

## **Fire Staff-Rides as Stories: One More Tool in the Bricoleur's Bag of Tricks**

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When constructed like stories with beginnings, middles and ends, fire staff-rides can be a profound method for learning about the craft of forest firefighting. Unlike a fire training exercise with its rigid outline of facts and statistics (including the presumption that, when all the “facts” are known, the behavior of the fire was inevitable and could have been predicted), a fire staff-ride, constructed like a story, places the same fire-event using the same facts and statistics into a storyline with a strong narrative structure. People involved with the forest fire tell, in their own voices, using their own words, the story of what happened to them while working on a particular fire. The rigidity of a training exercise gives way to a story told from the personal perspective of a human being.

When narratives about forest fires occur on fire-staff rides, these stories become vast natural networks for knowledge acquisition. Deep learning can begin, for as Klein (1998) notes, stories are easier to understand, to remember and to use. Also, stories can more easily deal with ambiguity, the “fog of battle” that is so common to forest fire environments. Within the framework of a staff-ride story, a fire event becomes more intricate and complex. This complexity comes about because the fire staff-ride facilitators have not dared to simplify the story of the fire, but rather to bravely deal with as many of the fire's incongruities as possible. In an essay titled, “In Praise of Ambiguity,” Mary Catherine Bateson (2004) notes: “Preparation for life is preparation for a long meander through uncertainty, for working with partial clues and rough approximations, for skillful guessing and zestful improvisation. Even those facts that seem clear and unambiguous unfold into unexpected implications....” What Bateson says about ambiguity and life fits the nature of forest fires perfectly.

There are three general characteristics to a staff-ride story: 1) a primary group of character(s) working within a forest fire situation; 2) a surprise fire-event that then happens to these character(s) and 3) the resolution of the dilemma created when the character(s) thought a forest fire was going to burn one way only to have the fire unfold in an almost totally unimaginable fashion.

Fire staff-rides, when composed as stories, are not training exercises. The historical roots of the word “train” are to lead or drag-out. The facilitator's role at a fire staff-ride is not like an instructor's role during a sand-table exercise or during a tactical decision game or leading a novice through the mathematics of a fire behavior problem. The facilitator's role is not to drag something out of the student but to insure that the story told to the student is compelling and well written; that the student is not allowed to skip ahead in the story; and that the unfolding of the narrative is completed in a manner that is generally understandable by those “reading” the story. Karl Weick (1995) writes: “When people punctuate their own living into stories, they impose a formal coherence on what is

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otherwise a flowing soup.” A properly prepared fire staff-ride can be likened to thickening a watery broth where the addition of new ingredients creates substance and texture.

The process for developing a staff-ride as outlined in the Army’s pamphlet, **The Staff Ride** (Robertson, 1987), works well for the construction of simple forest fire staff-ride stories. According to Robertson, a staff-ride has three distinct parts: a preliminary stage that encompasses intense study; a field component and a final integration phase. We have adopted Robertson’s scheme for constructing fire staff-rides.

In the first stage, students read and study the fire event from various sources, including books, videos and written reports. This preliminary reading, done weeks before the staff-ride, is basically a solitary classroom exercise. During the second stage, students, in groups, actually walk the physical terrain where the fire burned, stopping at key spots along the way to discuss the major episodes, both human and environmental, that occurred during the life of the fire. Finally, during the last stage of a staff ride, students share with each other their specific impressions of the day’s events. This is often a highly emotional portion of the fire staff-ride, when co-workers, after having literally walked in the boots of their fellow firefighters, begin creating their own stories about what might have happened. Silently, they ponder the nagging question of what they might have done in a similar situation.

As these three distinct mental models of the fire coalesce in the student’s mind, a rich, highly textured story emerges that is unique for each fire staff-ride participant. Often, as the fire staff-ride progresses through the chapters of the story, the story that is evoked for the student becomes one of high drama and emotion. After looking at the “facts” of a tragic fire event, the staff-ride participant is compelled to ask themselves whether he or she could have been caught in a similar untenable fire situation. In many cases, the student is astonished to find they mutter a muffled “yes” to this question. At that point, the deepest learning for the student begins. As Jerome Bruner (2002) notes, “...storytelling and story sharing make us deft in imagining what might happen if ...”

Sometimes, for the tellers of the staff-ride story and for the listeners of these stories, especially if they’ve been involved in a traumatic fire event like the fatalities on the Dude Fire in Arizona or the escaped Cerro Grande prescribed fire at Bandelier National Monument, closure and healing begin. These are the words of Al King as he opened the first chapter of the Cerro Grande Staff Ride (Keller, 2004): “Coming back here reopens the book on the darkest chapter of my life. But if my participation here today helps prevent any of you from going down the road we did four years ago, it will all be worthwhile.” One can sense the emotion in King’s words. This emotional response to a forest fire could never be accomplished by mere training; only the power of stories can initiate this task.

The French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, defined a person who was the opposite of the calculating, tabulating engineer---a *bricoleur*---a person who continually, and out of existing materials, invents his or her own strategies for making sense of an ever-changing reality. A *bricoleur* is a “jack-of-all-trades,” a handyman, a person who is able to continually master rapidly changing, often chaotic situations. What the *bricoleur* practices is *bricolage*---the ability to make quick sense of the world by using materials that are at hand. The metaphor of the *bricoleur* can be stamped onto most firefighting activities.

Sometimes, I think that we firefighters need to be more the *bricoleur* and less the *engineer*. We need to learn to turn on penny rather than a dime. It is only wishful thinking on our part to believe that another fire behavior computer model or an enhanced system of weather prediction, or, god-forbid, another checklist, will take the last bit of human risk out of our human dealings with forest fires. We must quit waiting for the magical solution to the life-threatening events forest fires pose, and, like the *bricoleur*, begin working with the stories that are always around us waiting to be told. Staff-rides, if composed like stories, are one more trick in the *bricoleur's* toolkit, and, like the concepts of after action reviews, high reliability organizing and improvisation, will help us become better firefighters, more able to deal with developing chaotic situations involving flame and heat and the rapid pace of change that is common to all forest fires.

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