normal or routine situations. However, based on the unique social dynamics that are inherent in these contexts, Osborn et al (2002) states that this is perhaps where leadership is needed the most. A contextual view of leadership offers an alternative view of researching leaders, which has not been common or has been 'neglected' in the current leadership literature (Osborn et al, 2002). Osborn et al (2002) discuss a contextual approach to leadership suggesting that leadership is inherently embedded within the context. They suggest that leadership is contextualised, recognising that the leadership is "*socially constructed in and from a context, change the context and the leadership changes*" (Osborn et al, 2002.P 798). Thus, conceptualising leadership as not being only 'found' within the individual leader, such as individual intrapersonal processes but as a social and interpersonal process, influenced inherently by the situation.

Emergency services; such as police, fire and ambulance continually face dangerous situations to their leaders, their team personnel and those they protect and serve. Leaders and their teams are tasked with making sense (Weick, 1993; Hannah et al, 2009) of these contexts, creating strategies and employing leadership processes (Baran and Scott, 2010) to

avoid potential threats and to resolve issues as they emerge (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007). Leadership is tasked in these contexts of ensuring that, through social and relational processes, team members and other leaders have an aligned understanding of the situation, which is often characterised by high ambiguity, equivocality of information, rapidly unfolding risks and threat to life. In order to mitigate these risks and complexities, leadership processes must adapt to produce an effective response (Hannah et al, 2009).

Katzenbach, (1997) in an empirical study of complex contexts proposed a way that this is achieved, stating that a *"team's performance may depend on its ability to draw on the leadership skills of its members... members must emerge as leaders as they are needed".* These are examples of shared leadership, which is defined as composed of two or more members of the team who *"engage in the leadership of the team in an effort to influence and direct fellow members to maximize team effectiveness"* (Bergman et al, 2012, p18).

The focus of the empirical doctoral study is on understanding how we do leadership in teams, the constructed meaning and relational processes of leadership in teams that operate in dangerous contexts. The research is informed by a social constructionist epistemology, and therefore an interpretivist philosophy. The research method used for the study is a series of eight focus groups across three emergency service organisations and one voluntary service. The analysis of data was conducted by adopting a step-by-step thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and applying the principles of progressive focussing (Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012).

Conducting focus groups with these teams has enabled an in-depth exploration of the nature of the danger that these teams face and provides a unique insight into how an integrated, shared approach to leadership emerges as an important aspect of the working team. The research findings highlight how all team members need to have leadership capabilities to be able to work effectively in these teams. To enable effective sharing of leadership in order to manage the span of control at incidents, team members must be considering all elements at play, have an acute awareness of situational dynamics, complexities and the implications for leadership approaches and processes at different stages of an incident.

Therefore, drawing on the empirical findings from my doctoral study, this research discusses the emergence of shared leadership in emergency response teams and specifically to operating in dangerous contexts. Shared leadership and the dangerous nature of the context may also offer generalisable elements to the normal organisational context. The implication of this study is for response teams to explore and develop the concept of shared leadership as a core element of their team training, informing team, individual and organisational development.

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