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Put All the Tools in Your Toolbox

About 15 years ago, what I call the Human Factors Movement began in the wildland fire service. Since then, firefighters have changed in wondrous ways. I'll admit, I still marvel when I hear a young firefighter talking about their influence, recognition-primed decision-making, or the unit's cohesion. The pace of change really accelerated over the last eight years, as the NWCG's Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program grew and matured. I can remember providing supervision and leadership training to fire folk back in the day. Pretty basic supervision concepts were news; and the subject of leadership was cutting edge, for most people there. Today, average firefighters understand pretty high-end human factors concepts. Many firefighters have become true students of leadership and the sciences that help us understand the people that fight fire; the people they aspire to either lead or follow. Most importantly, there's plenty of evidence that they are practicing what they have learned. For example, my recent evaluation of the L-380 training found that it is succeeding and that both participants and their supervisors see desired leadership behavior and performance showing up in the workplace.

When I was a hotshot back in the Bronze Age, you could have asked what the leader's intent was. However, on many crews, when the boss stopped laughing, screaming, or hitting you, the answer would be "My intent is for you to put your head down and dig!" Today, if people aren't feeling some sense of leader's intent, the Superintendent is going to have some unhappy boys and girls on their hands. Back then, an AAR consisted of "Be watered and lunched and lined-out for breakfast by 0600. Oh, and take a shower, I can smell you from here." Today, as a common practice, the AAR provides the basis of considerable organizational learning happening all over the wildland fire service. For years, we trained people beyond the peak of the stress curve, not realizing that we were keeping people from learning. It is pretty clear, that when it comes to the human factor, the average firefighter is far more sophisticated than they used to be.

However, despite this fantastic progress, I've noticed a troubling trend. Let's call it the Balkanization of human factors approaches, people creating separation between useful tools that should peacefully co-exist, even complement and enhance one another. Please don't get me wrong.

I know everyone means well, but people get so passionate about their favorite solution that they sometimes promote that solution to the detriment of other useful tools, even when that doesn't make sense.

For example, I've been told that "We won't drink the HRO Kool-Aid" because:

- a) "We're into the risk management and human error work of James Reason"
- b) "I'm into disaster theory or normal accident theory"
- c) "We're focused on creating a just culture"
- d) "I attended the L-380 training"

These are just examples, and I actually hear people make these arguments, and others, in different combinations. In each case, I've reacted in the same way – "Huh?" These arguments are like saying "I don't eat pizza because I like beer" or "I don't have a hammer because I use screwdrivers." I want the whole meal, and I want to have all the tools in my toolbox. More importantly, none of these concepts exclude the other and, in fact, they often complement one another nicely to contribute to a comprehensive leadership philosophy.

We all want to find tools to help firefighters. We want to get those tools into people's heads and hands as well as into widespread use. However, sometimes our desire to make a difference and our passion for the approaches we think will work, get the best of us. When that happens, we make silly distinctions and sometimes lose sight of two important facts. First, we're all on the same team. We all want the same result, and people with ideas different than ours are not the enemy.

Second, the broad range of human factors and leadership concepts to which firefighters have been exposed share huge patches of common ground in human and organizational behavior. Consequently, if we look, we will find that they often fit together in powerful ways. We need to see where they connect; where they complement each other; how we can use them together; and, most importantly, how they combine into a well-rounded philosophy of human factors and leadership. My thoughts? Let's put all the tools in our toolbox.

Biography

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