

# MOVING TOWARD A LEARNING CULTURE

Paul Keller



Does our wildland fire organization have a defined learning agenda? Does it avoid repeated mistakes? When its key people leave, does it lose critical knowledge? And does this organization act upon what it knows?

So, just who's keeping tabs on the important answers to such vital questions? Who is tasked with the hefty chore of providing a centralized knowledge and learning base for this country's extensive community of interagency wildland fire organizations? Whom do we count on to ensure that our wildland fire community continually moves forward as a true *learning* organization?

Meet the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center.

## Main Objectives

"Our main objectives are to improve safe work performance, expand organizational learning, share knowledge, and promote organizational change," says center manager Paula Nasiatka, a former National Park Service Chief Ranger with two decades of interagency wildland fire experience. "For the wildland fire community to successfully and safely perform its missions, it needs to be a learning organization."

She explains that three primary drivers facilitated the need for this vital interagency resource, established in Tucson, AZ, in 2002:

*Paul Keller is the managing editor of Fire Management Today.*



A lesson is truly learned when we modify our behavior to reflect what we now know.

[www.WildfireLessons.net](http://www.WildfireLessons.net) and [www.MyFireCommunity.net](http://www.MyFireCommunity.net) and now also [www.LMTCenter.net](http://www.LMTCenter.net)

"A lesson is truly learned when we modify our behavior to reflect what we now know."

—Paula Nasiatka, Center Manager, Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center.

1. The interagency wildland fire community is broad and diverse, involving hundreds of wildland fire organizations at various field and management levels.
2. The *Wildland Firefighter Safety Awareness Study (TriData)*, completed in the aftermath of the 1994 South Canyon Fire fatalities, recommended that the wildland fire community create a program where lessons learned could be shared extensively with wildland fire professionals.
3. The reengineering plan for the National Advanced Fire and Resource Institute, also based in Tucson, recommended incorporating "lessons learned" and "best practices" into the fire training curriculum.

## Center's Goal

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's goal is to help the wildland fire community become a true learning organization by developing a learning culture that works safer,

## What Is a "Learning Organization?"

According to David Garvin, Harvard Business School professor and author of *Learning in Action* (Garvin 2000), a "learning organization" is skilled in creating, acquiring, interpreting, transferring, and retaining knowledge. In addition, this subject-matter expert says that a "learning organization" purposefully modifies its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.

Garvin has been providing guidance to the wildland fire community in organizational learning—mainly through the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center—for the past 2 years.

smarter, and is continuously improving. Six critical tasks contribute to this developmental process:

1. Collect intelligence about the environment,
2. Learn from the best practices of other organizations,
3. Learn from our own experiences and past history,
4. Experiment with new approaches,
5. Encourage systematic problem solving, and

---

6. Transfer knowledge throughout the organization.

By acquiring, interpreting, transferring, and retaining wildland fire knowledge, positive organizational change will take place as we act on what we know, Nasiatka notes. Her center works with both formal and informal parts of the wildland fire community by:

- Cultivating positive relationships with recognized institutions in the wildland fire community;
- Demonstrating the center's value as a venue for organized problem solving and as a resource for implementing strategies; and
- Cultivating "communities of practice" from the informal networks of professionals who share a common concern or passion about a topic, and who enhance their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on a regular basis.

---

## The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center enables wildland fire professionals to improve their networks and enhance their skills.

---

The value of the center's activities to community leaders is becoming apparent as these projects align with their organizations' goals and priorities. "A strong word-of-mouth reputation is emerging that the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center supports and enables fire professionals to improve their networks and enhance their skills," Nasiatka reports.

"Before the wildland fire community can fully become a learning organization, it must first be open to becoming a learning culture," says Nasiatka. "If timely, candid information generated by knowledgeable people is available and disseminated, a learning culture can evolve."

The three areas that the wildland fire community needs to focus on to improve organizational learning are:

1. Adopting a culture of *continuous* organizational learning,
2. Focusing effort on the entire wildland fire profession, and
3. Expanding the pockets of learning to the entire community.

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center identifies these three focus areas in its organizational structure as Collection and Analysis, Knowledge Retention, and Knowledge Transfer.



*Learning in the field. Organizational psychologists Dr. Karl Weick (middle) and Dr. Kathleen Sutcliffe, authors of Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001), on the Cerro Grande Prescribed Fire Staff Ride—yet another organizational learning event assisted by the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center. Photo: Tom Iraci, USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Portland, OR, 2004.*

---

## Collection and Analysis

“After Action Review ‘rollups’ and Information Collection Team assignments are the primary tools we use to collect pertinent wildland fire information,” explains the center’s assistant manager, Dave Christenson. He said that case studies and surveys also serve as important collection tools.

“After Action Reviews—or AARs—are an inexpensive, simple, systematic process that have the power to change an entire work culture,” Christenson says. “The AAR can become a cornerstone of organizational learning.”

The four questions asked in this “learning after doing” After Action Review tool:

1. What did we set out to do?
2. What actually happened?
3. Why was there a difference?
4. What are we going to do next time?

According to Christenson, AARs initiate the knowledge transfer process. Their results can be used to enhance or sustain the performance of a unit or team. “Gems and nuggets will often surface from the AAR that will be valuable to others—but only if other people can have access to this knowledge.” He says that this is where the AAR “rollup” tool comes into play. This important resource identifies key issues by presenting fire professionals with the following challenges:

1. Describe one or more of your successes from which others can learn.
2. What was one of the challenges you faced and how did you overcome it?
3. How can training be improved?

## Lessons Learned Center’s “Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms”

### Websites

The Website at <<http://www.wildfirelessons.net>> contains a vast array of wildland fire knowledge arranged in a user-friendly format. The Website also has significant interaction with safety, training, and leadership development sites concerning both wildland fire and nonfire incidents. The Website at <<http://www.myfirecommunity.net>> is the wildland fire online community center that includes a community directory, learning opportunities, discussion center, and a knowledge exchange.

### Scratchline Newsletter

The center also publishes a quarterly newsletter that identifies new tactics, techniques, procedures, and processes. In addition, this publication shares lessons and effective practices received from the field. Scratchline’s main purpose is to inform and educate the reader in a fast and simple format. Articles come from the entire wildland fire community.

### The Learning Curve

The Learning Curve is published periodically for immediate use in the field. It provides a short summary of lessons from After Action Review rollups that have been received and reviewed.

---

After Action Review rollups are collected and analyzed for wildfire, prescribed burns, wildland fire use events, fuels projects, and all-risk events.

---

4. What are your recommendations for any unresolved issues?

AAR rollups are collected and analyzed by the Lessons Learned Center for wildfire, prescribed burns, wildland fire use events, fuels projects, and all-risk events. The lessons and effective practices are then shared with the wildland fire community through the center’s two newsletter-type publications (see the sidebar) and Website.

### Information Collection Teams

Information Collection Teams (ICTs) serve as another key tool for collecting wildland fire informa-

tion. A team is comprised of subject-matter experts and a member of the center’s staff. These teams collect tactics, techniques, procedures, and processes for 5- to 12-day periods at an event. An initial impressions report is then developed from this information and shared with the wildland fire community.

“The purpose of an ICT is to collect lessons and effective practices from firefighters that they believe will be of value to other firefighters. It does not investigate or review,” Christenson assures. Recent collection team efforts include:

- Hurricane responses in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida;
- Wildland fire use events;
- Alaskan wildland fires;
- Lessons and practices from the Southern and Northeastern States; and
- Southern California's 2003 firestorm.

## Knowledge Retention

"What we call 'communities of practice' are often key components to how the wildland fire community learns," Christenson says. He defines a community of practice as an informal group of people with similar work-related activities and interests. "Members can belong to multiple agencies or reporting structures, yet they regularly transfer knowledge through their informal networks of peers across agencies and in different areas of the country."

In the interest of serving the various communities of practice within

the interagency wildland fire community, the Lessons Learned Center has developed an online community center at <http://www.myfirecommunity.net>.

## Knowledge Transfer

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center has found that the primary way to share wildland fire knowledge is through networks of professional wildland firefighters working in various organizations and communities of practice.

Recent national and regional workshops have laid the groundwork on the importance of organizational learning. Video and DVD products of these workshops are available through the Lessons Learned Center.

"It's all about organizational learning," summarizes center manager Nasiatka. "As a knowledge resource center, the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center is striving to help

the wildland fire community become a fully developed and dynamic learning organization."

In carrying out this significant charge, the center is constantly acquiring, interpreting, retaining, and transferring wildland fire knowledge. "As the wildland fire community becomes more involved and embraces these concepts," Nasiatka assures, "positive organizational change will take place."

## References

- Garvin, D. 2000. Learning in action. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- TriData Corporation, 1996. Identifying the organizational culture. Leadership. Human factors and other issues impacting firefighter safety. Bureau of Land Management Contract: #1422-N-651-C5-3070.
- Weick, K.; Sutcliffe, K. 2001. Managing the unexpected: Assuring high performance in an age of complexity. University of Michigan Business School Management Series. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers. ■