
Bitter Lessons

by Lark McDonald



“A commander must accustom his staff to a high tempo from the outset, and continuously keep them to it. If he once allows himself to be satisfied with norms, or anything less than an all-out effort, he gives up the race from the starting post, and will sooner or later be taught a bitter lesson.”

- Field Marshal Erwin Rommel

No one appreciates learning the same lesson twice. It infuriates me when I do.

I felt like I was in a bad remake of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Face-to-face with a subordinate who, once again, was beating me at my own game. Again, my expectations were not crystal clear, or they were not documented. He had me at a disadvantage. I tried to use the “logic dagger,” and then when that failed, the “common sense net.” Regardless of my attempts, he deflected responsibility for his actions back to me. I ducked into the pottery hut and, increasing the intensity of my attack, maneuvered him into the kiln. But even at 700°F he proved to be Teflon—the responsibility just kept sliding off. Every thrust was met with a parry: “I didn’t know.” “You didn’t tell ME that.” “You didn’t say it THAT way.” “That’s not what I understood.”

I finally retreated, mentally exhausted and bitter at being no closer to solving my problem. Metaphorically, I felt as if I was trying to conduct a sword fight with a garden trowel. In this case my “trowel” was a poor set of standards.

Standards

As a leader, one of your duties is to guide a group of people to build synergy and align the direction of activity. Leaders provide intent to achieve this alignment, but they also provide team members with the requisite knowledge, skills, and they demonstrate the attitude required to complete the job. Leaders use standards to make sure the job gets done—and gets done right. True accountability requires the existence of clearly defined standards. In the end, standards are the mechanism by which the organization assures that its needs are met.

The Leader’s Role

Like many tools in leadership, standards are an example of you getting back what you put in. The leader has several duties relating to standards: first and foremost, to develop them. If a standard does not exist, you must build a framework before it can be applied to others. If a set of standards is in place, it is critical to review the standards in relation

to the job and what you want. Take a critical eye to your predecessor's work before continuing with the same standards. Are they measurable and observable? Do they promote excellence? Do they reflect and support your values? Do they solve a problem or potential problem? Can they be communicated clearly to subordinates?

This last question articulates the second key responsibility: to take the existing standards—laws, regulations, policy, handbooks, standard operating procedures—and communicate them in a way that subordinates can understand and put into practice.

Next comes training. The third leadership responsibility is to uphold the standard vigorously during training. Not only does this improve the chance that people will achieve the desired level of performance in the field, but it also establishes and reinforces true accountability. Comparing performance and discussing performance failures in a safe environment—such as during training exercises—allows for a taste of the possible consequences of sub-standard behavior. This military training axiom sums up the idea: “We die in training so that we will live in war.”

The leader's fourth responsibility is to uphold and maintain the standard. Without a standard in place, a leader has no grounds for disciplining or holding a subordinate accountable. Standards must be enforced to enable a leader to draw a line in the sand separating acceptable and unacceptable levels of performance. Failing to require that the standard be met in all circumstances, or by only some subordinates, obscures the line between the acceptable and the unacceptable. The act of discipline, which is punishment for being on the wrong side of the line, is impossible if the line isn't clear and unmoving. My sword-wielding subordinate knew the line was vague and seized upon that weakness to my disadvantage.

Setting a Standard

In theory, the concept of the standard is simple and intuitive. In practice, establishing a standard amounts to a lot of hard, proactive work. This is a leadership tool that leaders must build for themselves. Ideally standards should be built long before they are needed.

As an issue across the wildland fire industry, standards—or the lack thereof—have been a concern at all levels for years. This year, more than 80% of surveyed crew leaders felt that performance standards are unevenly set and enforced among fire crews. Many voice resignation over the fact that they feel they can't set standards in their own units or hold people accountable to them.

When these leaders are pressed, many of the barriers to changing or improving standards seem to revolve around two core issues: fear of the unknown (also known as anxiety) about management support and the larger “system of systems” and powerlessness in being able to change the status quo.

Both barriers are founded in a common belief that management and the system (such as the human resources departments) are responsible for setting the standards. To some degree they are. Agency HR shops have the standard agency employee guidance and regulations, but they don't have anything else—especially for fire crew leaders.

When it comes to fire crew leader's unique challenges and problems, most are treading new ground. The firefighting employees in an agency comprise a small percentage of the agency workforce. Workforce policies and procedures addressing the unique needs

and problems associated with high-risk environments do not exist—in fact, for the most part, agencies haven't even figured out they need them.

As the 100mph firefighting industry matures and grows, the need to revise and change the current 55mph policies and procedures will continue to increase. But until that happens, fire crew leaders who expect human resources and upper management to solve their standards problems are looking for love in all the wrong places.

A few years ago I asked the regional HR representative what the alcohol policies for crewmembers were. She responded honestly, "I don't know, I'll call [the local Hotshot Superintendent] and find out." In most cases, HR needs your help and assistance—not the other way around.

If you want to try your hand at establishing a better standard, don't plan to write it and throw it over the fence to your superiors. The standards must be accepted and supported by everyone who someday may be charged with enforcing them and standing behind you. They must have ownership in the development process. *Involvement equals commitment*. Those not involved will not be committed to the outcome and will not underwrite your standard.

When it comes to selling a standard to your superiors, ask yourself the following:

How will the new standard help make my superior's job easier? Does the standard conform to existing policies? Who must own the process? What's in it for them? How does this standard help them solve their problems? Usually standards that promote crew safety, clarify sticky issues of acceptable behavior, and enable leaders to discipline and terminate more effectively will win a fair hearing with superiors. Plans that integrate and support other parts of the system, such as performance appraisals and established crew or organizational values, also have a better chance. When you find yourself faced with a superior who has anxieties about implementing a new standard, offer to bring in the experts and do the research. Information alleviates anxiety.

Building new standards sometimes can be torturous work, but crew leaders who have gone through the process have reaped large benefits and received latitude in setting crew standards that improve effectiveness.

Although standards are best drawn up before the team comes on board, you can implement standards mid-stream if necessary. An illustration occurred last year when the leadership team of a fire crew had been experiencing ongoing problems with one of the crew leaders. (I'll call him "Jeb" for this story.). Jeb had been a subordinate leader on the crew for quite a while, and was a lone wolf. He continually was developing romantic relationships with the female subordinate crewmembers. He also tended to drink a lot with the crew.

The head of the leadership team readjusted the crew assignments and made sure that Jeb wasn't directly supervising his latest love, but the perception of preferential treatment was causing ripples in crew cohesion and the trust system. When confronted, Jeb was defensive. To Jeb, his behavior wasn't anyone's business. In many ways, Jeb knew better and regretted the friction his behavior caused, but when push came to shove, Jeb just wouldn't change.

The local HR representative stated that there wasn't much that the agency could do—Jeb wasn't "breaking the rules." When confronted, Jeb pointed to the "system" in his

defense. He was coloring within the stated lines. His responses began to imply lawyers and personnel actions, and visions of these unknowns spread like spot fires in the minds of the leadership team. Anxiety was on the rise. Frustration mounted as HR and management appeared to be worthless in helping resolve this issue.

The “Jeb Fire” looked ugly and the footing dicey. However, rather than bolt for the safety zone, the team went proactive. If the existing system couldn’t supply the tool, they would build one. In this case, the tool was a set of standards that specifically defined appropriate professional conduct of crew leaders. The standard involved all aspects of leader-to-crew relationships, such as drinking and socializing, training conduct, and inappropriate relationships. The potential standard was first discussed with management, who saw it as something that would address the issue, and reviewed by HR, who helped to assure that the new standard would not conflict with other agency policies.

The standard was based in the crew value set—which included safety. Crew safety is tied unvaryingly to unit trust and cohesion, and behaviors that undermine or disrupt that infrastructure pose real operational and workforce risks—risks that could, under the wrong circumstances, injure or kill someone. The standard would be tied into the performance appraisal system for measurement, and discipline could be applied if the standard was not met.

The problem of imposing a new standard on an existing team was resolved through a democratic vote among those involved. Any person disagreeing with the standard, in this case Jeb, was afforded an opportunity to write a dissent for consideration by management. If there were valid points in the dissent, the group would have to resolve them before continuing with the process.

The result? From a safety and cohesion perspective, Jeb’s behavior was indefensible if not against agency policy. When it came to trying to justify it in writing, Jeb couldn’t and never submitted a dissent. After it was implemented, Jeb met the standard until he could leave the crew. In the future, new team leaders had to agree to the standard as a condition of accepting a job on the leadership team.

In the end, the leadership team established a greater standard for themselves and for future leaders by turning what had been a subjective debate into a black and white standard, and it all had been done within the existing system.

Accountability

The concept of accountability is foundational to crew cohesion and trust. Holding subordinates accountable for their actions is a necessary part of leadership. Setting unambiguous standards ensures that your needs and the organization’s needs are clarified and understood.

Accountability is a noble word, but it can’t be used casually. As a leader you must take the time and effort in advance to establish good standards, train your subordinates to those standards, and provide the resources necessary to achieve the standard. Then—and only then—can you hold them truly accountable.

When a subordinate doesn’t meet the standard, retrace the process: *Can’t comply? Won’t comply? Doesn’t know how to comply?* If the subordinate can’t comply or doesn’t

know how to comply, these problems may be in your court to solve. *Won't comply?* With a good set of standards, you have the tools to guide the needed counseling or administer discipline.

With the standard well known and the resources and training provided, the failure to comply becomes the subordinate's choice, not yours. It isn't about you and them battling it out in the tops of the bamboo; it is between them and the "system" you have established. Your role is to watch from the balcony and execute the predetermined sentence. It is much easier battle, and the bitter lesson is theirs, not yours.