

People Have The Power – Risk Leadership in U.S. Wildland Fire Agencies

...The people have the power. The power to dream to rule. To wrestle the world from fools. It's decreed the people rule. It's decreed the people rule. Listen. I believe everything we dream can come to pass through our union. We can turn the world around. We can turn the earth's revolution. We have the power. People have the power.

-Patti Smith, People Have the Power" © 1988

About Risk Leadership Theory

The work of two leadership scholars at Fort Hays State University, Curtis Brungardt and C.B. Crawford, risk leadership takes an unconventional view of empowerment and organizational change. When I think of Risk Leadership, I think of Patti Smith's song "People Have the Power", a call to action, self-empowerment and collaborative effort.

Risk leadership theory advocates that low and mid-level employees, when necessary for the organization's well being, must empower themselves to confront and challenge management. Risk leadership turns traditional notions of leadership and empowerment on their head. The model envisions a coalition of energetic and committed members of the rank-and-file, not the organization's designated leaders, serving as the organization's change agents. Typically, members of this coalition share a strong belief that the organization should perform better, and have lost confidence in their management's capacity to lead the organization toward an effective vision.

Risk leadership, as a model of "bottom-up empowerment" and a somewhat confrontational approach, represents a fundamental departure from traditional thinking on leadership; and one that is likely to anger and threaten the power figures of, all but the most progressive, organizations.

So why might an up-and-comer in an organization expose his or herself to the risk implied in "risk leadership?" One or more of three motivations typically drive these "risk agents." First, and perhaps most often, risk agents rally around an important issue that they feel management has failed to attend to. Second, a person, or people, may serve as the primary cause for bucking management. Finally, these self-empowered risk agents act because they perceive a lack of effective leadership, and wish to assert their influence to help lead the organization in a better direction. Risk agents act because they care. They believe in their organization and its potential, but the organization's performance disappoints them. They want their organization to perform to its potential, and believe they can help it do so. Risk agents often represent the organization's "best and brightest," employees with reputations for commitment and performance, and they "step up" to leadership, intending to challenge management, influence the direction of their organization, and lead its transformation to something better than the organization is now.

Risk agents do not work alone, instead forming a coalition of people sharing their views; what Brungardt and Crawford call the “risk agency.” Members of the risk agency refuse to wait for the organization’s management to act or to empower them; they empower themselves to work with others for the collective good of the organization. The risk agency also reaches out to others to join their movement, including like-minded, influential members of their organization’s power structure. They also seek assistance from outside the organization. Once formed, the risk agency declines to follow the direction of top management, effectively refusing to be part of the problem any longer. Though a form of leadership unfamiliar in agencies organized as traditional, formal, bureaucracies; this emerging theory of leadership can help us understand the reaction of firefighters to a current issue in the U.S. wildland fire community, particularly the U.S. Forest Service.

Current Events – The Ellreese Daniels Affair

Recently, a U.S. Attorney filed criminal charges against Ellreese Daniels, who was serving as crew boss when his crew was overrun by the Thirtymile fire in 2001, killing four crewmembers. Firefighters have reacted to the charges against Daniels with fierce opposition. Some argue that prosecutors are treating Daniels unfairly, possibly illegally, and that his agency has abandoned him as a scapegoat. Others contend that reformers outside the organization harbor an unrealistic expectation for the level of stability and predictability possible in the dynamic environment in which firefighters operate. Many contend that criminal charges, designed to make an example of an individual and “send a message” actually run counter to the efforts needed to improve wildland firefighter safety. Most importantly, firefighters believe that Daniels’ predicament, coupled with other recent precedents, leads their agency unconsciously, inadvertently, but unquestionably, toward a very negative and uncertain future; one which they want agency management to lead them away from.

Recently, agency personnel have announced that they would abandon their operations and command qualifications, decline to take fire assignments, or leave their agency at first opportunity. Numerous firefighters have contacted both regional and national media outlets. Others have suggested that Forest Service fire personnel might stand-down in protest. Some call for Type 1 and 2 Incident Commanders to stand down and/or speak on the record to focus attention on corrective action. Others have suggested that Forest Service personnel sign a statement expressing “no confidence” in the agency’s management. Others exhort all members of the interagency fire community to contact their elected officials, and federal employees to contact the United States Office of Special Counsel’s Disclosure Unit. One 32-year Forest Service veteran has called for an immediate agency dialogue. The Federal Wildland Firefighters’ Association (FWSA) has joined the fray, actively lobbying Congress for hearings into the intent and unintended consequences of Public Law 107-203.

Given these events, the seeds of risk leadership appear to be germinating in the U.S. Forest Service fire organization. However, Brungardt and Crawford don't call their theory "risk leadership" for nothing, and there's much for the potential risk agent to know.

Understanding Risk Leadership – Tips for the Would-be Risk Agent

Why You Do It. It is important to remember that the ultimate intent of a risk leadership approach is not overthrow, anarchy, or obstruction, but self-empowered leadership that forces collaboration between the risk agency and management and positive change. In addition, risk leadership theorists promote an organizational culture that tolerates and demands a degree of confrontation and challenge as part of the organization's decision-making and problem solving. This is the ultimate intent of the risk leadership concept – to develop a long-term, but uncomfortable partnership from which collaborative changes flow.

Reserve Risk Leadership for Important Problems. Pick a problem of true importance to the organization, and engage in risk leadership "for the outfit." The difference between a risk agency and "a group of disgruntled troublemakers" often lies in what people choose to challenge management over.

Your Organization's Management Will Resist. However, practically, we must recognize that some power figures, particularly in traditional bureaucracies, will view what Brungardt and Crawford describe as self-empowered leadership, as insubordination. Government agencies, like many organizations, harbor many classical leaders and managers – people in positions of power whose instincts cause them to "lead" by stabilizing, controlling, organizing, and managing their organizations. Unfortunately, for some of these people, risk leadership looks like instability, loss of control, disorder, and anarchy. Classical leaders are about top-down direction, not bottom-up empowerment and collaboration. They solve problems with policies, to produce stability, standardization, and predictability. They manage, and view leadership as synonymous with good management.

Unfortunately, most contemporary leadership scholars would argue that, while this approach may have served organizations well in the past, it cannot effectively respond to today's dynamic operating environment. In our contemporary work world, leadership is all about change, not about stability, and today's effective leaders excel at guiding transformational organizational change and helping their constituents negotiate change. Consequently, in some organizations where classical leaders abound, a confrontational approach proves necessary to break from traditional approaches to leadership, in which designated power figures inclined to protect the status quo, serve as the organization's sole change agents.

Risk Leadership Is A Bottom-up Empowerment Model. The risk leadership model envisions low and mid-level employees confronting and challenging established authority for the purpose of transforming the organization, and appeals to these “risk agents” to assume responsibility, without waiting for designated organizational leaders to act. At the bottom line, risk leadership advocates believe that the rank and file must make transformational change come about in organizations, and that bottom-up empowerment or self-empowerment holds the key.

Risk Agents Are More Than Dissatisfied Employees. Risk agents have qualities that imbue them with power, credibility, and the capacity to challenge organizational authority with manageable risk of retribution. Typically, organizations view their risk agents as energetic, enthusiastic, innovative, hard-working performers who can collaborate; in short, people that organizations value and do not ignore or discard easily. According to Brungardt and Crawford, risk agents are often younger, relatively new to the organization, and moving-up.

Make Sure Your Heart Is In The Right Place. Critically, risk agents must act in the best interest of their organization. Risk agents must possess the ability to make sensible, ethical decisions and influence others to do so as well. Risk agencies are made up of people linked by their shared concern for *the good of the organization*.

Risk Agents Cannot Act On Their Own, Or Even As Part Of A Small Group. Instead, they form a coalition of like-minded individuals, called a “risk agency,” providing strength in numbers. Risk agents make up the core of the risk agency, but recruiting like-minded members of the organization’s power structure lends power to the risk agency’s cause and affords a degree of protection for its members.

The risk agency should seek support from outside the organization; the more influential supporters are, the better. In addition, Brungardt and Crawford leave open the possibility that the risk agency can successfully, and selectively, recruit freethinking members of management who could contribute information, resources, power and protection to the risk agency.

Consensus On An Alternative Vision For The Organization Is Critical To Success. The risk agency must steadfastly agree to and support a shared agenda for the organization.

Facts and Logic, Not Emotion and Passion, Will Carry The Day. Use rational arguments, and supporting data, when proposing an alternative agenda or vision to for the organization.

Expect Confrontation. Confrontation is part of the risk leadership model. Refusing to follow the guidance of leadership and offering an alternative vision puts the risk agency on a collision course with management. Management typically acts to squelch risk leadership and will likely respond negatively, seeking to assert its position and coercive power. However, it is from this conflict that organizational change becomes possible.

You Can't Stay In The Conflict Stage Forever. Collaborate. The objective of risk leadership is to find common ground and avoid perpetual dissension. Seek jointly supported outcomes and commitment to genuine change. For this to happen, the risk agency and management must eventually set aside their differences *for the common good of the organization*. The partnership that ensues remains “uncomfortable,” but ultimately, produces collaborative problem solutions.

The Risk Agency's Work Occurs In Four Steps

1. Preparation. Assume personal responsibility for changing things. Assess the organization's strengths and weaknesses. Build a strong risk agency – a coalition of like-minded people. Develop an alternative agenda for the organization. Typically, risk agents and risk agencies have superior situational awareness, realizing that an impending problem exists before management does. Like-minded individuals coalesce into a risk agency. They think about the problem, its causes, effects and implications; and empower themselves to develop, and achieve consensus on, an alternative vision for the organization.
2. Resist. Once the risk agency is established and its power built, directly or indirectly challenge and test management. Deny the consent to be governed. Take a stand on the issue, person, or change at hand. Refuse to be a part of the problem any longer. Advance the alternate agenda - offer a better way. Activate conflict as necessary to force management to adopt the alternative vision for the organization.
3. Resolve. Both sides must compromise. Collaborate to make real progress.
4. Institutionalize the risk agency. Modify the organization's culture to support genuine empowerment, innovation and organizational change.

Learn More: Read Curtis Brungardt and C.B. Crawford's book *Risk Leadership* (Rocky Mountain Press, 1999) ISBN 1-929149-01-8.