

# Leadership Lessons from Natural Disasters

All experienced leaders have, at some stage, had to lead their teams through a crisis. However, very few leaders can say they have led their team through a complex and unpredictable life or death emergency coupled with major economic implications for millions of people.

Leading a state or country through a natural disaster has seen the rise and fall of many leaders. It's fascinating to strip away the politics of these rare but extraordinary events, and examine the leadership behaviours to which the public most warmly respond.

Through locusts, fire, cyclones and floods, Australia entered the 2011 summer season with the full intensity of Mother Nature. Now, as the cleanup begins, we can start to look at what was done well, and where we can improve for the future. Enter Queensland Premier Anna Bligh. Prior to the cyclone and floods that slammed into her state, you could safely say that Anna Bligh was far from front runner for the next local popularity contest. In a matter of days, with the backdrop of recent floods and the rapid approach of a category 5 cyclone, Anna Bligh went from least likely to win a chook raffle, to one of the most respected leaders in the country.

During the natural disasters in Queensland, Anna Bligh was able to demonstrate emotional intelligence as a leader. So how did she do it?

Firstly, she embodied empathy and compassion, in a manner which came across to the majority as sincere. The Premier and her team offered what people most wanted – security. She knew the public wanted information and it was delivered accurately and timely, without alarm. In smaller towns, it was recognised that, without power or telecommunications, people would need meeting places. In towns like Grantham, meeting point marquees were set up to allow locals to find and communicate with each other. There was also the creation of 34 temporary 'one stop shops' where people in dire need of assistance could go to get cash as well as gain information on their insurance, electricity supply, potential entitlements and other information.

The Premier also facilitated effective communication between multiple parties.

For example, when energy workers needed streets cleared of onlookers to speed up the power restoration process, she quickly and respectfully passed on that message to the public. She also effectively utilised the media to kick off the coordinated free labour clean up of Brisbane.

Additionally, she provided a sense of authority. When listening to her updates, she gave the distinct impression that she was on top of the whole event. It was clear that she had surrounded herself with a first class team and that team was functioning at the highest level of unity.

Included in her team were the leaders of other states. She accepted assistance such as police resources, defence force personal and labourers. She knew she needed external help and she knew how to coordinate that assistance for maximum benefit to the people of Queensland.

She responded quickly to feedback. For example, when told during one of her first broadcasts of the floods prior to the cyclone, that a hearing impaired person did not receive accurate warnings, there was, from that moment on, a person on her left, signing everything that was said in every update.

Another strategy employed by the Premier and her team was to look forward to a brighter future. She initiated the Premiers Relief Fund with the aim of rebuilding Queensland, and continues to encourage the country to holiday in Queensland to add to the economic recovery.

Premier Bligh was also able to tap into the camaraderie of her community. She used language that resonated with her Queensland constituents. Phrases like "We are Queenslanders. We're the people that they breed tough, north of the border. We're the ones that they knock down, and we get up again." This type of language resonated loudly with Queenslanders, as was shown when a message was scrawled onto a piece of displaced tin by

a local, saying to Cyclone Yasi "Is that all you got?"

Overall, Anna Bligh's leadership created a team who were able to bring out the best in themselves and in those around them. People found themselves willing to give and willing to receive.

What we didn't see, in this instance, was Anna Bligh using the attention for political gain. We also didn't see her in over her head, or unable to instil confidence. We didn't hear silence. We didn't feel lethargy or insincerity. We didn't see panic. We saw action.

Emotional intelligence is paramount to being an effective leader. Particularly in tough times, it is important to be sincere, empathetic and compassionate. It is important to restore order. It is important to disseminate timely and accurate information. Above all, it is important for action to be seen, for decisions to be made, for initiatives to be rolled out and for support to be rallied. It is important to restore hope.

Anna Bligh balanced all of these things. Her success has been noted in articles with such titles as "How Anna Bligh, Politician, Acted Just Like a Human". It was summed up simply by University of Melbourne social researcher Lauren Rosewarne, who said, "Anna Bligh has been amazing, she got it just right." With emotionally intelligent leadership, you can get it just right. 

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