

Building Group Cohesion In Type II Fire Crews

Bill Lee

Abstract

This presentation received its start after the South Canyon Fire in 1994. At that time, fire investigation placed most all the emphasis on evaluating fatalities around the failure of equipment. My fire experience and professional career as a School Social Worker directed me in a different direction- the human factors of fatalities. My focus was specifically on the interactional dynamics of a Type II Crew in relationship to developing a cohesive firefighting group. These efforts lead me to publishing an article in the Spring 2004 issue of *Fire Management Today* on group cohesion in Type II Crews (Lee 2004).

The focus of this presentation will be what I has learned about group cohesion in Type II Crews form personal experience, the implementation of suggested strategies to build cohesiveness by other crew bosses and feedback during crew boss training. The building of cohesion in Type II crews starts before the fire season starts. It starts during district wide orientation and projects between adjoining districts. One-way has been through gatherings of crewmembers in neighboring ranger districts before the fire season begins. For example, the Washakie Ranger District of the Shoshone National Forest has an orientation campout with neighboring ranger district at the beginning of summer to get people better acquainted with each other for coming work projects an fire duties.

The second focus of developing group cohesion is during the staging process of crews. In the staging phase on the way to a fire, crewmembers typically meet at a predetermined location and caravan to the fire. During this phase, the crew boss should assemble the crew and acknowledge the need for crew members to get to know each other. Crewmembers can connect with each other, building cohesion within the crew, through introductions of the crew. For example, crew members might: introduce themselves, explain the special skills they bring to the fire line, say something personal about themselves, discuss what they can contribute to a more cohesive crew, and add anything else they feel helps crew member to get to know them. Afterwards, the crewmembers should be assigned to travel in groups other than the groups they arrived with at the staging location to continue to get to know each other better. Such mixing can break up cliques and foster group cohesion.

The third focus in developing group cohesive crews is during standby mode or severity call up. Under the severe fire conditions of recent years, some fire management officers have ordered Type II crews to stand by for potential fires. The standby strategy can allow more time for a crew to become more cohesive through project work as crewmembers wait to be dispatched. This occurred during the 2002 fire season where the Bighorn Type II, crew, which I was a member of was dispatched to Mesa Verde National Park. We did fuel reduction for many days until we were dispatched for initial attack.

My approach in this presentation would be to review previous works on group cohesion by Jon Driessen and Ted Putnam. Then to present specific steps I have developed and tested which I listed above. Finally to engage the audience in a discussion to further the ideas presented above in developing group cohesion in Type II Crews.

Bill Lee, 45 Pheasant Run Drive, Lander, WY 82520. Email: blee@Fre1.k12.wy.us

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Reference

Lee B (2004) Building group cohesion in Type 2 fire crews. *Fire Management Today* **64(2)**, 48-50.

The Author

Bill Lee has been a seasonal recreational specialist/wildland firefighter since 1979. He works for the Washakie District of the Shoshone National Forest. Bill is a School Social Worker in public schools in Lander, Wyoming when he is not working in the summers for the U.S. Forest Service. He has taken his skills of working with groups to look at the human factors that effect group cohesion in Type II Crews. Bill's work on group cohesion started to take shape after the South Canyon Fire and more recently after the 30 Mile Fire. Bill has recently had an article published in *Fire Management Today* on Group Cohesion in Type II Crews. This article has been the culmination of developing a teaching module for Crew Bosses on Human Factors in Type II Crews. He has spoken at crew boss training course at the Wyoming Fire Academy and in the field with fire management officers.