

Communication strategies and collaborative work practices in Incident Management Teams (IMTs) : The keys to organizing for high reliability

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There is wide acknowledgement that high -consequence domains (HCDs) need to effectively 'manage the unexpected' and so achieve consistently safe, reliable, and economically efficient outcomes. Even minor lapses or mistakes can lead to losses that are untenable to the community. In Australian bushfire management, it is the Incident Management Teams (IMTs) which are charged with minimizing losses and keeping the community abreast of the situation. Within IMTs, effective communicative strategies and collaborative work practices are the keys to success.

Notwithstanding their apparent importance, there has been little empirical research directed towards establishing the extent to which teamwork and collaborative work practices underpin the principles of organizing for high reliability (HRO). Among fire agencies in the US, these principles are currently being enthusiastically embraced. Yet even in that country, there have been few studies which have focused specifically on the links between collaborative work practices and high reliability organizing as it applies to fire-specific domains. A study conducted during the 2006 -2007 Australian bushfire season and funded by the Australasian Bushfire CRC sought, in part, to address this research gap.

Data was gathered by interviewing experienced fire management personnel (Incident Controllers, Planners, Logistics and Operations Officers) and by digitally videoing collaborative work practices during simulations and actual incidents.

This presentation will principally report on the observation component of the study. Again, the observations focused on the main IMT functional roles (see above) who also wore lapel microphones. Data was coded and analysed for artefact use; communicative strategies, and collaborative IMT work practices. This paper will:

- a) discuss emerging findings and their implications for enhancing teamwork in bushfire IMTs;
- b) identify the connections between teamwork strategies and ways of organising for high reliability; and,
- c) consider what this might mean for teamwork training specific to Australian fire management agencies.