



UNPACKING THE DIFFERENCES IN PERFORMANCE BETWEEN PRE-FORMED AND AD HOC INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS

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Background

Does it matter whether incident management team (IMT) members have previously worked together? This project investigated the teamwork and decision making differences between pre-formed and ad-hoc IMTs. Two important questions arise from the recent move by several fire agencies to use pre-formed teams:

1. In what ways do pre-formed teams perform differently to ad hoc teams in which members haven't worked together previously?
2. What can fire agencies do to help members of ad hoc teams quickly become more familiar with one another?

Methodology

Experimental simulation was used to assess the teamwork and decision making differences between small ad hoc (unfamiliar) and pre-formed (familiar) IMTs managing two bushfire scenarios. Experienced incident management personnel worked in four-person teams to complete a variety of tasks including situation reporting, preparing a media release advising the local community, and providing a handover briefing for the following IMT shift. The performance of the 32 participant teams was assessed from: (a) the quality of the reports and briefings produced, (b) subject matter expert observations, and (c) individual participant self-report questionnaires.

Results

Compared with ad hoc teams, pre-formed teams showed clearly superior performance on a range of measures:

- the number of fireground events attended to,
- the quality of the teams' responses to fireground events,
- the quality of teams' handover briefings and documents,
- timeliness of decision making,
- level of team situation awareness, and
- team processes (e.g., communication, coordination, leadership, trust and satisfaction).

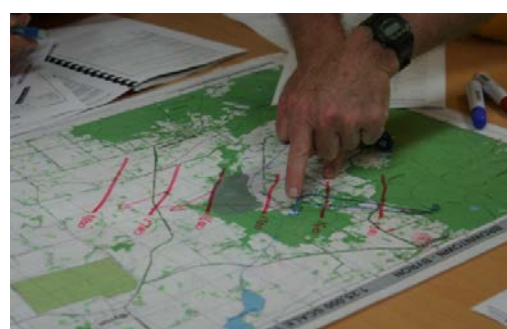


Potential implications

The results suggest three types of intervention may assist ad hoc teams to work more effectively together. The first two interventions, brief résumés and short question and answers (Q&A), can be used by ad hoc IMTs during the initial phases of deployment. The brief résumés and short Q&As enable a functional or sectional manager to increase their knowledge of team members that they haven't worked with before. Moreover, by asking simple questions about a new team member's competencies and relevant IMT experience, the Q&A provide the opportunity to develop rapport. The third intervention, exercising personnel who may work together, has to some extent been incorporated into agencies' training and exercise programs. These interventions aim to improve team coordination by increasing member knowledge of each other and fostering effective working relationships.

End-user statement: Deputy Chief Officer John Haynes, Victorian Country Fire Authority

As an Incident Controller at many large incidents I have experienced first-hand the difference in performance of an ad hoc team compared to one that has worked together previously. The time it takes to form a cohesive team can take many shifts, and in most instances there is not enough time for this to occur in a dynamic fire situation where the community expects high performance. As a consequence Victoria is trialling multi agency pre formed teams this coming summer to strengthen the bond within teams and to ensure high performance from the commencement of the incident. Peter's research provides invaluable insights not only into the performance differences between pre-formed and ad hoc teams, but also useful suggestions on how to get the most out of teams that must be put together in the traditional ad hoc fashion.



Acknowledgements

The simulation scenarios were developed with the kind assistance of Roger Strickland, Ian Morley, and Julie Boord of the Country Fire Authority. The IMT personnel participating in this study were from the NZ National Rural Fire Authority, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, Department of Environment and Conservation (WA), Country Fire Service (SA), Tasmanian Fire Service, Forestry Tasmania, and Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife. Ken Hall and Jayson McKellar from the NSW Rural Fire Service, and Alan Henderson and Stephen Dovey from NSW Parks and Wildlife Service generously observed and assessed the teams in this study.