



USDA Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Briefing Paper



Date February 6, 2006

Topic: Peer Review Panels - Purpose and Process

Issue: Identify iterative processes to improve fire management workforce performance and safety through review of systems, decisions, and behaviors.

Background: Implementation of a doctrinal approach to fire management requires performance management and error reduction systems that are designed to improve workforce use of discretion and judgment in decision-making. Reviews or investigations of accidents or other significant events provide opportunities to improve organizational learning toward this end.

Investigation of the 2005 I-90 Tarkio shelter deployment offered a chance to review behaviors based on perceptions and application of operating principles. The Regional Forester agreed to pioneer the concept through the Regional Accident Investigation Team assigned to review the deployment. Their process and report yielded a number lessons for future reviews of close-calls and significant events. This briefing paper takes from those lessons and proposes a system of iterative review to help achieve the following "end state."

End State:

Every employee is creative and decisive, exercises initiative and accepts responsibility, uses their training, experience, and judgment in decision-making to carry out their leader's intent, and "know(s) what 'right' looks like." Systems, principles, and rules contribute to the employee's ability to perform in this manner.

Intent of the "Peer Review" Process:

Provide a framework to assist the evaluation of individuals' decisions and behaviors, and contributing factors (organizational, environmental, social...).

Purpose of the "Peer Review" Process:

Reduce errors by correcting or reinforcing upstream behaviors and other factors. Peer reviews provide a means to learn from a variety of situations, including close calls, significant events, and routine performance evaluations. The objective is to create a culture that expects and values peer reviews as an important means to discover subtle indicators of potential future errors and as a catalyst for positive change.

Implementation:

Peer Review Panels should be used following near-miss events and close calls, and significant events, regardless of outcome. Individuals may request peer review of their personal performance. Unit and individual performance may also benefit from the use of the peer review concept, and line officers should consider using peer review to perform their annual 10% review of Type 3, 4, and 5 fires.

Peer review can be blended with accident investigation activities where concentric with the intent expressed by the convening line officer. This approach allows the evaluation of decisions, which may have led to the outcome, in terms of operating principles, leader intent, situational awareness, etc., and not simply as relates to the momentary violation of a rule. This approach helps segregate human error from intentional disregard of fundamental operating principles, and gives the opportunity to illuminate positive behaviors and decisions even when a bad outcome occurs.

Peer review can also be used to highlight systems and organizational issues that affect performance and safety.

Process:

Peer Review Panel Composition... The process centers around the convening of a small panel of respected operators, known for their ability to perform the particular mission in the particular environment, and also known to be insightful, fair, just, and honest. It is imperative that the panel and its members be able to create an open 'listening' environment.

Peer Review Panels are an opportunity to involve future leaders to help them expand their understanding of the diversity and complexity of fire operations, and broaden their vision of the fire program they will eventually inherit.

Questions... are designed to ascertain each interviewee's perspective. The panel will combine a number of these perspectives to develop a nuanced picture of the event, internal and external influences, and the decisions and behaviors involved. So, what perceptions are important to know?

1. What was planned? What was your leader's intent?
2. What information were you provided? What did you feel was missing? Why couldn't you get it?
3. What was the situation? What did you see? What were you aware you couldn't see?
4. What did you do? Why did you do it? What didn't you do? Why didn't you do it?
5. What did you learn? What might you do differently the next time? What can we learn as an organization? What might we do differently?

The Panel should continue questioning in areas where the reviewers feel disconnect, discomfort, confusion, or curiosity.

There will be occasions when the process of peer review begins to reveal misconduct. At this point it is the obligation of the Peer Review Panel to immediately terminate its activities and inform the delegating line officer of the potential need for administrative or other review / investigation. **It is important to understand that Peer Review Panel activities are entirely focused on developing lessons learned, and not to contribute to other investigations or reviews.**

Potential Products / Accomplishments...

While based on the same premise as the After Action Review (AAR), the peer review process is a look from outside the team, unit, or event, while the AAR is internal. Lessons learned by the Peer Review Panel will be made available beyond the team, unit, or event.

The immediate product of Peer Review Panel activity is a written disclosure of lessons learned, including the story of the event and the reasons it unfolded the way it did.

Benefits of the Peer Review Panel's process and report include:

- providing involved individuals feedback on performance, possibly including areas of potential improvement
- assisting the supervisor, program manager, and line officer in the evaluation and improvement of employee development efforts
- helping in the focused amendment of training strategies and materials, policy (principles and rules), and operating procedures
- supplying subject matter for presentations, briefings, job hazard analyses, safety alerts, and other communication opportunities
- contributing, in aggregate with other information, to a higher level lessons-learned analysis
- promoting long-term positive shifts in the organization and the culture

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