Australian Government

Australian Civil-Military Centre

Interagency Taskforce Leadership Guide

A guide for leaders and their team when establishing an Interagency Crisis Response

ACMC

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Introduction

The Australian Government uses interagency taskforces to respond to crisis situations and high-priority issues. As a taskforce leader, you will find yourself selected with little or no notice and facing a complex and demanding situation with a 24/7 media cycle and powerful political pressures.

To assist you and your team, this guide draws on Australian and New Zealand taskforce leadership experience to provide guidance and proven practices. The guide is not only for the taskforce leader but also for all the people who will provide leadership in an integrated team environment.

This guide is not prescriptive as every taskforce will have to adapt to its specific mission and context. Instead, the focus is on providing you with information and a self-reflection tool to be an agile and adaptable leader in complex and challenging environments where time is precious.

There is no easy formula for success. Your effectiveness as a leader depends on how you bring to bear your experience, human understanding, intellect and personal attributes on your mission.

This document complements the Australian Public Service Commission Taskforce Toolkit, which provides practical guidance on the full range of policy, service delivery and crisis taskforces. You should read these resources together and share both with your taskforce team.

My perspective on leadership in an interagency environment: whether it's United Nations, Australia or a coalition – leadership is the same. Leadership traits and values do not change because of the interagency parameters that we operate within. It is all about people. It is about relationships, communication and prioritisation for that.

Major General Cheryl Pearce AM
Force Commander, United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, 2019–2021

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Taskforces often begin informally with verbal instruction from the Prime Minister, a Minister, a state Premier or a foreign leader. In the first few days, you will need to focus on gaining an understanding of the scope of the situation, and what the host government and Australian Government objectives are.

You will need to clarify the purpose and authority of the taskforce and confirm that this appreciation of the mission is what the Government expects of you. Establishing a taskforce is a non-linear process; you will need to prioritise your efforts based on the nature of the response and the taskforce team.

While every taskforce is context specific, this section of the guide provides you with leadership actions and behaviours to achieve:

- a cohesive taskforce with clear purpose, strategy and operating structures
- communication and information sharing
- collaborative partnerships.

The following practices will contribute to your success in these areas:

- Understand and communicate government intent.
- Integrate individuals and agencies with different values, behaviours and priorities into a cohesive team.
- Establish an operating framework or structure.
- Unify efforts and find common ground between diverse stakeholders.
- Implement continuous improvement and learning practices to understand progress.

A self-reflection tool is provided at the end of this section as a summary of these practices to guide your actions.

Understand and Communicate Government Intent

Political leaders will expect strong and visible taskforce leadership to build or restore public confidence in government objectives and policies, and there may be electoral implications. You will need to lead, communicate and deliver the taskforce purpose mindful of the primacy of politics and policy.

Begin routine communication with political leaders and key stakeholders from the outset to build an understanding of the multi-layered nature of crisis response. This engagement will establish relationships and mutual trust and provide a direct means to share operational information. Your direct link with political leaders establishes authority to act and mitigates impediments to collaboration that may arise.

If you are dealing with political leaders for the first time, have confidence that they will appreciate frank and fearless advice based on expertise (yours or drawing on others'), knowledge of resources and capabilities, and appreciation of risk.

The Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, called and asked for my advice. It was a little after four o'clock in the morning, and just getting light. The walls there seemed to have lots of ears, so I went out into the middle of the big square in front of the hotel ... I gave him my frank advice: that what was required was a non-threatening option, something that would not excite any form of response, something that would ensure that we would manage the risk, with no possibility of a mistake or a miscalculation. That was my advice, and that was the way it turned out.

Sir Angus Houston AK, AC, AFC (Ret'd)
Australia's Response to the Downing of Flight MH17

Operationalise Government Objectives

You need to have an agreed taskforce mission and end goal/end state with political leaders. This requires translating government intent and guidance into operation objectives through honest, open and iterative communication to define what the taskforce needs to achieve and what success looks like, and to confirm who has political responsibility for the taskforce.

After confirming the taskforce's objectives, write them down to formally document what the taskforce needs to achieve. A written charter letter or terms of reference supports clarity of thought, contributes to shared understanding, lays the foundation for how to achieve the taskforce purpose, and assists you to prioritise taskforce efforts.

Build a Cohesive Taskforce

A taskforce often starts with one person – the taskforce leader. As it grows, you will need to integrate individuals and agencies with different values, behaviours and priorities into a cohesive team that can assist you to define the issue facing the taskforce and develop purpose, strategy and operating structures.

Your team will look to you for guidance and providing it can be difficult in the early stages of a response. As a leader, you will need to be comfortable in this uncertainty and be able to generate certainty to allow the taskforce to move forward.

To build a cohesive interagency team, effective leadership practices are:

- Seek and respect diversity
- Listen to all perspectives within the team
- Provide direction and establish common purpose
- Build a positive and collaborative team culture and environment
- Motivate and empower people to act
- Enable people to reach their personal, professional and cultural potential.

Practising adaptive leadership means that you should establish a workplace culture that empowers individuals and your team to:

- analyse problems
- predict outcomes
- make decisions in changing situations that prioritise taskforce efforts.

Your leadership needs to recognise and accept organisational strengths, allegiances and agendas and employ these within the new team to build networks, information-sharing channels and collaboration.

Get to Know Your Team

To lay the foundations for a cohesive team, one of your priorities is getting to know the people within your taskforce team. This includes their individual experience, skills and decision-making authority, and agency resources and capabilities. You will gain an understanding of existing networks and resources, and any risk the taskforce carries because of gaps in resources or expertise.

Provide your team with opportunities to share this knowledge. As you establish your daily meeting routine, ensure that each area has an opportunity to report. This enables the whole team to gain an appreciation of the taskforce's capabilities and builds social connectedness, which plays an essential role in making individuals and organisations more resilient.

You may be able to select some or all of the taskforce team. Some individuals thrive in complex interagency environments and others do not. Individuals who are confident and comfortable in crisis response demonstrate personal resilience, a disposition to act, an ability to keep calm under stress, and the capacity to analyse, plan and shape future events.

Be prepared to change members of your team if they do not suit the environment and nature of taskforce work. It is not a reflection on them, but 'fit' is everything in a taskforce team. Time pressures and the immediacy of the task require you to make decisions that you might be prepared to put off in a normal working environment.

> You must inspire groups, often with big differences and competing cultural narratives, to come together and appreciate the nature of the problem, build a relationship, and adjust their values, practices, and priorities to achieve adaptive change.
>
> **Dean Williams,** *Leadership for a Fractured World*, **p.39**

Decide on a Team Design

Designing your taskforce team is one way to implement clear and adaptive authority, decision-making and communication channels. Broadly, teams can be conventional or self-organising.

Conventional teams have more traditional structures, defined roles and directed activities, interactions and information flows.

Self-organised teams have flattened, less hierarchical structures that empower staff at all levels to make decisions and act under limited or no supervision.

Self-organising teams often suit the nature of interagency environments, with leadership enabling relationships that develop naturally from shared interests or collective activity. Factors that inform team design are the operational environment and team members' experience, knowledge and skills.

Define the Problem

You will need to define the problem or issue faced by the taskforce based on the mission agreed with political leaders. This requires engaging with experts on the ground and your taskforce team to build a clear understanding of:

- the needs of beneficiaries
- the environment the taskforce is operating in
- taskforce resources, skills and capabilities
- stakeholders and their purpose, agenda and interests.

Define the Taskforce Scope

After defining the problem, the scope of the taskforce can be set. This is the most important element of the taskforce process. The taskforce scope needs to document:

- the issue the taskforce needs to address
- a strategy to address the issue based on taskforce resources and capabilities, and taskforce team experience and expertise
- taskforce deliverables, timelines and governance
- a continuous improvement and learning framework
- what taskforce 'success' will look like and how success will be determined.

A clearly defined taskforce scope provides your team with clarity on their roles and responsibilities, assists with mapping and engaging with stakeholders, and puts in place a framework to resource, plan and make decisions.

Use the following practices to guide your behaviour.

Listen, Plan and Act

Take time to 'listen, plan and act'. Gather information to understand ground truth, appreciate risk, draw out hidden agendas, and find common ground. Do not rush to failure but also appreciate that you may make mistakes and that this is part of engaging with risk.

Visit beneficiaries, including those affected by the crisis and their family and friends, as soon as practicable. Time spent listening to people builds a rich picture of their needs and assists you to identify any gaps in policy or operational capabilities to deliver the taskforce mission.

An effective taskforce has an unrelenting mission focus on beneficiary needs, including making beneficiaries explicit within the taskforce mission statement. This galvanises taskforce effort, reinforces purpose and gives a human face to the taskforce mission.

Listening requires discipline and effort to 'be present' and refrain from getting distracted. Be aware of the need to overcome bias or the trap of beginning to prepare a response while someone is still speaking. Listen for

soft voices – introverts, local leaders from volunteer and community organisations or people who are unwilling to speak in open forums because they have dissenting views.

Crisis Appreciation

With an understanding of beneficiary needs, you can begin to formally 'define the problem' faced by the taskforce. Depending on your own professional background you will already have a variety of tools to assist in the initial appreciation and assessment of the task. Australia's capstone document is the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, which outlines the arrangements enabling the Government's 'all hazards' crisis management approach.

Guidance on identifying options and planning is drawn from a range of sources. It includes the Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook collection published by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, the Crisis Appreciation and Strategic Planning Guidebook (CASP) published by the Department of Home Affairs, and the Defence Joint Military Appreciation Process.

All agencies have their own well-developed crisis management procedures, and these are all valuable methodologies. However, single-agency approaches do not always translate well in a multiagency context. Beware of relying too much on planning processes that are agency or military specific. In an interagency taskforce environment, you must establish simple, easily explained processes that meet a common denominator of expertise within the team.

Establish Operating Structures, Procedures and Practices

Concurrent with building a cohesive taskforce, you will need to establish operational structures to enable the taskforce to function. Ensure that all members of the taskforce understand the operating structures, procedures and tools that you propose to use. Be prepared to adapt these to the team that you have.

Establish a Taskforce Structure

Interagency taskforce structures commonly include a Deputy and a Chief of Staff, supported by specialist

advisers covering finance/contracting, legal, cultural issues and public affairs/media. You should consider how to assign staff to plans, operations, logistics and interagency liaison. These functions are known across agencies, though naming conventions may vary. Anticipate that the medium-term and longer-term scope of the taskforce will change. To prepare for this, establish a dedicated plans function at the outset.

> In setting up the headquarters, I provided an explanation to my new staff of why the structure was being set up. People were assigned to functions that were not directly related to the delivery of their department's measures. This resulted in staff becoming integrated into the purpose of the Taskforce as a whole and development of a team culture centred on the operation rather than agency allegiances.
>
> **Major General Dave Chalmers AO, CSC (Ret'd)**
> **Northern Territory National Emergency Response, 2007**

Establish a Routine

The military refers to this as 'battle rhythm'. You are unlikely to be in a battle, though at times it might feel like it. Establishing a daily and weekly routine, where essential meetings occur at the same time, will ensure that your team rapidly falls into productive working practices. Importantly, it will reduce the stress on you and your team as you can dispose of routine tasks and be prepared to deal with unanticipated issues as they arise.

Share Information

It is important to establish a communication routine that shares information internally within your team and externally with all taskforce stakeholders. This includes using liaison officers and holding regular meetings. These types of routine information-sharing activities assist you to reinforce the taskforce mission, connect with stakeholders and establish effective processes to request resources (e.g. ADF capabilities).

When establishing a communication routine, consider the needs of your team, including language and cultural differences that may impact information flow. Consulting early with your team and stakeholders to determine their information requirements assists with this. Be prepared to change your communication schedule as the situation changes.

Dedicated analysis and management of information ensures you can access accurate information quickly for a range of purposes, including political and media engagement. Software tools and analytical support can map and visualise data to inform decision-making and bring some certainty to complex and changing situations.

Establish Strategic Communications

Strategic communication and media engagement are a critical part of taskforce leadership. The media has the potential to be unrelenting, and you will need to align the taskforce narrative with the Australian Government position. Your media adviser is an essential member of your team. Include them in meetings and seek their advice on every aspect of your communication strategy. Do not front the media unless you have discussed your media strategy with them. Remember the basic building blocks of constructing a narrative about the work of the taskforce:

- Who
- What
- When
- Where
- Why
- How.

It may be necessary to revisit the basic techniques that you will have learned in your media awareness training. Your job will be much easier if you are confident in handling media inquiries and shaping the message that you need to put across.

Establish 'Lines of Activity'

An approach to focusing efforts is to group taskforce activities. Previous examples include 'Lines of Recovery',

'Lines of Reconstruction' and 'Recovery Streams'. Within the military, concentrating effort in this way is known as 'Lines of Effort'. The purpose of this approach is to connect actions (ends, ways and means) and the broader mission.

Lines of taskforce activity can be based on:

- immediate relief
- short-term social and economic recovery
- longer-term recovery efforts aligned to social, economic, agriculture, business and industry needs.

Operation Queenslander in 2011 assisted communities devastated by floods. Senior state departmental leaders organised and led sub-committees based on six Lines of Reconstruction:
1. Human and social
2. Economic
3. Environment
4. Building recovery
5. Roads and transport
6. Community liaison and communication

Unify Efforts

A broad range of interests and agendas exist internally and externally to taskforce operations. One of the critical responsibilities of a leader is to unify efforts of contributing agencies, stakeholders and beneficiaries to reduce friction and competition, and promote common ownership of the taskforce mission.

To unify efforts, you need to:

- understand and respect stakeholder missions, goals, values, constraints/limitations and shared interests
- build common and shared understanding of the situation
- understand common and overlapping interests, goals and objectives
- Align and de-conflict efforts and deliver coherent effort
- Assess progress to change course if necessary.

> Try to imagine yourself standing in the shoes of the other person from the other agency who doesn't agree with your idea to work out why and to find that area of common overlap where agreement can be reached.
> It doesn't always have to be compromise but at least if you understand why there is a difference you can determine whether that difference matters to the mission that you've been given and needs to be accommodated. Or you can explain to them why it doesn't based on the direction you have been given by government, not on what would otherwise appear to be a whim or a casual dismissal of their value and their organisation's value.
>
> **General Angus Campbell AO, DSC**
> **Chief of the Defence Force**

Find Common Ground

The diversity of interagency environments means that individuals and agencies may have different agendas or interests, even when everyone is working towards the same goal. As a leader, you need to find something common to all parties beyond the taskforce outcome and use it to bring people together to lay the foundations for deeper information sharing.

> Where you have people with hidden agendas who are not prepared to come to the table with them, you have got to draw those out and have those courageous conversations in a manner that does not belittle or take away the mana of a particular individual.
> Mana is given or bestowed on a person or group who has respect. It is all encompassing and gained through actions, words and deeds. There is a spiritual element to it.
>
> **Major General Dave Gawn MBE (Ret'd)**
> **CEO Pike River Recovery Agency, New Zealand**

Measure Progress

A learning and evaluation framework is an integral part of taskforce practice. It equips you with data to provide

evidence and deliver objective assessments to government and stakeholders on taskforce progress.

From the beginning you should assign or request resources to conduct evaluation. Questions that you should be asking include whether the taskforce is:

- achieving its objectives and purpose
- meeting the needs of beneficiaries and other stakeholders
- internally cohesive.

Having an objective evidence base is essential to ensure accurate reporting and build confidence, both internally and with stakeholders. When you speak to the media during a tragedy, remember you are speaking to the families and friends of those affected or to people who may have lost everything.

Measuring progress should become part of the taskforce culture and routine. Learning outputs are an important component of routine external communications at all levels, while also assisting leaders with practical ways to know yourself and know your team.

The framework or approach chosen needs to exist from the outset of taskforce operations and built iteratively through team, beneficiary and stakeholder consultations. Our best advice is to find someone to do this job for you, to keep measurement and evaluation simple and to include it as a key agenda item in your routine daily and weekly briefings.

Demonstrate Care for Health and Wellbeing

As a leader, you need to look after your own wellbeing and that of your team. For yourself, pace yourself and recognise that if you burn out, you will not be able to provide the leadership necessary to achieve government objectives. Actively maintain eating well, getting sleep, and taking physical and recreation time.

Towards your team, you need to demonstrate and champion health and wellbeing, and be alert to unusual and concerning behaviours. Ensure that those who are in supervisory positions look after their subordinates.

Self-Reflection Tool

The aim of the following self-reflection tool is to provide an overview of the leadership practices discussed in Section One. Use it to guide your actions as a checklist or to identify areas of improvement when establishing a taskforce.

Clear Purpose and Strategy

☐ Translate political guidance into operational purpose, scope and end goal.

☐ Understand context and authorities, plus the limit of authority.

☐ Document taskforce objectives, authority and decision rights.

☐ Establish beneficiary needs (affected, family and friends) as mission focus.

☐ Document key deliverables, timelines and governance.

☐ Build a path to success and measure progress.

Cohesive Taskforce

☐ Seek and respect diversity.

☐ Build understanding of team members' experience, skills, capabilities and decision-making authority.

☐ Explain vision, end goal (success), expectations, taskforce structure and team design.

☐ Establish shared culture, values, understanding and purpose.

☐ Inculcate continuous improvement and learning.

☐ Demonstrate care for own and others' health and wellbeing.

☐ Recognise efforts and contributions – 'gift success'.

Operational Structures

☐ Implement a taskforce structure with a dedicated plans function.

☐ Establish a routine ('battle rhythm').

☐ Concentrate operational effort along 'Lines of Activity'.

☐ Establish an information management and analysis function.

Collaborative Partnerships

☐ Establish trust.

☐ Develop and build relationships.

☐ Understand stakeholder perspectives, agendas, interests and priorities.

☐ Unify efforts based on shared interests and common purpose.

☐ Develop collective ownership of the taskforce purpose with full accountability and responsibility with 'the' leader.

Communication and Information Sharing

☐ Listen to all perspectives.

☐ Establish routine communication with taskforce team and all stakeholders.

☐ Establish reporting requirements (internal and external to the taskforce).

☐ Have frank, fearless, respectful and hard conversations.

Effective leadership principles are constant, but your context and environment will change.

Leadership during an interagency crisis response is different to 'business as usual' because the situation is usually politically charged, and public emotions and urgency will be running high. When casualties have occurred, families and the community will be demanding answers.

Leadership in an interagency environment consists of engagement and representation upwards and outwards, while coordinating across, and directing and listening downwards and inwards. Experience has shown that an overly authoritative or prescriptive leadership approach does not work in these situations.

To assist you to focus and prioritise your efforts, leaders who have been in this position have identified the following key principles. These principles help develop and maintain connectedness by valuing people's contributions and understanding stakeholder needs, priorities and objectives.

Trust

The art of leadership is about how you weave your experience and organisational background with skills, personal attributes and human understanding. You must earn trust, build a team and unify diverse individuals and agencies – and look after yourself while doing it.

Trust is fundamental to interagency taskforce teams and effective relationships. You need to establish trust in yourself as a leader and trust between members of the taskforce. While it is simple to say, there are – as the following diagram demonstrates – many building blocks to earning trust. Trust develops from core foundational leadership traits including authenticity and transparency.
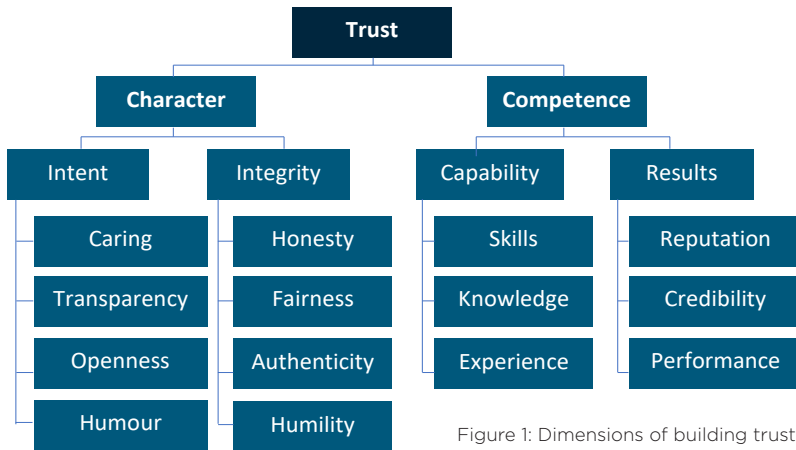
Trust

Character
- Intent
  - Caring
  - Transparency
  - Openness
  - Humour
- Integrity
  - Honesty
  - Fairness
  - Authenticity
  - Humility

Competence
- Capability
  - Skills
  - Knowledge
  - Experience
- Results
  - Reputation
  - Credibility
  - Performance

Figure 1: Dimensions of building trust[1]

Diversity

A strength of interagency environments is the diversity of culture, experience, expertise, education, skills and background that come together. If diversity is not present in your taskforce, you need to actively seek it out. There is never one answer in complex situations. In diverse taskforce teams, solutions are arrived at with experience, perspective and input that supports the team to consider new information, conduct analysis and find the most suitable approach to the problem.

Leadership behaviours that demonstrate respect for diversity are:

- Giving everyone an equal voice
- Knowing the people, you lead and their communication strengths and preferences
- Making space for people to contribute and 'value add'
- Self-awareness and understanding your own leadership style
- Listening and drawing everyone's perspectives together
- Acknowledging your own bias, prejudices and stereotypes
- Working to manage the effects of differences in understanding.

[1] Adapted from https://budbilanich.com/trust-must-be-earned/

Diversity deters groupthink and guides individuals away from protecting organisational interests and agendas. It develops loyalty to the taskforce and its purpose. Leading in diversity is not easy. Learn to read body language, listen and draw out those who are more introverted in a way that ensures everyone maintains their self-respect. We need to foster and protect what our New Zealand colleagues call mana.

Communication

Communication is fundamental to leadership and taskforce success. Effective communication starts with your own ability to think clearly, process complexity and provide simple, compelling and understandable messages. You need to communicate government objectives, your expectations and the taskforce's operational mission.

Communication is fundamental to the success of any interagency operation.
An effective practice is talking people through their behaviour and reasons when impediments to collaboration arise, such as people not contributing, actively undermining or doing something that conflicts with the vision. Where a frank but respectful conversation has not worked, you may need to go to a higher authority to put the team back on a collaborative path.

Lyndall Sachs PSM
Career diplomat, Ambassador to Iran, previously Head of Mission in Baghdad and Beirut

Relationships

Relationships underpin effective leadership because they enable you to find shared interests, unify individuals and agencies and develop mutual understanding.

Depending on the environment, you need to build relationships with stakeholders that do not immediately come to mind because you have not worked with them before, for example local charities and volunteer groups.

Your relationships need to move past transactional engagements by considering language and consistent communication. Overall, you need to recognise the value of conversation, discussion and negotiation as a leadership tool.

> While you are dealing with people when it is urgent, it is not a relationship of any substance. It is a transaction or a problem.
> It is much better to have a shared understanding of one another and a relationship so that you understand what the pressures are, and you can really do your best to understand what the problem is.
>
> **Major General Jake Ellwood DSC, AM**
> **Operation BUSHFIRE ASSIST 2019/2020**

Empathy

Taskforces coordinate and deliver government assistance to people and communities in need, often after loss of life, home or livelihood. These situations are complex, challenging and heartbreaking, and you will need to connect your head (thinking) and your heart (emotion) to build a rich understanding of your purpose and vision, make decisions in uncertainty, and prioritise efforts to those in need.

You will need to adopt heartfelt communication and practices that have the needs of beneficiaries at the forefront of operational efforts. You will need to combine your analytical, logical and rational thinking that centres on facts and figures with empathy and compassion to meet the needs of beneficiaries.

> People are more comfortable dealing with just the facts and the logic. So, the first thing to understand is that facts and figures help a little but not as much as heartfelt communications.
> You can't just touch the head; you have to touch the heart as well. And once you touch the heart, then your message sticks, or you've got a better chance of it sticking.
>
> **Major General Steve Day DSC, AM**
> **Coordinator-General for Drought, Joint Agency Drought Taskforce**

Mindfulness

The practice of 'being present' means that you are engaged with people in the moment, aware of your thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and surrounding environment without distraction or judgement. A 'be present' leadership approach supports you to connect with your team through active listening and by avoiding becoming preoccupied with other activities.

You must schedule time in every day when you can slow down and step back from the tasks of the moment. However long the taskforce lasts, remember that it is 'a marathon, not a sprint'. Too many leaders have come to grief through losing perspective or failing to re evaluate their role in an evolving environment.

When you practice mindfulness, you are able to manage judgement and assumptions, which creates a safe space for your team to reach their full potential by enabling them to voice differences in opinion, make mistakes, adapt and continuously learn.

Being connected to self provides a way to realise and manage your own wellbeing, which is necessary in taskforce environments because if you burn out you will not be able to provide effective leadership.

The ability to be mindfully present is a more essential leadership trait than creating compelling objectives, expressing ideas clearly, and being receptive to input.

Research suggests a direct correlation between leaders' mindfulness and the wellbeing and performance of their team.

Harvard Business Review
13 December, 2017

Quick Summary

Leading an interagency taskforce provides different challenges to those that you will have experienced in your home organisation. But the fundamental principles of leadership remain unchanged.

There is no set taskforce operating structure or team design. Your leadership actions, behaviours and practices must be flexible in response to the situation, the taskforce team, and the available resources. You already have the experience, training and know-how required to meet the political, public and media demands of crisis response and interagency environments.

Your leadership is a critical taskforce success factor. You must engage, empower and connect with others to build collective ownership of the problem. At the same time, you must establish clear and defined lines of responsibility and accountability. Be prepared to accept failure and gift success.

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