Leading through recovery

Key lessons from Roger Sutton

Roger Sutton was Chief Executive of the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority for four years following the Christchurch earthquakes. Fifteen years on, we are privileged to share some of Roger's hard-won reflections about what actually works when leading communities through disaster.

SET EXPECTATIONS

Recovery isn't a marathon with a clear finish line. It's more like an adventure race consisting of navigating unknown terrain with your team, dealing with setbacks, taking wrong turns, and constantly adapting.

> *People say disaster recovery is not a sprint, it's a marathon. But a marathon has a defined course and ends after 42.2 kilometres. This is much more like a week-long adventure race. You kind of have an idea where the endpoint is, but you have no idea how you're going to get there. You do it in a team. The course is uncertain. You'll go up the wrong valley and need to retreat and try somewhere else. You're only as good as your weakest team member. And sleep is important· you need to rest.*

Effective recovery leadership combines strategic thinking with deep empathy, technical expertise with political awareness, and relentless persistence with the wisdom to change direction when needed.

GET YOUR TEAM RIGHT FROM THE START

If you can, hire teams of people who have already worked together, rather than individuals.

People who know each other can have much more direct, honest conversations. They can say "Richard, you made the argument yesterday. It's not working. It still stands for these reasons." They'll tell you straight up when your ideas won't work.

You want people who are tolerant and forgiving, those who can engage with angry critics and still show up productively the next day.

Recovery needs leaders who will talk to anyone, even community members who've just hurled abuse at them in public meetings.

SET THE CULTURE EARLY (AND MAKE IT STICK)

Recovery organisations require a different organisational culture.

Be openly transparent about mistakes, regularly discuss lessons learned, and constantly work with your harshest critics.

Try "premortems," get your team to imagine your current project has crashed and burned in six months, then figure out what went wrong. It's a great way to surface problems before they become catastrophes.

GET THE BEST EXPERTISE AND KEEP IT CLOSE

Start with the very best experts you can find. They know where other great experts are and how to communicate complex issues publicly.

Anyone less than the best will be overly conservative with safety decisions, creating expensive red tape when you're dealing with ambiguity.

Bring key experts directly onto your staff rather than using external consultants. Outside firms add unnecessary risk margins that become disruptive when managing uncertainty.

TALK STRAIGHT, TALK FAST, AND LISTEN

In crisis, speed trumps perfection.

Messages that are 90% accurate but delivered quickly build more trust than perfect information that arrives slowly. People want to believe you're telling them what you know as you know it.

Show up regularly at community meetings, even when you don't have much new to say. Stand at the door as people arrive. You can read the car park dynamics and work out who really needs your attention.

> *Stand at the door and greet people as they arrive at community meetings. If you stand at the door, you can see the car park. You can see the body language of people as they get out of the car and you work out who the real problem is. You'll see Neville and Raewyn get out of the car, and you'll see Raewyn look at Neville in a really angry way. You know you need to be talking to Neville.*

Learn the art of the proper apology.

Sometimes a simple acknowledgment of someone's frustration makes all the difference. Use the "three T's": Time (do it quickly), Turf (on their territory), and Terms (on their terms). Plus a fourth T - Talk. Let them speak first.

Work with your critics early on. Some of your loudest opponents can become valuable allies if you approach them with genuine respect.

EMBRACE "GOOD ENOUGH" EXPECTATIONS

When people have lost everything, 10% of normal service beats 0% every time. This is the "10% rule" and it challenges many instincts. When your power's gone off at home, a normal 10-kilowatt supply allows you to run your hot water cylinder, stove, and air conditioning system. But a tenth of that —one kilowatt—gives you the lights, the Wi-Fi, the fridge and the phone charger.

Remember that you're navigating unknown territory. Sometimes you'll head up the wrong valley and need to retreat and try a different route. The goal isn't perfect execution.

WORK AROUND POLITICAL REALITIES

Politicians face natural constraints in disaster environments. They struggle to delegate high-risk decisions, find it difficult to work with opponents, and focus heavily on media management. Understanding these limitations helps you plan around them.

If you need to reverse a decision later, make the announcement yourself rather than having a politician do it. You can change course more easily than they can.

Use your political opponents as information sources. They see problems your allies miss and represent community voices you need to understand.

BUILD SYSTEMS FOR PERSONAL SURVIVAL

Create external support networks of mentors who can provide objective perspective and trusted advisors who aren't caught up in daily operations.

Monitor your wellbeing systematically. Track whether you're exercising, and maintaining friendships. Have someone with permission to tell you when stress is affecting your judgment. Protect the people keeping you functional. Your assistants, deputies, and close team members need resources and protection from political pressure.

THE LONG VIEW

Recovery unfolds over years, not months. Some people will need support for over a decade.

Think about rotating leadership every couple of years. The environment is punishing, and even good leaders develop blind spots. Fresh perspectives prevent tunnel vision.

There will be other disasters. Take the opportunity to build recovery capability for future events.

> *No one from Wellington City Council came down and wanted to be seconded to learn for Wellington's recovery or Wellington's disaster. Very interesting. I didn't invite anybody, but no one was sent. I think there was so much they could have learned."*

If you'd like to hear more about recovery from Roger, contact rogerasutton@gmail.com
Interested in building recovery leadership capability? Check out RRANZ, rranz.org.nz

Further questions? Get in touch with Tracy (tracy.hatton@resorgs.org.nz) or Charlotte (charlotte.brown@resorgs.org.nz).