

Monitoring the performance of incident management teams

Geoff Conway AFSM, reflects on the last ten years of incident management team evolution.

In 2006, I described an initiative developed by fire services in Victoria to monitor the performance of incident management teams in real time. The initiative was part of the response to coronial recommendations for monitoring firefighter safety. This was extended to include monitoring of broader issues around incident management effectiveness. A key outcome from this initiative was the building of an evidence base for the development of training and briefing materials for incident management team (IMT) members. It was also intended to provide case studies that would inform the design of exercises for development and practicing of incident management skills. What became apparent during the early stages of the program was that watching incident managers as they went through the decision-making process was of much greater value when compared to the analysis of the decision-making process after the event.

The Real Time Performance Monitoring Program is still operating in Victoria. It has since been supplemented by a broader initiative developed by Victoria Police who have a coordination role in emergency management. The Strategic Emergency Management Assessment Teams (SEMATs) were commissioned following the 2008–2009 summer to monitor wider emergency management preparedness and response activities. SEMATs operate on similar principles to Real Time Performance Monitoring and model some aspects of their assessments on Real Time Performance Monitoring case studies.

The observations made in 2006 on the need to prepare IMTs for more frequent 'out of scale' events has been shown to be valid. Australian and New Zealand incident managers have been called on to respond to a number of extreme weather events and natural disasters since then, ranging from earthquake, floods, cyclones, major fires, to locust plague and major blue-green algal blooms. Some of these events have generated intense public and political scrutiny. In all these cases the performance of incident managers at all levels has been a major component of inquiry and coronial considerations. In their 2012 Noetic Note, Peter Murphy and Peter Dunn reflected on the challenges facing incident managers. They suggested that 'The failure [of incident management] is seldom one of character, but inevitably a lack of preparation and understanding. Leaders, and their teams, are unable to effectively apply their knowledge and skills to a situation that is either so novel, or of a scale that is beyond their experience and conception.'

The response to scrutiny and subsequent critiques of incident management performance has given added impetus to the efforts agencies make to prepare incident managers for their role. At a national level, the AFAC Emergency Management Certification Scheme establishes formal certification of incident managers. Many jurisdictions have developed more robust training and endorsement programs for incident managers to identify those personnel who have demonstrated their capacity to perform incident management roles with confidence.

This is a positive outcome of the scrutiny. The dilemma is that scrutiny through hindsight is problematic and has limitations. In particular it tends to dissect the detailed decision making of IMT in isolation from the context in which those decisions are made. Graham Dwyer (2015) suggests that we need a better way of learning from our experience of managing major emergencies.

Real Time Performance Monitoring remains one of the few tools available to agency leaders to understand the performance of their incident managers based on the context in which incident analysis and decision making occurs. It is a stronger indicator of capability and skills in leadership than post event reviews.

Original article at <https://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-21-02-07>.

References

Murphy P & Dunn P 2013, *Senior Leadership in Times of Crisis, Noetic Notes vol. 3, issue 1*.

Dwyer G 2015, *Learning to learn from bushfires, Pursuit, University of Melbourne*. At: <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/learning-to-learn-from-bushfires> [23 May 2016].

About the Author

Geoff Conway AFSM, is a former Deputy Chief Officer of CFA Victoria and is currently General Manager – Mine Fire and Emergency Unit of Victoria's Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources. From 2011 to 2016 he was Executive Officer to the AFAC AIIMS Steering Committee and was the principal author of the Fourth Edition of the AIIMS Manual.