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Firefighter Cohesion and Entrapment Avoidance

Story Transcripts

Cover—The Missoula Technology and Development team interviews a firefighter.

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Story Transcripts

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Problem 1
Firefighters Not Getting Along

Story 1: Out To Compete With Everybody

There was us and another hotshow crew, there were some jumpers there, it was kind of mixed, we were on this division, another shot crew came in, and I guess starting off by saying this, some healthy competition's always good, but if you get, if people get too full of themselves, that's not good either.

And this crew in particular, they were obviously out to compete with everybody all the time, and they were doing their own thing. And we worked with them a couple days, and they wouldn't communicate with the other crews or strike team leaders or even the division sup, because they were just kind of, out there doing their own thing and wanting to show everybody up.

And we had a couple of days of that and it was a safety issue. So what I did is, I, out on the line, I gathered up the overhead of that crew, and things were really busy, it was a hot burning fire, we were going direct, you know, just a busy time, and so I didn't have time to sit down with them for a long time. I just got them and told them, "You need to start communicating with everybody around you and be a little more professional in the way you're acting, because it's a safety issue." I said, "You need to straighten this out." I was pretty blunt with them. But in some instances, that's what needs to be done. It was just basically said that you guys are off in your own world here and, you know, you obviously want to be the star of the show here and you're not cooperating with other people, you're not talking to people on the radio, and you need to straighten it out. It was real simple.

Immediately right after that, they started communicating, cooperating with the other crews, and the other people on the division. And they actually apologized a few days later.

Story 2: The Excitement Is Gone

Got these 20 people together and we're going down to Colorado and we get to the fire and, you know, like anything, you're new on something and it's exciting. So right away everybody wants to do a good job and get toward the goal.

About halfway through the fire, people get tired and the interpersonal stuff starts to get a little touchy. So we had a couple of individuals in particular that were kind of starting, I don't know if you want to call it a rebellion or a mutiny, but, you know, along those lines where their tension or discontent about whatever factor starts pulling them apart from the main group. And there breaks our cohesion immediately because now you're missing two people and those people act like a cancer and just starts to spread. And so just bringing everybody down because once those two went, then we lost the cohesion because everybody's looking at these two saying "Well, maybe they're right, maybe this isn't fun. I don't like digging in the dirt and mopping up all day." And so then everybody's kind of doubting what we were there for in regard to our goal. It wasn't real outright, just you know, subtle things, little comments, you know, why are we here, blah, blah, blah, just little things. But the big things in the overall picture, trying to keep things going in a positive way throughout the course of the fire until we were done. So, yeah, little things, but they were big.

And since one of them is a squad boss, you know, he's kind of one of those people that sort of in a leadership place where a lot of people are looking up to and so then it's definitely my job to address it. And it's two days left, should I even bother with it or should I just let it kind of fly by the wayside, but I decided to address it anyway. Pulled them aside, and said, "Hey, this is what I'm seeing. Is this what you're doing?" And of course both denied it and so we talked about our goals again, what we wanted to see, and then I gave the one the ultimatum of, you know, clean up the act or take the fast boat home type deal. That seemed to work well, but I think you always encounter that sort of stuff toward the end of a tour.

And, you know, if you don't address those issues, there goes all your trust and respect that you tried to build over the last 12 days. Because somebody in that crew is going to say, "Hey, I thought we were going for this goal and this guy's over here being a jackass and you're just going to let it happen." And for that instance, it culled the situation and we got things back to working order and the cohesion came back again. Once those two people realized that being an individual isn't exactly what you might want to do when you have to be working with, you know, 18 other folks. So that was the big thing on that fire because it was a big fire and a lot of things going on and just having that cohesion, people working together, was a big deal.

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

I was the Assistant Crew Boss/Crew Boss Trainee. And Griff was my trainer. There was this other guy on the crew, he was working on his crew boss too and I didn't know that. I had been picked as the crew boss trainee for that trip because of my training needs on the district.

It's not my fault that I got to go out as crew boss and he didn't. He was just sulking the whole time. He was one of the squad bosses, sulking, sulking, sulking. He made it—I won't say that they didn't follow what I asked them to do but they didn't make it very easy for me. And, I thought we had an all right time but there were times when it just didn't mesh quite right; we didn't mesh as well as we should have. You know, and, by the end of it, they would pick, pick, pick on me.

Well, then on the next trip, it was that way all over again. I got to do the crew boss thing so actually we were going to split it and he was going to take assistant for 1 week and I was going to take assistant for the next week. I was leading the crew and half the crew was following me. We would walk down the road and the other half was following this other guy and they were walking down the other side of the road. He would have them do stuff like that. I was like, we can't have this. You know, I talked to Griff about it and Griff was like, "Yeah, this is not good." So we sat down with him and we were like, "We know that you're bent about not being crew boss, but you're going to be crew boss next week. But while I'm crew boss, please respect it. You know, quit doing this stuff. This has got to stop, you've got to start following or else the whole crew will fall apart. You're going to screw up everything." Well, after that talk, this guy started like really helping me.

Problem 2
Working With Unfamiliar Resources

Story 1: Grab People Off Districts

I guess dealing with the aspect of cohesion, when we put together crews—because there's kind of a difference between crews like a 20-man crew, say a shot crew, and a crew that we put together on a forest. That 20-man crew, the type 1 crew, is going to be together all season and then our forest crews, we just grab people off districts and put them on. And those are, I don't know, there's aspects of each that are hard to deal with but the forest crews are extremely hard in the sense that you don't know what you're getting. Real good crews, but you just don't know the people. You don't work with them for, say, 4 years like we do here.

So we have all these people coming together, a lot of them new, some second or third year, but basically people that didn't really know each other, maybe worked together once or twice. And so I guess that's kind of where the team-building stuff starts. They came in at different intervals and so those people that I knew, I'd go up and talk to. Like, if I knew you, I'd go up and talk to you. And whoever I didn't know, it's the kind of thing where you introduce yourself and shake hands. It's a meet and greet at the beginning there.

At that point, people are standoffish and what not, so you get your little groups of people here, groups of people there, usually the people that know each other. We try to get people working and doing things, getting a manifest together, checking gear, pairing up different people with different people.

Before we headed out, we all gathered up and did a briefing to tell the crew where we were going, had a roster already made up of who was going to be the squad bosses, who was going to be crewmember type thing. And so everybody introduced themselves, said where they're from. We went around, the assistant and I, and gave people their position, which was really, you know looking back, a good thing because I guess that is the main icebreaker for that whole crew because everybody's name gets out on the table.

Yeah, anyway, we gathered up and had our briefing, you know, people got to talking. We loaded up and headed out. We took, I think, five different trucks just to accommodate all the gear and the people. And since we're not a crew that's permanently together, we just kind of have to piece together trucks or what not. So anyway, we had five different trucks. And we tried to load up our squads that we had determined earlier, load them up together. And that was a real good thing because the way we picked out the squad members was, you know, trying to pick people off of different districts. Because you don't know what combination is going to work and what's not. So on the ride to Denver, say a 12-hour ride, you might as well have people that don't know each other talking together, right? And that's a good thing, usually it works. It worked in this case. So that was, that was good.

Story 2: Resources I Hadn't Worked With Before

I know just thinking back to last summer, coming in with a number of different resources that I hadn't worked with before. The first day's operation, that kind of transition day, I just relied upon the person that I was replacing to kind of, to brief me on who was doing what and how they were doing, who was putting in the best work or what kind of work each engine was doing and then looking at their equipment and seeing what their capabilities were. Some of them, every one of them was different. So getting a good briefing from that person, that I was replacing, but then, you know, not making an assumption because I didn't know that person at all either, it was all new to me.

The next day, when I took over, it was just kind of scaling back, stepping back. Not being maybe as aggressive as we could have been until I got a good feel of who I had working for me, what their capabilities were, you know, how they communicated back to me in critical times. Whether or not they just left me hanging out there on the radio or they could tell me, you know, confidently that they had it or whatever the situation might have been. And then going over to them, not just sitting there and watching them, going over and looking at their equipment, looking at what, how they were doing, helping them out, because some of them were pretty inexperienced people. And just kind of letting them know again what I expected of them, because it was going to be different than the person that was in charge before me. Not that I didn't trust them or anything, it was just a matter of getting comfortable with the situation and who I had and what we had going on with the fire.

Story 3: Crew Straggling In

This was the Brushy Fire, this is a fire in pretty much just pinyon-juniper and it was about 20 acres when we got there, maybe 10, something like that, it had a little bit of size to it. It turned out this was just one of those fires where there was no access to the heel of the fire. This was one of those where you had to go in on a road that was above the fire. It was late afternoon when we initial attacked it. We brought in a five person IA squad that was stationed from our station. So I knew all of them. We brought them in and we started suppression on the fire.

So at that point we got them there, we decided that there wasn't going to be enough, we'd need at least a 10-person crew. We called in a 10-person crew, IA crew to support the people that we had there. A lot of these people were folks that I hadn't worked with before. They have no cohesion whatsoever because they're coming from different parts of the district and then coming together at the fire. It was one of those things where they couldn't really get everybody together at a predetermined location. People kind of straggled in from this 10-person crew so two people would show up and then three more people would show up. And, so it was one of those things where every time—I remember this really good because it was pretty steep, but every time they showed up, I'd hike up to the top of the fire, tie in with them, give them the briefing, which I had memorized by this point and, you know, then say, "Okay let's go back down." So, then I'd go back down and then three more people would show up, so I'd hike back up to the top of the hill, brief them, tell them what was going on, give them that whole spiel and then bring them down the hill, tie them in with the squad boss that was running the IA crew, the IA foreman, and then they would become a part of that crew down there.

You know, basic, just introductions, introductions like you would do if you were introducing somebody to your dad. Hey, this is so and so and they're from whatever forest and they're here with a 10-person crew and we're still waiting for some of them so we're going to have these guys work with you for a while and you're responsible for them, and basically had one crew down at the bottom.

Story 4: They Welcomed Us In

A good contract crew and a good agency crew—the differences are very minimal. The training is virtually the same, the equipment is virtually the same, and they're all human, so the makeup of the crew is virtually the same. The biggest thing is a contract crew at times maybe won't be treated the same when they're on an incident as another crew. People have a problem before they meet me, and before they see our crew perform they have a preconceived notion of what they're getting. And for some reason, it's extremely negative. Should at least be given a chance to either fail or succeed, that's all I ask.

It was an experience I've had this year, actually in northern Idaho. The fire had been jumped earlier that day. There was quite a few jumpers. I think they put out six jumpers, at least. So they had assumed the overhead responsibilities for that smaller fire. And, you know, we got there—and they welcomed us in. We got briefed. There was a very lengthy discussion with the jumper in charge and he gave me every piece of information I would ever want to know and then some, and gave me his idea of what he would want me to do with my crew, but then gave me enough respect to allow me to make the decision of how to do it, and how to go about working my crew. He didn't tell me how to split my crew up and how to dig line, I mean, he gave me the respect that I would normally anticipate getting, that I know how to fight fire. You know, allowed us to go out the next day and to take on more responsibility, and to take a portion of the fire as our own. They would work with us; they wouldn't segregate themselves. They integrated themselves into the firefighting process in our area. They were pulling my crew numerous times on the early stages of that fire to go assist them, to catch the fire. I haven't worked with a lot of smokejumpers, it's just a handful of fires in my experience, but it seems like every time I do, they waited to see what we were going to do before they made their decisions about how to judge us and how to treat us, or what responsibilities to give us on the fire.

It does stand out in my mind as one of the rare times that I felt like I was on a team other than my crew while I was fighting fire. And that no matter what happened, we would, as a team fighting the fire, we would adjust whatever was needed to make it happen safely.

Problem 3
The Fire Gets Hot and Firefighters Get Nervous

Story 1: The Fire Was Really Picking Up

The one that I'm going to talk about is the Hayman Fire that was down in Denver, outside of Denver, here, I think in 2001. I guess, we'd be on far southeast flank of the fire. We were just working one flank with two hotshot crews. We were just leapfrogging digging line. One time I guess it was probably 13 or 1400 and the fire was really picking up. And we were both heading down a long ridge and so at that point, people were tired, the hottest part of the day, and we're going downhill so we just took a minute. And it wasn't a dangerous situation, so to speak, but we just took a minute to sit back and gather the group up and let everybody know why we were stopped and that we wanted to talk about safety hazards, see if anybody had seen anything and just go around to each member of the crew and get their feeling on what was going on, just kind of involve everybody, to let them know that this is what we're going to do but you're going to be part of the decision. The downhill line construction, which we wanted to see if anybody would bring that up, they did. So that was a big one we talked about. And then we got into for the sake of the younger people in the crew, we got into the trigger points and somebody took weather and we discussed a little bit of that.

I think in their mind when they're talking about this throughout the day, they're envisioning that worst-case scenario, at least that's what we're trying to put in their mind is, you know, all these conditions that we have are bad and they could be leading to something bad. So let's just keep an eye on them and keep talking about them. So that's already in their mind. And then when it happens, it's like, oh, okay, here's what we've been talking about all day, let's do what we need to do to get out of it or to mitigate.

The best thing it's given me is some trust factor. As long as that person feels some involvement, then I'm getting a little bit of their trust because they know that somebody's going to listen to what I have to say and even if it doesn't happen the way they're going to say it, that seems to be a big thing. You know, just the fact of knowing that everybody's on the same page, gave everybody that mentality where we're all thinking sort of alike. So my buddy's looking out for me and I'm looking out for her. I know I've been on crews where there wasn't trust and when you get in bad situations, you don't have that trust. Everything goes out the window.

Story 2: We Had People in a Panic

It was on the Jasper Fire in 2000. And we'd spent some time scouting in the air looking for an adequate helibase for the pieces that we knew we had coming. We'd found what we thought was going to be a good helibase. It had some limitations with regard to wires and a little bit of squeeze in there with regard to what we knew we had coming as far as aviation assets. But the thing that we felt fairly comfortable about was that the fire was going to continue to move away from us. And was going to leave us in a high and dry good situation, we weren't going to need to look over our shoulder and worry about the monster wherever it was at. Boy, we couldn't have been more wrong.

We all missed it. We got a wind switch from a southwest to a southeast and that was—and we had an open flank that we were watchful of, but we continued to feel that it was going to continue to move away from us and we weren't going to need to be concerned with that. You can get pretty wrapped up when you're building a helibase from scratch. There's a lot of things that need to be in place and working very very proficiently and smoothly. The wind switch came, and it was immediate. It was immediate recognition by several people there. It was even way before the smoke got to us. It was way before the fire brands started landing on the helibase and burning stuff up. And it was like, "Oh God. This is not good." We've got a lot of people, a lot of apparatus, a tremendous amount of moving parts here, and we're going to sit here now and focus on what it is we're feeling or sensing more than really observing at that point in time. And Chris and I got together and we kind of hunkered down and talked about it, and he said if we need to move, we've got to do it now. I said, "I agree. I don't even want to wait to see what develops." Before we actually got everything moved out of there, we had the smoke column bent over coming right across us. We had fire brands landing in the meadow that we had chosen for the helibase. We had people in a panic.

We got the pilots together and we said, "Guys, this is not a good deal. We need to get this whole ball of wax out of here and we need to do it pretty darn quick," and they're like, 'Yep, you betcha.'" So they grabbed their contract folks, they grabbed their managers, everything seemed to calm down a little bit. We went to the people that I felt were the most experienced with the situation that we had to deal with. I just felt that if the direction was going to come from anybody and be acted upon rationally, the pilots were going to be the ones that were going to better be able to get this thing moving so that we could just shuffle on out of there. You can't have any urgency in your voice. You can't move quickly. So it's like you've got smoking brakes going as you're working through this process because you're standing on them, going, Jeez, I need to walk calmly, I need to talk calmly. I need to walk up to an individual, get them close, there's wind, there's generators, there's pumps, there's noise, get them up close, talk to them as calmly as I can, and say, "You know, this is our situation here. We need to get this, this, and this done." Those guys did such a wonderful job, not only with their own contract crews, the mechanics, the fuel tenders, the whatever they had with them, but they did a really good job in calming down the managers, discussing with the managers, and their crews, and we were able to pick up all of the stuff that it took us at least a half a day to get set up, we were out of there in an hour.

Story 3: We Have Spots All Over the Place

It was a type 2 crew I was working with, I was one of the squad bosses on it. We all came together from the Santa Fe National Forest and it was just people from all different districts on the forest. Where everything happened, we were in Yellowstone, working on the East Fire at the time. And it was 10 o'clock in the morning and our mission of the day was to look for spot fires and we were having fairly good winds. I could just sense that something was going wrong. I'd fought fire in Montana before and I knew the trigger points in the situation. We were just catching a lot of spots that early in the morning. It was heavily timbered area and there was just spots all over the place. Everywhere you were looking, you were finding spots. And that was, you know, a watch out to me, that we got spots all over the place, we got people that aren't familiar with this country much at all, we got people that aren't familiar with the trigger points. And I felt that this was something that needed to be keyed in to all these people. We all had to be on the same page so if a situation does arise, we're all together and we can get out of this area together. I alerted my crew boss, and from what I can remember he had not fought fire in Montana and so I let him know, you know, this is something we gotta start watching out for.

I'd say about a half hour later, you know, we were catching more and more spots, the RH was starting to dip lower, I said, "This is time that we regroup, let's get together. You know, if we're going to be working these spots, let's get together in this situation and let's stay together." As far as regrouping, I feel when the situation arises, you have to have a face-to-face. A face-to-face you see the emotions, you're getting everybody together, you're getting everybody informed, you're getting everybody on the same page. You need to have everybody on the same page, especially when things are going chaotic.

I conferred with the crew boss, and I was like, "It's time we get out of this area." It was blowing up and we found a beautiful meadow that offered a great protection. So we all got up into the safety zone, and I could watch everybody's expressions and how everybody was dealing with the situation. And some of these people—but not all of them—hadn't had a lot of fire experience so they'd never dealt with big fire, they'd mostly dealt with small initial attack and they hadn't seen a lot of intense fire activity. I was with the whole crew. I just kept on briefing with them. I don't know if it was a comforting thing, but I was with them the whole time. And I was working with them the whole time. I think one of the best things to do in those situations is keep people informed. And just watching how they're reacting to the situation. You know, if you have to, you know, take that person to the side. If you're seeing that they are getting really scared, let them know that you're there and that everything's going to be all right because you want to make it out of this too, you want to get home at the end of the night. You gotta keep everybody together and you gotta watch their emotions, watch how they're dealing with the situation, and be there for them. If you don't have that cohesion, then it's going to be hard when something really does happen. Everybody would have been scattered all over the place and, you know, it could have potentially been fatalities out there.

Problem 4
Can't Trust Other Firefighters

Story 1: This Person Was Dangerous

We had a new squad boss, we hired to the crew, we hadn't worked with him a lot and it became real obvious to us that this person was real aggressive, overly aggressive, and they were a danger to the crew and themselves.

The first thing that happened with this person is, there's a two-track road right along the ridge, we were dragging fire down it, we had our lookout in place, the lookout called and said, "The fire, the main fire is making a run at you guys." And just on this person's word, we had everybody up on the road and we actually had a little slopover at the time, but I told everybody to pull back now, back off the backside of the ridge, we had our escape route and safety zone identified and I saw, you know, everybody, got them accounted for, then I called this particular squad boss again and said "Where you at? Get your people out now." And they delayed on what I told them to do. And it wasn't a long delay, but it was, it could have been real serious. And I spoke to him afterwards and, you know, "What was that all about?" You know and he said, "I thought we could just hang in there just a few more seconds longer." I said, "No, when I tell you to move, you move now." Right at that point, I didn't trust that person any more. Because they were very aware of what we expected of them. If you're given an order, you just follow it, you don't question it, you just do it. At that point, I removed this person from being a squad boss, kept him on the crew as a crewmember.

And the next day, we're in a canyon, we had a spot fire and pretty steep slope, and we started flanking it, split the crew, we were flanking it, I called a helicopter in, and told everybody, "Do not get out in front of it, don't get out in front of the head of the fire. We'll flank it. We'll knock it down with a helicopter. We'll pinch it off." And I'm talking to the helicopter, I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, and I look up and this guy's scrambling on his hands and knees up in front of this thing trying to build line, singes his moustache, had to grab him, get him out of the way, and I just sat him down by the trucks and said, "That's it." And I sent him home that day. But I did what I had to do at the time. I realized at that point that they could file a grievance or do whatever they wanted to do, but it really didn't make any difference at that point. This person was dangerous. It's a bad deal for everybody. Themselves and everybody around them.

Story 2: We Had Spot Fires Behind Us

We were on a medium-sized fire. Really intense fire behavior and in the middle of the day, and we were burning out, and a crew was behind us—was another crew was holding for us, and all of a sudden, a note, just note in my mind that they were holding, which they were spread out along the line, facing away from the fire, which they should do, but I noted they were sitting down. But all of a sudden, as we were burning, all of a sudden there were multiple spot fires behind us where they were, and so it required that we help them, and which we did, because it was necessary. Noticed, noted the body language, noted how much help they were. I was upset, but didn't really want to show that. But I did go up to the operations chief and said, "I don't trust them, there's some big issues there." Said, "We will take care of this." Said, "You do not have to get involved, I just want it out there that you know, and we will handle this situation." So we just made sure that we had put oversight on them. So, and it was a crew such that we could do that. And I couldn't observe personally, so all the times we used a squad leader. I wanted eyes behind us then at that point.

Problem 5
Resources Out of the Loop

Story 1: They Felt Isolated

Here in Central Oregon; I was working for the BLM. This is a large range fire, 10…15 thousand acres, had been going for a number of days. We were getting structural firefighters from other parts of the State that weren't necessarily used to working here and doing wildland fire. So there were some structures.

We were working in a very large river canyon, and this is all, again, light fuels, mostly grass. So a very fast-moving dynamic fire. And I was sent out to a piece of line at the beginning of a day, at the beginning of the shift with a plan in place to tie in with some structural or rural firefighters who had been out there, and we were going to initiate a burnout operation for the day. And I was to use these resources out there. And when I got out there, these folks had been really out of the loop; they didn't have any commo with the incident command post. They had no idea what the plan was. They really were feeling quite vulnerable out where they were at, they couldn't see the main fire, there was a lot of things—they were just really frustrated. And when I showed up, here I am the only guy in federal green and yellows, and they immediately latched onto me and went, "What the heck's going on?"

They were structural folks intending to protect the few structures that were out there, that were at the top of the canyons. So the fire's in the bottom of the canyon, it's burning up toward these houses, but it's miles away at this point. But we're having to make a plan miles in advance because of the type of fuels. So when I showed up, they immediately came to me, and I could sense their frustration and almost anger directed toward me as, you know, what is going on? And right then I realized, these guys are either going to eat me alive, or I need to somehow connect with them and let them know what's going on and let them know there is a plan in place; we haven't forgot about them; they're in an okay place. And I, for the next 10…15 minutes, I just put out a map on the hood; explained to them what the plan was, where the fire was, what the communications were, how they were a key part of this plan and that we were counting on them, and I think that totally changed their perspective. And I really listened to what they had to say. I mean, they asked a hundred questions and I did my best to answer every question I could. They wanted me to even make radio calls and say to these other people that I told them that we're out there. It's just, they felt isolated, because they hadn't seen anybody, and so I made radio calls, I made telephone calls, I sketched things out, and it worked out great. It ended up being—over the next couple of days we worked together and established a great working relationship and ultimately it ended up well, but boy, there were a couple of moments there when I thought I was a goner!

I think bringing them into and including them as part of the group, and letting them know that they weren't alone, that they were needed, it increased—not only increased our productivity, I think increased their safety, increased their awareness, and made them feel part of the group.

Story 2: He Was Freelancing

I was a division supervisor. I had, I think, three or four crews assigned to me—mix of type II and type I crews. And I had three dozers assigned to me and three dozer bosses. So I staged them in the safety zone because I did not have a tactical assignment for them. One of them was an older gentleman. He, you know, asked questions when I briefed him so we had a dialogue instead of me just telling him stuff. The other gentleman was a younger guy—I came to find out later that it was his first large fire assignment so he was a little out of his element.

We did have a lookout posted who could see up the drainage. He called and he said he was concerned about the fire activity picking up. We did have a chunk of unsecure line. He was a solid guy; he called with a concern specifically about the position of a type II crew because he knew where all the people were also. And I said, pull the trigger, and let's get everybody headed toward the safety zone. So I called the type II crew and then I started checking all my resources because I didn't have strike team leaders at the time so I started calling them on the radio, one by one. "You copy. We're headed toward safety zone. Fire activity picking up."

Well, the dozer boss that I had staged had deployed himself tactically with a piece of equipment so that means, me as a division sup I had no idea where this guy was. He was the younger of the dozer bosses that showed up that morning. Put him in the safety zone, he takes a bulldozer and starts working his way up the line. He was freelancing big time, big problem. He had an assignment. He was staged. So when he told me he was not in the staging area, I yelled at him on the radio and I'm like, "What are you doing? You were not assigned tactically." I don't remember exactly what I said but I was pissed so I'm sure it was not a positive thing. As soon as I got done talking I was like, I shouldn't have done that on the radio. That's not where you correct people's behavior is on the radio. You don't correct people in front of everybody. Everybody hears the radio because you're on your tac frequency. Everybody in the division hears you and then they think that if they screw up I am going to chew them out on the radio too. Because I've seen other people do it and I've seen the effect it's had. And they don't trust you. They think that you are just going to correct them or yell at them instead of talk to them and treat them with regard.

So when we got to the safety zone, the fire blows up. We're taking pictures and watching it. I pulled all the single resources—and the supervisors of the resources together to tailgate, after action review about, you know, the pulling the trigger, the escape route, make sure we did everything and everybody understood. And the first thing I did was, while we were gathered up around the tailgate was, I turned to the dozer boss and said, "I am sorry I yelled at you on the radio. I just want you to understand that it's my job to know where you are at all times and I can't do it if I don't." So it was kind of a conditional apology. I apologized to him but I also told him what the expectation was. I actually talked to the older dozer boss. And, you know, they weren't off the same unit. I said, you know, just work with him. I don't think he has a lot of experience with equipment or on large fires. We didn't have any more problems. I just made sure he was with someone with more experience.

Problem 6
Questioning Tactics

Story 1: We're Not Going

When I was a strike team leader on the Glacier Peak Fire in '85 in eastern Oregon, we had a strike team, a strike team trainee, and we had three crews underneath us. And we had fire that was burning on a slope, north slope, dry year, drought year, so everything was burning and the fire had slopped over down below, it was maybe 50 feet at the most. We brought them all up, all three crews up to where the slopover was, we said we want you guys to go around, we need you to tactically, you know tactic wise, to go ahead and just cut this thing off, however you want to do that. And he just, I remember he just stepped back and sat down and goes, "We're not going." It wasn't a, "Nah I don't feel comfortable," it was like, "No, we're not going. I'm not going to put my crew down there." I said, "Okay." But what the crew had seen, it was a very new crew, what the crew had seen was all this fire going up the hill so they had that perception that we were going to put them in danger if we put them down below the road without an anchor point.

The strike team leader trainee that was with me, we sat down, like I said, and talked with him, trying to find out why he was feeling that way. And also talked to him, talking to his crew; finding out what they thought and working through—I think in his mind, I could be wrong, I think in his mind he was playing the "what if" situation. He was saying, "Okay, what if this doesn't go like they say it does? What if it goes bad?" That's when he said, "You know, what am I going to tell the parents of these kids, you know, if we die?" Like I said, he was fairly new; he had only been in fire for 3 or 4 years so he was still seeing, you know, big fire.

And what we tried to do was, we asked him questions on what was it that was making him feel uncomfortable. In other words, what was—was it a fear of being burned up? Was it a fear of not knowing where his crew was? What was it that was making him fearful? And it turned out that he had been working for a gentleman that had had a crew have to run from a fire that was down below. So he had this training from this gentleman that he had been told, never let your crew go below a road with fire below you on that.

We said, "Okay, what, how would you go about this? Here is the fire; just look at it as that's just your fire. Don't look up above, don't look at the big fire up above, look at the fire down below and what would make you feel comfortable." And he thought about it for a while and he walked and he talked with his crewmembers, which I thought was real good and asked them their opinions. And he said, "Well I feel comfortable if I make sure that my crew is together, I know where they're at and I can see everything." And I said, "Well, see everything on the fire?" He goes, "Yes, see everything on this fire and also see not just the fire but also where it came from." He said, "Because that's probably the way we're going out if we have to leave." On that, he says, "I want to make sure that I know every area around that fire." And so we had the crew look at all the upper part where the road was, looking down on the fire, looking around, pointing out things. We're looking at it and saying, "Okay if you come in to that area, what can you see?" He would sit there and he'd look and go, "Well, I can see that but I can't see around that little ridge, this little spur ridge." I said, "Oh, what if you get up on the spur ridge?" He said, "Well I feel better about that." And so we just talked about placement of where he could work on his crews, just making him feel more comfortable with his environment at least to the point where he could feel comfortable leading that crew. But we also made sure that they knew that we understood. You know, we didn't—I think that helped with getting the person to feel comfortable is we didn't say, "Well what do you know, sort of thing? You're going to go down there and do it because I'm the strike team leader and you're the crew boss." So I think, in that instance they felt comfortable that they weren't going to be entrapped because they were able to take the time, to look at the fire environment and say, "Okay, here's the good spots, here's the bad spots and we're going to use this good spot but we also have a back up."

Story 2: Should We Be Here?

They had a burnout operation that was going on just up the ridge from us. Intended line that we were going to be holding was midslope. It was an old cat road, pretty much surrounded on the lower part by a reprod unit. I was going to be a dozer boss. The dozer that I was with, he was on standby there, had him parked off to the side. Didn't have a whole lot of time to talk with him up unto that point. I just met with him, exchanged names, and pretty much just glanced at his equipment as I had been relieving somebody else and it had already been inspected.

We were getting a little bit more active fire behavior. I noticed that some embers were getting down in the reprod area. We had some type II and some type I helicopters with large buckets to come in there and help us suppress that a little bit, pretreat it to make sure nothing had caught. Air attack was also over the fire and was concentrated on our area since it was the most active. Noticed that we were starting to pick up some spot fires down there in the reprod. Pretty much weren't real visible to where we were at, because the smoke was laying over in there. Every once in a while, the smoke would peel off and we'd get a view, and could see them.

I stayed with the dozer, and that's pretty much all we had. After a few minutes of trying to catch a few spots, the dozer operator dropped his blade and yelled, "Should we be here?" I noticed a definite sense of panic that he was starting to seize up a little bit. I can't recall the exact question I asked him, but I realized that this was his first fire that he'd ever been on. He was relief for the previous dozer operator. This was his first fire, and it was a going fire, but he did have a pretty good excavation background from talking to him for about 30 seconds I realized that he knew how to operate the dozer, he just didn't know how to operate the dozer in this environment. Didn't have a whole lot of time to talk to him, since he was pretty much our only resource. And the only thing I could think of at the time was asking if he trusted me, so I asked him, "Do you trust me?" He paused momentarily, and said, "Yeah." I don't know why he'd say that, but he said "Yeah," so I went with it. I was confident. As long as he knew how to run that dozer, I thought we made a pretty good team with what we'd been given. His eyes were the size of saucers, but he raised his blade and we bailed off down into the reprod with me leading him.

I don't know how needed it was that I actually would physically lead him into an area that I knew that he could get in there and be effective, and I could stand off to the side, but I kind of felt it was my duty that I asked this fella if he trusted me, because I was definitely going to be out in front of him the whole time. But I definitely wanted to make more of a concerted effort to be really close, go slow, make sure we kept in perfect sight, and try to direct him down there instead of just going ahead and flagging some line and coming back out the other side way ahead of him, which is what I would normally do with an experienced dozer operator who had been on a lot of fires. I'd have just flagged a perimeter and got out of the way. But I think we went a little bit slower, a little bit more deliberate, just to try and reinforce that trust issue that I asked. So we managed to surround some spots, the smoke finally lifted as the fire died down.

Problem 7
Lacking Local Knowledge

Story 1: Out of Their Element

So I'm on a helicopter crew and we respond to this rangeland fire, light fuels and rapid, active fire behavior, rapid rate of spread, and it's in an area with a lot of canyons, and so you're going to have a lot of wind influences. Because of the helicopter we are the first ones there, so we have an IC-qualified individual so we take over the command of the fire.

We typically used people that were more experienced with rangeland fires. And we were in such dire need of resources that we had a hotshot crew that was ordered and arrived on the fire. And they are wonderful in the environment that they work in and know, but in this era there was less crossover between range fire skills and forest fire skills. And I could tell the crew boss, the person in charge of this hotshot crew, an organized, cohesive, excellent crew, was out of their element, and you could see the indecision and the apprehension in the person's face and their eyes. And I made the assumption that being's how that person is a crew leader that—that went, you know, then throughout the crew; that kind of atmosphere can permeate a crew, and I just felt like it needed to be addressed.

They were apprehensive enough that, and I wanted to have good coordination with this crew, that I took a member of the helitack crew that I trusted and just assigned them for the duration of the incident to this crew. And it was a technique that worked very well, and then you had the ability even though you had radio communication and stuff with that crew, because you had somebody that you knew, even though they weren't part of that crew, was a great contact for a coordinated effort between the helitack crew and the hotshot crew, and it's a technique that I've used numerous times since. It works so well developing a greater team between those two diverse groups by doing that.

I think it's worth the time to take a minute to try to develop a little bit of a personal relationship, "Hi, my name's, what's your name, and how are you doing, and well this fire's really going to town, isn't it? And, you know, how do you feel about it, and what are you planning on doing." And maybe see, get a little feel for their comfort level, and if you can detect any concern you say, "Well, you know what? I've got a person on our crew that's had a lot of experience at this fuel type, or maybe this location, or what we're getting into. What would you think about this person going along with you guys and helping you out and if you've got any questions then maybe it would be a good contact between the two crews so that we can have a coordinated effort?" So try to ease into it a little bit with respect. If I was in that crew leader's position, I would feel a lot more confident and relaxed if I had local knowledge, local skills right at my beck and call; somebody that was right there that I could ask a question to, so I would think that atmosphere of confidence would go through the whole crew. It gave them the reassurance they needed to be able to operate, and they also knew that if they had any questions —and it could be—we've talked about entrapment, it could be a question that had to be answered in a timely fashion and they had somebody there, right with them that had the skills to answer that question.

Story 2: You're on People's Turf

You know, a national, basically a national fire organization, is that you can be in Washington one day and end up in Florida the next, fighting different, completely different kinds of fire. Those kinds of perceptions will lead to other people's differing comfort levels.

I'd mentioned I'd been up in Michigan a couple weeks ago and we were helping them do some initial attack; we also helped them do some prescribed burning. They approached fires completely differently than we did down here, just because that was their local method and they had used it for so many years. The first fire that I went on, I had a local IC with me. We took care of it, but then after that, they said "Okay, you're on your own." And that was, okay, I've got one whole fire underneath my belt up here—but I also have local people, local leaders working for me. So in that case, I had to trust them to do what they thought needed to be done in that particular fuel type. My job as the incident commander was to get people on scene, get them assigned, identify the hazards, you know. Every day we'd have a briefing and we'd sit down and talk, and this is what we're going to do, and this is how we're going to do it, and then just talk with the folks, but just find out what they're able to do.

If I had marched in and told one of the local engine bosses if they said, "Well you know, this is probably a pretty good idea to go ahead and go around the fire this way." If I had said, "Nah, I want to do it this way" that would have been the best way for me to just completely kick my own legs out from underneath me. You don't want to, "I'm Ramrod, the fire god from South Carolina and I'm up here in Michigan, and I'm going to tell you how to fight fire up in this jack pine that I've never seen burn before." That's just not going to get you any kind of respect at all, and actually, probably end up probably causing you more troubles. Because, basically, everyone's just—you're going to say, go do this, and everybody's going to be off doing what they thought they should have been doing in the first place. You're on peoples' turf. You're there to help them out, but at the same time, you're from outside. When you go other places you've just got to find out how it's done locally.

Problem 8
Home Unit Loyalties and Cliques

Story 1: Best Friends

There's always a couple of knuckleheads in the bunch—20 people, 20 personalities, there's going to be one or two knuckleheads. I was running a 20-person crew, 20-person AD crew, all first-year firefighters. And I hadn't worked with that crew ever and all of a sudden, bang, here I was running this 20-person crew. They had just formed up freshly out of fire school and we're having a moderate lightning bust, maybe a heavy lightning bust, and we're getting a lot of fires—little fires. One acre, two acres, maybe an occasional five-acre fire. We chased around fires for a couple of weeks.

And it was pretty obvious right out the gate, three of them were best friends together and those three, if they were together, I couldn't get anything done with them. They were essentially useless, they were too damned close. They'd start getting in rock fights, or start arguing with each other over what happened the night before—and they were best friends, don't forget it; they were best friends, but they were best friends that you just couldn't have be together at work. It just didn't work. Kind of like little kids, I put one on one squad, one on another squad, kind of put one on a specialty squad and that seemed to break up a lot of that troublemaking out of that crew. It did come out somewhat favorable results. I wouldn't say it was ideal.

We eventually went off forest once the forest was comfortable with them, we went up to Wenatchee, Washington, on a fire assignment. They were too together. And for the whole assignment we were up in Washington, it turned out, for 30 days. And the whole time, and I had to keep those three separated, because any time they put their heads together, nothing but problems.

Story 2: We Needed To Bring Them Together

I went on assignment back in 2000, I think 2001. We pulled a crew together from the Deschutes and Ochoco, both U.S. Forest Service and BLM. So we got the crew together, and it was like my last—I was hoping for it to be my last crew boss assignment as a trainee, and we went out. And one of the things I noticed right off the bat is that we had folks from Sisters, and we had folks from Bend, and we folks from the Ochoco, and folks from the BLM that had never worked together, and I picked that up right off the bat as there were little groups of people that would talk with each other, and the thing that I found very interesting, and later on very helpful, is that each area that sent folks had either a squad boss qualified person, or a crew boss qualified person. So totally on our crew, there was probably four people that were crew boss qualified; but they still liked to go off as squad boss, or just go off with the crew. So you can kind of see them, the folks that knew the supervisor that they worked with, might be an engine crew or a hand crew supervisor that they worked with, that's where they looked for guidance, and I picked that up right off the bat, and I thought that was very, very important.

Told the squad leaders to set your squads up. It's their choice who they want on their squad. And they were picking folks that they knew on each squad; we had two squads. We were going to break it down to three if we needed to. I noticed that this group was here, the ones that knew each other, and this group was here, the ones that knew each other. Basically what it was, was the folks on the Deschutes were together, and the folks on the Ochoco National Forest were together, and I didn't think that was a good way to work it. I thought about that situation and realized that the cohesion to try to build a team when you have folks that are sitting there that are relying on their supervisor for anything that came down was going to be very difficult. And I think what helped me on that assignment was there was other folks that were crew boss qualified. We got together and we talked about how we're going to pull these people, because I see these little groups talking to each other, and we needed to bring them together.

So what we did is that we figured out how to try to break them up into different squads so that they could intermingle with folks that they weren't comfortable with. I wanted to break it up, mainly because I was thinking of cohesion. How can I build this team fast as I can to get the trust factor that I need as a crew boss? And by breaking them up and splitting them on—you know, I took probably half of them that were from the Deschutes and put them with the half on the Ochoco.

I let it play itself out, and it only took a few days for them to start interacting with each other and talking with each other, and getting that comfort level with each other within that group. And within probably four or five days, we had a pretty good solid team. They were listening to what I was asking them to do. I could talk to any one of those crews. They trusted me; I trusted them. I listened to their concerns; they listened to my concerns. We had a pretty easy assignment, it was mostly mopup, but there was some downhill line digging, we had a couple slopovers, and we just—I got on the radio and told the squad leaders to pull your folks back into our safety zone. They pulled them back; it ran very smoothly. Now, if that would have happened the first 2 or 3 days, three different little groups that we had would have looked for their leader to ask if that was the right thing to do.

About the Authors

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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.

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Electronic copies of MTDC's documents are available on the Internet at:
http://www.fs.fed.us/eng/t-d.php

Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management employees can search a more complete collection of MTDC's documents, CDs, DVDs, and videos on their internal computer networks at:
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