**Thriving In Complexity Podcast E1: How to Deal with Complex Situations with Graeme Thom**

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See if you can surround yourself with people that you can learn from, see if you can surround yourself with good people, see if you can surround yourself with people that you like being with, that you wantto be with. That's not to say you can't learn from others that you don't like, and absolutely you can, but to have a better life, learn from people who are where you want to be.

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Welcome to the thriving and complexity podcast. I'm your host, Susanne Le Boutillier, and I'd love for you to join me as I peek behind the scenes of complex situations and workplaces, and interview leaders and experts who will challenge your thinking, and form and inspire your leadership so you and your team can thrive in the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world we live in.

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On today's podcast episode, I'm speaking with Graeme Thom; Graeme has served as a fire officer for more than 40 years. He has been burned, had ceilings fall down around him, fallen into gullies and dropped through burnt out floors. He has been spat at, shot at, abused, accused of corruption, praised and thanked, but not all at the same time. He has led statewide and interstate Fire and Rescue deployments and overseen responses to significant fire tragedies. Always an operational fire officer, he was one of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services’ longest serving senior officers. He also filled a variety of roles including Commissioner Community Safety and Risk Management, Assistant Commissioner northern region, Brisbane City Fire commander, Executive Manager State Fire Safety Department, and Director of Operational Performance Improvement. In 2007, he was awarded the highest level of recognition granted to a fire officer and received the Australian Fire Service Medal. In Australia's bicentennial year, he was awarded the Australian Centenary Medal for his contribution to the Australian community, and he has also been presented with the Australian fire protection medal. That's only a few of the very many awards and commendations he has received. However, the one closest to his heart came in an email from one of his sector commanders. The day after they had fought one of Brisbane’s biggest bushfires, it simply said, there was general agreement among the troops at the end of our debriefing following that fire, that they would follow you anywhere. He is now an international speaker and emcee, a media commentator, and mentors high profile people in the fire industry and in other organizations; and since 2020, is also the Founder and Executive Director of the International emergency services speakers agency. He remains passionate about fire safety, the fire services and disaster and emergency management at the local state national and international level, and is a strong advocate for how knowledge, experience, and wisdom gained both by himself and his associates in this field can be used to help individuals and organizational teams to improve their performance and results. I hope you enjoy today's episode as much as I enjoyed speaking with Graeme.

Welcome Graeme, it's so lovely to have you here on the thriving and complexity podcast. I wonder if you'd like to share with everybody something about yourself that most people wouldn't know.

03:55

Is this like a secret, Susanne? It is, it is.

03:58

It is, it is. It's an opportunity to share secrets about yourself, Graeme.

04:04

I don't know about a secret as such, but probably most people, Susanne, would not know, that I was actually in Vaudeville for a number of years. My daughter actually started working in a show called Maureen's musical melodies, which is Vaudeville show and I used to take her there, and then as time went on, Maureen said, “Would you mind just standing on the stage to fill in a gap and the back line there?” And lo and behold, I ended up being in the Vaudeville show for a number of years *and* loved it, it was just fabulous.

04:40

Wow, that's so interesting, because my grandparents used to have a boarding house in Spring Hill when my mum was a little girl and all their guests were all the Vaudeville actors from the from the 40s and the 50s.

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I was a little bit later than that.

04:59

Yeah. I'm assuming he would be. So Graeme, when did you first become passionate about becoming a firefighter?

05:10

That's a really good question. I suppose about a 10 year old kid, I remember watching the fire brigade turn up to a campfire, and being really kind of in awe of the firefighters putting the fire out, and then a number of years later, actually one of my girlfriends back then, her father was the Chief of the fire brigade in the local town. So, that gave me a bit more of an interest, and then coming over the story bridge one day, I looked into the kid place fire station and seen all these firefighters doing these fabulous things and having such a wonderful time that I went down and asked to join. Not that I was passionate about being a firefighter. But once you join the fire service, because I wanted to do something fun and exciting, and adventurous and all of those things, but once you join you very quickly start to realize that it's not only about you, it's about helping a lot of people in the community and the first house fire you go to and you see the tragedy, you get the excitement, you get the buzz, but you see the tragedy of it, and you see how you can help the people. That's when the passion starts to develop or if you're in a road accident, you're helping people. That's when the passion comes on board, and then combined with the fact that you're working with other great people doing exactly the same thing. That's when that passion sort of embeds itself into your brain, you know?

06:36

Yeah, and that passion would make it a lot easier to get through some of those tough times that you mentioned, because I imagine you saw some fairly confronting things as a firefighter. So, having that sense of purpose must have been very important to you?

06:51

Yes, it is. It allows you to sort of get on with the job and get through to the next one, I suppose.

06:59

So Graeme, what's one thing about being a firefighter that you think everybody should learn at some point in their life? Something that being a firefighter taught you that you think's really valuable for anyone to really understand?

07:16

Yeah, I think one of the key things is that, you need to be able to very quickly analyze a situation, circumstances that you're in, and prioritize them, and then apply the weight of what's needed to that priority to get that part done and more often than because firefighters operate in emergency environment, we have to learn to do that. We have to learn to say what's really important here, and get on with it, and the rest, although it's still important, it's of lesser importance than that key thing that needs to get done and you need to get on and do that. So everybody needs to learn to do the really important things in life, and we all procrastinate when it's not an emergency, but if you can prioritize, and get over the procrastination by prioritizing, that's a key issue for life, I think.

08:12

So I know with all of your years of training, Graeme, that would have been something that you've developed, but I wonder if you can think back about what was some of the things that you did that helped you learn how to do that?

08:27

That's a good question. You've got some great questions here, Susanne, you've got some great questions. I think the first thing to say is that an organization, whether it's your own business, or whether it's an organization that you belong to, and certainly the Fire and Emergency Services does this, I think really well; and that is that it will give you policies, it will give you procedures, it will give you training, it will give you tools and techniques to do the things that you need to do to be able to prioritize and take that massive action, that hard, solid, rapid action to get things done, backed up by all of that stuff that I've just talked about the tools, the techniques, etc., the training, the policies. For all of this about our lives, when we are trying to do something that we believe is important and that others may believe isn’t important, but at least we believe is important. All of that's great, all of that's wonderful, and organizations can do that for you, but ultimately it then comes down to you to take all of that and to apply it in your life and to move forward. Otherwise, it's just good stuff sitting there on the shelf sitting there on the sideline, that you can use it anytime but you need to use it. You're the one you're the only one in this world that can pick all of that up and put it into practice.

09:53

So I know Graeme, when you speak, because I know that you speak to a lot have different audiences. You speak about wisdom, and so there's all of those policies and procedures and training, but there's some magic sauce, isn't there? In between, in terms of picking up all of that material and that training and actually putting it in into practice. So, is there anything in terms of translate, how you translate that into the wisdom on the job that you think you could share with people in terms of some of the things that you might have done that have helped you to develop that wisdom over time?

10:37

That old saying that anybody that's moving forward only does that with a vision, and the vision is only created by standing on the shoulders of giants that have gone before you. That's the foundation of wisdom. It's not wisdom, but its foundation of wisdom. The second foundation of wisdom is what I talked about, in some presentations, and that's the acronym of fire. The FIRE acronym being fuel, the ignition, the respiration, or the oxygen needed the fire, and the enablers and fire, which is the things that you need to do in your life to correct what you've done in your life. So, you need accountability that's being able to account for what you decide to do in your life with all those policies and procedures and things behind you. You need responsibility, which is the ability to respond to what you've decided to be accountable for. Then a really key one for wisdom is, you then need to be culpable. You need to be able to say, the error on this occasion, for this issue is mine, and mine alone, if that is the case, and accept the culpability accept the responsibility, the accountability vector, so don't share it around. If it's a shared issue, by all means, share it around, but if it's you, you need to take the responsibility. And then you need to take that corrective action. So the first part is that standing on the shoulders of giants, the second part is that using the acronym of fire for accountability, responsibility, etc., and the wisdom comes about when you have data and knowledge plus experience. Now the experience can be yours and others or it can be just yours, and insight; from the experience from all of that from that combination, and the insight that you then get, which allows you to see into the future, so that you can deal better with the present. So you combine all of that together, and you start to get wisdom. And that's where it come. Wisdom is not philosophical, wisdom is practical.

12:55

So Graeme, it sounds like engaging in reflective practice. When you've been through an experience actually looking back and thinking about what went well, what didn't, what could I do better next time is a very important part of developing that wisdom over time.

13:12

Yes, absolutely. And for most organizations, and certainly, fire emergency services fall into this category. Although they do that reflective process well, what tends to happen is this, certainly within fire emergency service, because we deal with emergencies, is that we will do that reflective process, we will do that debrief, we will analyze it to death and come up with a whole range of recommendations. Let's say we have 20 recommendations, we only get around to putting three of them or seven of them into practice. Yeah, before the next emergency comes and we're doing the same debrief over almost the same issues and coming up with some of the same recommendations, and we might implement another two or three, instead of figuring out how to implement all of the white stuff that has come out of that reflective process and putting it into place, and that's most often what organizations do. They do it incrementally, and then there'll be a change of staff, the change of policies and procedures, and the wisdom falls by the wayside. And as last and or the people who have the insight and have the wisdom up here, depart, either through natural attrition through retirement, or resignations, or nobody's listening to them, etc. So, you lose organizational wisdom, by not implementing it properly and quickly.

14:38

I suppose that goes back to what you were saying earlier about making sure that you're always focusing on what are the priorities. What's most important here, what needs to be done? Now what needs to be done next, and always keeping that continual focus.

14:53

I think you and I may have talked about it. I'm not sure, but Stephen Covey's and the four quadrants you know, what's urgent and important compared to important, but not urgent. People will focus on the bottom left hand quadrant or whichever quadrant it is that might be important that is not urgent, or they'll do something that's interesting and non-urgent. That's one of the things. We all have a tendency to want to do the things that are interesting, rather than important, I think.

15:23

And I know, when you're under pressure situations, there's always the focus on what is the next most urgent thing that I know, you previously, were in command of all of the fire services in the Greater Brisbane Area. And so, you would have had a very complex situation amongst you at times, where you had, I think I've seen before you've had over 50 calls out a day that you were managing, but there would have been a range of things that you always had to keep your eye on into the future, because if you didn't, things would have fallen apart in the future.

16:04

Yes, and that comes down again, to teamwork. That there is nothing worthwhile that gets done that isn't done through some kind of teamwork you know. Unless you're a hermit living all your life up on the rocks, you know about Mount Tamborine or something or other, you might achieve the best rock pile in the world. But anything outside of that generally is done by a team of people and staff, again, by building on the wisdom, and so in the complexity of the environments that you operate in sometimes, and I don't think any of us can operate in that complex, intense environment all the time, you burn out. Your brain just simply gets overload, information, data overload and energy overload. But in that confined period of time, when you are dealing with hugely complex issues in a confined period of time, you then need to be able to delegate, and delegate well, which is an art in itself. And make sure you've surrounded yourself, hopefully, with people that you can delegate well to, and who will do the job well. And recognizing that they may not do it as well as you think you would. But that's not the point, you need to get the whole job done, not just everything done as well as you could do it, you need to get the job done. And that might be a large, complex fire, or it might be a range of fires coming in at the same time or a range of different, it's not always fires that are occurring. At the same time, there might be floods and fires going on, there might be rescues going on, there might be road accidents going on a whole range of different issues that you're dealing with. But you divide up labor, and you manage great incidents and great opportunities by dividing up labor, labor and sharing the opportunities with others.

17:58

And I think that's one of the challenges, isn't it Graeme? Realizing when you get to that very senior type of position that you can't be the hero in every situation, that you actually have to work as that coach on the sidelines, in many cases, thinking about who are my best players for different situations? Is that analogy sort of resonate with you in terms of the work that you've done?

18:26

Yes, except for the first part. I could be wrong about this, I'll only speak from my perspective on this. When you say you can’t always be the hero, I think when you first join an emergency service organization, there is a desire to be a hero, you would like to be the person who rescues the child or the puppy or the damsel in distress, etc. As time goes on, you recognize that you don't need to be the hero. So, it's not that you don’t want to be the hero, it’s that you don't need to be the hero and then you get just as much enjoyment of somebody else doing the heroic stuff. Because if that heroic stuff is getting the job done. I mean, you don't want firefighters rushing into a burning building, just because they think they want to be a hero, they need to be going into the building with consideration and risk management to achieve the outcome. And that in itself may be heroic, but they're not going in there to be heroes. So just giving them different slightly different contexts, you do need to let others do the more heroic stuff, to get the job done.

19:40

I mean, brings up that saying from Marshall Goldsmith, that what got you here, won't get you there, in some ways that the reason why you often get into something and the reason why you get promoted and you're good at something, it comes to a point in your career, where you do need to perhaps shift and think about how do I need to be different to be successful in this role, because it's not the same as when I, for example, joined up to be a hero.

20:11

Yes, and I suppose there's a couple of things there. The first one is The Peter Principle, you've always got to be doing that self reflective thing, again, making sure that you aren't in a position that you have been put into, simply because you're not going to be competent in a higher position, you know. So whatever position you're in, you've got to make sure that you are competent, particularly in the emergency services. And that you can still be stretched into the next position so that you're not stuck on that next position. For me, in any organization, and particularly emergency services, to only have people in positions of authority and power through the hierarchy, who are stuck on those positions, because they have the Peter Principle that they're all incompetent and can't go any further. And so that's a bad organization, you want people that can be stretched, they may be comfortable, where they are for a point in time, but they can be stretched, and they can stretch themselves to go into the next position. And that's why in particular, the emergency services and comes out of the military thinking to a large extent where on the battlefield, if you lose the captain, somebody else has to be able to take command and be the captain. And so in the emergency services, you're always stretching people up, they've got to be able to do obviously, the job underneath them, but they've also got to be able to do their own job and be able to take command at a slightly higher level. And that gives you a great capacity for an organization and units within an organization to thrive in times of complexity, because they're not stuck with that level of incompetence issue, the Peter Principle kind of issue going on. It's interesting to note, Susanne, that one of the major differences in say the Israeli army, compared to some of the other Arab League armies is the hierarchy structure, the empowerment down into where the leadership level needs to be rather than taking command and ordered from further up in the chain of command. And the Roman legions used the same principle was the centurions; Give people the power they need here, but make sure they can also move up and down the stretch a little bit.

22:34

You mentioned thriving in complexity, Graeme, I wonder, I'm very curious around what does thriving and complexity mean to you?

22:46

I think thriving in complexity means being able to go home at the end of the event, whether it's a one day or 10 minute, a one week event. And this happens to all organizations because all organizations have complex issues that they deal with, which are compacted down into shorter time frames or longer time frames. But it's being able to go home at the end of the event, knowing that you've done the best job for you and for the organization that you work with whatever that organization might be, and that you have learned something that you can apply the next time. And you're not burnt out at the end of that period of time. If you’re burnt out, you're not thriving. In this time and time and time again, where people don't thrive, they burn out. Yeah. And that's never good. With burnout, comes a whole range of PTSD kinds of issues with the burnout, short or long period. Thriving is making sure that you have, personally, processes of management, self-management in place and organisational management to ensure that the organisation and the individuals in it thrive through those periods of complexity that they will get. And see what’s one only has to think of, you know, the recent bushfires the recent floods, the recent COVID stuff, very complex situations that arose, and the organisations that are thriving are those ones that are flexible enough and have got policies and procedures in place, and have good people in place that are thriving. Oftentimes, it's a self-weeding garden, the ones that don't want to be in those organizations will leave anywhere. They'll go anyway during times of complexity.

24:47

So, Graeme, obviously you've got a wealth of experience in this space. And I'm just curious, I'm sure you've been faced with a complex situation. Like many people, you look back and you wonder whether you could have handled that differently or wish that you could have. I wonder, is there a situation like that, that you be comfortable to share with people and talk about why you feel that way and what you might do differently if you were ever faced with that situation again in the future.

25:17

As a leader, the people that you're leading have expectations of you as their leader. You have expectations of yourself and as a leader, you're not leading in isolation with you and the team of people under you, you're always dealing with externalities, that impact upon your leadership. So as you're asking that question, Susanne, one of the incidents that occurred, I was in charge of taking a convoy of firefighters, a volunteer exhilarate are not exactly volunteers and permanence, and the support people down to New South Wales to help them fight their fires in New South Wales. And I was the overall incident commander for our fire, our Queensland Fire Service contingent operating in their space and New South Wales for the Rural Fire Service down there, and the permanent fire service in New South Wales. And so they had given us work to do butworking alongside them. And it was hugely complex, the fires were large, complex fires, the interaction between the agencies was significantly complex. Given that when you arrive with a task force, you are immediately on the front line. In some circumstances, and this was one such. An incident occurred during the night shift, where our communications between New South Wales and Queensland were not aligned. We were using our own comm systems, our own comms processes, policies, etc. And so we're in New South Wales. Now, I had saved a significant number of men and women out in the field fighting that fire. And unbeknownst to me, as the incident commander, the New South Wales had discovered a significant emergency and had put out what's called a code red, which is sort of the highest level of communications override that you can get, everybody shut up and listen to what's going on with this code red issue. And, it impacted upon the Queensland fire service, my team of people that we did not know that that code red was going on simply because we were operating on two different comm systems very similar, in fact, to that to do what occurred 9-11. And 9-11 was a much greater tragic scale, but that the comms between organisations as of such critical nature, when you're interfacing with each other, on this occasion, it wasn't. So it wasn't until sometime later that I had found out that this code red had been initiated by this other organisation. My greatest learning out of that was A - make sure you do that kind of pre planning, but also B - as the leader, you also need to be as forceful as you can possibly be, without too much hyperbole with the other organisation in making very sure that they know what a critical situation you have been with your team, because of that lack of communication that had occurred and making sure as the leader, you were reinforcing that really strongly. I think I could have done that better. Both post and during the incident.

28:46

And so what's something that you have learned when you were faced with the unexpected through your experience in foreign emergency services? So you've given us one example. I'm sure there's been some other things that you've also learned in terms of being faced with those very unexpected situations.

29:08

One of the incidents on a much smaller scale, I suppose, but equally as relevant. As a young officer, in fact, that was my very first high-rise fire. I lost one of my firefighters. We had gone up about three o'clock in the morning. Lots of false alarms the day before in that particular building. The caretaker had met us on the ground floor, three o'clock in the morning, taken us up to the 10th floor, he was in the lift with us. We got on to the 10th floor, shouldn't have gone to the 10th floor, and there's a lesson in that as well. Always step back from emergency and try and assess it before you enter it. Don't just step into the emergency, but when the lift doors opened, a thick black smoke started pouring into billowing into that lift, which is quite shocking and confusing when it starts to happen when you're not expecting it. And the lift doors closed, taking us back down to the ground floor. But what had happened was the youngest of the firefighters had stepped out of the lift, lift doors enclosed, taking us down, leaving him up there. That was probably the most confronting time for me in the fire service, as a brand new officer. First ever high-rise fire and losing a firefighter, youngest firefighter, on the 10th floor, and all that smoke and heat going down on the left, on that particular night, I mean, literally, all I want to do is to cry and go home, I'd had enough, I'd lost a firefighter on my first high-rise fire was, you know, what kind of leader are you what kind of person you know, so much for you being a bloody leader and a hero, you know. But be that as it may, and this is the situation that we all face, to some extent to some degree in life, be that as it may, I still had others in my responsibility, including that caretaker in the lift coughing his lungs out and my crew that were with me, you can't just go home, you might feel like going home, you might feel like going sitting in the gutter and crying. But you're not new, you've got a job to do, you've got work to do. So, you need to get on with it and do it. And irrespective of what they, the rest of the crew thought of you at that time. And some of them didn't think much of you at that turn. To me at that time I'd lost the young firefighter, you've still got to get on with the job, you've still got to do the job that you're there to do. And part of their job is looking after the rest of those firefighters, and then putting into place something to go and find the one that you'd lost. So you in life, you've got to get on with the job, certainly in emergency situations, certainly in complex situations, you've got to step back from before you step into it. But once you're into it, you've got a job to do, you've got to see the job through. But factoring in all those things that we talked about how to thrive in a complex situation, you can lead fact all those things in as well. And that's a learning process, both by the individual and the organisation.

32:15

And, Graeme, I think you bring up a really common challenge for leaders when they're faced with very confronting situations, you really have a choice to make at that moment, don't you? It's about do you actually focus on how other people see you? Or do you focus on the job at hand and the outcome that you're trying to achieve? And how you choose to respond in that moment can lead to very different outcomes. If you focus too much on what other people think of you, that can paralyse you or cause you to go down the wrong path. Where as, you focus on what's the outcome we're trying to achieve, it's not about you. It's actually the bigger picture. Things can play out so very differently.

33:01

Absolutely. You've probably faced many complex situations yourself.

33:07

Nothing quite as dramatic as that. But I think in the moment, you know, we all think what's happening to us is the worst. And I used to work with a doctor who would often share with me stories, they’re identified, of course, but to help me put what was going on around us into perspective. But in that moment, you're that type of approach not really appropriate when you're faced with the situation that you've just described.

33:39

And if I can just add one other thing, Susanne, I love the poem by Rudyard Kipling called If, it's one of my all-time favorites. And there's a terrific line in that poem that says, if you can meet with triumph and disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same. And that's so critical, that's so important that even if you make mistakes in life, that's not who you are. You are not your mistakes. And neither are you your successes. You know, you're a human being with potential and capacity and the ability to move on in life you're not bound by what you've just done that's the graduate holes of the past, you know?

34:25

No, I couldn't really relate to that, Graeme, I know when different things happen in your life, often unexpected things. You have a choice to make in that moment it’s that moment, is that am I going to let what's just happened define me? Or am I going to choose, you know, how I want to be and I'm going to define who I am myself through my actions from this point forward. So Graeme, what is it that drives you to share your experiences with other people because I know that you speak to a range of different organisations. Why do you think that it’s so important that people hear about some of these experiences that you've had?

35:13

One of my great bugbears, I suppose, Susanne is, is within our own organization, fire and emergency services, we are certainly better at it now than we ever have been, and getting better all the time. But it is that issue about it's like a waste of wisdom. And I'm not talking about my wisdom, although I hope I've had some developed over the years. But it's the waste of wisdom that goes on in every organisation. And it becomes this repeat of what doesn't need to be repeated, which is so wasteful. And if we continue to waste resources, we're wasting opportunities. And we're wasting opportunities to make the world that we live in better. And so for me, I was always trying to encourage the firefighters, what lessons did we learn out of this? And what can we share amongst each other so that we can show that we can stop somebody getting injured? So that we can stop somebody not going home at nighttime after their shift? And so that we can make what we do better. Yes. Which helps externally, so it's kind of external to the organisation that you're working on. Its internal, and your own organization, and it's personal. And so the last part, the personal path, if you're not, you know, somebody said a long time ago, often maybe, if you're not enjoying what you're doing, don't do it. You know, there might be circumstances might keep you around for a little while. But if you're if you're going to stay in an organisation for one year, five years, 10 years and sit there and wringing, complain the whole time and say you hate it, that's your fault, in my opinion. There will always be extenuating circumstances, but mostly, that's your fault. And so, either learn to love what you're doing, or go on and do something else that you do love, go to another organisation, start your own business, or work here and do the best job you can and go and start a charity or something and do something that you love to do, if that's the case. But don't sit here and whinge about it. So the third part is loving what you do and enjoying what you do. And if you're improving what you're doing for others in the organisation, that again, is self-reflective, it comes back to you and it makes your life better. And so, wisdom is often about making your life better. And if it makes your life better, and makes others better, and should make others better, that's the third part your life. So your life, the organisational life, outside of your organisation. Not sure whether that answered the question.

38:00

Well, you can continue on if you like, because I know it's not just you who speaks, you have a speaker's Bureau. And so you have a range of other people that you can also share with organisations who were interested in tapping into that wisdom that you speak about. So I'm just wondering if you want to tell us a little bit more about some of the other speakers and the types of things that they can share with people?

38:26

Thank you. Yeah, absolutely. So the Bureau I was is the International emergency services is Speaker's Bureau. And it has, as its speakers, those that have come out of the complex world of emergency services. So that's fire police, ambulance, State Emergency Services ESC rescue lifesavers, but it also includes military, so all the Army, Navy, Air Force, and other aspects of the military, and also the medical side, doctors and nurses and paramedics and different countries around the world. And so all of those people have got generally speaking, emergency experience now. There are others in the Bureau as well, Susanne, that might be for example, in Queensland, I'll just use Queensland as an example. But it applies almost throughout the world, universally. And that is that, for example, a mayor in a town, let's say Brisbane, and they are the head when an emergency occurs. They are the head of a committee of a group that has to deal with that emergency within their city or their town, etc. So they have to deal with complexity and emergency over extended periods of time. You know, the 2011 floods. I was both the Brisbane City Fire commander plus I was sitting on the committee's being chaired by the mayor of Brisbane and I can tell you those mayors, they have to know their staff or they should know their staff to deal with the emergencies that apply in their patch in the retirement, they are sitting there as the mayor. And so some of the speakers are also people like past a mayor of Brisbane, that there's people from military, there's a guy that has written a book, one of the speakers, the book called “How to amputate your leg in a war zone” you know, fairly unique experiences that some of these speakers have got. There's a retired naval Commodore, who was the two I see the second in command and Afghanistan and in Iraq, through the naval side of things. There's the retired Commissioner of the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services, Lee Johnson, twelve years as the Commissioner of one of the largest fire and emergency organisations in the world, most, like even in America, their small town, fire brigades. Queensland we have one whole state with thousands and thousands of volunteers, thousands and thousands of permanence and exhilarates. So very large, complex organisations and the speakers in the Bureau have got the emergency frontline thinking that they can apply to management issues in any organisation, because they also apply them as leaders and managers in their own organisation. An Assistant Commissioner from the New South Wales Fire Brigade, Ellen Clark, was the Officer in Charge the assistant commissioner in charge of the Olympic café terrorist attack, and that what that did to him personally, so most of these speakers can also talk about PTSD, managing stress they can manage, like I'm talking about not only leadership and management, but leadership and management and critical circumstances and in the sort of the normal running of an organisation as well. So they've got vast experience, huge speaking skills, and they can deliver, you know, really powerful messages to their audience, and get the message across all the people in that audience, that organisation by using analogies from where they've come from in the Fire and Emergency Services background. So, brilliant speakers.

42:11

Oh, I'm wonder we've we sort of take a little bit of a lighter note. And I wonder if you want to give us some insights into some of the myths that might exist about firefighters other than the fact that their role calendar pinups? Well, at least they are in Queensland, there seems to be that bit of a view. But what are some of the things about being a firefighter that you think people probably misunderstand?

42:39

Well, probably all firefighters would like to be in the pinups and the calendar. Unfortunately, we can’t all be there. Although they did have an over fifty’s firefighter calendar for a while. Didn't work real well at all. But we do have both male and female firefighters calendar, which is very good. But other than everybody wanting to be in the firefighters calendar, or not. I suppose that the common myths are things like firefighters just sit around playing cards all day until the bills go, absolutely not true. Firefighters, some firefighters do play cards. And they play tiddlywinks, a range of things they do in the downtime, the downtime is not a lot. People have got that impression that there's a lot a lot of sitting around playing cards, it's absolutely not true. There's a lot of training that goes on, there's always debriefing stuff of different fires, there's going out and visiting the patch that they work in and learning about the patch. Firefighters are a jack of all trades and certainly trying to be across a vast array of issues and information to make sure they can apply what's best to be applied at any particular time. If any of my firefighters were, when I was via commando were found to be turning the lights and sirens on to go and get their lunch, they would have got the rear ends kicked really hard. But there's still people out in the community that think that we put the lights on, so we can get in front of the queue to get the hot pies fast at first, but that's not true. The only time you will hear those lights and sirens is when there's a potential emergency or an actual emergency. The only time that you're healing and I suppose the other side is that the fire service that's both volunteer and permanent has people in the organization that come from a wide range of occupations and professions outside before they become firefighters. We've got people that have been studying law, lawyers, people that have been a lawyer and come in and wanted to be a firefighter and vice versa. Some firefighters that have now become lawyers, we've got people in the medical field, we've got people in engineers, pilots that are firefighters. And so, firefighters have a range of skills, and academic backgrounds, the same as those in communities. So that's a myth the firefighters are all sort of one category of people, we're just human beings that are doing what most, and 99% of all firefighters are actually passionate about what they do. They love what they do, for a range of reasons. They just love being firefighters, I deal with a lot of retired firefighters, and all of them would go, almost all of them, 99.9% again, would go back and fight fires again, or go back and be a firefighter. Again, they just love it that much.

45:55

I think I like asking that question because it just brings up all the assumptions that people can tend to make. And the fact that we assume, we hear something, so we assume it to be true. But the importance of actually going in questioning that and asking, Well why do I know that to be true? So yeah.

46:19

Always check your assumptions. Did you know, an assumption about how phlogiston?

46:27

Okay, I’m very curious to hear what that is now.

46:31

Phlogiston is the stuff that’s inside every material body throughout the universe, every galaxy, every planet has phlogiston inside it. And when you light the material, it gives off phlogiston. And when all the phlogiston has given off, the fire goes out. And that's totally wrong, that's absolute rubbish. It's not true, that for about 200 years, Susanne, people thought that stuff had phlogiston they assumed that phlogiston and that's what was burning. That was what I was going getting given off. And most of the alchemists in chemistry at the time, thought that was the case. And a lot of them thought that was the case because other chemists and alchemists thought that was the case, we thought that other and they believed it because other chemists thought it. Yeah. So about 200 years, people assumed that there was a stuff called phlogiston. It never existed. That's just a huge assumption. Yeah, nobody that nobody really checked. And interestingly enough, it was a young woman who thought about it a lot more was doing some experiments herself. And she thought, I don't think this stuff exists. I don't think it's a real thing, so she wrote a paper about it. And guess what? She didn't get any recognition for it at all, a man did. She did about 100 years later, but it took a long time for people to go, Hey, she was right. She was saying, I think it's oxidisation, I think it's this chemical process called oxidisation. It's rapid oxidisation. Assumptions. Assumptions that hold us back from progressing.

48:15

And the importance of asking that question, how do I actually know that this is true? Yes. Where is the evidence?

48:23

There’s the counter evidence.

48:28

So, Graeme, if you had a chance to go back and talk to your 25 year old self? What would you tell yourself? Based on all of your wealth of experience these days?

48:41

Why did you pick 25?

48:43

Well, a lot of people go back to 18 year old, and I think that 25 is because this is a more professional, sort of focused podcast. And I think that's probably more an age when you are making some choices, life choices these days, I know I've got my son's about to turn 24. I suppose I know where he is, and where he is still deciding who he is, and how he wants to be. 18 is very young these days and I think you still evolving as a person, right through your 20s. And so I think there's an opportunity to come back and take some wisdom from someone else and I think you're a little bit more potentially mature then and able to take it in.

49:29

It truly is. It's a lot of what we've already talked about, and that is, see if you can surround yourself with people that you can learn from, see if you can surround yourself with good people, see if you can surround yourself with people that you like being with that you want to be with. That's not to say you can't learn from others that you don't like and absolutely you can, but to have a better life, surround yourself with people that you like being with and that you can learn from, and surround yourself with people, not surround, but learn from people who are where you want to be and there was a terrible thing in the fire service for many, many years. There was a whole cultural thing that developed, which is mind-bogglingly stupid. But there was a huge culture that anybody that wanted to progress that wanted to become an officer, there was this culture in the firefighter ranks that, you know, you're a sniveler, that you're, you know, you're trying to be better than you ought to be. What's wrong with just being a firefighter? There was this for a few years, there was just this horrible culture of don't try and be anything other than what you are. Thank God, that’s changed. Took a while to break out of that, but don't let a culture that you might find yourself in dictate your thinking for you think outside that culture. And if you want to be something for the right reasons, go for it. Go for it. You know, surround yourself with good people and learn lots. Love what you're doing, and stretch yourself to see how far you can go.

51:10

That's great advice, Graeme, really lovely advice. And if I know in our show notes, we'll include all of your details, including the details of how to contact you with the Speaker's Bureau. But if people would like to connect with you online, how can they go about doing that?

51:30

The first way would be through the Speaker's Bureau. And that's the long name is the International Emergency Services Speaker's Bureau, but just iessp.com.au. And that will get you to the website, and you can contact me directly through the website. You can send an email to me, which is [Graeme@GTassociates.com.au](mailto:Graeme@GTassociates.com.au). Or on my mobile, quite happy to take a call on my mobile, 0416-167-523, and any of those three will get me fairly quickly.

52:11

Graeme, it's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you today and I know you've got so many more stories, and insights, and wisdom to share with everybody. So, if anyone is interested in having Graeme or one of his speakers, come and speak to your organization, please reach out to him. I know he'd love to hear from you, and genuinely lovely person. I really appreciate you taking the time out Graeme today to come and speak with me. Thank you so much, it's been my pleasure to, Susanne. Thank you. Cheers!

Thanks for listening. If you had something you want to revisit or explore in more detail, you can check out the show notes. If you enjoyed this episode, and you like helping others to open their thinking, please share it with others, post about it on social media, or leave a rating and review. As always, a big thank you to Leon Flitton, and the team at the podcast concierge. That's all for this episode. I'll see you next time.