

IDENTIFYING AND RESOLVING BREAKDOWNS AT THE REGIONAL MANAGEMENT LEVEL

J. Grunwald^{1,2}, & C. Bearman^{1,2}

¹Appleton Institute, Central Queensland University

²Bushfire CRC

Breakdowns can dramatically influence fire management operations

Breakdowns happen between all levels of fire management during complex large scale events.

Breakdowns can be left unresolved for long periods of time.

This can disrupt decision making processes and impede effective actions because of:

- **conflicting, confusing or lack of information,**
- **teams carrying out tasks without informing other relevant teams, or**
- **key differences in the interpretation of fire information leading to conflicting operations.**

Study Design

Identification and resolution strategies were explored using semi-structured interviews and simulated event questions based on a real fire management scenario.

Eleven regional level management staff were interviewed.

Interviews were analysed using a bottom-up thematic analysis technique



“...I pulled him aside and I said ‘...what’s your job?’ He said, ‘I’m the planning officer’, I said ‘yeah but what planning are you doing?’ And he said ‘I’m putting this truck here and this truck here’, and I said ‘no you’re not, that’s the operations officer’s job, what’s your job? So forget the fire, next 12 hours what are you putting in place to make sure this fire is well resourced?’”

Quote on mentoring staff

“...if they’re (IC) trying to hide it I can still pick the little quiver, but excitedness on the radio, how they’re actually speaking, if they’re tripping over their words and can’t get it out or see them try and scabble for describing what’s going on...”

Quote on detecting breakdowns through phone conversation



How to spot a breakdown

Breakdown identification strategies could be separated into four groups:

- **detection via conflicting/confusing information,**
- **detection using experience based intuition and non-verbal cues,**
- **detection via formal and informal networks, and**
- **detection through proxy designation.**

Even though breakdowns could be easily identified in many cases resolutions were still not found.

This could be attributed to regional level staff not exploring breakdown cues thoroughly.

How to resolve a breakdown

Breakdown resolution strategies were grouped into direct and indirect strategies.

Direct strategies included:

- **delegation**
- **increasing available resources**
- **negotiation**
- **using authority**
- **mentoring**
- **sending regional representatives forward**
- **replacing non-functional staff**

Indirect strategies focussed on pre-planning and predictive strategies, such as building cooperative relationships with group leaders and state level coordinators.

Why is it important?

Regional level coordinators have the ability to detect and resolve breakdowns that can severely impact operational decision making.

By understanding what strategies are most effective decision making tools and potential training programs may be developed for regional staff.