



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service

Technology &
Development
Program

5100–Fire
March 2009
0951–2805–MTDC



Firefighter Cohesion and Entrapment Avoidance

Discussion Questions



Cover—Firefighters during morning briefing.

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Discussion Questions



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5100 9E92P30 Entrapment Avoidance

March 2009

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Discussion of Problem 1 Firefighters Not Getting Along

Story 1: Out To Compete With Everybody

- Why is excessive crew competition a cohesion problem?
- What work practices did the leader use to stop excessive competition?
- How can excessive competition between crews decrease confidence in the leader and detract from situational awareness? Can this increase the chance of entrapment?
- What other work practices have you or others used to reduce excessive competition?

Story 2: The Excitement Is Gone

- Why does complaining among firefighters cause a cohesion problem?
- What work practices did the leader use to deal with this problem?
- What other work practices have you or other leaders used to maintain cohesion when firefighters got bored and started complaining on fires?
- How could complaining among firefighters contribute to increasing the chance of entrapment?

Story 3: He Didn't Get To Be Crew Boss

- Why does a squad boss undermining a crew boss trainee's authority result in a cohesion problem in the rest of the crew?
- What work practices did the crew boss trainee use to take care of the crew cohesion problem?
- What problems with confidence in the leadership of the crew boss trainee and situational awareness were created when the squad boss led half of the crew up the other side of the road? How could this action play itself out in a potential entrapment situation?



Discussion of Problem 2 Working With Unfamiliar Resources

Story 1: Grab People Off Districts

- What work practices did the crew boss use to build cohesion in his crew of firefighters from different districts?
- How could the actions of this leader increase both confidence in his leadership and situational awareness once they got to the fire?
- What work practices have you or other leaders used to build cohesion with a group of firefighters who were just pulled off of districts and didn't know each other?

Story 3: Crew Straggling In

- What specific work practices did this leader use to integrate new firefighters into his existing crew?
- How could his actions help to increase both confidence in his leadership and situational awareness?
- How would the leader's work practices have changed if the firefighters were straggling in when the fire was blowing up? Discuss how a change in fire behavior can change the work practices available to the leader to deal with cohesion problems.

Story 2: Resources I Hadn't Worked With Before

- The leader scaled back suppression operations for a couple of days. How was this linked to cohesion?
- Discuss the work practices this leader used to establish cohesion with the engine crews he hadn't worked with before.
- Talk about a specific time when you have had to work with unfamiliar resources and had concerns about cohesion. What did you do?

Story 4: They Welcomed Us In

- Discuss how stereotyping of firefighters can create cohesion problems on a fire.
- What work practices did the smokejumper use to build cohesion between the contract crew and jumpers?
- What work practices have you used to create cohesion between contract and federal crews?



Discussion of Problem 3

The Fire Gets Hot and Firefighters Get Nervous

Story 1: The Fire Was Really Picking Up

- When the fire picked up, what were the specific work practices the leader used to maintain cohesion?
- How do you think his work practices affected the likelihood of the crew becoming entrapped?
- Think of times when a fire got hot. What other actions did you or other leaders take to make sure firefighters stayed together?

Story 2: We Had People in a Panic

- How is the situation this leader faced a cohesion problem?
- What work practices did this leader use at the helibase to pull people together in a hurry to avoid a high likelihood of entrapment?
- Think of a time when you were a leader at a place like a spike camp, fire camp, staging area, or helibase. What would you do if you had to quickly build cohesion to facilitate an emergency evacuation? Who would you turn to for help?

Story 3: We Have Spots All Over the Place

- How does the fire getting hot cause a possible cohesion problem?
- What main work practices did this leader use to keep his crew cohesive when the fire was spotting all around them?
- How could the leader's work practices increase both confidence in his leadership and situational awareness?
- Discuss how to maintain a cohesive group: when would you use radio communications and when is it better to have a face-to-face interaction?

Discussion of Problem 4 Can't Trust Other Firefighters

Story 1: This Person Was Dangerous

- What work practices did the leader use to deal with the cohesion problem caused by the overly aggressive squad boss?
- How did the actions of the squad boss possibly damage confidence in the leader and situational awareness, thus creating a dangerous situation for the entire crew?
- The leader had to remove the squad boss from the crew. What cohesion problems might this create for the leader? What work practices would you use to deal with these potential cohesion problems?

Story 2: We Had Spot Fires Behind Us

- How did one crew not watching another crew's back create a cohesion problem?
- What actions did the crew boss take to create minimal cohesion with the other crew to reduce the chances of both crews getting entrapped?
- How could his actions increase confidence in the leader and improve situational awareness?
- Talk about other situations when you had to work with crews on fires you didn't trust. Discuss the work practices you used to deal with the problem.



Discussion of Problem 5 Resources Out of the Loop

Story 1: They Felt Isolated

- Discuss the work practices this leader used to reduce tensions and build cohesion with the angry and frustrated structural firefighters.
- How did the leader's actions enhance the rural firefighter's situational awareness and help build confidence in his leadership?
- If the fire had been blowing up in this story, how might this have changed the work practices the leader used to build cohesion with the structural firefighters?

Story 2: He Was Freelancing

- What work practices did this leader use in the story to solve the immediate cohesion problem she faced with the dozer operator?
- Discuss the work practices she used to restore cohesion with the dozer operator and the rest of the division in the safety zone.
- Discuss how this story illustrates that cohesion needs to be built, maintained, and restored.
- If the division supervisor hadn't apologized to the dozer boss, how could this have hurt situational awareness and confidence in her leadership in the division?

Discussion of Problem 6

Questioning Tactics

Story 1: We're Not Going

- How did the strike team leader build cohesion between herself and the crew boss who refused the assignment?
- How did the strike team leader's actions improve the overall situational awareness of the crew boss? How might her actions have increased the crew boss's confidence in her leadership?
- How might the work practices the strike team leader used to build cohesion with the crew boss have changed if the danger from the fire had been more immediate?

Story 2: Should We Be Here?

- How did the dozer operator's concerns about engaging the fire cause a cohesion problem?
- What specific work practices did this leader use to establish cohesion between himself and the dozer operator?
- Discuss how the dozer boss's work practices might have increased situational awareness and built confidence in his leadership.



Discussion of Problem 7 Lacking Local Knowledge

Story 1: Out of Their Element

- The leader talked about having to carry out his work practices with great finesse. How would you go about assigning a member of your crew to another crew without causing a cohesion problem?
- What other work practices have you or other leaders used to build cohesion with firefighters who were unfamiliar with the local area?
- How would putting an experienced range firefighter with the hotshot crew improve the overall situational awareness of both crews and confidence in their leadership?

Story 2: You're on People's Turf

- How can an IC's lack of local knowledge on how to fight a fire create a cohesion problem between the leader and the local resources?
- What specific work practices did this IC use to establish cohesion with the local resources?
- Discuss times when you were in charge of resources and didn't have local knowledge. How did you build cohesion with the local resources? Also, how do you think your actions helped reduce the chances of entrapment?

Discussion of Problem 8

Home Unit Loyalties and Cliques

Story 1: Best Friends

- Discuss the work practices this leader used to deal with the cohesion problems created by the best friends.
- If the leader hadn't dealt with the problems the best friends created, how could it have damaged confidence in his leadership and situational awareness? How might it have increased the chances of entrapment?
- Talk about times when you as a leader had to deal with other firefighters who were too close, causing a cohesion problem. Talk about what you did to resolve the problem.

Story 2: We Needed To Bring Them Together

- What work practices did the leader use to integrate people from several districts into a single cohesive crew?
- Talk about the work practices you or other leaders have used to build one crew from several district crews.
- If the leader hadn't been able to integrate the district crews into one crew, how could it have impacted situational awareness and confidence in his leadership once they were on a fire?



About the Authors

Leslie Anderson is the Program Leader for the Fire and Aviation Program at the Missoula Technology & Development Center (MTDC). Leslie has a bachelor's degree in forestry from the University of California, Berkeley, and a master's degree in forestry from the University of Montana. She began working in wildland fire in 1979. Leslie was a smokejumper from 1984 to 1989 in Missoula, MT. She worked for 2 years in fire management with the Costa Rican National Park Service as a Peace Corps volunteer from 1989 to 1991. Leslie worked as an assistant district fire management officer on the Bitterroot National Forest from 1992 to 1997 before coming to MTDC as an equipment specialist in 1997. She served as a project leader for projects involving fire shelters and fire-resistant clothing before becoming a program leader.

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Library Card

Anderson, Leslie; Outka-Perkins, Lisa. 2009. Firefighter cohesion and entrapment avoidance: discussion questions. Tech. Rep. 0951-2805-MTDC. Missoula, MT: U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Missoula Technology and Development Center. 8 p.

This report provides questions about the information in the DVD "Firefighter Cohesion and Entrapment Avoidance" for use in training. The DVD was created by the Missoula Technology and Development Center based on interviews with 49 experienced leaders of firefighters. The DVD's goal is to increase firefighters' awareness of cohesion (how closely firefighters are tied together as a group) and its importance in helping wildland firefighters avoid entrapment. The DVD includes facilitator's notes, transcripts of the firefighter's stories, and discussion questions.



Keywords: burnovers, deployments, safety at work, training, wildland firefighting

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<http://www.fs.fed.us/eng/t-d.php>

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