

7 Where to Next?

If you don't know what to do, that's okay. But do something. Start somewhere. ... There is no model for this [responding to unique disasters] ... but we're smart enough around here and we're well connected enough that we're going to create [something].

—Pete Williams, Black Saturday entrepreneur

Disasters and crises abound. Recent data even show that disasters are increasing in frequency and severity. Now more than ever, we need to be better prepared as individuals, communities, and organizations to respond to the crises of others in meaningful ways. Organizing compassionate responses to crises is both timely and timeless. It is timely in that human suffering is widespread throughout society (Rynes et al. 2012) and has various causes, including conditions at work (Dutton, Workman, and Gardin 2014), personal tragedy (Hazen 2008), and adverse environmental conditions, such as natural or human-caused disasters (Frost 2003). It is timeless because crisis, loss, and disaster are fundamental aspects of the human experience, and all individuals will be exposed to some sort of tragedy at some point in time (Bonanno 2004).

We hope that some of the ideas shared in *Spontaneous Venturing* will generate new ways of thinking in terms of both academic research and practical disaster response. In particular, we believe the stories from which we developed this book provide clear paths for how current programs can be enhanced and new ideas can be developed:

- In chapter 1, we told of the personal costs of disaster. Disasters touch many people, and often continue to impact communities for years following the initial destruction. However, while disasters are horrific and destructive, they also reveal a compassionate, resilient,

and enduring side of humanity, whereby victims help fellow victims overcome crisis.

- In chapter 2, we explained the traditional perspective of responding to disasters: the command-and-control model. This model clearly has a place in responding to crises in that it allows for the engagement and coordination of institutional actors (e.g., emergency responders) and generates or passes through many resources. However, the assumption that the command-and-control model is best suited for all scenarios is fundamentally inaccurate. Disasters are idiosyncratic and surprising, and they have an unequal impact on victims. As a result, it is nearly impossible to fully prepare for a disaster. Therefore, disaster planning should include ideas that incorporate spontaneous compassionate venturing as such efforts occur in the aftermath of nearly every disaster, are driven by local residents, and provide the most effective response—one that is customized, speedy, and of appropriate magnitude.
- In chapter 3, we shared the stories of local people who organized in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires. Individuals immediately took action despite being victims themselves, demonstrating the value of local knowledge and relationships in mobilizing resources to help others. Amazingly, we found these individuals generally had to work around rather than with those acting within a command-and-control framework. Furthermore, we also learned the incredible destruction and loss experienced by the Black Saturday actors and how, despite all this, they were far from helpless.
- In chapter 4, we extended the concepts developed in chapter 3 to better understand just how those affected by the disaster managed to mobilize resources despite experiencing considerable losses. We highlighted the value of social networks, in particular brokerage relationships, whereby compassionate entrepreneurs bridged the relationship between resource providers and victims. Furthermore, we found that entrepreneurs accessed resources in different ways: some bundled and repurposed what was available locally, whereas others sought (and received) resources from outside investors and donors. In short, entrepreneurs did everything possible to resource their efforts to alleviate suffering. Finally, this chapter provided a way of measuring just how helpful response actions might be. For example, if a response is rapid and large in magnitude but is insufficiently customized, it may not help at all. This type of response may end up

hurting victims more than helping them. As individuals, communities, and others respond to suffering, rather than responders simply assuming they are helping, they should be mindful of how much they are actually helping.

- In chapter 5, we further expanded on how venturing to help others helps victims. In particular, we highlighted how when victims take action to help others, it helps them by strengthening their behavioral, emotional, and assumptive resilience. This is important in that victim organizing to help others appears to create a virtuous cycle for the victim-actor: venturing leads to social interaction, community connections, and other positive outcomes that further reinforce resilience. From the stories we shared, we found that when victims were capable of providing a response but did not, they were more likely to experience increased dysfunction. Therefore, it is critical that victims not be treated as helpless, as victims themselves appear to hold a key to their own recovery.
- Finally, in chapter 6, we explored spontaneous compassionate venturing in the least developed country of Haiti. We wanted to see whether compassionate venturing was a phenomenon limited only to resource-rich countries or whether it could also occur in the most unlikely of locations. We found that after one of the most devastating disasters ever to hit a nation, victims still organized and provided effective responses to suffering. However, these responses differed in *how* they alleviated suffering. Some ventures helped victims transform their situation, whereas others maintained an ongoing subsistence model. We advocate for efforts to transform victims by helping them move through stages to “build back better.” While these processes are difficult, they ultimately provide greater freedom, growth, and functioning for victims.

So What? Who Cares? A Call to Action

What can be done to better prepare for the future? In the remaining pages of this book, we develop some ideas for how various stakeholders can personally embrace the principles of compassionate venturing.

There Is a Role for Centralization—But It Is Not the *Only* Role or Even the *Most Important* Role for All Disaster Situations

Though we have perhaps been hard on the command-and-control approach, we do not mean to imply it has no place. Quite the

contrary—there is clearly a very important role for emergency responders and institutional resource providers, which deliver incredible services after a crisis. For example, the Red Cross and other international aid organizations are often among the earliest responders to a disaster area and most often draw on local personnel for this response. Furthermore, the sheer scale of destruction caused by disasters inevitably requires an infusion of resources well beyond the capabilities of victim-organizers.

However, alleviating others' suffering is not just about restoring lost resources. Victim needs are multiplex in nature, involving psychological, physical, and emotional needs. Many of these needs cannot be met by outsiders, who simply cannot fully understand or relate to victims' experiences and needs. Furthermore, victims gain benefits from engaging in the intensive and often exhausting process of venturing. While counterintuitive, it is critical that outside responders avoid setting aside or undermining victim efforts to alleviate suffering, for allowing and enabling this type of action may be the most effective outside approach to alleviating suffering.

In sum, the most important role of outsiders is likely not just to offer basic resources but to truly enable the autonomy and action of victim-actors. Though disaster responders may feel an urge to be efficient in addressing needs as soon as possible by taking command and exercising control, they should be mindful that these actions could generate untoward long-term consequences. For example, a command-and-control response could result in the appropriation of outside resources *away* from victim-actors; it could lead to unhelpful, overgeneralized responses that cause more damage than good (e.g., off-the-shelf psychological interventions); it could promote long-term dependencies for basic needs (e.g., shelter, food, health care services) that are not sustainable and do not promote transformation; and it could discourage actors from trying to be part of their own solutions.

Thus, to those in emergency response institutions, while we honor your contribution, we implore you to be mindful of the various costs of the command-and-control model for the long-term recovery of disaster victims. We invite you to seek innovative ways to support and even encourage local action after a disaster. We encourage you to have faith in local people and businesses in all different kinds of economies, to trust that they will know best, that they will be equipped, psychologically and physically, to provide effective solutions, and that they will take steps to participate in their own recovery.

Every Situation Is Unique. Identify What Will Work Best for You and Your Community

As suggested throughout this book, but especially in chapter 5, research suggests that everyone will at some point be exposed to a potentially traumatic stressor or crisis. Though these crises may not come in the form of a disaster, they will likely provide opportunities for compassionate action. When encountering these experiences, trust your knowledge of yourself and your community. If outsiders try to tell you “That’s not how things are generally done,” but you know it is how your community functions, what you are doing is probably correct! Disasters hit communities in different ways. For example, the Black Saturday bushfires completely destroyed certain communities while leaving others virtually untouched. This is common and leads to unique circumstances for each individual community in terms of recovery. In light of the disproportionate way the Black Saturday fires affected communities, it would be inaccurate to say “All Black Saturday victims need X or “What happened to affected Black Saturday victims was Y.” Statements such as these are too general and do not reflect the real experiences and needs of disaster victims.

As a community actor, trust your specific knowledge of your community. Who are the people who can be relied on to take action? What resources do you have immediately at hand that you could deploy? Get creative! By simply believing in your community’s capacity to self-heal, you are already halfway to taking generative action. Furthermore, be aware that after a crisis, outsiders are searching for ways to truly help. If you have outside connections, consider ways to deploy their capabilities. There are so many needs after a crisis that nearly any skill or capability is useful. For example, in our Black Saturday examples, these outside sources put to use cooking skills, legal knowledge, IT knowledge, medical expertise, communication skills, an understanding of temporary housing, psychological resources, insurance help, and so forth. Most important, know that as a local person, you have the best knowledge about what resources are needed to help you and your community heal. You are the expert!

But Do Not Go It Alone. Learn from Those Who Came Before

Despite what we just said about you being the expert of your own community, you are not alone when it comes to developing long-term solutions. While no two disasters are alike, there are similarities that can be useful, especially when the goal is long-term recovery. In all our

studies, we found that many local actors made impromptu connections with disaster actors from other contexts (e.g., California forest fires in the United States, the earthquake in Mexico). That is, as the recovery evolved from the earliest stages toward an effort to rebuild communities, entrepreneurs often reached out to others to learn how they could best “build back better.”

At least two features make this approach effective. First, the pull rather than push approach to gathering outside input allows local customization of outside ideas. That is, local residents *sought* (pulled from other sources) the most relevant information for their situation rather than having general disaster information pushed from the top down. This led locals to actively explore various options in other contexts, allowing them to hand-pick aspects that transferred over. In particular, the act of seeking information from outsiders made local people more open to outside ideas that could be relevant.

Second, local residents seeking outside support could receive information that was *timely*. For example, when the town of Flower Dale, Australia, burned to the ground, it took a little time before residents were ready to consider rebuilding. However, they were ready to begin considering building back better sooner than outsiders might have assumed. Within a couple of weeks, they were already plotting to create a model of helping for future disaster victims to follow. They surprised outsiders with their ambition, in light of the destruction their town had experienced, with the loss of homes, lives, and property, and the general isolation they experienced after the disaster. As with other aspects of disaster response, timeliness appears to be one of the most critical aspects in customizing a response. When is the time right to get outsider advice on the recovery? Ask the local people!

Embrace Action and a Revitalized View of Potential Opportunities

Action is a fundamental principle of traditional entrepreneurship and the pursuit of opportunities. When it comes to potential opportunities to alleviate suffering, action is critical as well. We encourage a bias toward action. If you see a problem that needs solving, solve it! In our data, we found all different types of action: some volunteered for a number of hours or days, others initiated ventures that lasted months, while still others developed ventures that continue to this day. The long-term outcome should not be the determining factor in whether or not to do something; rather, locals should simply take action when they

notice suffering and feel they might be able to help, experimenting with what they have on hand.

When it comes to traditional opportunities, entrepreneurial actors may need to carefully weigh whether or not the business will succeed long term and the costs of taking action. In contrast, successful action to alleviate suffering may mean that a venture ceases operation once it has successfully addressed the need in the community. Furthermore, the cost of *not* taking action may be much higher than the cost of acting, both for the community and for the entrepreneurial actor.

Start Where You Are and Then Be Prepared to Think Big

Every venture or project has to start somewhere, so when alleviating others' suffering, start where you are! Taking on too much will feel daunting and may inhibit action. So start small and start with what you have. As victims of a disaster, you might consider what your own needs are. Many in our data set did just this. For example, farmers who had lost all of their fencing realized others may have experienced the same loss, so they created a fencing venture. In doing so, however, they first started by just seeing if they could organize to fence their own properties. Similarly, another victim recognized that the local community needed a sense of community. She spoke with a local church pastor and within hours set up an impromptu community center in the parking lot of the church. This community center became the temporary "hub" of the community where fellow victims could share stories over a hot meal, obtain information on the status of the fires and the recovery, and so forth.

While both these examples could be considered success stories at that point, the founders of these ventures transitioned from the initial idea to something much, much bigger. This surprised them but highlights the importance of thinking big when it comes to spontaneous venturing. In the first example, the local fencing venture became an international sensation, with volunteers coming from all over the world to participate. The organizers converted their small farm quarters from a private home for two into headquarters for the operation. They housed and fed volunteers while coordinating refencing programs across the affected area. As time went on, the founders realized they had created a network and organization capable of doing even more. They have responded to an array of disasters from 2011 to today, hewing to the mantra, "We are not just rebuilding fences, but helping

rebuild lives.” The lesson? Do not underestimate the potential impact you have; it may be much larger than you anticipate!

This principle is further exemplified in the second case noted above. The woman who founded the community center realized that the community in need was much larger than her immediate neighborhood. She partnered with two other women to create a network that reached a widespread community of people who suffered from the Black Saturday bushfires. This network led to the organization of retreats, with the founders organizing a host of resources to address the needs of the broad fire community, seeking to help people “create a new normal and realise their dreams.” Today this entrepreneur is still serving her community as the venture has continued to evolve, with new needs emerging over time.

In short, do not hesitate to think big! If it looks like there is a substantial unmet need, be the one to fill the gap. If people are flocking to your effort as volunteers, funders, or customers, you may be on your way to solving a problem even bigger than the immediate disaster response. Run with it, and be prepared for what those in our studies called an “ongoing evolution” of the venture. As the venture changes, it may end up changing you in ways you never imagined. However, it all starts with taking action, beginning where you are, and trying to address real needs in a customized way.

Don't Have the Resources? Think Again!

So you have an idea, and you know what you want to do. Now, you just need some resources! Not so fast! You have much more on hand than you might think. Do not fall victim to the “I would have ... if only I had had ...” attitude; it is debilitating and inhibits action. Remember, if you have identified a real need after a crisis, you are already far ahead of many responders—you actually know what is needed! With this in mind, now think of creative ways to address that need!

In every situation there are ideal tools or resources that fit a need, but postdisaster responding is not the context to wait for the ideal to happen. If you wait for an ideal situation to exist before stepping up to respond, you will likely be waiting forever. In Haiti, for example, an ideal world would be one in which all of Haiti's roads and infrastructure were replaced, but this may never happen. Rather than wait, venture responders can take action with what they have. This requires several things. First, be more open in considering what resources you

do have. What skills do you have? Break this list down into small chunks. Are you talented at mobilizing people? Organizing? Transporting? Getting resources from the outside? Leadership? Communication? Conducting a more detailed inventory of what you can do can lead to solutions. This will also help you push through any debilitating stance of waiting for a prepackaged set of solutions. Second, consider your network. You are more than your own skills—you are your network as well! Whom do you know who could contribute to the effort? Does that person have additional contacts? Can you create new contacts by generating publicity for your efforts? Think about how you can magnify your current network and capabilities to fill the need. Finally, think about your full set of resources (yours and your networks) and consider how you could alter or repurpose those resources for alternative purposes. Could equipment, buildings, or infrastructure be used in different ways? Now is not the time to worry (at least initially) about the long-term redeployment of resources. Instead, think: “What could be repurposed today for the short term?” As suggested throughout this book, needs will evolve. The resources needed today may not be needed tomorrow. Worrying about how long you can redeploy a resource will only inhibit action.

As in Pursuing Traditional Opportunities, There Will Be Variance in Spontaneous Ventures’ Performance

The performance of spontaneous ventures will vary, primarily with respect to response speed, customization, and magnitude. This means that there will be a number of responses, all providing different degrees and levels of value. Some responses may be small but highly customized; others may be large and more generic, such as the solicitation of financial donations. Because of this variance, responders should not try to be all things to all victims but rather should focus on alleviating suffering in whatever way is most possible. That is, all actors should be aware of others and their possible roles in providing an effective response. Command-and-control responses have a place and may be most capable of a large-scale response but will likely lack in customization and speed. Similarly, local actors may feel their response is “too small”; however, the reality is that local responses, no matter how big or small, can often be the fastest and most customized in meeting critical victim needs. For this reason, spontaneous responders should not let the fear of poor performance inhibit action. No matter how large or

small their contributions, the importance of spontaneous actors cannot be overstated.

Be More Aware as a “Helper”: Are You Really Helping?

While we have emphasized in no uncertain terms a bias toward action, it is also necessary to add one small but important qualification: responders who are “helping” need to constantly question whether or not they are indeed helping. Even the best of intentions can lead to negative or less desirable outcomes. We illustrated this in great detail in chapter 6, where we highlighted sustaining ventures. While these ventures continue to provide some value—food, shelter (tents), and access to water—they also stand in between those they help and real transformative solutions.

As with any form of venturing, compassionate venturing can evolve: prosocial motivations can shift into motivations for power or financial resources. Helping others can be rewarding—it feels good to see that you have provided for others. However, as we saw in our data, converting others into dependents is not helpful for the victims. While compassionate responders may feel good continuing to provide for others’ livelihoods, this approach is problematic in the long term. It is not sustainable, and at some point it stops being a form of help.

We suggest that any effort to help others needs to establish mechanisms to assess whether and how a venture is helping. It is critical that the venture be honest in this process by asking, “Are we doing more good than ill?” These issues are further complicated by the donation and aid provision complex that typically surrounds disasters. Millions of dollars may be poured into a disaster area that has very limited capabilities to manage and deploy those resources. We found shipping containers of materials being stored in warehouses on receipt, rather than being distributed (Black Saturday), billions of dollars donated to NGOs and foreign governments went unspent (Haiti), and thousands of volunteers flocked to disaster areas to offer aid, complicating ground logistics (both Black Saturday and Haiti). With all these resources coming into an area, waste is inevitable: resources are misappropriated, exploited, or simply forgotten until they spoil. It is our hope that by raising the profile of local spontaneous ventures as a more promising path to disaster response, future efforts can avoid waste and instead pour resources into the local ventures doing the greatest amount of good.

Conclusion

Disasters and crises are regular occurrences that have impacts on individual well-being, communities, and even global economies. However, disasters also highlight some of the best in the human experience. It is our hope that readers of this book might be as inspired as we were in reading the accounts of the courageous actions of compassionate entrepreneurs. Furthermore, our hope is that by sharing these accounts, we may help future postdisaster actors of all varieties learn from the actions of spontaneous entrepreneurs to consider taking action (for local persons), incorporating the actions of local residents and businesses in broader planning efforts (for institutional actors), and providing resources that sustain the ongoing efforts of spontaneous ventures (for outside donors).

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Spontaneous Venturing

An Entrepreneurial Approach to Alleviating Suffering in the Aftermath of a Disaster

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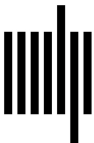
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