

The case study method and management learning: making the most of a strong story telling tradition in emergency services management education

Mark Wall considers the use of case studies in emergency services management training

Abstract

Emergency services managers learn from practice yet practice is an expensive and sometimes a dangerous teacher. The case study method allows for a vicarious experience and reflection on practice and has use as a management teaching and research method. As such it should feature early and often in emergency services management education and in related training and development for practitioners in this field.

Introduction

Story telling is embedded into the culture of emergency services, and it is a powerful medium for replicating and improving that culture. Rather than rail against the tendency, trainers and educators should capture, harness and direct it. Story telling by experienced emergency services personnel, and the facilitated, critical and reflexive examination of those stories, can be usefully employed in the education and development of emergency service managers.

The focus of this research is on the selection of teaching methods that support the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes—dispositions in other words—suitable to good emergency services management. Eventually, a larger body of work will be attempted, but here a strong tradition of story telling is joined to a body of literature on the case study method. The intention is to propose the combination of story telling and case study as a viable educational method for fostering appropriate dispositions for emergency services managers.

To ensure that a proposal for a recommended way of teaching management is convincing, as to its merits relative to other approaches, story telling must be established as endemic to the culture of emergency

services and some parallels must be drawn between it and the case study method. The case study method itself is introduced and interrogated as a research and teaching approach relevant to this field. The attempt is to build on and acknowledge the strong story telling tradition, and to show why this tradition lends support to the proposed teaching method. For reasons of space only, discussion is limited to general management, made up of the functions of planning, leading, organising and controlling, rather than operations, incident or event management.

Story telling traditions

Story telling is one of the ways individuals seek to validate, and sometimes embellish, their experience and practice. In telling the story, the speaker passes on information about values, practices and lessons learnt. Stories are often, and mainly, the means by which organisational culture is replicated, reinforced and reinvigorated (Bartol et al 2001:82). Herreid (1998:163) notes that 'stories are ... natural allies in the transmittal of the wisdom of the tribe from one generation to the next'. In the emergency services field, as in most action-oriented and action-based vocations, there is a strong story telling tradition.

Experience shows that emergency services and the armed forces rely on inter-action story telling to reinforce, and indeed to introduce, certain values and practices. There is also a kudos associated with having been at a certain scene or incident. The resulting 'war story' both celebrates and advertises this. The sort of 'hot action' that occurs only occasionally in policing, for example, is usually short lived but seems to characterise that work in the popular imagination, is usually short lived. By their nature, war story type events usually involve only a few actors, usually the first and second responding crews, in key positions. Most emergency services work is fairly routine and dull, sufficiently so to have been described by more than one retiring officer as 'years and years of boredom punctuated by moments of

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Adequately training and equipping personnel is a foundation for successful teams.

stark terror'. The attraction to action is therefore quite strong, even understandable, and most jurisdictions have experienced problems with an over response to certain incidents. In my own practice I became aware of a service that had difficulty meeting its mid-week, night shift patrol car commitment. Yet the same service managed to field nearly three times that number of cars, at short notice, in response to a high-speed pursuit. Officers attended from all over the command area 'just in case' — just in case they could help, just in case they could get into the action and, arguably, just in case they could at least see something that might sustain a later anecdote or story.

None of this is problematic. Indeed it is appropriate for emergency services to have an orientation to action. For the most part the consequences of this can be accepted, including a temporarily reduced response to lower priority incidents, and some elaborate story telling, rather more easily than the reverse. What can emerge is a fixation with the 'front line', if there is such a thing, and a glorification of the operational officer at the expense of meaningful consideration of other issues. General management, not so much incident or event management, can be one of these.

Stories of good management do not abound in the emergency services (in fact it is probably fair to say the opposite). This is not to propose that examples of good practice are similarly rare. Successful teams and competent individuals are not 'found', they are not in nature, rather they are recruited, selected, trained, deployed, equipped and remunerated. Good

management puts the rescue team, for example, into the vicinity of good practice and the resulting good practice story implies, at least in part, a good management one. What is required is a harnessing of the story telling process to deliver good management content. Suitable stories, cases in other words, need to be built up by educators and trainers.

Good emergency services management

What is largely missing from the contemporary considerations of emergency services management are those topics related to its higher level functioning and philosophy of practice. Questions such as 'why we serve' (Hermitage 1999) and 'how management can directly support service delivery' (Small 2002) need to be routinely appraised. Similarly, questions relating to learning and professionalism like the ones raised in this paper, require examination (Ramirez 1996). In the end though, the focus remains on 'how management can be good in both senses – technical and ethical' (Gardner 2002).

Most emergency services managers learn their professions essentially as apprentices learn their trades. There is always a degree of 'looking over the shoulder' of a manager or supervisor, which is supplemented by some brief classroom-based exposure to management theory. The result is largely a continuation of the status quo now underpinned by a pet theory or popular opinion. Managers rely on satisfactory practice, and theory or opinion that corresponds, rather than critical research and action learning to inform their decision-making. There are a number of reasons for this but one that can be relatively easily changed is the practice of management education.

Management practice is amenable to change and is not yet faultless. What is required is a clear path that breaks with traditional management practice and a licence to tread that alternate path. In other words, alternative management prescriptions need to be sanctioned and modelled. Part of that modelling work can be done through story telling, and the vicarious learning available through the case study method. Management educators in emergency services can use the case method both to research managerial alternatives and to teach them. Research is, after all, a process of inquiry leading to understanding, while education is a process of facilitating the development of understanding in others.

Research and learning using the case study method

According to Walker (1980:33) a case study is, 'the examination of an instance in action'. He continues, 'the study of particular incidents and events, and the selective collection of information on biography, personality, intentions and values, allows the case study worker [writer, teacher, student] to capture and portray

these elements of a situation that give it meaning' (Walker 1980:33). Essentially case study research is descriptive and the task is centred on the portrayal of just what is going on in a certain individual instance. The case researcher looks to provide a thick, rich description of context, specifics, individuals, groups, generalities and uniqueness in the face of questions such as, 'What is happening here?', 'What is it like to be a manager here?', 'How can others share this experience?'. The case study researcher first builds the portrayal of the case under examination and does this through techniques such as participant observation, unstructured interviewing and document examination. The intent is to produce a fine-grained description with an emphasis on 'illumination' through the specifics of the case (Stenhouse 1978). Admittedly this is more than simple, one-dimensional story telling but it is a difference of degree not kind.

MacDonald and Walker (1975:4) add that 'as a method of research, the case-study commands a respected place in the repertoire of theory builders from a wide range of disciplines; medicine, law, engineering, psychology and anthropology are examples. The case can generate a theory as well as test one; instance [or example] and abstraction [or theory] go hand in hand in an iterative pattern of cumulative growth'. The case study method is generally seen as a set of rules, procedures and techniques that stand in fairly stark contrast to the usual suspects of experiment and survey-based research. Yin (1993:xi) notes that 'the method is appropriate when investigators desire to:

- a) define topics broadly and not narrowly;
- b) cover contextual conditions and not just the phenomenon of study; and
- c) rely on multiple and not singular sources of evidence'.

As management is largely a matter of decision-making, the overall aim of a management case study is to explore, describe, illustrate, test, explain or exploit certain decisions within particular contexts, among various agents and from multiple perspectives (Hussey and Hussey 1997).

Eventually, case study research and teaching needs to stand or fall on its utility as a means to a selected end. While ends will vary, it seems reasonable to suggest that the case study will have 'understanding' as at least one of its objectives. The illuminative-descriptive case study is a case in point. I can recall the matter of a police officer who became too overweight to fit into a patrol car. Such a case can be used to 'floodlight' a general area of management concern, say, managing the recalcitrant or depressed employee through the technique of 'spotlighting' a particular manager – employee relationship. The case description would allow the reader to experience vividly the 'instance' (the officer's

experience, the gradual development of the problem, the lack of timely intervention, etc). The question can then be asked (appreciating that the study is socially and culturally constructed both as a case and as a study) '...what is there in this case study that I can apply to my own situation, and what clearly does not apply?' (Walker 1980:34). The emphasis is on the reader as problem solver/practitioner and this is so even when interpretive explanation or naturalistic generalisation is attempted by the case study author. Such a strong 'reader' focus allows the case study the extreme luxury of an end outside the sometimes esoteric and narrow world of research. The end proposed is an understanding that can lead to wise action as a professional practitioner.

Teaching and learning with cases

A story is suitable as a case, and ultimately suitable as a case study, for a number of reasons. Primarily, a suitable story must be fleshed out, it must be more than a passing anecdote and it must be populated by the characters it involves. For example, in raw form, a critical anecdote, a unilateral diatribe, a subversive spray, a tall story and a plaintive bleat are not suitable. This is not to say that cases critical of management should not be used any more than it is to say that cases critical of the workforce should not. Indeed any type of story is suitable if it can be 'turned over', examined from a number of perspectives, interrogated for context, vicariously experienced, and studied and researched in all its rich detail.

Yin (1993) provides a detailed description of case studies as a research tool that clearly points to their use as a teaching and learning method. By classifying case studies as exploratory, descriptive and explanatory, Yin appears to be targeting the higher level learning objectives of application and analysis (Bloom 1956 cited in Grossman 1994:7). Leenders et al (2001:5–7) make the link more explicit when they note that the case study method permits participants, including the writer, educator and students, to 'learn by doing and teaching others'. They maintain that the skills developed from the approach include:

- qualitative and quantitative analytical skills;
- critical thinking skills;
- decision-making skills;
- formulating congruent action and implementation plans; and
- application skills.

The method itself is not new as a pedagogical device or teaching practice. Although it is often attributed to the Harvard Business School, or more generally to the teaching of law and medicine (Hunt et al 1977; Gray and Constable 1983; Davis 1998). Mauffette-Leenders et al (2001:v) claim that the basis or origin of the case study is the Socratic method. This is the method of

teaching, not by telling, but by asking. The facilitator uses participant discussion and guided questioning to move through the case, to introduce variations and hypotheticals and to test conclusions, generalisations and rules of thumb. The process is critical, it calls on participants to give reasons, to know why something should be done or is the case. Most importantly it demands critical thinking, identifies gaps in the evidence and uncovers assumptions.

Emergency services management, as a paradigm practitioner discipline with an orientation to practical problem solving, decision-making and action, can benefit from case based teaching. The case method, with its focus on action in real settings, can be used in the profession to validate and extend good practice. Cases that are practice-based and problem-oriented can inform novice and experienced practitioners alike. Equally important, exposure to the case study method allows research to become part of practice. Cases are digestible and they accord with the practitioner culture. They do not intimidate like other forms of research.

Practitioners competent in the method can experience new or other instances, and will also become better skilled in interrogating their past and current professional practice. The intention is that the practical knowledge of experience (know how) is extended, and that some of it is even made explicit as propositional knowledge (know that or know what) for the cumulative benefit of the individual practitioner and the profession. Additionally, Merseth (1994:1) reports that case studies have utility by exposing users to multiple perspectives. Students interpret cases differently and knowing this helps them to appreciate and work better

within a pluralist society. Accordingly, case study students can grapple with the central normative issues of public service (know why) within the relative safety of an educational setting.

The basic goal and principles of a philosophy for emergency services management must be based on good management practice, and not on any apartheid of knowledge. Good management is good in both senses of the phrase: that is, technically and ethically (following Gardner 2002) and will be appropriately made out in the three dimensions of:

- 1) knowing how to do something;
- 2) knowing what should be done; and
- 3) knowing why.

Management of this type will depend not on scientific generalisations and replication but on decision-making and judgment that is true to context, defensible, and reasonable in the circumstances.

Case study research, and the case study method, can directly address practitioner concerns with good work and as such, emergency services managers are 'natural case study workers' (Walker 1980:34). Decision-making is their primary work and each decision is made in the absence of textbook answers and 'silver-bullet' solutions. As Thompson and Strickland (2001:C-2) put it, 'each managerial situation has unique aspects, requiring its own diagnosis, judgment and tailor-made actions'. The case study method straddles the chasm between passive methods of classroom instruction and inherently risky and expensive workplace learning. Learning is by doing, but the action of the instance is vicariously experienced and the analysis, discussion



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Emergency services training requires action based and social setting situations.



Practitioner students need to understand research and practical application to become good decision-makers.

and subsequent reaction are done by the learner as a surrogate to the original case actor. The essential premise is that through knowing one instance we are better prepared to know another. The emphasis is on what often, frequently, usually or generally happens and what can be done about it. The significant variables, in a real setting, give you a feel for managing uncertainty rather than a knack at law-like prediction.

Room for improvement

As Walker (1980:34) has noted, practitioners are ‘natural case study workers ... they all tend to make judgments on the basis of knowledge of the particular instance, rather than by reference to research findings’. They are not looking as researchers for penultimate ‘truths’, but for guidance for good practice.

The case study method is proposed as a method of outstanding utility in the preparation of decision-makers for complex social settings (McAninch 1993, Hunt et al 1977 and Gray and Constable 1983). Practitioner students are immersed in the detail of a researched instance, and required to hone their skills as decision-makers. The objectives of the method in this context are to:

- increase understanding;
- build analytical skills;
- practise planning;
- enhance judgment; and
- gain in-depth exposure to various contexts (Thompson and Strickland 2001:C-3).

For case study teaching, Hamilton (1978) proposes a context-based interpretation that generates provisional generalisations for verification through comparison and action. In essence, Hamilton (1978) calls for a way of knowing that fits earlier prescriptions for a reasonable basis for management decisions. Emergency services management is a social and action based profession.

Accordingly, knowledge in the field can have utility only in light of informed action in a social setting. The crucial ingredient is judgment and a first test of that can be drawn from Walker (1980:45) who writes that, ‘case study research relies heavily on face validity – the judgement that the results seem to fit the reality.’ As the problems of emergency services management and case study research are seldom mechanistic, or technological, evaluation of possible solutions needs to take into account the complexity of the case. The idea of an initial judgment based on face validity is useful here. The concept is similar to the lawyer’s test of ‘at first blush’ and, while first impressions can deceive, it works as a starting point for critical analysis, participant discussion and eventual provisional conclusion.

Conclusion and future directions

The ultimate purpose of emergency services management education is wise action and good practice. The use of the case study method allows learners to synthesise a critical research and action learning approach into their professional practice. This is an example of the much vaunted ‘learning to learn’. Case students do learn content but more importantly, they learn process. Case studies discourage rote learning, thrive on complexity, explore plural perspectives, are open to the contested nature of public policy, and they best approximate that most powerful educational method – learning from experience. Most authors agree that case studies extend practice, aid practical deliberation and assist reflection. Case work requires the student to give reasons, to ask why and to anticipate. As the skilful case practitioner unfolds the story, builds the complexity and introduces the subtleties the student is close to the instance in action, safe in the educational setting and free to experiment, research and learn.

The case study method is proposed as a research, teaching and learning technique in emergency services management education that has educational and

organisational merit. There is sufficient support in the literature to make the first claim. The fact that management in the emergency services is neither perfect nor unchangeable makes out the second.

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Author

Mark Wall is a consulting academic in professional development for police and emergency services in Australia and internationally. His research interest is in the area of management learning and teaching. He is currently completing his doctorate at the University of Technology, Sydney.

