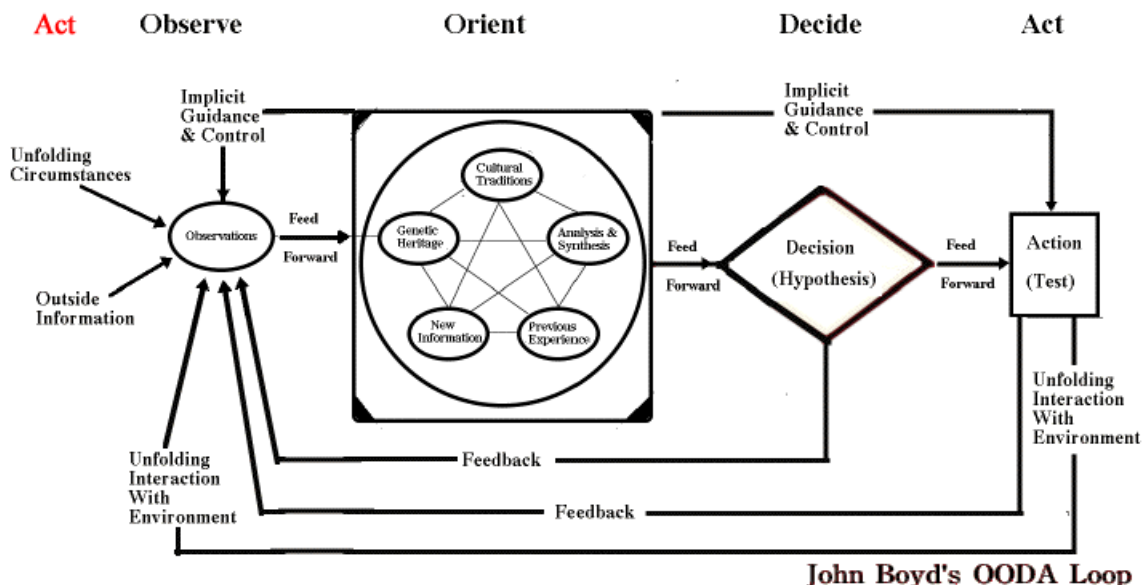




Acting in the HRO moment - Let's try it

Text by Jonetta T. Holt

In the wildland fire community we have, as every organization does, developed a style of work. It is our corporate culture: what analysts say boils down to "the way we do things around here." Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe say in Managing the Unexpected, that corporate culture is what holds our groups together and sets prevailing tones. "An organizational culture emerges from a set of expectations that matter to people." What happens in your organization when someone introduces a new idea? Do you notice a willingness to try something new? Or, are early adopters scarce in your group?



Some organizational experts recommend that in order to introduce changes in our organizations we should "act our way into what we become." Karl Weick even recommends **Acting** as the first step in John Boyd's OODA Loop!

(Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) "OODA loop is one form of reflection-on-action. OODA is a tactical routine, intended to improve ongoing operations...OODA can become overly rational and unrealistic if it is treated as simply linear thinking and then acting...The core of HRO principles is the link starting with Act and moving quickly and tightly to Observe and Orient (e.g. people act their way into an understanding of what's up)."

Consider the story below about the Redding Hotshots training program and how a new approach, based only on an idea that it might work, had profound and unanticipated benefits for crewmembers.

The Redding Hotshots, based in Redding, California, are one of three training crews in the Forest Service, tasked with training future fire leaders. Every year, the crew is composed of individuals chosen from a wide variety of firefighting experience levels to work together for six months. Most of them have never met anyone else on the crew. This was the case for Amy Reid who works on the Placerville Ranger District in Camino, California. She says the program was recommended to her because of its reputation for leadership development and gaining fire experience. At the beginning, Amy doubted her ability to complete it. And at the end, she was grateful she had made it through. "It pushed me physically and mentally throughout the season." The wide diversity of the crewmembers, Amy reflected, helped make the program a success.

Diversity among crewmembers is just what Redding Hotshots Crew Captain John Wood says, has made a difference in recent crew performances. John says recruitment for the Redding Hotshots took a turn three years ago when a new idea spurred by conversations between the crew's superintendent and a former superintendent and longtime firefighter encouraged them to attempt hiring Student Temporary Employees (STEP) from colleges in Northern California.

"The idea was, that these people are going to graduate, they're going to have a college degree, but they won't have any experience fighting fire. We can grab these people in their second, or third, or last year in the program and get them some experience in the field."

John said they thought it would be important for the students to get fire experience with a hotshot crew because of the crew's certain exposure to a long season: "They would see fire in steep, rough terrain and see a variety of ways to approach fires. If you put them on an engine somewhere, they're possibly going to get passed by for an entire season. On a hotshot crew, even in a slow season, they're going to see fire and they're going to get a diverse experience just by the sheer number of hours of contact they have in the field. High intensity training programs exist for lots of other professions, but there are not a lot of those opportunities in fire. The crewmembers are not just going to see fire, they're going to see a lot of fire."

The first year the hotshot crew began actively recruiting college students was 2006, John said. Recruitment in the past had been open to individuals from any of the federal land management agencies and any other fire service that would commit to supporting their employee through the program. "The things we were looking for were folks who would benefit from the program and do a good job for us." Targeting college students became one of the recruiting tools to get the best candidates, to identify individuals who show an interest in spending time on a handcrew, and have the physical and mental aptitude to complete a rigorous season.

John said not only did the new approach assist them in reaching high quality candidates, it changed the way the crews came together as a group. Students thrown into a mix of individuals with a wide variety of firefighting experience, helped develop a new level of crew cohesion.

"When we brought those folks to the crew, they were brand-new-right-out-of-the-box-shiny-rookies. The crew members who had experience, saw they could have a positive influence on these rookies."

John said experienced crew members saw the benefit of coaching and mentoring the new-to-fire-students. "On a crew you (the crew) are only as strong as the weakest link. If the crew has a weakness it is going to be exposed and, depending on what the weakness is, it is either going to show up twice in the season or every minute of every day. I think the experienced crew members believed that if they taught these brand new rookies everything they knew, it would be one less thing they had to deal with in the field. It didn't take long to see it start – even in the training season. In the classes, going through the training season, they were able to make some really good headway. They let the rookies try it and do it and then they would step in and help too. We didn't anticipate it, that's just how it happened. All those things coming together created the right situation. Experienced firefighters saw an opportunity to guide and help develop their crew members."

John said that during the eight-week training season a lot of attention is focused on developing crew cohesion. "This is all the time we have for them to develop a working culture before the start of fire season. I believe that some of the success of our program is because of our attention to crew cohesion. The rest of it is due to the individuals' willingness to come to the program and jump into it."

The 2009 season was the fourth year for their new angle on recruitment. "I don't see us not doing this in the future: We keep getting quality. I think that has a lot to do with the process we've developed. The folks we've hired are great employees."

Without realizing it, John's recruitment of a diverse group of individuals made his system more complex, adding reliability and resilience! Weick and Sutcliffe write, "...the environments that HROs face are typically more complex than the HRO systems themselves. Reliability and resilience lie in

practices that reduce those differences in complexity. Wise practices either reduce environmental complexity or increase system complexity. Assuming that it is harder to change the environment than your system, we have highlighted ways you can improve sensing and acting when faced with complexity. Our recommendations boil down to this advice: *make your system more complicated*. That recommendation is based upon the principle of requisite variety...if you want to cope successfully with a wide variety of inputs, you need a wide variety of responses. For example...in wildland firefighting...firefighters fight complex fires with equally complex backfires in an effort to better match and manage what they face." Pp. 113 of Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty, 2007

Implementing all of the principles of high reliability organizing can be approached in a similar manner. If we think we have an idea about what actions support the principles of HRO, why not try them? Organizational leaders who want to promote a mindful way of doing business in their groups, may find success in introducing one idea and watching its development. Leaders who are acting mindfully, make their environment more complex, not more simple. They "fill in" their time using their skills to try something different, and they include others. They even:

- Start working on something when they have no idea where it will end.
- Try new things or try old things with a slightly different twist.
- Think out loud and raise questions about context.
- Inquire publicly about how other people may be thinking or feeling about a situation.
- Share their ideas and collect the ideas of others.
- Compare the perspectives of other individuals with their own.
- Become adept at re-framing situations in order to solve real problems.
- Continually examine the assumptions that are guiding their own behavior and challenge their thinking.

Following Weick and Sutcliffe's advice about practicing high reliability principles, as individuals maybe we can pick one that we like, that we think we have an affinity for, and try to make it our own. If we have to have a complete picture about what we want it to resolve for us before trying it, we are frozen into inaction, and learning stops.

Consider using this HRO Story in a learning opportunity, teaching moment, or teambuilding session you design for your unit, team or organization.

Questions related to this story:

- What characteristics of this handcrew's leaders help build a corporate culture that supports trying something new?
- What kind of environment encourages members of a group to step forward and offer their guidance to less experienced individuals??

Broader questions to ask ourselves regarding our teams and organizations:

- What HRO principle is most applicable to you?
- If you wanted your organization to have a look at 'what HRO looks like,' what one principle would you act on today?
- How do you see acting on that principle as being a benefit to your organizational work setting and/or your co-workers?
- Do you like to try new things?