



Managers who work in high risk environments, such as wildland fire, are often tasked with "briefing" crew leaders about the potential hazards they and their crews face and instruct them on what actions to take when those hazards become realities. *Crew leaders in those audiences are considered the "experts" in their line of work: they go to the line to accomplish the identified objectives and at the same time deal with extraordinary potential for changing conditions that could affect the outcome of their work and/or jeopardize their safety. Sensitive managers realize that briefings hold the promise of setting these crews up for success - by presenting them with the information they need to perform at an expert level. They recognize that crew leaders are locations of expertise that need to be continually monitored, developed and taken advantage of.*

How is that to be accomplished? Many fire managers describe morning briefings as having become overly-long. They have become an event where line-going personnel get little information they can actually use in the field. Some crews even say they are "bored to tears." This can be dangerous. By looking closely at the techniques of some fire behavior analysts working this last season, it may be that other high risk environment managers can also find keys to communicate messages that will meet the needs of field-going personnel and *prompt the expertise that lies therein.*



Morning Briefings: Boring or Effective?

How Our Conversations at Briefings Can Reinforce "Deference to Expertise"

It is moments after dawn in July when firefighters, managers and support personnel stand together in a half circle facing a large map listening to Incident Management Team members, technical experts, agency administrators and a visiting dignitary address the crowd. Speakers are lined up at the front near the map and as their turn comes up they deliver their portion of the collective briefing. The audience hears how the fire behaved last night, what the objectives are today and where to find the shower units that just arrived and set up during the night. They are also reminded to turn in their time to finance and where to turn in lost-and-found items.

Following the incident meteorologist's weather forecast, a fire behavior analyst (FBAN) steps up to talk. "This fire is going to move on divisions J, K and L today. The reason it is going to be active there today is because after the inversion lifts at about 11:00 a.m., surface winds from the southeast will start hitting the 30 mph mark. What that means to those of you who are going to work on these divisions today is that you are going to see the fire increase from creeping into torching and crowning...." The tone of the briefing has suddenly changed. Instead of a listing of redundant material delivered by speakers who occasionally demonstrate how uncomfortable they are talking in front of audiences, this speaker is talking to them, telling them what he expects to happen and how that will affect them. There is a noticeable change in the audience – now, everyone is listening intently.

"Today the overall picture is that winds are going to push this in every direction. In these divisions the wind is going to be a good thing because it is going to push the fire back into the black. But in this division the winds will flow across the tops of those miles of dozer lines out there and when it does that, it will expose burning material that has been incubating inside the dirt. When the wind exposes that, it is going to pick embers up and throw them outside the containment lines." Visual elements drive his conversation, he makes eye contact and watches for slight head nods telling him he is making his points clear.

Gene Rogers, a FBAN for more than 20 years, has learned to use descriptions instead of a lot of numbers when he talks to firefighters about fire behavior. In fact, he often purposely leaves out the numbers in his briefing, even though they are part of his forecast printed in the Incident Action Plan. Numbers, he says, are often too difficult for people to translate into meaningful information.

What Gene wants the crew bosses today to remember from his briefing is "where the fire is going to be active and why its going to be active: what is the key thing that could happen on the fire today based on what the forecasted weather is."

Risa Lange-Navarro, who also works as a fire behavior analyst, says she tries to imagine being a crew member in the audience listening to one of her briefings, in order to determine what information line-going personnel need to hear that day. "I'm always trying to put myself into the crews or the single resources or whatever, into their position. It's like, OK, what are they seeing? What do I need to get to them? What information do I need to get to them at whatever level they're thinking in order for them to make safe and effective decisions out there to keep them safe, to get them home?"

Long incidents frequently present incident management personnel with the challenge of trying to find something new to say. Gene refuses to use old information. "If you get into a non-changing event, you've got to pick up on what subtle changes are going on and change the briefing," he says. "Identical briefings don't work!" When he does repeat information, Gene says he briefly explains to the audience why he is repeating it. Sometimes it is for the benefit of new people, and sometimes it is because he wants to re-emphasize a safety element.

Gene says he usually limits the number of his messages to three, tying each of them to the weather event that will precede it. He also watches to see if the messages are hitting home with crew leaders getting ready to go to work. Gene reviews the Incident Action Plan to identify which crews are going to which divisions to “get a feel for who is out there on the line.” If he recognizes key players at the briefings, he pays attention to them, making personal contact as soon as possible.

When he stands in front of the morning crowd, Gene scans the audience. “I’m doing a sort of troop review. I’m looking to see what Type 1 and Type 2 resources are out there. Do we have a lot of contractors, are there local resources?” He adjusts his briefing to match the needs of the audience members and then after the briefing is completed he rotates among the divisional breakouts to answer questions or re-emphasize points. “I try to reiterate them in a different manner, make a different analogy,” he says about the visits with divisions.

Sometimes he will have an opportunity to visit with crew bosses on the fireline whose crews are working in positions that could become compromised by changing weather conditions, Gene says. “I’ve gotten out there and asked them, ‘What are you going to do when the front arrives? And they’ll say ‘Oh, that’s right, that’s right, they talked about that in the morning briefing...’”

Risa, who also visits with crews in the field, says she often asks them to describe what they are experiencing. “I try to get out on the ground as much as I can with the crews. Some crews are pretty standoffish. They’re told to not talk to strangers, but I’ll try. I’ll ask them, so what are you guys seeing in the weather? Are temperatures kind of going up? How about humidity? I’ll ask them, so what are you seeing along with that? And then I might tell them to think about what happened a couple days ago or get them to remember what happened when the fire took off and they were beating their butts trying to get around it. I try to get them to think about it – to make it *their* memory, not my memory.”

These fire personnel are delivering their messages using conversational techniques in briefings. They focus their messages on what line personnel need to hear, telling them what they can expect to happen and describing how that event will affect them. And they effectively reinforce this *prompting of expertise* in field-going personnel by asking them questions in the operating environment.

What Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe in “Managing the Unexpected” have to say about deferring to expertise, may also assist us in building this as a proactive skill. Our understanding about deference to expertise usually points us to their definition of: “Deference to expertise pushes decision-making to the field level, migrating decisions both up and down, reducing the consequences of errors in decision-making. Decisions migrate around HROs in search of a person who has specific knowledge of the event. Deference to expertise is as much collective as it is individual.”

Weick and Sutcliffe also write about expertise: “Expertise is relational. It is an assemblage of knowledge, experience, learning and intuitions that is seldom embodied in a single individual. And if expertise appears to be confined to a single individual, that expertise is evoked and becomes meaningful only when a second person requests it, defers to it, modifies it or rejects it.” They also write, “Expertise resides as much in relationships as in individuals, meaning that interrelationships, interactions, conversations and networks embody it.”

To be especially useful, the content communicated must be current, rich in context, and relevant to the immediate needs of crew leaders. The extra effort it takes to truly connect with crew leaders before, during, and after briefings provides access to knowledge beyond just surface information to the deeper level of becoming aware of what each other knows. Real connections make rich conversations possible. It is through conversation that context and trust are established and that knowledge is both shared and created. Conversations can create connections that lead to relationships and learning.

The wildland firefighter profession is effective only to the degree that its members take responsibility for it, engage in the collective conversation that shapes it, and see themselves connected to their fellow firefighters.

Questions related to this event:

- What if the fire behavior analyst had simply stated that people working on the fireline today would probably experience strong, variable winds today?
- Would the crews assigned to divisions J, K and L had been just as well prepared if they had not been warned that smoldering embers lying just beneath the surface of the soil on the dozer lines could get pushed beyond containment lines and into fresh fuel?
- What if the crews assigned to those divisions had earmarked the day as “an easy job” and become complacent about patrolling the dozer lines?

Broader questions to ask ourselves regarding our teams and organizations:

- Have we developed our abilities to identify what others need to hear?
- Are we sharing the information people need to hear?
- Are we framing the information we share in ways that people can easily determine how it could or will be important to them?
- Are we prompting expert reactions among personnel who need to be able to discern new patterns quickly?

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Consider using this HRO Story in a learning opportunity, teaching moment, or teambuilding session you design for your unit, team or organization. For more information on High Reliability Organizing and Organizational Learning, please visit the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center’s website at www.wildfirelessons.net, or contact the LLC staff:

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