

# THE ROLE OF AFFECT IN INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS

**Jan Douglas** (PhD Candidate)  
 Department of Education, University of Tasmania  
 Jan.Douglas@utas.edu.au

## Why study affect in the workplace?

- We are holistic beings with our thoughts, feelings, imagination, beliefs systems and actions interconnected.
- Work places many people under enormous amounts of pressure especially in high reliability organisations (e.g. fire and emergency management, aviation, emergency medicine) where people have become susceptible to stress, fatigue and job burnout.
- Emotions are an important factor within organisations because they are embedded in work activity and cannot be separated from our thinking.
- Positive emotions enhances problem solving and decision making.
- Self doubt can easily over ride the best skills and this can have a cascading effect within the team.
- Affect research has had minimal attention in fire and emergency management.



## The challenges and expectations that Incident Management Teams are faced with.

- Work is *risky* work because the focus of the work activity is on high reliability operations. IMTs require a safety culture within the team where all members of the team direct their attention and actions towards minimalising risk.
- Work activity is carried out in shared workspaces that are not co-located (i.e. fireground and ICC). Work of this nature cannot be conceived of as pre-established but are continually reconstituted within the complex dynamics of relations of technology, persons, and space.
- Australia's changing climate combined with the topography and vegetation has become one of the three most bush fire prone areas in the world. The other bushfire prone areas are southern California and southern France.
- With significant climate changes, and fires such as *January 1994, Canberra Fire Storm* and *Black Saturday*, fire and emergency management personnel are continually under increased intense pressure.
- Community expectations have amplified in recent times requiring the highest quality of service and high accountability.
- Governing bodies along with legal and moral expectations has placed enormous demands on emergency services beyond the traditional roles of firefighters.

## What is affect?

**Affect** is an umbrella term for an array of constructs that describe how people feel and what people experience. For example both **Felt emotions** which are primary emotions that include joy, love, anger, fear, sadness, disgust and surprise, and **Team affect** which includes team confidence, team potency, psychological safety and team climate, come under the term affect.

## Research Questions

- 1) What are the lived experiences of people who work in IMTs?
- 2) How do emotions give meaning to IMT work activity?
- 3) What enables and constrains IMT teamwork?
- 4) How might IMT work activity be improved to create higher performing teams?

## Data Collection

Interviews ( n=65) conducted with IMT personnel from four states (i.e. TAS, VIC, QLD, NSW) across Australia.

## Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, coded and organised manually according to the Participants' responses and literature reviewed. The data was then entered into NVIVO, a software qualitative analysis program.

## Findings

People were asked to talk about their experiences of working in IMTs: (e.g.) Can you tell me about an IMT that worked really well, and one that didn't go so well? The data showed that people's felt emotions were grouped into unpleasant feelings (i.e. anger/frustration, fear and surprised –not anticipating the future), pleasant feelings (i.e. joy, amazed and not surprised-anticipating the future), and potential to develop stress where fatigue was the common theme. Figure 1 illustrates that 70% of IMT members experience negative emotions with 20% of them having potential to develop stress.

In terms of self identity 82% of participants conveyed that being confident and in control are important aspects of working in IMT's. 18% of participants felt at times they were not in control of the situation at hand, illustrated in Figure 2.

