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## Valuable Stones

by Lark McDonald

Many years ago when my firm was first starting to work with wildland fire, we were given permission to shadow some Canadian and US Type 1 hand crews. We procured PPE, and for the US crews, took the step test and went to the basic S130/190 to obtain red cards.

The course was standard S130/190 fare, taught by a team of older, experienced firefighters. What made the course most memorable for me was not the course content, but rather the “context” of values that were communicated with the material. In preparation for writing this piece, I went back to my original student guide to look at my notes—there, the memory returned as I read the statements that were sprinkled throughout the course:

*Never trust anyone*

*Don't take anyone's word for it*

*You are responsible for your own safety*

Having come from a background concerned with crew coordination, I was stunned. I had always learned that where there is no trust, there is little cohesion. Stories followed that illustrated times where the instructor had been set up in a dangerous situation by a superior, and where his own abilities and judgment prevailed to save him.

The messages were resolute. The students, mostly people in their early 20s with no previous exposure to firefighting, absorbed it all without comment. I knew little about wildland fire—who was I to question? We wrote it down and pressed on.

The next day we were introduced to fire shelters and to the rule to always follow the crew leaders' instructions. Many of the students immediately detected the apparent disconnect:

A student asked, “*You said earlier that we aren't supposed to trust anyone, if it is an emergency, how do we know if to follow our crew leader or not?*”

The answers were muddled: The instructors made several attempts to reconcile the issue with the students:

*There are no set rules....*

*Experience will be your guide.*

*If your crew leader knows what he is doing, then it is OK to follow him.*

*Once you get experience, you'll understand better.*

The attempts fell short - the dots just wouldn't connect. The lack of experience in the students had provided no backdrop for the rules. The values guiding the rules also weren't defined. The more they tried to explain the application without the foundation, the more the gray areas just turned grayer. The more it went on, the more firefighting

was portrayed as wild west of incompetent people, where the best defense was a healthy distrust of all and a strong streak of self-reliance.

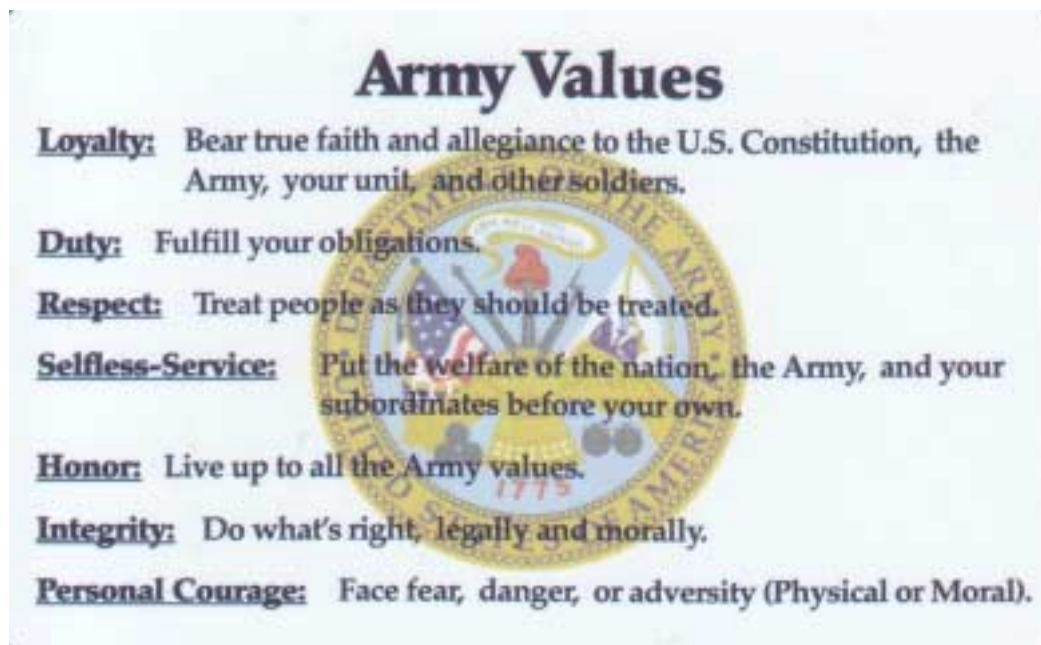
I don't fault the instructor for what he was apparently trying to accomplish, or necessarily for what he said. His words were from the seasoned soul, steeped in experience and from a deep concern for fire safety. Everything he said was good advice, taken in the right context by people with the right experience. But the message was ill-timed and misdirected. Intentions aside, the instructors ended up presenting a confused and jumbled picture of what really guides a good firefighter in ambiguous situations—values and experience. Without either the instructors or the students realizing it, distrust, apprehension and (in some students) paranoia became part of the firefighter value set for 35 new firefighters—good and bad - right then and there.

### **Values as a Tool**

Leaders are the caretakers of the culture. "Culture" is a collection of people who share the same sets of values. As a leader, you communicate and reinforce your organizational culture and values to bring people together and to build trust. With trust, comes cohesion and synergy. Understandably, common values play a critical role in team building and group cohesion.

Yet despite their importance, many leaders (and trainers) don't give very much thought to what their values are, or how they communicate them to their subordinates. But to those leaders that do see the light, a well communicated value set can provide both bedrock and an effective leadership tool.

As bedrock, we build from our values our operating principles, SOPs, and performance expectations. As a tool, we use values to guide acceptable behavior and ethical norms. We also use value discussions to carefully and thoughtfully orient new crewmembers to the base assumptions of how we operate.



## Using Values

I break the process of leveraging values into four steps: Build, Publish (or communicate), Define, and Do.

**Build:** If you don't already have a set of values for your crew or organization, build a set using these guidelines:

1. Involve everyone who would be impacted your values—especially your subordinate leaders and your superiors. The outcome should be a set that everyone has bought into.
2. Make your values behavioral traits, that are not operationally specific. Remember that you are defining WHO you are, not what you do.
3. Make the list short enough so that people can remember it later.

**Publish:** A published set of values will go a long way if you post it in the right place and use it in day-to-day operations. Publish it in your SOPs and handbook, where new crewmembers will see it. Post your values in an area of value—the briefing room, your office, in your operations books, etc. Have your values around so that subordinates see them and can see that care about them.

**Define:** For each value, define what it means, especially in the context of your work. If you have “professionalism” as a value, what does that mean for the crew while they are in camp? Many fire organizations use “safety” as a value, yet rarely do they define what “safety” really means. Aspiring words are great stuff, but they will mean nothing if you can't define them, teach them and demonstrate them.

**Do:** As a leader you must demonstrate your values every day through your character. Often, the source of conflict on crews is a result of differences in values. Use your values as orientation points to resolve conflict and to keep your organization focused. Use your values to counsel crew members with performance or behavior problems. Make your values part of your every day operational vocabulary.

The concept of using formal values to align and build synergy applies to large organizations as well. Although wildland fire is rife with procedures, training, and rules—the NWCG and the agencies have yet to create and define a core set of values for wildland firefighters. Without core values, it will be hard to build a consistent culture for future leaders to learn and reinforce. Wildland fire has spent significant time and effort to coordinate the physical components of its operational environment. With a fraction of the time and effort the agencies could establish a universal set of firefighter values that crew leaders and instructors could leverage, and in the process, take a big step toward moving some crews from just “functional” to truly “cohesive.”

### Questions:

- Do you have a formal set of values?
- If not, who should be involved in deciding what they should be?
- If so, are they published? If so where (where you do work, over the water cooler?)
- How do (would) you train your crew values to others?

- Can you link your every day activities to your values? Whether it is a tactical maneuver or pushing paper—do your activities support your values, and do you conduct your activities in a manner that supports and reinforces your values?
- What are the behaviors you expect from someone that has your values?
- Finally, as a leader—what do you need to do to demonstrate your adoption and support of your crew/organizational value system?