

The Emotionally Intelligent Firefighter

An unspoken human dimension of wildland firefighting

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Introduction

The human factors revolution of the 90s transformed the way the wildland firefighter community thinks and feels about the business of fire safety. It has shaped the focus of fire conferences, training curriculum, and professional safety staff meetings. Regardless of all our efforts to understand why tragedies continue on wildland fires, we still shy away from a frank and open discussion on the powerful role human emotions play in the outcome of these significant events.

The word “feelings” still invokes thoughts of weakness and is antithetical to the mythological firefighter who must depend on raw intellect, cognitive fitness, and hard learned experiences to make safe decisions. Feelings must be suppressed during the heat of the battle in order to stay alert, keep calm, think clearly, and act decisively in a dynamic and fluid fire environment. The prototypical firefighter, threatened by danger, must avoid decision errors by the hard-nosed analytical processing of facts and suppression of hyper rational emotions, which can lead to loss of command and muddle the picture of what must be done.

It is not uncommon to hear leaders and public speakers apologetically preface remarks about feelings by saying, “not to be touchy feely,” so as not to be perceived as soft or lacking credibility. However, if you listen carefully, you may recognize that emotional tone is a driving force behind every important discussion amongst people. Ironically, anger and more subtle expressions of frustration or displeasure are an expected and tolerated part of a firefighter’s emotional dialogue. Making good use of the other domains of our emotional landscape is unfortunately too often taboo or disregarded.

Don’t get me wrong

I am not an advocate for giving free reign to feelings, and letting it all “hang out” in sort of a new age “sensitive” firefighter culture. The intimate emotional zone shared between friends and family should not trespass into the workplace, and an understanding of this boundary is itself a demonstration of emotional competency. Proper understanding of social and organizational norms and ground rules on how to articulate emotions in the workplace must be maintained in order for people to work productively together. Furthermore, I am not arguing for a preoccupation with emotionally driven thoughts that may cloud the finite attention space available in our working memory. Finally, this abstract is not an attempt to advance the latest pop psychology, Zen art of right culture thinking, or promote the benefits of mindful meditation. I trust open minds will prevail.

Emotions in action: listen for the alarm

One hot summer day I was driving to a fire along a narrow, twisting dirt road. Suddenly, smoke blotted out the rig that was traveling a few lengths ahead of me. As I peered ahead I could no longer make out anything; the unexpected smoke was now a blinding dark cloud. With my foot tightly covering the brake, I could feel anxiety flood my body. The pounding sound of my heart was noticeable, and my anxiety quickly built to an unpleasant feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach. I was motivated to pull over to the side of the road and let this smokescreen clear. Waiting by the side of the road I could hear an increased tempo of chatter on the radio while I contemplated continuing on. If not for my internal lookout still on point, my impatience would likely have prevailed. A half hour later the air cleared, visibility improved, and I continued on my way – only to be stopped a few hundred yards down the road. I could make out a person in a dingy yellow shirt giving first aid to a traumatized passenger. A crew buggy had rear-ended a slower pickup attempting to lead the convoy through the curtain of smoke. Although I did not think too much of it at the time, if I had continued driving head long in the blinding smoke, chances are I would have been part of this nasty little pileup.

The caution that fear forced on me that day likely prevented me from having an accident. Like a rabbit frozen in terror at the hint of a passing fox, or a protomammal hiding from a marauding dinosaur, my situational awareness was heightened by an instinctual cue that compelled me to stop, pay attention, and take heed of a coming danger.

All emotions are, in essence, impulses to action that humans have developed from our most primitive beginnings. The root of the word *emotions* is *motere*: the Latin verb “to move,” With fear, blood flows to the large skeletal muscles, such as the legs, making it easier to flee. At the same time, the body freezes, if only for a few seconds, giving time to decide whether hiding might be the best option. A flood of hormones make us ready for action, focus our attention on the hazard, and assist judging the best response. Emotions are typically indispensable for rational decisions; they point us in the proper direction where dry logic can then be of best use. However, lack of awareness of our emotional state can leave us hostage to an out-of-control surge if our emotional brain is left to run rampant.

The emotionally competent firefighter

Research in psychobiology and cutting edge neuroscience have provided an insight that should intrigue many cognitive-oriented folks through new brain-imaging technologies. The scientific aspect of emotions should prove liberating to the professional firefighter interested in a rational discussion of this unexpressed dimension of human factors. The latest research on how we think and decide on a biological level and the importance emotional intelligence plays in job performance, advancement, and survival redefines what it means to be a smart firefighter. The act of innovation on a wildfire assignment is both cognitive and emotive. Coming up with creative problem solving is a cognitive act, but realizing its value and the ability to persuade, be persistent, and persevere under pressure is an essential emotional competency.

The emotionally literate wildland firefighter

An example of the practical benefits of emotional literacy can be drawn from a critical incident stress intervention concept taught to handle crisis situations and negotiations. In any meaningful human exchange, it is useful to understand the thinking style, or nature, of the person with whom you are communicating. Personologic style models developed for crisis intervention suggest there are two diametrically opposed styles of information processing that human beings may employ. Although it is recognized that people are one of the most complex creatures on the planet, and some could justifiably argue this is gross oversimplification, I believe it is helpful to have a grasp of this concept when you meet someone on a fire for the first time.

To understand this concept, it has also been suggested that there are two basic types of people: 1) cognitively-oriented people, and 2) affectively-oriented people. Based on observations, many of firefighters tend to display a cognitively-oriented dominance with reason and logic used preferentially. Affectively-oriented people in the ranks are not generally as apparent, but you no doubt recognize their effusive behavior when you meet them. They tend to rely more on emotive cues to influence their thinking and actions. Once again, it is clear that humans can fall anywhere in the spectrum of this model, but people do tend to experience a dominate personologic style.

The emotional feedback from our first impression strongly influences our initial ability to communicate and understand each other. Self awareness of your dominated personologic style and the recognition of others can improve your ability to connect or align with people in a quicker manner. In order to base a plan of action, this valuable communication tactic can aid in helping you come to agreement on an effective LCES (Lookout, Communications, Escape Routes, Safety Zones) safety system. Firefighters have reported that the reason they love this glamorous, dirty job is because of the excitement, physical challenge, and the relationships. In fact, the meaningful relationships to be discovered and fostered when people are pulled together to solve problems, mop up a stump, or staff a Yurt is what motives many to accept this often dangerous job.

Emotional intelligence: lessons learned

When a firefighter was interviewed following a notorious fire entrapment he stated that he decided to pull his engine out before a nearby hand crew was burned over because "the situation just didn't feel good." When asked why he did not speak up and share this concern with others he said, "There were a many more experienced, higher ranking firefighters out there that day, and how could I explain over the radio that I think this operation is unsafe simply based on a gut feeling?" The fear of expressing the "wrong" feelings in a given situation can prove tragic. Not recognizing common ego defense mechanisms - denial, or intellectualization - during an overwhelming entrapment episode can compromise a timely escape, prevent fire shelters from being deployed, and create conditions where people will

project/communicate an inaccurate sense or tone of the true reality and danger of the situation.

The emotional memory: the portal

Experiencing a life-threatening event has been referred to as a “portal experience”. The emotional memories of these events are imprinted on the primitive part of the brain called the amygdala. The more intense the emotional arousal, the stronger the imprint in long-term memory, and a latent potential for stunning recall. If we later experience a similar stimulating sensory event, our emotional alarm will sound in response to this imprint, which is hyperlinked to the pre-existing flight-or-fight response programmed in all of us. In the first few milliseconds of a perception of a threat, the brain’s neurochemical (epinephrine/norpinephrine surge) alerting system is activated. The amygdala, the main site in the brain where the emergency signals are routed, springs us to action moments before signals on parallel circuits catch up with the neocortex. It is here we finally begin to piece together what is actually going on or what is about to happen.

Emotional SA: knowing one’s emotions

Situational awareness of your emotional state is essential in order to master normal human responses in triggering sensory events. Self awareness paired with enhanced emotive response recognition of others can help you make an appropriate response to your posted neural lookout. Self awareness of your feelings can also prevent an emotional hijacking by non-threatening sensory stimulation, and give you more time to refine a plan on how to react. Self regulating competencies and taking control over your own state of mind will make you more resilient and capable to self reset the amygdala trigger, and rebound more quickly from a hijack.

Situational awareness of “gut” feelings can give you confidence to act when you reach your internal trigger point. When you suppress or discount your gut feelings in an effort to present an outward appearance of calm and control, you can send the wrong signal to others. This notion of self control does not mean denying or repressing true feelings. During an escalating event, the visceral-feeling signals, and tuning into yourself can help you to avoid indecisiveness, and loss of precious time waiting for the neocortex to fully understand what is happening.

Summary

We hear it, we say it, but what do we mean?

- Create a passion for safety
- Speak up if you “feel” it is unsafe
- Be calm, think clearly, and act decisively
- Leadership motivation
- Portal experience
- Values - respect/integrity

- Crew cohesion - conflict/trust
- Individual perceptions of risk
- Critical incident stress
- Just culture
- Outcome severity (emotional) bias
- Cognitive lock up (hijack)
- Doctrine – a moral standards
- Facilitated Learning Analysis Report - Lesson learned – “do not ignore your gut feeling”
- Safety – is a state of being

Clearly, the above are some examples of a corporate vocabulary infused and created from an emotional conscientiousness. These emotionally founded ideas, principles, and concepts are at the heart of matters important to many people who have invested their lives in a complex and extraordinary firefighting culture. The intent of this paper is to strengthen the recognition that current efforts to make lasting improvement in safety through an emphasis on learning must include emotional as well as intellectual knowledge. The desire for cultural change and enhanced human performance requires the re-tooling of ingrained habits of thought, behavior, and feelings. As we search for more answers to the question of why unexpected and undesirable things happen on wildfires, I hope you will feel a little safer talking about this compelling untold human dimension of firefighter safety.

Where to go from here?

Unlike the old standard measure of IQ which is principally determined and fixed early in life, emotional intelligences can be developed from lessons learned throughout life. The following are some actions you can take to strengthen your emotional IQ:

A. Read/References:

1. *Emotional Intelligence – Why it can matter more than IQ*, by Daniel Goleman
2. *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman
3. *The Emotionally Intelligent Manager*, by David R. Caruso/Peter Salovey

B. Learning - online training:

1. Emotional Intelligence at Work – USDA AgLearn
2. Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace Simulation - AgLearn
3. Increasing your Emotional Intelligence - AgLearn

C. Private vendor course:

- <http://www.6seconds.org/training/>
- [Emotional Intelligence training resources](http://www.6seconds.org/training/)

D. Attend a seminar: <http://www.eiconsortium.org/>

E. Self study: <http://www.eiconsortium.org/research/research.htm>

Practical exercise #1 - demonstrate your EI on the fireline

Consider asking for “LCES status checks” on the radio the next time your gut is telling you something. We are told that every firefighter has a right to a safe assignment and to speak up if he/she feels unsafe. The question remains, how can this be done effectively in the heat of the battle? Use the “LCES status check” as an emotional intelligent code word. If your gut is telling you something or some sensory signal is activated, then it might be a good time to ask for an “LCES status check.” Recognize the “LCES status check” as a verbal code of caution and a trigger to shift the momentum of the operational task at hand towards a refocus on safety. Acknowledging a firefighter’s internal lookout could be just the heads up needed to ensure situational awareness is keeping up with transitioning events.

Emotional Competence Framework

Personal Competence

These competencies determine how we manage ourselves

Self-Awareness

Knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions

- **Emotional awareness:** Recognizing one's emotions and their effects
- **Accurate self-assessment:** Knowing one's strengths and limits
- **Self-confidence:** A strong sense of one's self-worth and capabilities

Self-Regulation

Managing one's internal states, impulses, and resources

- **Self-Control:** Keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check
- **Trustworthiness:** Maintaining standards of honesty and integrity
- **Conscientiousness:** Taking responsibility for personal performance
- **Adaptability:** Flexibility in handling change
- **Innovation:** Being comfortable with novel ideas, approaches, and new information

Motivation

Emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching goals

- **Achievement drive:** Striving to improve or meet a standard of excellence
- **Commitment:** Aligning with the goals of the group or organization
- **Initiative:** Readiness to act on opportunities
- **Optimism:** Persistence in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks

Social Competence

These competencies determine how we handle relationships

Empathy

Awareness of other's feelings, needs, and concerns

- **Understanding others:** Sensing other's feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns
- **Developing others:** Sensing other's development needs and bolstering their abilities
- **Service orientation:** Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting customer's needs
- **Leveraging diversity:** Cultivation opportunities through different kinds of people
- **Political awareness:** Reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships

Social Skills

Adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others

- **Influence:** Wielding effective tactics for persuasion
- **Communications:** Listening openly and sending convincing messages
- **Conflict management:** Negotiating and resolving disagreements
- **Leadership:** Inspiring and guiding individuals and groups
- **Change catalyst:** Initiating or managing change
- **Building bonds:** Nurturing instrumental relationships
- **Collaboration and cooperation:** Working with others towards shared goals
- **Team capabilities:** Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals

Above framework excerpt from the book: Working with Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman.