

LEADERSHIP



Decision Making in Crises *From Bushfires to Coronavirus*



By John Sautelle, Cultivating Leadership

New Year's Day 2020

"Wake up. We have to leave now and head to the nearest beach. An out of control bushfire is burning towards us." These chilling words from my wife Anne jolt me fully awake. It is 6:05 am on Tuesday, New Year's Eve. Anne wakes our daughter Eleanor, and son-in-law Tim. Our 6-month-old granddaughter Audrey looks at Anne with wide eyes. Moving as quickly as we can to pack both cars, I take the follow up phone message: "Evacuate now. Go to the nearest evacuation centre." An internet search suggests the Hanging Rock Sports Club, about 15 mins away, is the only evacuation centre in Batemans Bay. Assuming this will be the safest place, we depart, our miniature groodle Milly tucked away on the back seat. It is 6:25 am.

Many thousands of miles to the north, unbeknown to us and the rest of the world, the World Health Organisation is setting up an emergency Incident Management Support Team to deal with a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, reported the day before.

Little did I know the bushfires were just the start of a prolonged period of uncertainty and crisis for Australians, then humankind, on a scale not experienced in living memory, as

coronavirus cuts a deadly path across the world, separating families, friends, and workmates, collapsing health-care systems, destroying economies. All with horrendous impacts on the marginalised and disadvantaged. And never before have so many of us been called on to navigate daily decisions with potential life and death consequences, none more so than the millions of frontline workers, first responders and those keeping essential services running around the world for our benefit.

For the past 20 years, a large part of my work has been supporting leaders around the world grow and develop their capabilities, including enhancing the quality of their decision making. CEOs and senior leaders who can see across their organisation and beyond are now wrestling with urgent decisions being presented in new and daunting ways:

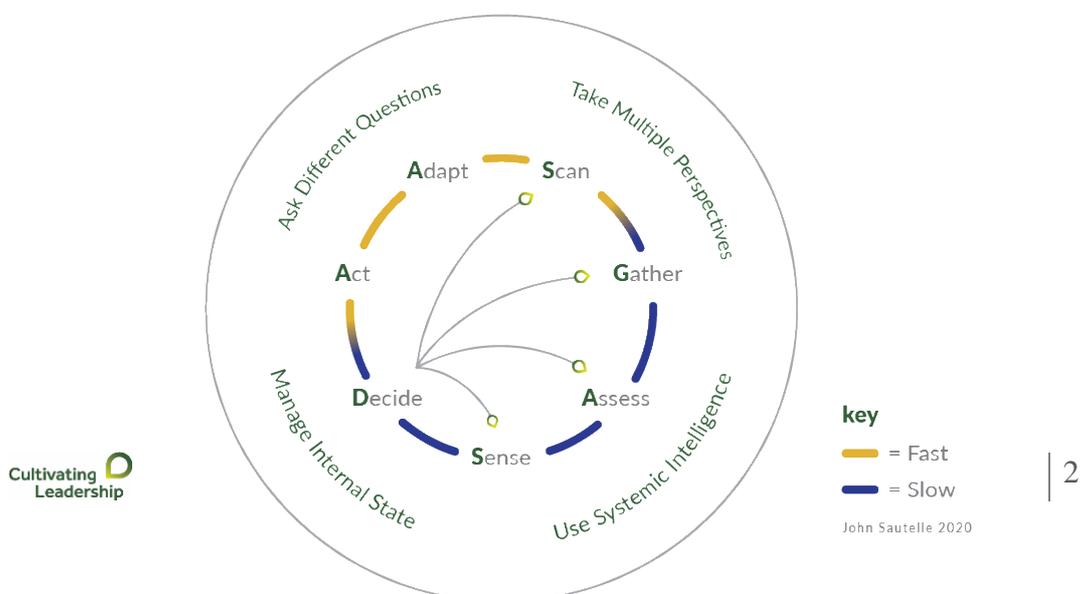
- How do I manage strong emotions and support those I lead to do likewise?
- How do I stay productive when relentless doses of adrenaline are sapping my energy?
- How do I manage the immediate crisis and plan for what might be coming ahead?
- How do I authentically connect people to a purposeful future?
- How do I pay attention to innovative opportunities emerging from the disruption?
- How might I actualise the latent hunger for more life-sustaining workplaces?

Recently, my work with leaders suggests the sheer scale and prolonged nature of the Covid-19 crisis is stretching, testing, and reshaping the ways they approach decision making. As the boundaries of personal and work lives are disrupted, and individual and collective traumas occur, 'go-to' frameworks are proving insufficient.

These challenges could overwhelm us. Wherever you are being called on to exercise leadership -- be it a large global organisation, your work team, in your community, your family or just yourself -- my hope is that this paper offers you some practical entry points to enhance the quality of your decision making. I also hope you will find some clues to answer another big question these times ask of us: *"How do I become what is needed right now?"*

Decision Making Framework

Refined in real time during our bushfire experience, the decision-making framework I have evolved is depicted below.



The framework includes four enabling practices: *Ask Different Questions*, *Take Multiple Perspectives*, *Manage Your Internal State*, and *Use Systemic Intelligence*. Some of these are highlighted as they emerge through the bushfire saga. Together they support all elements of the decision-making framework – *Scan, Gather, Assess, Sense, Decide and Act* – and the idea of moving fast *and* slow.

Tested and adapted in the sleep-deprived, adrenaline fuelled days that followed the early morning “leave now” phone calls, and currently by Covid-19, I have come to appreciate how helpful the framework can be. When things are moving quickly and in unforeseeable ways, you will find there is a continual dynamic and fluid interplay between the elements described below as you are called on to make numerous decisions, many minor and some monumental.

To take a deeper dive into these elements you can access the companion [Decision Making Guide for Complex Times](#), a stand-alone guide with detailed notes on all elements in the framework.

Scan

In a crisis, rapidly scanning your environment to get a handle on what you are dealing with is really important. Keeping one eye on threats and the other on resources you will need, and at the same time stepping back to notice helpful and unhelpful patterns in how you and those around you are responding, can be very challenging. Confronted by the bushfires, my mind turns to some key questions:

Which is the primary threat we need to focus on?

What might be coming that we need to plan for?

What resources do we have? What resources will we need?



Tuesday 6:45 am

An eerie sun rises over the ocean to the east, smoke and flecks of ash thick in the air, we arrive at the evacuation centre. Cars pour into the surrounding carparks, locals and tourists towing caravans and trailers. It is peak holiday season here. The queue grows as we register our details with the person in charge. "What do you know about the status of the fires?" The question throws him off balance. "We don't know what's happening -- I just responded to a call to come in and run the centre." He seems uncertain and anxious, as do the people from all walks of life flooding into the Hanging Rock Sports Club, young and old, fit and frail, singles and couples, families – and assorted pets. We quickly scan our immediate environment and realise, through no fault of the community volunteers who run it, the centre is not up to the task it is facing. The sports club is up a flight of stairs, without easy access for people with limited mobility. Inside there is no food, limited supplies of water, no back-up generator and no separate space for babies and children. With questions about the fire-rating of the building, I make note of the only viable escape route – across the playing fields to the east, through the vegetated littoral zone and sand dunes to the beach. I make a quick dash into the Batemans Bay town centre to buy food, extra water, coffee and extra batteries for our torches.

During the morning, two things happen which shake the assumptions we made that the safest place to be is the evacuation centre. I overhear a chilling conversation: "My husband is with the State Emergency Service – he just called to say the fire just burnt through the communications centre and is heading our way, and they don't know if they can defend us."



Within minutes of hearing this, the viability of an alternate escape route to the beach goes up in smoke as a spot fire ignites the band of bush between us and the sand dunes. I watch an Elvis helicopter repeatedly bomb the fire with water sucked up from the ocean, wondering if it has done enough. And then the power goes off and we are enveloped in a choking, hot, smoky darkness.

Manage your Internal State

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. ~ Viktor Frankl

Central to decision making under pressure is our ability to notice and manage our internal state – which is actually one of the few things we can control. When crisis tips you into a chaotic world, the ability to remain calm becomes even more important. Only from a calm, centred space can we choose our responses. When we react automatically out of fear, anger or anxiety, we paralyse ourselves, or precipitate rash, risky actions. We also transmit our stress to those around us. This is especially problematic for leaders who can then amplify contagiously the stress of their people.

In the bushfires there were only a small number of things within our control. We had a clear direction -- maximising safety and minimising damage to our health -- against which we could test all our decisions. We could control the quality of our decision-making process, and we could focus on managing our fears and anxieties.

Tuesday 12:10 pm

All morning the fire burns against the strong northerly wind, with fronts to the west and south of us. The forecast change in wind direction to the south drives one of the fire fronts directly at us. There is a moment of calm then the "southerly buster" arrives. The sky turns bright blood orange, then everything goes black as dense smoke engulfs us. Along with hundreds of others crammed into the sports club, I wonder if we will live or die.

The muscles in my stomach tighten, closely followed by a feeling of nausea, as fear grips me. For a moment, I freeze. Then I start box breathing – breathe in for a count of four, hold for a count of four, breath out for a count of four. After a few stabilising breath cycles, I can observe myself in the situation. No longer paralysed by fear, I look for Anne. She is alternating between comforting and cooling a terrified elderly woman in a wheelchair and checking on our daughter Eleanor. Eleanor is on the floor of the lady's bathroom trying to protect baby Audrey from the smoke – along with a number of other mothers with babies and small children.

The stifling heat is unbearable, and it is getting very difficult to breathe. Someone asks the person in charge if we should open the doors to let air in. He does not know. Then a local doctor makes the call: "The smoke can damage our lungs, but the heat can kill us. Open the doors." I help open the nearest sliding door, and acrid smoke pours in.



We survive. After a trip to have Audrey checked at the hospital, which had also come under direct threat from the fire, we spend a disturbed New Year's Eve cooped up in a powerless, smoked filled motel room.

Moving Fast and Slow

In a crisis, there are times we need to act quickly, and times when slowing down is really important. When your life is under direct threat, engaging in lengthy thought processes can be fatal. With the fire racing towards Anne's family home, we acted immediately when we got the call to evacuate. When the context allows, slowing down to make important decisions not only enhances the quality of those decisions, it can also save time later when fast decisions are needed.

Wednesday, 1st January

After a sleep-disturbed night, we wake to a smoke hazed dawn. Anne and I queue for hours, in the acrid air, at the only supermarket in town with a generator, to buy essential supplies.

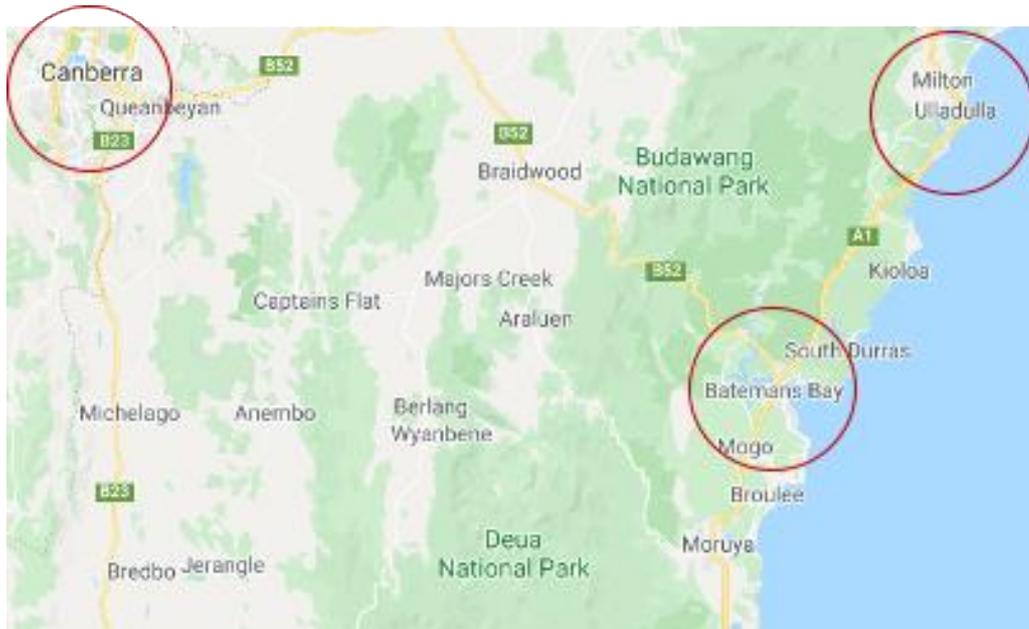


Then our focus turns to the difficult decision we now face. With catastrophic fire conditions forecast in two days' time, and strips of unburnt bush still surrounding the town, do we stay where we are in Batemans Bay or make a break to get back to our home in Canberra?

We gather as much information as possible and spend the afternoon assessing our options. Notwithstanding the lack of power and hazardous smoke in the motel rooms, we decide to stay put for the night as out-of-control fires are still raging, continually blocking roads in all directions.

Thursday, 2nd January – 5:30 am

Escaping our hot and uncomfortable room to take our dog Milly for a walk in the early morning smoke haze, I hear the main Highway to the north is open. We quickly decide the risks involved in leaving are less than the health risks in staying. Joining a long convoy of cars, we constantly monitor the "Fires near me" and "Live Traffic" apps for information.



We arrive at Ulladulla. A trip that normally takes 45 minutes has taken six hours. It was like entering a parallel universe with hundreds of holidaymakers shopping, on the streets and in the parks, going about their business as if nothing unusual was happening.

Ignoring our son-in-law Tim's instinct to quickly grab food, coffee and keep going, I insisted we take a break, find a good café and have an early lunch! On reflection, a powerful example of how quickly, unconsciously, our cognitive biases, in this case, normalcy bias, can create a simple story we then act on. Fortunately, as it turns out, the extra time we spend does not result in terrible consequences.

Thursday, 2nd January – 11:55 am

Having just left Ulladulla to continue north, we hear the highway ahead has again been overrun by fire and is closing. It is clear we need to turn around and head back to Batemans Bay before thousands of other drivers come to the same conclusion creating a chaotic gridlock on the roads which could be life threatening. Anne phones Eleanor, in her car behind us: "We are turning back." One hour later we arrive back at Batemans Bay, disappointed and exhausted as we face the need to start all over again.

Gather

After our hasty return to Batemans Bay, and a frantic search for new accommodation, we regroup. Knowing multiple out of control fires are still burning,

roads are unpredictably opening and closing, without power, communication severely impacted, and facing extreme smoke hazards, we restart our stay or go decision-making. Aware there can be no 'right' or 'wrong' decision, with the consequences only knowable after the event, Anne and I quickly begin gathering information from as many sources, and as many perspectives, as we can.

Thursday, 2nd January – Afternoon

We visit the evacuation centre and ask State Emergency Service personnel what they are planning if the fires became life-threatening again on Saturday; we visit the local police station to get information on the roads that might not be otherwise available. Returning to the motel, we start phoning people to gather additional perspectives.

We ring three volunteer fire fighters we know and trust. A local, who raised the alarm when the spot fire broke out adjacent to the evacuation centre; a brigade captain who is sent in to troubleshoot the most difficult and dangerous situations, and who has been directly involved in fighting the fires near Cobargo, which is on our southern homeward route. Then I ring Joanne Byrnes, who has been alternating between the frontline and the radio control centre, bringing over 25 years as an air traffic controller to the mix. Finally, I ring my closest friend, Tom Fisk, with his 40 years' experience in forestry management, and a wealth of knowledge about wildfire behaviour. Anne, Eleanor, Tim and I meet to assess all we have gathered. Throughout the information gathering we were also assessing the quality and integrity of what we read and heard. Guiding questions for this included: How reliable is this? What unquestioned assumptions sit under this information? What is the internal state of the person giving this information? What biases might they be subject to?

Assess

Whilst moving fast to scan and gather information is important in a crisis, slowing down as much as possible when assessing that information is equally important. Here are some important things to consider in the assessment phase: *Situational risks; Key Polarities; Cognitive Biases, Mindtraps and Quality of Information*. You can find more about these in the [Decision Making Guide for Complex Times](#) guide. I will highlight here some that were especially prominent for us in the bushfires.

Assessing Situational Risks

In a crisis, it is really important to re-evaluate risks. As your context changes, so do the consequential risks. As we assessed our situation, two questions were on my mind: *What new risks do we need to consider? Which low-consequence risks are now of high-consequence?*

Normally I would not pay much attention to the risk of losing mobile phone access. Right now, however, if the mobile tower back-up batteries run out sometime

tomorrow as predicted, we will lose access to vital information about the fires, wind conditions and road closures – and if we are on the road when that happens the consequences could be disastrous.....

On a sidenote, in this Covid-19 threatened world we find ourselves constantly reassessing risks normally taken for granted. Needing emergency medical help when it might not be available necessitates taking more care to avoid cuts when preparing food, and restricting driving to essential trips, as a minor injury in an accident could result in life threatening consequences. Risks we normally factor in unconsciously need to be consciously reevaluated.

Assessing Key Polarities

We can think of polarities as paradoxes, or interdependent pairs, we live in. For example, activity and rest is a polarity. If we want to stay healthy, we need to balance how active we are with how much rest we get. Over time, if we over focus on the activity pole, we suffer fatigue or injury, forcing us to rest whether we like it or not. And vice versa.

Another polarity, central to human existence, is reflected in our need to be simultaneously autonomous and connected to others. If we are too connected, we feel anxious. If we are too separate, we feel anxious. Managing these anxieties is one of the most challenging aspects of relationship management. In a crisis like the bushfires, the challenge is amplified, especially for leaders in the field. In the Covid-19 world, this challenge grows exponentially day by day for leaders around the world, as fears, anxieties and unresolvable grief escalate. In complex or chaotic situations, a number of other key polarities come into sharp focus.

*Rely on authorities **and** exercise independent judgment*



Source ABC News

On the 2nd January there were 127 fires burning in NSW. Of those 67 were out of control, and many of them were joining up to form ferocious mega fires which rapidly exceeded the worst-case scenario modelling that had been carried out. Rural Fire Service deputy commissioner, Rob Rogers, made it clear the firefighters would be unable to control, let alone extinguish, the raging blazes. In his words: "The message is we have no capacity to contain these fires ... We just need to make sure that people are not in front of them."

The official advice was clear – up to 90,000 holiday makers on the southern coastal strip of NSW should leave immediately. When to rely on authorities acting on expert advice, and when to exercise independent judgment, is another tricky balancing act.

When I heard the word "leave now" in the early morning phone message on New Year's Eve, I was galvanised into immediate, unquestioning action. In response to the official advice now being given, however, the question "How could this be wrong for us?" came into play.

Putting myself in the shoes of the authorities, it was clear the main risk they were managing was the potential for a catastrophic loss of life if tens of thousands of people were not relocated from the NSW coastal strip in the next two days, notwithstanding the considerable consequential risks in trying to do so.

They were not, however, focusing on unique risks faced by individuals or families, and rightly so. For us, the risks associated with having a vulnerable 6-month-old baby were very significant. So, whilst we gave significant weight to the official "leave" advice, we also knew we had to exercise independent judgment when considering our stay or go decisions.

*Balancing planning **and** acting*

Getting the best of planning and acting is both important and tricky in a crisis. There were times I had to resist the instinct to act too quickly, and there were also times I found myself planning for long term consequences I could do nothing about, regardless of the decision we would make. Nick Wignall gave me insight into how over-focusing on planning can be an unconscious antidote for uncertainty:

"Chronic worriers live under the illusion that thinking is always problem-solving and that planning always leads to greater levels of preparedness. But neither of those are true: Just because you're thinking about a problem doesn't mean you're thinking about it productively. And just because you're planning — running through countless hypothetical future scenarios — doesn't mean you're any better equipped to handle them. Often, you're just making yourself feel more prepared. Worry gives you the illusion of certainty. But in the end, all it does is fragilize you." [4 Things Emotionally Intelligent People Don't Do.](#)

Short term **and** long-term planning

The context you are dealing with informs decision-making time. The key is conscious attention to this. Crises which plunge us into the chaotic realm, especially when associated with immediate threats to life, necessitate a very short-term focus. In the bushfires, our time span ranged from the present moment to three days out. Leaders wrestling with the impact of Covid-19 need to focus on much longer timeframes, ever mindful of the risk of overreaching, driven by unconscious needs for predictably and certainty.

Quality of Information

After gathering and assessing all the information and striking a balance with the amount of time spent planning, we were ready to make our decision – almost.

Sense and Decide

In many western cultures, mind and willpower have been privileged in decision making. Underpinning much of this is Descartes' causal story "*Cogito, ergo sum*" – "*I think, therefore I am*". Current research invites a new story, along the lines of "*I am, and thinking is part of my knowing*".

We now have a growing body of evidence that paying attention to the intelligence of our whole system – our heart, our body, the energetic fields within us, and the fields that connect us -- can yield rich sources of information which we may otherwise miss. This is explored in detail in the companion [Decision Making Guide for Complex Times](#).

Thursday, 2nd January – Early evening

Based on our assessment of the situation, we are leaning towards staying where we are in Batemans Bay. To check, I sit comfortably and, as I had done on a number of occasions in the previous days, focus my attention inward to access the still, quiet and centred place of inner wisdom I have learnt to trust.

I bring my attention to the decision we are about to make, focusing on sensations and feelings that arise. If there is a sense of "knowing" which feels calm and clear, I know I can rely on that. If I feel unsettled, if my gut or some other part of my body is signalling something is not quite right -- an embodied sense of niggling doubt -- I hold off making the decision, as it may be I need more information; or I may need to reassess and re-evaluate risks – or it may just be the timing might not be right to act. On this occasion the decision to stay feels calm and clear.

Act

Comfortable with our decision to stay in Batemans Bay, we discuss what we need to do to prepare for the coming weekend, and potentially a long stay in another smoke-filled motel

room without mobile phone or power. We then fall into bed to get some much-needed sleep. Half an hour later sleep vanishes as a FaceTime call jolts me awake. The concerned faces of our eldest sons, Christopher and Tom, and their wives Ellen and Kari, fill the small mobile phone screen.

Thursday, 2nd January – 10 pm

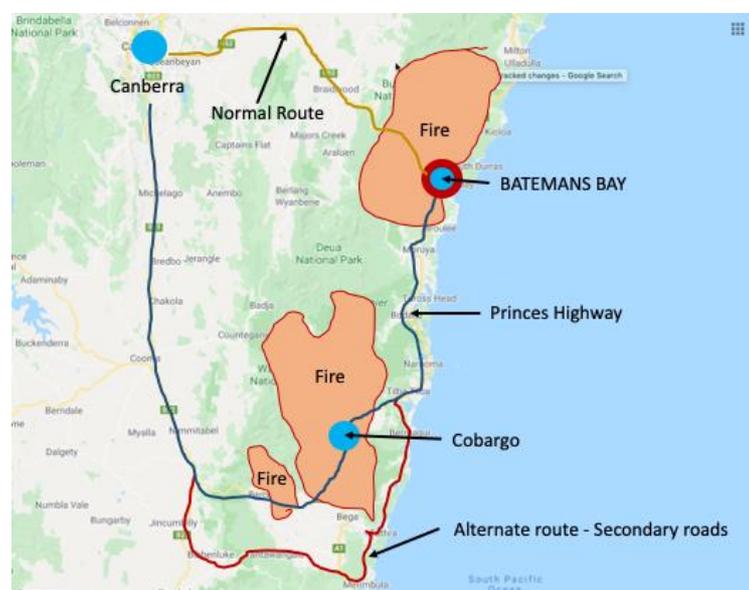
"We want to talk through with you why we think you should make a break for it tomorrow and take the long way south down the coast to get back to Canberra." Along with our youngest son Sam, and members of our extended family, they had left Batemans Bay the day before the fires hit, and unbeknown to us had also been gathering information and assessing our options. Anne and I listen carefully to what they have to say. I then share with them everything we have found out, and why we think the risk of getting trapped on the long, and more isolated, coastal route, as thousands try to leave, has tilted us towards staying.

With reservations, and palpable concern for us, they accept our decision and the call ends. More than ever our situation weighs heavily on Anne and I. Doubts and fears creep in as I struggle to manage my internal state. What if I can't see clearly what they can see? What if we are wrong?

Thursday, 2nd January – Midnight

Exhausted and unable to sleep, my niggling doubts gain strength, prompting me to phone our son Tom. "I want to go through everything again, can you help me see anything I am missing?" It seems to take an eternity as we check everything - including hour by hour detailed wind and temperature forecasts for the next 24 hours and predicted fire behaviours. After we finish, the decision to stay remains.

One thing has changed, however. Through my conversation with Tom, I am now consciously aware I have been assuming that the extent and ferocity of the fires to the south will prevent the Princes Highway, the most direct route home, from reopening for at least another day. If that changes, everything changes.



Adapt

Friday, 3rd January – 2:10 am

Lying on the bed, still struggling to sleep, I have a strong sense I should check the live Roads app. Only minutes before, the Princes Highway to the south has opened. I look at Anne, and before I can share the news, she says: "I have a strong sense we should change our minds and go." When Anne has a clear, embodied instinct, I pay close attention. When we have the same instinct, I don't hesitate. "We need to leave as soon as we can, before everyone else gets on the road, and before the wind gets up and starts blowing smouldering tree trunks over. And by leaving in the dark we will be able to see those tree trunks."

We quickly talk through how we will manage the risks of the drive. Anne prepares food for the trip and I wake Eleanor. "We have decided we need to go, as soon as possible. I will explain why later – can you get Tim and Audrey up and pack as quickly as you can?" As has been the case for the past few days, trust in each other at crucial times has stood us in great stead. Even though Eleanor was central to our decision-making hours earlier, she now faces a surprising reversal. All she requests is a two-sentence explanation, nodding as she closes the motel door.

Friday, 3rd January – 4:20 am

Both cars packed, we are standing in the motel driveway, when our daughter Eleanor shares a concern that could again change everything. "Audrey is unwell, she has woken up with a cough." In disbelief I struggle to take this on board as a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, combined with exhaustion, threaten to overwhelm me. Our grand-daughter Audrey's fragile lungs have already taken a beating from smoke exposure, and now the situational risks have suddenly and dramatically altered. Taking Audrey to the hospital to be checked will close our safe departure window. Setting out without her being examined could also have dire consequences.

Again, it is time to trust. "Whatever you decide will be ok. You know Audrey best. Take a few minutes to talk to Mum and Tim and trust in yourself." After getting their thoughts, to help calm herself and draw on their parenting and nursing experience, Eleanor makes a quick call to brother Christopher and sister-in-law Ellen to talk through the risk of Audrey getting really sick before we make it to either Bega or Cooma, which have hospitals, and the risks in delaying our departure. Her instincts confirm her decision. "Let's go." We hit the road, wondering what awaits us.

As it turns out, we end up the lead car in a convoy of hundreds on our smoky, winding, harrowing 8-hour trip. Along the way we drive through Anne's hometown of Cobargo, overrun by fire days before with devastating loss of life and property.

Anne stays focused on her task of scanning for wildlife, resisting the emotional pull to look and see how many places of childhood memories have been destroyed.



Main Street of Cobargo – source ABC News

We eventually make it back to Canberra. Overcome by emotion, we fall into the relieved arms of our family. We are lucky, for as we are celebrating our safe return, one of the fires we have driven through is flaring up, closing the Princess Highway for the rest of the day, forcing hundreds who are not so lucky to turn back.

Conclusion

I want to reiterate that when dealing with complexity there are no right or wrong decisions. With the bushfires, whilst the decision we made to make a break for home turned out for the best, that was not knowable at the time we made it. To claim it was the right decision would exemplify self-serving attribution bias. Likewise, had Audrey's condition deteriorated, had a burning tree fallen at the wrong time (we saw plenty of those), had one of our cars broken down, had one of the fires blocked the highway a few hours earlier than it did, or one of many other risks manifested with tragic outcomes, that would not have made the decision the wrong decision. What I do know is we optimised the quality of our decision-making to give ourselves the best possible chance.

With Covid-19, we see world leaders, buffeted by competing bodies of expert opinion, choosing different command and control responses to stabilise the spread of the virus, whilst simultaneously acting to address the devastating secondary social and economic crises being fuelled by the health crisis. As the horrendous daily death toll continues to mount, I have great compassion for those carrying the burden of decision making, as we will only know retrospectively which of the different country-wide experiments save the most lives and livelihoods.

Writing this, I feel incredibly grateful for a number of things. Whilst traumatising for us, we escaped relatively unscathed. The fire burnt to within centimetres of the verandas of Anne's family home and many houses in the street were obliterated, including the next-door neighbours.

The bushfires burnt an estimated 18.6 million hectares, destroyed over 5,900 buildings, including 2,779 homes, sent many small businesses in country towns to the wall, killed at least 34 people and more than a billion animals. Thanks to the incredible courage and self-sacrifice of the volunteer fire-fighters, and luck with wind changes at crucial times, tens of thousands of lives, ours included, were saved.

Humans have shifted the nature of our environment faster than we have been able to evolve our own brain and nervous system to cope with that changed environment. With thoughtful practice, we can evolve ourselves to the challenges the shifting, changing, complex world offers.

Footnote



Personally, first with the bushfires, and now Covid-19, I have never felt so aware of my privileged position – and with that comes a desire to do something about it. If you have the financial means, I encourage you to provide financial support for those who, day in and day out, put their lives at risk for us: frontline health workers; first responders; those keeping essential services running. And for the vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged who are also most at risk.

There are many organisations to which you can donate. If you don't already have one, here are two to consider.

Australian Bushfires

[Red Cross Disasters and Relief Recovery Fund](#)

Covid-19

[Care Covid-19 Emergency Relief](#)

John Sautelle is the author of [Choose Your Stories, Change Your Life](#). You can contact him at: john@cultivatingleadership.com

You can access the companion [Decision Making Guide for Complex Times](#) guide.

On the Cultivating Leadership website, you can find a rich range of resources. For those who prefer to [Watch and Listen](#), there are videos and podcasts; for those who prefer to read, there are a range of [Blogs](#) and [Papers](#). If you want to stay in touch through our newsletter you can

[subscribe here](#). For more insights into the leadership challenges arising from Covid-19, I recommend you read Jennifer and Keith's blog [Leadership on the edge of chaos](#).
