HRO Stories

Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

Being Mindful: Are we managing our expectations?
by Jonetta T. Holt

Redding Hotshots scratching line on the Bear Wallow Fire 2008.
Photo courtesy Scott Wetmore

In the wildland fire community, there are practices and processes in place, routines even, that seem to dictate what we expect will happen during the day. Fire managers have often been heard to say, "We bring order from chaos." Since orderliness *seems* like a good thing, we often assume it is.

What if the routines and processes we have in place, are creating blind spots in our overall awareness leading us to be less mindful about the activities we are engaged in? Our expectations are simply assumptions that guide our choices.

Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe say in *Managing the Unexpected*, that "to have an expectation is to envision something, usually for good reasons, that is reasonably certain to come about." However, "even though we have a routine to deal with a problem, does not mean that we necessarily understand the problem. Routines are also expectations that are subject to the very same traps as any other expectations." Similar thinking traps are demonstrated in planning processes, when people become entrenched in the idea that reality will play out just like it is planned.

What if we had a simple technique that would enable us to identify our most deeply embedded assumptions and help us expose the frailty of our expectations?

Jim Steele recently explained why he teaches a four-step process he learned from the U.S. Marine Corps. Read this story about why Jim considers it a critical skill to challenge our assumptions and how this process helps to manage our expectations.

Jim Steele, retired from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, now works as a consulting forester and is the fire chief of a rural fire district. He retains his qualifications as a fire behavior analyst (FBAN) and has taught multiple classes in the subject. Several years ago, he discovered that many students in fire behavior classes who are asked to describe fire behavior based on the model outputs they just generated, such as "erratic fire behavior," could not do it because they are unable to visualize what that would look like. Jim felt that description skill was critical to performing the FBAN job correctly. Transforming theory and modeling into a reality that could be understood by firefighters is critical to developing a better understanding of this gap between "what I think" and "what really is." He began using an effective technique with his students that he learned and adapted from Marine Corps tactical decision games training.

"I give them a scenario. Then I give them one minute to ask clarifying questions, but will not give them additional information. Then they have 30 seconds to write down their assumptions. After that they have one minute to write down their tactics and one minute to tell the class what they are going to brief their fire crew on."

- Scenario
- 1 minute for clarifying questions
- 30 seconds to identify assumptions
- 1 minute to write down tactics
- 1 minute to brief the crew

It is a difficult exercise, Jim says. "You have to bring your brain to the task. **But the more I used it, the more I realized how critically important it became to test our assumptions.** Most people don't write anything on the assumptions part, because *they don't know what an assumption is.*"

Assumptions are ideas about what we believe everyone's reality is, and are often so deeply embedded in our thought patterns that we lose sight of them. Our expectations about "what everybody knows," are frequently reinforced by the routines and processes we have in place that guide our actions throughout our work day. Jim sees that as the beginning of a mindless response creating a potentially dangerous environment. "One of our first assumptions when we go to the field is that all of our dogma works. We're making assumptions with the 10 Standard Fire Orders. For example, let's talk about weather prediction, number 5: Just because it's the best available information, doesn't make it right." Firefighters go to the field assuming it is.

Some assumptions in wildland fire management are inherent in important concepts, Jim says. "We tell ourselves that we need more risk management. We *assume* that we know what that risk is. In order to know what the risk is, you have to be able to describe it in vivid terms and visualize them changing from hazards to the risks we think will confront us."

A specific example, Jim notes, is how we use LCES (Lookouts, Communications, Escape Routes and Safety Zones). "We assume that LCES works," Jim says. "But we have not formally told people how to use it or how to use it successfully. The closest we came to it was a smokejumper designed LCES workshop that we did a long time ago. It is on the shelf and there has been nothing since then." To view a PowerPoint presentation about the application of LCES, go to www.wildlandfire.com/ppt/lces.ppt

So, if we looked at the assumptions inherent in the LCES process, how many would we find? Do we assume that:
1. We have successfully evaluated the Incident Response Pocket Guide Step 1 on Situation Awareness and 2 on Hazard Assessment) in the Risk Management Process **before** identifying how we will use LCES (Step 3) for our specific situations?
2. That the person who is the lookout will be located in a position to be able to see the correct portion of the fire and the crew?
3. That the lookout is monitoring the radio and relaying the correct information to the crew that includes what fire behavior attributes to watch for, how to communicate them, when, to whom, and why? That vigilance is as much a part of the job as communicating verifiable information and data?
4. That the communication system will provide uninterrupted service throughout the work shift and that firefighters won't "walk" on each other in their transmissions and miss vital information?

5. That escape routes are marked and tested? That all crew members are capable of using it to escape? That the route is adequate and will not be compromised? That if the primary escape route is compromised, another one will be open?
6. That everyone knows what the characteristics of an adequate safety zone are? That the safety zone is reachable from their position on the line and has been mapped and validated by folks that would be expected to use it?

   Assumptions are not going away. However, Jim advocates a three-part process to manage them:
   1) Identify them,
   2) Discard the ones that are based on fantasy and keep the ones that are based on facts and
   3) Visualize how they can become untrue in a moment and prepare to manage a new reality.

"If we built plans with an HRO slant, we would ask 'how is this going to fail when we really need it.' And we would keep asking that question."

Consider using this HRO Story in a learning opportunity, teaching moment, or teambuilding session you design for your unit, team or organization.

Questions related to this story:
- Are there more assumptions we make about the use of LCES than just the few mentioned here. Can you think of some?
- Can you think of other examples when we assume that everyone knows the situation and we skip steps to "get to the important part" of the meeting, i.e. the After Action Review Process?
- Do we assume that everyone is making the same assumptions?
- Do we plan our daily work with assumptions based on facts or on fantasies? Do we know what the difference is?
- Do we regularly check in with our co-workers asking them to articulate their expectations?
- What if we began each meeting with "assuming that …." Would we be able to better manage our assumptions if they were clearly labeled as such out loud for everyone?

Broader mindfulness questions to ask ourselves regarding our teams and organizations:
- Are we updating our routines and expectations?
- Are we behaving in ways that compel such updating?

- Are we looking for the signs in our routines that our expectations are inadequate and unexpected events are unfolding?
- Have we identified a threshold for implementing recovery before we are in the midst of an event?
- Have we thought about what it is we need to know (and what we do not need to know) in order to act on a problem?

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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