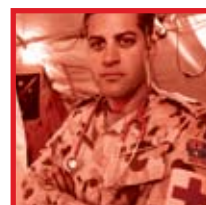




# Leadership in a Time of Disaster

**Brigadier Nick Jans, OAM, Australian Army Reserve**

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This is a story of grassroots leadership and my role in a process in which a group of ordinary citizens, with no formal authority whatsoever and operating within a stunned, fractured and dispersed community, achieved some remarkable things in the months that followed the 'Black Saturday' bushfires in February 2009.

My wife and I live in Marysville, in a beautiful mountain valley in the Victorian central highlands. But the things that made it an icon of the Victorian tourist scene also made it a bushfire risk. Judy and I had worked hard to minimise the risk, by siting our home in a defensible location and building it of fireproof materials. And we had worked out what we need to do as a team 'when the fire came'—and we had equipped and trained ourselves for bushfire defence.

Judy, the organising dynamo behind all these arrangements, had spent the previous week making the final preparations for the impending 'extreme-fire-danger' weekend that, after an unprecedented series of days of temperatures in the mid-40s, was tipped to be potentially horrendous. Meanwhile, after spending the previous week on professional duties in Sydney, I returned on the first plane that morning to help with the final preparations.

By the evening we found ourselves literally fighting for our lives in the face of what, as the Royal Commission subsequently affirmed, was the most extreme bushfire the planet had then recorded. Our part of the village was the first hit and within 30 minutes we were engulfed in flames—Judy later described it as like being in a cage that had been lowered into the depths of hell. Through luck and (mainly, I like to think) good management, the house survived but those on each side burned to the ground in less than an hour. By midnight, the lovely mountain village that was our home had been devastated, with only 32 buildings from 600-odd still standing and 34 of its citizens dead.

Most of the survivors, shell-shocked and emotionally gutted, had to be relocated, often some distance away (we were able to stay because our house survived). And, as if the experience during the fire itself wasn't bad enough, those who were relocated were then prevented from returning for another 10 weeks, while the coroner and her team sifted through the wreckage for further bodies. Further, when they were allowed to return to begin to piece their lives together, it was to watch as dozens of rubble-filled truckloads rumbled out every day with most of what remained of the village and its houses. Meanwhile, there were already worrying signs of the thickets of red-tape that would soon entangle us. Many of its citizens could be pardoned if they wondered *if* Marysville would ever be restored to its former glory, let alone *when*.

In the aftermath of a disaster, some communities fracture under the strain of fear and anger. But others become more united and cohesive, and emerge from the experience stronger and more supportive than they were before. As the following examples of achievement in 2009 testify, Marysville was an example of the second.

On Anzac Day 2009, just a few weeks after the fire, the community celebrated its biggest Anzac Day ever. While the major focus was the celebration of the Anzac spirit, as it was played out on Black Saturday and afterwards by citizens and emergency services, we wanted also to use the occasion to lift the spirits and the optimism of the community. So, in the Anzac Day address that day, I stressed that the community's very ability to mount such a big event so soon after coming through the fire was a demonstration of its resilience to the outside world and to itself.

And to prove the point, exactly one week later the community engaged in the first step of a huge collective brainstorming activity, where we began thinking constructively and creatively about what we wanted from a new township. More than 300 of us gathered together in a huge marquee on the practice fairway of the golf course to spend the day engaged in small group and plenary sessions. This was rounded off in July by a smaller, more intensive long-weekend workshop, where a blueprint for the new Marysville and ‘Triangle area’ was developed.

By mid-May, the golf club had restored its front 9 to ‘playability’ and by mid-June, with the help of philanthropists, notably the Fox and Forrest families, the community—with comparatively little assistance from government—had established a temporary village that housed dozens of displaced residents. By November, the back 9 of the golf course was back in business and by December we had run our first ever ‘Pro-Am’ competition. By the end of the year, Marysville again had a viable retail facility that also served as a social hub.

Judy and I joined a community group of local citizens that began forming itself early in the second week following the fires. Many had backgrounds in business, politics, policing, public administration and the military, and most had seen the world and knew how it wagged. We had individually spent the preceding week-and-a-half picking ourselves up and shaking ourselves out, before beginning to sense that somebody—indeed somebody like us—might need to step forward to speak for the community. Sharing this idea with one person led to sharing with another; and that got the process going. Our aim was to be the conduit between the community and the authorities. But we also saw a secondary function in terms of ‘filling the gap’ in terms of leadership, if such was needed.

I had two main roles in all of this: as a member of the local leadership group that was formed towards the end of February and, from mid-March onwards, as president of the Marysville Community Golf & Bowls Club. Judy also initiated and ran a local garden recovery scheme, which acquired plant contributions from all over the country and then looked after them until they could be distributed to local gardeners when they commenced the restoration of their gardens.

And as I did leadership and observed examples of leaders and leadership—some great, some not so great—I re-learned a number of lessons about the practice of leadership in circumstances of uncertainty and volatility. Reflecting on all this, I can see that it can be summarised by five axioms of leadership.

### **Axiom 1: Great things can be achieved when people’s spirits are energised**

True leadership involves energising spirit, by doing things that appeal to people’s hearts, rather than just their heads and hip pockets. Make no mistake, leaders also need to be good managers—they will lose people’s commitment if their plans do not make sense or do not work. But it is often the very boldness and novelty of such plans that excites and engages people. And this can move mountains.

The community leadership group was guided by a vital piece of advice that had been given to us in late February 2009 by the businessman and philanthropist Andrew Forrest. During his first visit to the district, and as a prelude to his throwing the weight of his philanthropic organisation into the recovery process, Forrest had discussed with us the reasons why some communities bounce back from a natural disaster, while others just fade away.

The ‘bounce-back communities’, Forrest said, took responsibility for their own recovery and rebuilding. They didn’t wait for governments or other agencies to help them. They went about helping themselves but they were also not hesitant in asking for any help they needed. Importantly, they began by setting themselves what Forrest called ‘big, hairy aggressive goals’. They asked big and they aimed big. And even if, as often

happens, they didn't quite achieve those goals, they still advanced themselves by much more than they ever thought possible. 'You in the Marysville and Triangle area', Forrest told us, 'you must do the same'.

I'll give you an example of the power of his words. At that time, I was President-elect of the Marysville Community Golf & Bowls Club. We on the committee had already decided that since the club was one of the few viable businesses left in the district, we had to do our part to help with local economic development. Even though our fairways and bowling green were unplayable, we had a reasonable chance of reopening for business within a few months. We needed a big splash event to tell the world that we were ready and willing for business.

So, at a community meeting the day after Forrest's visit, and emboldened by his advice, I announced to the assembly that the Marysville Community Golf & Bowls Club was setting itself a 'big hairy aggressive goal', to conduct a pro-am tournament before the end of the year. To many of the shell-shocked people at the meeting, such a goal may have seemed absurd. But we set the goal, because we realised we needed to set it—for ourselves, for the district and for the morale effect on the assembly that night. And, as already indicated, we did it. We had the entire course back in playing condition by November and, before Christmas, we conducted our Pro-Am. It was an extraordinary achievement for what had formerly been a very low-key and laid-back local community sports club.

Our philosophy—the philosophy that guided the recovery and revitalisation of the golf club and the philosophy that guided the community leadership group—was this: 'we not only can do it for ourselves, we must do it for ourselves'.

Such a philosophy was all the more important because it was the direct antithesis of the approach that the authorities wanted us to follow. The authorities wanted us to follow passively: to wait for a phased program of reconstruction to unfold and to take advantage of the multitude of services that were increasingly provided. Their assumption was that communities that have just been subjected to a disaster will be still dazed by the experience and, therefore, will not be capable of managing their own destiny. They wanted us to sit back and follow orders.

Perhaps this made sense to a politician or a senior bureaucrat. But it ignored two vital truths about social activity: that the very process of active and positive engagement, especially in overcoming adversity, stimulates and lifts the human spirit; and that the recovery and revitalisation of the spirit after a disaster is just as important as the recovery of the structured environment in which people lived.

This aspect, of the importance of the spirit, is something that is absolutely fundamental about leadership but is not well understood. This relates to the factor of 'followership'. Followership is the neglected 'other side of the leadership coin'. Followership is not a passive process: it means actively engaging and collaborating with the plan and the program that someone else is proposing. And—here is the important point—followership is fundamentally an emotional/psychological and social process. As followers, we decide to follow, not just because doing so furthers our own material or financial interests but often because doing so satisfies an emotional need. And an important part of this is the intrinsic satisfaction we derive from participating in a collective process, especially if this collective process is aimed at the greater good.

Let me give you an illustration. Obviously, the restoration and revitalisation of the Golf Club was a collaborative effort. It was brought about by the members and a small core of paid staff. But I'm quite sure that at least part of the basis for the extraordinary effort of all these people was that the committee framed its vision very much in community terms. Every time I spoke in public, whether it was to the members or in public speeches or media presentations, I stressed the key role of the golf club in community recovery. I stressed that the club's future and the community's future were inextricably linked, and that we were working for a more important outcome than simply the restoration of our playing facilities. So the energy that went into lifting ourselves up by our bootstraps had a strong emotional and altruistic element, kicked along

by the ability of the leaders of the club to articulate the goal as well as to articulate a logical path to its fulfilment.

The community leadership group took Andrew Forrest's words to heart. We established a charter; we set operational and strategic goals. We consulted intensively with the community and we ensured legitimacy by conducting an early 'election process' in the middle of the year in which we invited nominations from anyone who might be interested—and we were prepared to conduct an election should this be required by the volume of nominations (as it turned out, it wasn't). And, at all stages, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, we did things to engage the spirit of the community.

## **Axiom 2: Leading with the heart has powerful advantages – but beware its downsides**

The community leadership group's performance depended very much on the passion and commitment that we brought to the role as volunteers. Regardless of the fact that we had each been psychologically and financially affected by the bushfires, each of us was prepared to do what was necessary to achieve what the community needed. (And in my particular case, I found it hard to ignore the imperative that decades of professional socialisation had stamped on my sense of identity and sense of duty.)

To a certain extent, our situation was analogous to the leaders of a newly-formed family business, who will do whatever it takes to be successful and set up their family for future prosperity. Having your heart and your soul engaged in the process makes it easier to commit to the long hours that will be necessary, to be tolerant in dealing with difficult people and to maintaining a consistent level of performance to ensure that early wins are consolidated and contribute to bigger wins later. And it is plainly important in gaining credibility and acceptance from other citizens as the spokesperson/spokespeople for the community. You are much more credible if you present yourself as being fair dinkum—especially if you are a local and thus have 'in group' status.

But there are obvious disadvantages as well. Not only is there a tendency to overextend oneself but you can get too emotionally involved, with the result that you sometimes will fail to see the nuances in a situation and will fail to see when you need to back off and negotiate, rather than to grit your teeth and 'crash through'. It was to our huge advantage that our numbers included a small handful of experienced business professionals who had come from outside the district to put their services at our disposal. Many was the time when we locals were on the verge of letting our passion get the better of us, and the cooler heads of our non-local colleagues were instrumental in avoiding some unwise words or actions.

This important factor of 'passion control' in team structure points to a broader principle of team design and structure, and the need to include mechanisms that will help a leader or leadership team to maintain perspective and balance.

## **Axiom 3: A team leader must focus on making it easier for the team to perform**

The third axiom may—at least at first glance—seem to contradict the first. As a leader, you don't have to be continually 'leading from the front' and motivating people. This especially applies when those in the team are well qualified and keen to achieve the goals. In those cases, the leader's main task is simply to make it easier for the team and its members to do what they need to do. In terms of this axiom, as a leader in the community and in the Community Golf & Bowls Club, I concentrated on three main 'enabling' leadership functions: strategy, synergy, and support.

To begin with, I saw it as important to concentrate on **strategy** by 'staying in the crow's nest', so that I could look ahead to the next challenge and deal with any emerging problems that might impede the longer-term achievement of our various goals.

I left most of the day-to-day activities to the excellent teams of citizens who were my colleagues in this enterprise. My role in this was doing things to enhance the **synergy** of these teams so that everybody was pulling in the same direction and their total effect was greater than the sum of the parts.

Third, I saw it as my role to provide the **support** that all the members of these teams needed: support that ranged from ensuring that they had resources and technical advice on tap when it was needed, through to continual reinforcement and reassurance that they were on the right track and that they were doing a great job.

Of course, there were times when I did have to 'lead from the front'. This applied especially in the early stages, when the team was assembling and bedding down and at times of crisis. But this does not apply for the large proportion of time—and your leadership style must necessarily be less directive.

#### **Axiom 4: Although the leadership process is tricky, messy, seamless and chaotic, it has an underlying logic**

My fourth axiom follows from the third, and concerns the activities that comprise 'leadership behaviour'. Leadership models tend to categorise behaviour into a few neat little bundles and, while they might be perfectly valid in themselves, they bear little resemblance to what the reality feels like. This is because what leaders actually do involves the simultaneous exercise of a multitude of activities, all of them intertwined, many of them seemingly spontaneous and random in origin, and difficult to tease out as separate elements.

But there is often an underlying logic to all of this that was discernible to those with an informed perspective. Because, while each task might be small in itself, each is often interrelated with many other activities, so that poor performance in one seemingly-minor aspect results in unnecessary complications and problems somewhere else and/or sometime later.

Take the community leadership group to which I belonged. We core members spent most of our time engaged in what were superficially four main types of activities. First, we engaged in **sense-making**, trying to find out what was going on and what it meant—to find out who was an ally, who was a prospect, who was an opponent, to find out where things stood from the perspective of the government and our corporate benefactors, and to work out opportunities and threats.

Second, we were continually working on **relationship management**, building networks and the like to leverage our opportunities and minimise our threats. A lot of the time, what we did seemed less like 'leadership' and more like politicking, negotiating and persuading. Nevertheless, all of it was crucial in preparing the ground for getting things done. Third, we had to **adapt** quickly and appropriately to crises and other unexpected twists in the journey when these arose.

Finally, we slogged away at the activity that took up most of our time: the comparatively straightforward—I say 'comparatively'—process of **administration**, by which we build on the results of all these other activities to help us determine what we were going to do, how we were going to do it, who was going to do it and all those other formal mechanisms that help in moving closer to one's goals.

Although many such tasks are not particularly challenging in themselves, a leader needs to apply equal diligence to every single one of them. It is this inherent requirement for consistency, comprehensiveness, reliability and endurance that makes sustained leadership performance so challenging. But doing so is important for two main reasons. In fluid situations, you never know which apparently-trivial issue is going to turn out to be very far from trivial—and projecting a persona of reliability, consistency and a certain 'presence' is very important in the team 'support' function discussed above.

What made it relatively easy for me to discern the patterns in what I was doing was my sound understanding of leadership theory and practice. In what often superficially seems to be chaos, the experienced leader will be able to recognise and respond to the underlying pattern of actions. And it is this interrelatedness that leads me to the final axiom.

### **Axiom 5: There is nothing as practical as a good theory**

My leadership activities in Marysville in 2009, even more so than on previous occasions where I had to perform the leader role, were based on a solid understanding of the theory and principles of leadership. I had been studying leadership intensively over the previous decade, particularly in terms of the alignment between mainstream leadership theory and commonly-used military leadership models, and how they can be applied in non-military situations. All this was underpinned by my own experiences in leadership over the last few decades. As a consequence, I came to my 2009 role with a well thought-through idea of what it was that I had to do correctly and the consequences of indifferent performance.

In fact, in Marysville in 2009, perhaps for the first time in my professional life, I found myself really knowing both *what* I was doing and *why* I was doing it. This was not only a profound and humbling intellectual experience but it also made a big difference to my confidence and my effectiveness.

One big benefit was that I could self-monitor and self-regulate as I went. It was as if there was a little Nick on my shoulder, whispering into my ear, critiquing what I had just done and telling me what I should do next:

That was good Nick, telling the Premier what the golf club needs in the immediate and the short term. Now make sure you assemble as many members as you can immediately gather, so that you can thank the Premier, in his presence, and in terms of the broad strategy for the Club as it relates to the recovery of the district. That will reinforce the message for both him and for the locals. And before the group disperses, introduce him to the course superintendent who is just over there and can be one of your hastily-assembled group: tell the Premier what a terrific job this man and his team of volunteers have done to restore the facilities to playing condition; and make sure you reinforce the effect on the superintendent by telephoning his wife tonight to tell her how well her husband presented himself to this VIP.

It is a great advantage to be guided by a valid mental aide-memoire in testing times.

All this is a validation of my professional motto that ‘there is nothing as practical as a good theory’. And because leadership is a science as well as an art. Understanding the science sharpens your appreciation of its artistic application. As you develop a practised eye, you begin to see nuances that you might otherwise miss.

This is perhaps best illustrated by another post-Black Saturday event. Andrew Fox, the scion of the Fox family, had arranged for his mate Greg Norman to come to Marysville and play a charity event. As president of the golf club, I had the opportunity to follow Greg throughout the 18 holes of golf that he played that day. I watched his every shot in the hope that I would see what made him hit the ball so beautifully. But alas, it eluded me.

When I mentioned this to his then-wife—‘Chris, I have been watching Greg all day and I can’t work out what he does to hit the ball so beautifully’—she looked at me in an amused way with the remark ‘you’re kidding, right?’ In other words, to another sporting genius, what Greg was doing was perfectly obvious. And although my understanding of leadership is nowhere near in the same class as Chris Evert-Lloyd-Norman’s understanding of tennis and golf, I think the principle is the same. The more you learn, the more you learn. Or to borrow an adage from another golfing genius, Gary Player, ‘the more I practice, the luckier I get’.

When I had time to sit back and reflect on all these experiences, I realised what a considerable advance I had made over the last decade. In my last leadership assignment, back in 1999/2000, I was not nearly so well

prepared—even though that particular assignment came after three decades of professional experience. For example, I realise now that I had been too ego-involved in that previous role. Even though I had been working with a very good team, and even though the task we had been given was somewhat nebulous, I worried about the extent to which I was ‘neglecting to stamp my authority’ on the process.

As it turned out, my reluctance to ‘stamp my authority’ on that particular occasion turned out to be the right approach, because the team was quite capable of achieving the goals that we had been set, as long as I was able to provide those ‘3Ss’ mentioned above—strategy, synergy, and support. But in all likelihood, I could have been an even better leader on that earlier occasion (and on most other occasions before that) had I been much more aware of and able to apply these five axioms.

One final thing about the five axioms: it will now be evident that they are all linked. The whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts.<sup>2</sup>

## **In conclusion**

Many of the lessons that I learned from my experiences in 2009 had been confirmation of sound practices learned in a previous career. But others were gained from the fresh perspective I gained from that fascinating activity called ‘leadership’. All this was a confirmation of the power that comes from both understanding and practice. As a professional or businessperson, you plainly have to know your own field and your own speciality but it helps also to know the leadership field if you have to ‘do leadership’ as part of your responsibilities. ‘There is nothing as practical as a good theory’—and a sound model will be a reference point for your choices and actions.

The Marysville journey is a work in progress. It hasn’t quite worked out the way we hoped it would; there have been many setbacks, many frustrations and many disappointments. But I’ve always believed in the usefulness of making the most of every experience. So I can confidently say that my understanding of leadership today is probably twice what it was on 6 February 2009.

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## **NOTES**



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- <sup>1</sup> This is a slightly-edited version of a paper titled 'Leadership in a time of disaster – a short paper on a profound experience', published on the Australian Defence College's website in July 2012: see <[http://www.defence.gov.au/adcdocs/cdle2012/CDLE\\_120718\\_LeadershipInATimeOfDisaster-AShortPaperOnAProfoundExperience.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/adcdocs/cdle2012/CDLE_120718_LeadershipInATimeOfDisaster-AShortPaperOnAProfoundExperience.pdf)> accessed 8 August 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> The word 'theory' refers to a model or conceptual schema about the relationships between various factors and outcomes. All of the theories on which I have drawn are well grounded in scholarship and research (see, for example, the attached reference list).

## READING LIST

### **'Leading from the heart' (Axiom 1), see:**

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- Steven M. Norman, Bruce J. Avolio and Fred Luthans, 'The impact of positivity and transparency on trust in leaders and their perceived effectiveness', *The Leadership Quarterly*, Issue 21, 2010, pp. 350-64.

### **'Achieving great things by energising people's spirits' (Axiom 2), see:**

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### **'Focusing on things that make it easier for the team to perform' (Axiom 3), see:**

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Mary Uhl-Bien, Russ Marion and Bill McKelvey, 'Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era', *The Leadership Quarterly*, Issue 18, 2007, pp. 298-318.

**'Nothing as practical as a good theory' (Axiom 5)**, see:

Bruce J. Avolio, Fred O. Walumbwa and Todd Weber, 'Leadership: Current Theories, Research, and Future Directions', *Annual Review of Psychology*, Issue 60, 2009, pp. 421-9.

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