

Back to Basics for Fire Program Managers

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Abstract

Fire Program Managers (FPMs) have differing points of view as to what Type 3 incident management is and more importantly how incidents are processed on their units. FPMs for this discussion are Forest and District/Zone FMOs. These differences can be associated with typical human dynamics of the individual, training, experience and having too much of a program of work to concentrate on actual operations. Many FPMs adopt the “organization on their unit” when they arrived at the job and accept that it is functioning correctly. Because of these differences not all FPMs may be fulfilling their duties effectively or efficiently, thereby lessening the quality of the program they oversee and possibly increasing the risk to their employee’s safety. They may assume that everything is organized and running properly and unless something bad happens they and we may never know otherwise. Their Situational Awareness may be less than desirable.

What seems to be lacking is a clear understanding of the following:

Clear roles and responsibilities when the fire bell goes off

Differences between an Extended attack organization and the “Type 3 Team”

Differences between Strategies, Objectives and Tactics.

The difference between Leadership and Management

A question to be asked at this point. Is the solution to effective Type 3 incident management to train the Type 3 IC solely? Or is the solution to train the “Fire Organization” to effectively “process an incident” including a properly functioning IC?

Introduction

Human error problems can be looked at in two different ways: The person approach and the system approach. The work of James Reason (1990), and his “Swiss Cheese” model of system approaches to accident causation suggests that the person approach focuses on the errors of the individuals, blaming the individual for forgetfulness, inattention, or moral weakness. The system approach concentrates on the condition under which individuals work and tries to build defenses to avert errors or mitigate their effects. Looking at the 3 major fire tragedies it would be hard to place blame solely on the active failures of an individual. Even if one tends to place blame solely on the individual the next question is then how can so many firefighters be doing it wrong? Management must have some responsibility if they did not know their employees were so

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ill informed or trained. It is management's responsibility to ensure validity of Red Cards in the first place. By asking these types of questions we can then clearly see the benefit of using a system approach to causation and hopefully prevention.

In 2004 I assisted in the development of the Type 3 IC certification. Later I served as an instructor in the "Train the Trainer" session for the individuals who would be responsible for the certification of Type 3 ICs in their regions. At this "Train the Trainer" session I noticed there was a great deal of inconsistencies from the trainees (all fire program managers of some level from every Region in the Forest Service) as to what Type 3 incident management was and more importantly how to deal with it. I'm not saying they were totally in the dark but the differences of how they spoke about and dealt with the subject matter of the simulations was not as well organized as what we would be asking of the Type 3 IC. Here we were gathered to ensure the Type 3 IC would live up to her or his "canned" duties yet the managers of these ICs had varying degrees of what it even was. In one critique after a simulation an FMO gave rave review to the Incident Commander (IC) in the "Hot Seat". The critiquing FMO stated the IC did well defining incident objectives. The fact that the IC talked about tactics exclusively and never mentioned strategies in the sense of "Incident Objectives" eluded the FMO critiquing the action. This type of behavior was not uncommon. It is as if we are addressing half the problem by only practicing and certifying our Type 3 ICs. A distinct gap exists when we discuss and especially when we manage "Extended Attack" which is also Type 3 Incident Management, and if an organization has not discussed and even practiced at great lengths the difference, I fear the people on the incident will be neglected. Looking at Reason's model I would place this in the latent defect section of "Organizational Influences".

My perception of what was occurring at the Type 3 training and with my experience as a Fire Operations Safety Officer in my past position is this. There is a lack of understanding of organizational roles and responsibilities. Not job position descriptions but what the 4 levels of the organization do when the fire bell goes off. Everyone knows what's in their official position description but ask what a Duty Officer does when the fire bell goes off and you get various answers, the first one being, what is a Duty Officer? There has been a great deal of reorganization and movement and administrative change in the recent history with the National Fire Plan monies. Dispatch is a good example; Central vs. District or Zone. With these changes, responsibilities and duties may become blurred and assumptions made that say "yes we got it covered". Often "mission creep" occurs with one person or organizational branch performing the duties of another distorting intentions or responsibilities.

Does this insinuate that Directives and Policy are not valid? Not at all! Forest Service Manual Direction has at times been interpreted in different ways but for the most part they are what they are: Direction. They are as valid as the laws and regulation of their origin and for the most part clear.

The 4 levels of Decision Making for a Fire Management Organization once the "Fire Bell" rings are basically as follows:

Agency Administrator: Line Officers are responsible for all aspects of fire management. Duties are spelled out in FSM 5100. The fact that recent direction is striving to get District Rangers to attain core competencies is reflective of the agency's determination to get these individuals knowledgeable in the Fire Management profession.

The fact may be that the Agency Administrator has very little or no experience, knowledge or skill in this area. For all practical purposes the FMO needs to assist the Ranger through the maze of responsibilities she or he has, especially during an active season.

Fire Program Manager: Includes Forest Fire Staff, District/Zone FMOs - the “Real” positions that deal with management issues; WFSAs, Agreements and overseeing the whole operation according to the Fire Management Plan. Ensuring the Agency Administrator is knowledgeable of what is occurring etc.

Duty Officer and Dispatch: A need exists to have someone, usually other than Dispatch, especially on an active unit to handle all the questions that Type 3, 4 and 5 ICs may have while managing an incident. This is different than the duties that Dispatch performs of sending resources. Duty Officers are someone to monitor the Type 3, 4 or 5 IC – The link to management for questions, answers and advice. On a small Unit this is often the AFMO or even FMO; however during busy activity you may need to have a separate Duty Officer so the FMO can assist the Agency Administrator with WFSAs or Political issues. A clear distinction of Dispatch and Duty Officer Responsibilities is essential in these instances. They are two very different and distinct duties.

Type 3, 4 and 5 ICs: These duties are spelled out in a number of places including the Fireline Handbook. We have shaken up the Type 3 IC in the past 10 years with an abundance of issues, some very valid others not so. Some Type 3 ICs have handed in their Red Cards because of these problems. If we look at Reason’s “System Model” we see this as a latent attribute up the management chain.

The FPM is bombarded with a great many bureaucratic requirements; this is just a fact of life like many other managers except with one important distinction. The FPM manages a program that puts people in harms way. Given the gravity of the business it is imperative that Leadership on the unit is present and clearly defined. As hard as it is to be both the Manager and Leader it must happen. If no one on the unit is providing leadership the latent pieces of cheese on Reason’s model increase exponentially.

We see a great deal of information to Line and FPMs to “certify” they have had the training and certification because they are “responsible” for the activities that occur under their authority. We also have WO efforts to increase understanding of our own system. Hopefully the intentions of the WO will occur in such a way that these things happen. I believe what will occur is that without practicing the skills learned in these training or certifications nothing but a block checked on a form will occur. The paper ship is looking good but the real ship may be leaking as you read this. We need to realize that to become a learning organization we will need to build the habits associated with a learning organization. This is different than good Policy and Direction or even following it.

Steven Covey states in “7 Habits for Highly Effective People” (1999). To build a habit (transpose behavior) you need knowledge, skill and attitude. Most of the NWCG training is information that we hopefully turn into knowledge and in some cases unfortunately this is where we stop. In many cases we have been poor at building skills associated with knowledge to become a practitioner. For one thing we are not really

encouraged to do so. Taskbooks are a very good start but without a valid review committee at the Unit level to ensure that proficiency is obtained than this can be a moot point. If marginal performance is accepted by the Red Card Committee (FQRC) then marginal performance is what we should expect.

The premier organization that puts people in harms way and perhaps the organization we should emulate more is the military. They cannot be at war at all times so they take their practice, respect of command and command presence very seriously. They are constantly reviewing their own performance in a timely manor and the fact they are all soldiers first no matter the rank is apparent. The Marine Corps builds skill sets through the use of simulation, whether sandtable or computer or paper and pencil it is practice, practice, practice. It is not unusual for a senior officer in the Military to participate in a sandtable exercise with lower ranks to “play Warfighting”. More importantly they conduct large simulations such as at a Battalion level with 1000 personnel and even Regimental exercises that are designed to wring out performance capabilities of their whole organization. They are present and engaged because the objective is clear. They still have managerial duties but never relinquish the leadership traits of “up front and present”. They are soldiers interacting with soldiers in the game of Warfighting no matter the rank! They have learned that when you know how decisions are made you can make better decisions.

Discussion

Recently the USFS made an outstanding effort to ensure the Type 3 Incident Commanders (IC) have an understanding of their responsibility; this was accomplished through a certification process using a “live fire” exercise of simulation. This mandatory requirement to ensure competent behavior from the top of the organization makes this statement. “THIS IS HOW WE WANT YOU TO BEHAVE.” The ramifications of such an effort are tremendous in that Type 3 Incident Commanders are getting a very clear message – and more importantly somewhat the same message across the country. A large effort or Policy change in the agency did not have to occur to make this happen. The feedback that I monitored was very positive. The participants at first were nervous but afterwards the amount of operational dialect was tremendous. Exchanges of methods, ideas of how to accomplish different tasks were common and the exercise dispelled a bunch of unfounded ideas about Type 3 management.

If the Type 3 Certification Process was such a positive message that basically says “this is how we want you to behave” then the next step in this equation should be to tell the Fire Program Manager – “This is how we want YOU and YOUR ORGANIZATION” to behave. I do not see National direction any time soon requiring the field to accomplish a “Unit Certification”. Hopefully it will now be on the minds of the FPM to take it upon themselves to accomplish on their unit, and the truth be known this is where the responsibility lies anyway.

One of the most important realizations a FPM needs to make is that they are Leaders of Firefighters first and managers second, and as such they should be very concerned with how their primary objective is proceeding. It is time for the FPM to “play Warfighting” thereby getting back to the “Basic’s” for the FPM. There is no basic training for the FPM other than experience and M-581 which is a one week bombardment

of information on what you should know. There is now process other than experience to practice skills.

Getting back to basics for the FPM in my mind would be to accomplish items such as: A clear written description of all fire management and leadership positions is known and practiced. Knowing how the Duty Officer is going to relate to the IC and also the Duty Officer relationship with Dispatch is defined. Delegations are in place from line to the fire management allowing fire managers to operate without undue interference. The difference between Extended Attack and a full Type 3 Team has been discussed. How the unit will handle the incident until a Team arrives? Rangers have been through their certifications and practiced in how they will participate when fire strikes. The list of basics for the FPM is long and you can write scenarios that will force your organization to deal with them, maybe for the first time ever.

Simulation tools are easy to obtain and the simulations themselves can be as complicated or simple as you wish to make them. The benefits are large! By carrying out practice exercises seriously you can judge both individual and organizational behavior. You can review behaviors at all levels by having each level carry out After Action Reviews (AARs) for their function and then with the whole organization. There are different functions and issues with each layer that do not have to be discussed with the entire organizational level. Observations of individuals can also be used by the FQRC members when considering individual qualifications later when convened in committee. By doing After Action Reviews immediately the essence of what was planned, what actually occurred and the difference between the two are captured in the team's mind developing patterns of behavior we speak of in leadership. I would think we would want this behavior in our organizations from the Module leader to the IC all the way to Staff.

Besides the above mentioned benefits of doing "dry fire exercises" the most important is there is no one at risk. Time pressures place individuals at stress and you can judge individual behaviors and in the case you recognize some behavior you as a supervisor may want to change in an individual or even parts of the organization now would be the time to do so without the problem of true Risk.

If you are looking for excuses, I have compiled some that I have thought of and used myself. Some excuses are as follows:

This isn't the Military.

I'm too busy with the bureaucracy – (fill in whatever part budget, FPA, IFPM).

We don't need that because we get a lot of fire activity.

What Horses backside thought of this?

I'll let the FMOs, AFMOs, FOSs do this, it's their job mostly.

I'm not even Red Carded and feel embarrassed.

Maybe you're just timid. Say What! You say you want me to start to play games on my Forest? You want me to stand up there participating and expose myself to everyone? I haven't fought a fire in how many years! Well my answer to you is yes that is exactly what I am suggesting. You as FPM expose your people to some pretty risky stuff on fires so think about that! Not the time to be shy or feel dumb.

Maybe a picture of your sons or daughters out on the fireline working a Type 3 Incident would change your vision. What type of organization would you want backing

them up, ensuring they have what they need when they need it and that someone such as a Duty Officer or Dispatcher with a sound knowledge of what the IC is encountering is talking to them in earnest. The tone of that conversation tells the D.O. a great deal about the demeanor of the operation. I am sure we all think that everything is well and functioning on our units, and I am also sure we can process fires without it because frankly we are not that bad at what we do and often it is just plain luck. I am also sure we can process fire more effectively, efficiently and because of practice reduce our exposure to undue Risk always looking towards professional behaviors, I am very sure of that!

We as an agency have hired Gordon Graham and have spent thousands of dollars to hear him say “Train as you fight and fight as you train” or how about “everyday is a training day”. So the next time you’re in one of those high dollar sessions feeling good listening to Gordon or someone such as he saying to yourself “Right-on” also ask yourself this.

Ask yourself just what day it will be that you provide the leadership to “train as you fight” for you’re organization.

The day you start to change or validate your organizational habits by doing simulations may be the day you start to fill in the some of the holes in your part of the Swiss Cheese! That’s the day the Fire Program Manager gets to playing “Firefighting” applying some or all of their knowledge and skills and maybe even learning a few new ones.

References

- Reason, J. (1999). Human error. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Covey, S. (1999). “Seven habits of highly Effective People” copyright 1999 Franklin Covey Co.