

Effective Communications in Wildland Firefighting: Can wildland fire agencies walk the talk?

Jules Leboeuf

Introduction

Every fire organization would agree on the critical importance of communications. The 21st century has afforded people with the latest technology in the form of every electronics device known to man to do it faster than ever in the history of humankind. Communicating faster and in larger volumes means that we have created a greater potential and capacity for error in communicating with each other. In the business of wildland firefighting we are not immune to this condition. It is apparent to everyone that a whole lot of messaging is going but in fact a great deal of understanding is still missing in the delivery.

Fire organizations claim that effective communications is an essential element in the business of wildland fire management. Living proof of this exists in fire organizations' policies, standard operating procedures and situational awareness models such as the 10 Fire Orders and 17 Watch out Situations. These are built-in systems to hopefully guarantee the presence of effective communications in every aspect of operations.

The following extracts from the 10 Fire Orders illustrate the emphasis on communications:

- #6 Give Clear Instructions and be sure they are understood
- #7 Be Alert, Keep Calm, Think Clearly, Act Decisively
- #8 Maintain Control at all time.
 - #9 Remain in communication with your crewmembers, supervisors and adjoining forces.

The following extract is from the 17 Watch Out Situations is particularly crucial because of the critical communication's bridge, and therefore, gap that could potentially put people in harm's way:

- #14 The management of the fire is transitioning

We insist that effective communications are extremely important if not essential to wildland fire agencies, yet fatalities and injuries continue to plague wildland fire operations. What is increasingly remarkable is the continuing reluctance for wildland fire agencies to take a rigorously honest look at the contributing human factors with respect to accidents and incidents.

Do as I say not as I do!

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Legislation, policy and situational models such as the 10 Fire Orders are public declarations on how fire agencies do business. These orders represent the corporate and hopefully lived values of our agencies. The challenge is converting the theory in principle (the talk) into the theory in use (the walk). With the high price that comes with accidents and incidents on the fireline it behooves every wildland fire agency to invest time and resources into implementing effective communications into practice. These declarations can be viewed as an agency's values and would imply that members of an organization would express these values on the job. Some suggest that these values have a tendency of staying in the office only to be viewed in manuals and wall plaques in the coffee room. If these values are not able to be expressed in a consistent fashion by all staff members, an assumption could be made that a misalignment exists between corporate values and the behavior of front-line staff.

If firefighters are not able to express the values of the organization through appropriate behavior during wildland firefighting operations, a misalignment of values between the organization and the workers will continue to exist. Issues like safety and effective operations will continue to exist as theory, putting firefighters and organizations at risk.

If something does not work: Do something different!

Just look at a wildland fire agencies policy manual if you want to track the history of problems associated with communications and decision-making. Solutions to solve "the problem" can often become "the problem".

Training is the automatic default reaction to organizations in search of solutions in imparting knowledge to workers.

Workplace training is a multi-billion dollar industry in North America. Business is booming and organizations cannot resist the lure of what training programs promise to deliver. Experts are suggesting that 80%-90% of training dollars are wasted due to the inability of trainees to transfer the knowledge back into the workplace.

Managers would get a better return on their training dollars if follow up sessions were designed as part of the overall training program. Due to the pressure of current workloads and expectations, managers expect staff to come back from training sessions "out-of-the-box" ready to hit the road running with their newfound knowledge. Without follow up sessions such as workplace coaching, training dollar investments wither away along with the knowledge delivered by a training provider. Follow up sessions should be a maintenance feature of any training program.

Failure in trainees being able to transfer working knowledge can usually be traced to lack of assigning coaching responsibilities to key people within the organizations. Sometimes this occurs because management fails to attend the same training as the subordinates creating a language barrier amongst team members.

Training must be built into the organization as opposed to being bolted on as an after thought. An alignment of goals and values of the organization must occur with any training that it undertakes; otherwise the training will feel awkward and have no meaning or value to people in the workplace.

Most wildland firefighters will inevitably experience training or workshops in leadership or effective communications. It is here that the individual will receive a variety of information in skills and techniques to better equip themselves when

supervising crewmembers on the fireline. Unfortunately this is only half of the equation in building better leaders and communicators for wildland firefighting operations.

The other half is what we're here to talk about – the human-caused factor. As humans, how we engage and inter-relate makes a difference. If we as firefighters cannot figure out how to work together – because it is a team sport – then we need to be in another business. We cannot understate this reality.

Effective Communication implies that mutual understanding exists between people. Better relationships build trust and in turn create fertile ground for mutual understanding. Obviously there is a great need to integrate interpersonal skills training into the wildland firefighting curriculum. Interpersonal skill sets alone cannot accomplish the task of building better wildland firefighting organizations. Without taking these skills to heart in the hopes that we will act and behave appropriately in the heat of battle, firefighters will continue to only receive half of the package. A toolbox with the individual's ability to identify appropriate situational behavior, will allow them to put theory into practice at a moment's notice when dealing with people during the chaos of wildland fire operations.

“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...”

The original sycophant yes man must have been the magic mirror in the fairy tale of Snow White. No matter how ugly the wicked queen would have been, the magic mirror would have continued to spew kind words about who was the fairest in the land (the mirror was a victim of corporate downsizing as soon as he informed the Queen about Snow White). Can you blame the mirror? The Queen might have been ugly but she held all the cards of power. Organisations sometimes suffer from this syndrome when it is time to take that hard honest look at itself when it comes to current business practices especially after a major wildfire incident. Who really has the guts to say it like it really is?

Wildland fire organizations can begin the process of putting theory into practice by taking a hard and honest look at itself. Noticing and telling the truth is a guiding value and is the first step in awareness. Engaging in “good” dialogue is extremely important yet so rarely experienced in today's workplace. Equality, empathy and openness are elements essential in engaging in good dialogue.

Can we talk? (No, really, can we?)

So why is good dialogue absent in the workplace, especially in wildland fire operations?

People in emergency services are quick draw artists when it comes to decision-making. If we could draw a side arm as fast as drawing a conclusion in decision making, we would be top dog in those old western movies we love to watch on TV. We are the masters when it comes to Observation/Draw Conclusion/Take Action. In wildland firefighting, our ability to read a situation and take action based on our assessment of a situation is highly prized as a skill. Consider it a natural gift handed down from our ancestral descendants of primitive man. The ability to stay on top of the food chain was based on a keen sense of reaction. The game was simple, react or perish were the rules of the ultimate survivor reality show.

As the old saying goes “shoot first and ask questions later” basically illustrates our predisposition to jump to conclusions at the blink of an eye. Habits run deep and die-hard when it comes to human behavior or as some refer to “habits of the mind”.

If I may make my own assumption on this tendency, what makes us good in the wildland firefighting business makes us bad in our ability to engage in good dialogue. We usually resort to describing the world we know as opposed to what we actually see.

Doubtful? Just ask police investigators regarding statements taken from a crowd of people who have witnessed a crime in the middle of the day in broad daylight in a busy part of a city. Social experiments have been set up where a video camera was set up to record a staged crime being carried by actors. Police took statements from witnesses stating widely opposing views of what actually took place. Witnesses were shocked when allowed to view the video after giving their statements to the police.

Why is this information important to people in the wildland fire business? Understanding that we have a tendency/propensity for viewing the world through a distorted lens combined with an ability to draw conclusions at the drop of a hat may help us admit that we have some special challenges regarding how we engage with people. Being aware of our “human condition” or “habits of the mind” is the first step to recognizing where the barriers exist preventing us from having good dialogue. Speed kills, is a slogan used by many highway enforcement agencies and it would seem also applicable in the prevention of “bad dialogue”. Awareness of this tendency gives us the ability to slow down and think about what we are actually seeing and thinking.

Explaining this tendency to react based on our quickly drawn conclusions can simply be explained as the way our minds quickly process information and make judgments. This explanation is further illustrated in a framework referred to as the Ladder of Inference. (By Chris Argyris)

The ladder represents how the human mind will process information and arrive at a conclusion. Imagine every rung of the ladder represents stages of our journey to the top of the ladder. Once at the top of the ladder we base our action that we will take on information and meaning that we have gathered along the way. This process happens as fast as an electrical impulse and thanks to years of evolution and busy lives we have perfected it to an art form. The only problem is that because we select in some details and select out others, how can we trust the information we have gathered in making our assumptions? Chances are that if the information is not reliable, our decision to take action is probably incorrect.

Because we do not describe the world we see, or perhaps pieces of the picture are hidden from our view, we have a tendency to gather inaccurate information. In fact some say that all data (information) that is viewed by the human eye is distorted based on our personal views of the world. Our cultural and personal experiences created a bias toward what we see resulting in an inaccurate assessment of a situation.

As we travel up the ladder of inference we take this skewed view of the world and we put meaning to it. Again we twist the story so it fits our personal experiences so it can fit nicely with our predetermined view of the world.

Now that we are loaded for bear with this inaccurate assessment of a situation we drive it all home to the top of the ladder to make our conclusions/assessments and then

take action based on all this information (did I mention that the information may be biased and inaccurate?)

The actions usually result in great misunderstanding and frustration making attempts for good honest dialogue a remote possibility. Sound familiar? If we were writers for a situational comedy show we are hitting pay dirt. Innuendos, misunderstandings leading to hilarious outcomes or embarrassing situations would be a plenty. This is a formula for those “au fromage” sitcoms that have been written over 50 years of Television history. The scenarios are recognizable as we see them time and time again with hilarious laughter at one of the characters expense all to happen all over again on next week’s show. Real life is much the same as the scenario happens over and over again except that it’s not funny and relationships are strained resulting in low trust, hostility and much energy, time and money in trying to make amends in rebuilding personal and workplace relationships. Being human is an occupational hazard when it comes to our automatic defaults in how we process information. This does not mean that we are bad or evil it just means that we need to be aware of our own tendencies. A famous cartoon character once said, “I am not bad, I am just drawn that way!”

How can you overcome this tendency to jumping to the wrong conclusion or judgments? Awareness as mentioned is a good start. For starters you must be able to recognize when you are moving up the ladder of inference. This will allow yourself to stop, get a reality check and than proceed with caution (you are your own enemy in this business!).

Being able to recognize where you are on the ladder will help you back down in order to get a true view of the information you are gathering. This is truly an art form that requires a great deal of practice (nobody said this was going to be easy). Being able to help others in backing down the ladder is a powerful tool and a true gift. Good dialogue translates into better decision allowing you to become a better leader.

Effective communications rests upon us not the other guy. We need to be aware of how our own assumptions, conclusions and thinking patterns affect our ability to communicate. Mutual understanding is the basis for good decision-making.

Tips for creating the right environment for Good Dialogue:

- Self-Awareness - Take a course and/or read about the ladder of inference
- Start noticing what you are noticing at work or at home and do a reality check.
 - Ask questions of yourself regarding why and how you have come to a conclusion
 - Ask others for clarification on things they have said or done
 - Remember that we describe the world we know (and not what we see)

Double check your source of information before telling the story of what you are seeing or thinking.

- Develop training curriculum that matches the values of your organization with the desired behavior of your staff during wildland fire operations
 - Ensure that management attends the same training programs that subordinates attend

Putting the theory in principle into everyday practice must become the objective of every individual on the fire line throughout to the corporate executive boardroom if safe and effective operations are desired. We can safely assume that any modern day wildland fire organization would be interested in taking the first step on the walk to good dialogue.

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The Author

Jules Leboeuf has been a Forest Officer with the Alberta Land and Forest Service since 1985. A graduate of the Forestry Technologist program at the Sir Sandford Fleming College of Natural Resources, he began a career path with various Conservation Authorities in Ontario. His career path lead on to the Province of Alberta, working in ranger stations located in the northern boreal forests, and the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains.

Presently Jules is stationed in the Provincial Forest Fire Centre as a Wildland Fire Prevention Officer. Delivering the fire management program at the district level and Provincial level has given him special insight into a variety of forest fire issues.

He is regularly invited as a wildfire instructor at the Hinton Training Center, which is the main provincial training facility for Forest Protection Division. With an interest in leadership and communications he is able to relate personal experiences from the fire line directly to the course participants with an emphasis on putting theory into practice back onto the fire line and not just in the classroom.

He is an active member on Level 1 incident command teams and currently holds the certification level as Incident Commander. Participation as Duty Officer and Fire Information Officer at the Provincial Forest Fire Center also contributes to a continual learning environment in the business of communications and teamwork.

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