

# BOOK REVIEW: *MANAGING THE UNEXPECTED*



Dave Iverson

Particularly on transition fires, the unexpected is par for the course. Our interagency wildland fire organization and the land management agencies that support it should be constantly prepared to manage the unexpected.

Yet how many times have we seen executives and administrators attempt to manage the unexpected after the fact by blaming it on someone—usually someone else? *Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity* (John Wiley & Sons, 2001), by Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, offers insight into this problem. But the reader shouldn't expect easy answers, because the authors' goal is to help us learn to cope in real-world organizations and to work together to improve them. For that, we must abandon the search for quick fixes and embrace the reality of living in complex, adaptive systems and organizations.

## Staying “Mindful”

Why the title “Managing the Unexpected”? The reason is simple. Most of the time, we can't manage the human and natural environment to conform to the wishes of an organization. More often than not, it works the other way around. As we try to manage organizations to function well despite the variability of the environment, we need to be constantly “mindful”—a key concept for Weick and Sutcliffe—to watch for changes in the environ-

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ment and adjust organizational behavior accordingly. Weick and Sutcliffe contrast mindfulness to mindlessness—following the rules—which is useful, too, in the right context.

The authors define mindfulness as “the combination of ongoing scrutiny of existing expectation, continuous refinement and differentiation of expectation based on newer experiences, willingness and capability to invent new expectations that make sense of unprecedented events, a more nuanced appreciation of context and ways to deal with it, and identification of new dimensions of context that improve foresight and current functioning.” That is certainly a mouthful—and a mind-full. However, Weick and Sutcliffe stress that sometimes you can't wrap complex subjects into the neat, tidy packages too often seen in the business and management literature.

Weick and Sutcliffe spend a lot of time leading us through a study of “High Reliability Organizations” (HROs), such as flight deck crews on aircraft carriers, where you really don't want things to go wrong. They do this to help us better understand pitfalls and strengths in the management of all organizations. Only by learning from mistakes can we learn to do better—to adapt.

## Focusing on the Unexpected

Oddly enough, it is by studying HROs that we can see firsthand just how important it is to focus on the “unexpected,” to learn to act mindfully. In HROs, you ignore the unexpected at your immediate peril. In other organizations, you can ignore the unexpected for much longer, pretending that somehow the universe will eventually align itself with your vision and mission.

In *Managing the Unexpected*, Weick and Sutcliffe explore the shadow side of organizational culture that many other authors overlook. They stress things like “dynamics of surprise,” “preoccupation with failure,” and “reluctance to simplify.” Even the terms they use are unexpected to those who are steeped in win/win or quick-fix reactive management cultures.

In a subchapter titled “Enhancing Awareness and Anticipation,” Weick and Sutcliffe advise us to, among other things:

- Cultivate humility;
- Be glad when you're having a bad day;
- Create an error-friendly learning culture;
- Develop skeptics;
- Be suspicious of good news;
- Seek out bad news; and

- Treat all unexpected events as information, and share this information widely.

## Creating a Learning Organization

Even this short list serves as a handy launching pad for creating a learning organization. But there is much more to *Managing the Unexpected*,

such as chapters devoted to “Why Planning Can Make Things Worse,” “Assessing Your Capabilities for Assured Performance,” and understanding the importance of paying attention to “Organizational Culture and the Unexpected.”

As I reflect on recent tragedy fires on public lands—fires with names

like “Thirtymile,” “South Canyon,” and “Dude”—I wonder whether we could have done better in our fire suppression efforts had our broader agency cultures and our more narrowly framed firefighting cultures been more mindful. Weick and Sutcliffe’s book is a start down the path of increasing our mindfulness. ■



## WEBSITES ON FIRE\*

### Ecological Restoration Institute

Established in 1998, the Ecological Restoration Institute (ERI), in the School of Forestry at Northern Arizona University (NAU), supports ecological restoration through education, research, and a common forum for open, objective consideration of ecological restoration issues. Through experimentation and research, often in collaboration with partners such as the USDA Forest Service, ERI develops comparative information on passive management versus active management using techniques such as thinning and prescribed burning, particularly in the dry ponderosa pine forest type. ERI’s Website provides information about past and current research projects, answers to frequently asked questions about ecological restoration, and links to many NAU sites.

Found at <<http://www.eri.nau.edu>>

\* Occasionally, *Fire Management Today* briefly describes Websites brought to our attention by the wildland fire community. Readers should not construe the description of these sites as in any way exhaustive or as an official endorsement by the USDA Forest Service. To have a Website described, contact the managing editor, Hutch Brown, at USDA Forest Service, 2CEN Yates, P.O. Box 96090, Washington, DC 20090-6090, 202-205-1028 (tel.), 202-205-0885 (fax), hutchbrown/wo@fs.fed.us (e-mail).

### Lands in Transition

Lands in Transition consists of eight questions and feedback to help users learn more about the history of the Lake Tahoe Basin, how people and fire have affected the Tahoe forest, and what it all means for today’s forests. After the questions, the user can pretend to be a forest manager, responsible for making difficult decisions that balance the interests of the people and the forest’s health. As the forest manager, you consult with experts and see the results of your decisions.

The site, developed by the Gould Center for Geography Education and Outreach, Department of Geography, Pennsylvania State University, with funding from the USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, is very media intensive. Several movies provide interesting graphic representations of the effect of fire in the Lake Tahoe area. Almost all the photographs, tables, and graphs can be magnified to improve readability.

Found at <[www.gouldcenter.psu.edu/lit](http://www.gouldcenter.psu.edu/lit)>