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# Talking with Wolves

by Lark McDonald

It was early June 1944, the last days before the invasion of Normandy by Allied Forces. The operations plan for the invasion was immense—thousands of pages of hand-typed and duplicated instructions. It was truly an IAP from hell. As a precursor to the invasion, the plan dictated that airborne units were to drop behind enemy lines and seal off the beaches from German reinforcements. The invasion came at a critical point in the war. It had to be successful—the result would shape the face of the world. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of Allied Expeditionary Forces, was nervous about the outcome and spent a few hours with the airborne troops before the invasion.

He explained to these soldiers that the invasion force would be most vulnerable and exposed when on the beach. The paratroopers had to buy the invasion force time, keeping German reinforcements from reaching the beach until the invasion forces could fully establish themselves.



*General Dwight D. Eisenhower meeting with paratroopers  
of the 101st Airborne Division, June 5, 1944, Newbury England*

A few hours later, more than 900 C-47 aircraft began the transport of 13,000 men from the 82nd and 101st airborne divisions from England to the Cotentin Peninsula. As history well documented, the weather was bad and there were no navigational aids. Enemy fire

was fierce. The men were widely scattered in the confusion. Many paratroopers were killed before they hit the ground and many more were drowned upon landing in flooded landing zones and fields. Those who survived were forced to find one another and then move and fight in small groups, many unrelated by unit, rather than in organized battle formations as planned. Many men fought under strange leaders for revised or new tactical objectives.

Although the plan had fallen to pieces, Eisenhower's intent had been clear. The soldiers adapted their tactics and targets as needed, and together they kept the German forces from reaching the beach. In the final analysis, two factors played heavily into the success: the paratroopers were well trained, and the commander's intent had been made crystal clear. Metaphorically, they were prepared to be adaptive like a pack wolves, not a herd of sheep.

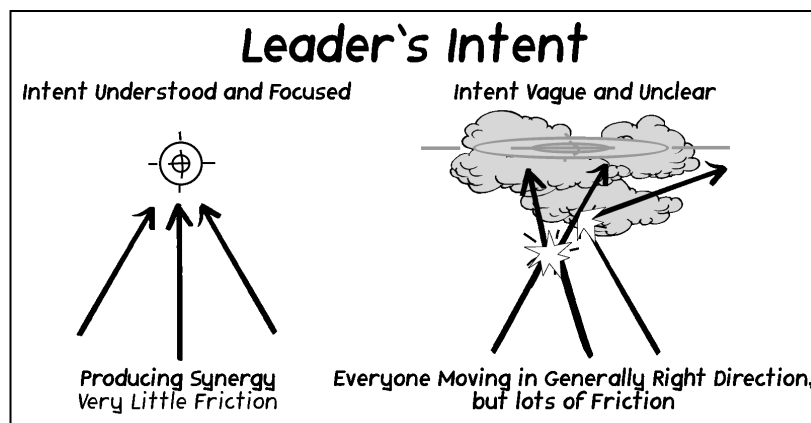
## **Flashback**

In the post-mortems of the South Canyon accident in 1994 there were abundant calls for finding ways to build more resilient and adaptive crews. The crew of the future was generally defined as one that not only could do their job well, but also that could detect problems early and mitigate risk immediately and proactively. This was particularly true in the case where errors or mistakes had been passed down from higher levels of the command system. In short, the crews of the future would be better experienced, better trained, and even the lowliest firefighter would be able to recognize and communicate a potential problem and everyone would listen. Firefighters would not just blindly follow along the next time.

But there were mountains hidden in these cultural clouds. Better training implied that the existing training system was insufficient. More experience implied that more time and money would need to be spent to provide firefighters with realistic and meaningful preparation, especially during slow seasons. Making error-resistant crews meant that crewmembers needed to be able to make decisions for themselves and have the experience base to do that professionally and competently. This implied that many crew cultures needed to be shifted to reinforce and encourage this skill and capability. The issues were huge and stretched wide across many facets of the organization. This made implementation of the solutions difficult. Funding was hit or miss—mostly miss.

Flash forward to 2000. Fire management began to realize that many of the keys to the goals of better crew or team cohesiveness had been resting in the hands of the front line leaders all along. From this realization has also sprung the awareness about how current leaders will need real support from management to accomplish these goals. While there are many steps that must be taken by fire managers and leaders, communicating clear intent is a step that a leader can take alone.

All leaders produce synergy through providing purpose, direction and motivation. A method of providing purpose is giving a clear leader's intent for everyone on the crew or team. The concept of leader's intent is dirt simple—by clearly defining the desired end state for everyone, you keep people working in alignment toward the common goal.



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A key to providing good intent is provide not just the WHAT & HOW of the mission, but the WHY—the larger picture of the operation and how the crew's activities link to those higher objectives, and why it is important.

### ***Incident Intent***

When communicating intent during an incident, you are faced with the reality of how information is focused and filtered as it moves down the chain of command. As the message goes lower the WHY we're doing this gets replaced by the WHAT to do. The big picture is distilled to "how does this affect me?" This is a natural communication phenomenon, but it also contributes to the narrowing of situation awareness at the bottom of the food chain.

During an incident there are competing communication needs: first, the need to keep everyone focused and to provide the guidance quickly. These are working against the need for everyone to understand some of the big picture so that they can adapt and make decisions for themselves. In the middle, command teams must find ways to keep the command intent clear while not obscuring the point with unnecessary information.

### **Communicating Intent in the IAP**

**Q1:** Does your IAP mix potentially competing objectives without providing context or true priorities? Does your IAP outline the overall strategy and contain the expected or important contingencies, or does it just list general control objectives in section 5?

For example: does "Protect the town of Bluff" appear along with "Protect all archeological sites" and "Protect the Yellow-rumped Hamstring's habitat areas"? A list of objectives isn't helpful unless they are placed into the larger context of what the ICT is trying to accomplish and what the real priorities are. If given the problem of protecting only one of these "General Control Objectives", could your Fire Engine Operator on the Type-6 engine who is stuck out on the end of Division Z make the right choice given what you have provided him or her?

**Q2:** Does your IAP state overtly who are the critical divisions and who are supporting divisions?

When your critical divisions or operations are known to all, it helps to undermine the attitude of entitlement that some resources seem to get. It helps to keep resource arguments and the pilfering down.

**Q3:** Do your division assignment lists reflect and link to the incident strategy and the command team's intent?

Does "...get a good, complete and fast mop up on the Division B near the subdivision before it heats up again." mutate into something akin to "Mop up is like dancing, the tool leads and the H<sub>2</sub>O follows." by the time it gets to the assignment sheet? (honest!—I wish I were making this up.) Make sure that the content on the bottom reflects the priorities and issues at the top.

### **Communicating Intent in Briefings**

**Q1:** Do you clearly communicate the driving and order of the priorities and values at stake?

Giving this information helps subordinate leaders to "get inside your head" on the situation. If these items are not front and center at several points in the briefing you can expect someone to miss the point.

**Q2:** Do your briefings operate like a talk show?

Some incidents run their briefings with a set of rotating guest speakers offering their own perspectives, objectives and priorities. Assure that the priorities and messages are properly integrated and put into the larger context. No one section chief should be redirecting the emphasis of the briefing. Weight the time spent on a section equal with its relevance to today's objectives.

**Q3:** How does your team assure that your intent is understood at the lowest levels—particularly in the areas of the fire where things might change quickly?

Set mechanisms up to monitor how well the word is getting to the critical operational units. Sometimes a personal visit is the right approach to make sure the word gets out.

### **Crew Intent**

At the crew level, the leader must communicate intent not only to meet short-term objectives, but also to perpetuate learning and crew cohesion for the long-term. Communicating a clear and connected intent brings many benefits to the crew:

- **Reduces friction among crewmembers**—Most crewmembers are trying to do the best job they can, but often if the target is unclear the routes to success may collide. Defining what RIGHT looks like sets a firm target on the wall for all to see and aim for.
- **Enables adaptability and flexibility**—If a crew (not just a leader) is going to be resilient to error and adaptable in its tactics and thinking, the crew members must also be able to see the forest from the trees. Once the plan goes out the window, the crew's understanding of the driving priorities, the values at stake, the assignment, and the crew's role in the bigger picture will dictate the action. Being sucked into unnecessarily risky operations by persuasive fire commanders and division supervisors becomes less likely when the overarching perspective is understood. It also means that contingencies, potential problems and trigger points are known and can be recognized and communicated by all. All these things enable the crew to work better in small groups and crewmembers to work independently.

- **Provides purpose and meaning**—Understanding the direct link and relative importance of what the crew is doing relative to the big picture gives meaning to the work for the crew, or in the case where there is little meaning, it provides a reality check for undertaking operational risks.
- **Provides measurement**—knowing the desired end state means that everyone can measure performance against the target. It enables a baseline for the after action review or debriefing, and provides needed perspective when unconventional or non-standard tactics are employed.
- **Raises expectations of involvement**—Bringing crewmembers into understanding larger picture widens the learning funnel. The lessons they learn in the field are not limited to just what directly happened to them, but what also happened all around them. Assigning a crewmember to not only attend a briefing, but to correctly communicate the commander's intent to others is a critical skill that all crew members and new leaders should have. Training subordinates to expect the larger picture helps to keep them from getting drawn into dubious situations through incomplete or vague directions or information. Last, it places responsibility on the subordinate for self-development—a critical attribute in a learning organization.
- **Promotes self-reliance and self-confidence**—Knowing what *right* looks like provides an avenue for crewmembers to become self-reliant, relieving the leader of some of the nit-noid directive supervision tasks over time. It promotes independent problem solving and decision making, and through debriefing provides immediate feedback for good and bad performance.

A herd of sheep goes where it is told. A pack of wolves moves and hunts adaptively and situationally. This year the average crew experience level will be lower than it has been in years. Crew leaders facing this reality should ask themselves if their current communication practices are more attune with raising sheep or raising wolves.