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Heat of the moment

Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission recently concluded its hearings into the devastating Black Saturday bushfires of 2009. Amid the stories of courage, heroism and unimaginable 173 people lost their lives – a focal point of the commission's attention was the thorny issue of leadership.

As counsel assisting the commission, Jack Rush QC, was central to his assessment of Victoria's emergency command and its role in the unfolding disaster. Despite his ire, he was responsible for much of the most nuanced discussion about leadership.

Leadership cannot be divorced from command. Command does not merely involve the issuing of orders or directions, or sweeping in to take control at an incident control centre. Command, we say, demands a presence, both to inform and if necessary to reassure and inspire," he says in his final submission.

During the hearings it was revealed that the Victorian police chief commissioner, Ian Nixon, left the emergency command centre on the evening of Black Saturday to attend dinner with friends.

Mr Nixon was critical of the "lamentable lack of visibility and leadership" from the emergency command. For a time of such dire emergency, leadership was about being there.

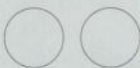
Leadership and command is not to be confused by a retreat to so-called co-ordination, or to broad oversight.

Leadership and command is not to be confused by being available if necessary, or by the use of a telephone. Leadership and command is an emergency crisis presence," Rush told the royal commission.

Mr Nixon could not fathom how "at the very hour of crisis" Victoria's emergency leadership did not consider its presence an imperative.

It is unacceptable ... that at the height of the fire and emergency, as many sought refuge in CFA sheds and ovals, on main streets, as others gathered in many in vain to save themselves and their families – that those in charge of the legislative structure in this state were not present on duty, exercising and showing leadership by their presence at that time," Rush protested.

Mr Nixon's response to the bushfires, although dedicated and courageous, was sometimes running on raw emotion. There was no shortage of heroes on Black Saturday. What was lacking was the inspiration, resolve and presence that strong leadership provides.



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always be an element of exaggeration, that's human nature. The trick is to test out these exaggerations and correlate what's said with other things said in the interview and with what you are factually aware of."

As well as interview skills – which Salt has developed over a 20-year career – intuition also plays a part in sizing up candidates. A range of "non-verbal clues", such as eye contact, facial expressions, confidence and nervousness, can be revealing.

"It's the sum total of what you're seeing," he says. "The face can be unforgiving."

Having the gift of the gab won't help either a candidate or a recruiter.

"The more a candidate talks, the greater the likelihood they will trip over themselves if they're not telling the truth. The more you [the recruiter] talk, the less you will get from the candidate," Salt says.

Candidates with well-rehearsed patter aren't doing themselves any favours. "You can hear when somebody has been coached or mentored and that's when all the red lights go off."

Salt says that in the case of a shortlist of candidates with similar skills and experience, the decision by the employer will be personal.

"We tell our candidates that it's going to come down to the chemistry and rapport in the room," he says.

"Organisations have what I call a cultural inventory and when you have four or five people who can technically do the job, the decision makers in those organisations are instinctively going to employ people who are like-minded."

Salt says that he has never placed a candidate who is technically brilliant but who is not culturally in tune with the employer. "Conversely, I have said to a client, 'This person is not completely qualified, but he shares your values'. I have placed that candidate so many times I've lost count."

For Justine Eden, director of Brisbane company Eden Ritchie Recruitment, the little things often count the most.

Well before she gets down to compiling shortlists, Eden is looking for tell-tale clues. Job applicants who call her for more information in response to a job advertisement get immediate points.

"I always note the ones who call me to find out more about the role. I invite applicants to call [in her job

WHAT RECRUITERS LOOK FOR

Ability to do the job, including the candidate's knowledge, skill set, personal and professional abilities, experience and potential.

range of topics makes a difference in the hiring decision.

Personal values

Integrity, passion, drive and confidence.

Communication skills

Written and oral, ability to listen.

Independence

A fearless ability to speak your mind, the confidence to offer an alternative solution and a preparedness to stick your neck out.

Career fit

Recruiters want to see a "career logic" in the position you are applying for.

Cultural alignment

Candidates have to be a cultural match with the team and organisation.

Interpersonal and social skills

A warm, engaging, intelligent, intuitive ability to interact and add to a conversation on a

Simplicity

Employers value the skills and experience that cut through the noise and fads and focus on the core issues.

Source: Ambition, Salt & Shein

advertisements], but very few do – only 2 per cent," she says.

Turn-offs include covering letters not tailored to the position; covering letters with errors – "getting my name wrong" – or no covering letter at all. Twenty-page resumes are a mistake. "That person potentially has a problem communicating and writing succinct reports," she says.

Applicants who have a different job every 12 months, meanwhile, make Eden "a bit nervous".

What Eden likes is when candidates articulate what the position means to their career. "So many people will tell you what they've done in the past, but few can articulate their career plan, 'This is what I'm looking to do in the future and this is how this position fits'," she explains.

Recruiter Gary Denton agrees. The managing director of Marble Group, which has offices in Sydney and Perth, says "career fit" is an important indicator of a candidate's suitability.

"Likeability plays a big part. If you exude a strong positive energy, that's something that will carry over for the client as well. If the recruiter spots it, the client is going to spot it too," he says. **BRW**



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