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## **To Make a Difference: Sometimes You Must Take a Risk**

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. The situation calls to mind three things about leadership.

First, in today's world, leadership is all about change; and change is both messy and very painful, and leaders serve their constituents by helping them negotiate that change. Second, "classical leadership" is alive and well in the United States. Though seriously flawed, that old command-and-control, coercive, approach still has appeal. For example, some people see a need to reform wildland fire: to assert some stability, control, and predictability in this dangerous occupation. Apparently, questioning the efficiency and motivation of the U.S. Forest Service when it comes to providing for firefighter safety, they have chosen to reform the wildland fire workforce by force, using the autocratic power of the law. Finally, an emerging theory of leadership, known as "risk leadership" can help us understand the reaction of firefighters as a form of leadership, though a form unfamiliar in agencies organized as a traditional, formal, bureaucracy.

The work of two leadership scholars, Curtis Brungardt and C.B. Crawford, risk leadership takes an unconventional view of empowerment and organizational change. 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 organization's power figures. So readers might ask why an up-and-comer in an organization might expose themselves 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 change 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 remain disappointed by its performance; 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 it is now.

Risk agents do not work alone, instead forming a coalition of people sharing their views. They also reach out to others to join their movement; including like-minded, influential members of their organization's power structure. The coalition, what Brungardt and Crawford call the “risk agency,” also seeks assistance from outside the organization. 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. Once formed, the risk agency declines to follow the direction of top management, effectively refusing to be part of the problem any longer. Which brings us back to the Ellreese Daniels affair.

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.



Nowhere is firefighter sentiment more evident than at *They Said*, an online community of firefighters whose members have reacted with frenzy. In recent weeks, contributors 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.

The seeds of risk leadership appear to be forming in the U.S. Forest Service fire organization. However, it is important to remember that the ultimate intent is not overthrow or anarchy, but collaboration between the risk agency and management. There's much for the potential risk agent to know. *Wildfire* readers can learn more about risk leadership by reading Brungardt and Crawford's book *Risk Leadership* (Rocky Mountain Press, 1999) or by visiting my website at [www.guidancegroup.org](http://www.guidancegroup.org).

### ***About the Author.***

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Mike DeGrosky is Chief Executive Officer of the Guidance Group, a consulting organization specializing in the human and organizational aspects of the fire service and an adjunct instructor in leadership studies at Fort Hays State University. His interests include leadership, strategy, and bringing the concepts of learning organizations and high reliability organizing alive in fire organizations. He is currently pursuing a PhD focused on organizational leadership. He can be reached at [info@guidancegroup.org](mailto:info@guidancegroup.org)