The use of Tactical Decision Games (TDGS) and Sand Table Exercises (STEX)
For
S-Course delivery at the 2005 Arizona Wildfire Academy

The Arizona Wildfire Academy (AWA) requested a group of facilitators to lead several S-courses through TDGS delivered in the form of STEX during the 2005 Academy. The Academy leadership had no prior experience with STEX nor did most of the lead instructors for the S-courses. The scope of the operation was never fully realized until it was already in motion. Fortunately, two STEX train the trainer sessions had been scheduled for mid-week and four STEX facilitators were available and committed to assist. A total of seven tables were eventually utilized along with four outdoor terrain models (hastily modified piles of construction dirt) to facilitate nearly 300 individuals in the hot seat over a six day period.

The core group of four facilitators quickly expanded to seven by mid-week, with two individuals steeping in for single day periods for a total of nine facilitators. A single table was committed to an S-234 course which was fortunate enough to have an experienced STEX operator on the cadre. This table was located in a separate facility and was not part of the "STEX Group". A single day peak of three S-courses occurred on Thursday with six tables fully utilized. Sunday and Friday consisted of single courses. The peak day required a 12 hour commitment and the remainder of the days required 8-10 hour commitments to allow for set-up, facilitation and STEX Group AARs. During the busiest days a STEX Group Coordinator was required, mainly due to last minute planning, AWA Command Staff interest and an influx of local and state-wide media crews.

Through a process of trial and error, the "STEX Room" evolved into a main room with 5 tables and a secondary room with a single table (due to space constraints). The main room allowed for seating of 30 people and an introduction to TDGS was formally presented (1 hour-standard Fireleadership website propaganda) for about half of the groups and informally (5 minute explanation) for the remainder. A rotation was designed and based on 30 minutes per table. This set-up allowed 30 people, in six groups of five each, to receive the one hour introduction and rotate through 6 tables in 3 hours for a total of 4 hours in the STEX room. The STEX coordinator or Lead S-course instructor managed the clock and announced "5 minutes" at the 25 minute mark and "time" when 30 minutes had elapsed

The students had nothing but positive feedback and the STEX work was hailed as the "highlight of the academy". The students enjoyed the break from a classroom setting and the interaction with the STEX cadre, all of whom were experienced, well-respected firefighters within the Southwest Geographic Area. The experience level of the facilitators was critical, especially with the ICT3 scenario and the S-336 scenarios where a real working knowledge of unique fuel types was necessary to deliver quality training.

Courses Serviced: S-131, S-230 (two sessions), S-231 (two sessions), S-200, S-234 (independent of the STEX Group), S-300, S-330, S-336 and two STEX train the trainer sessions.

Key Points

It is all about the facilitator: The quality, enthusiasm and flexibility of the individual facilitator carried the program. There was a great disparity between individuals within the S-courses; facilitators had to quickly switch from facilitator to coach to teacher, often within the same scenario. Scenarios would quickly move from a simulation to a seminar or snapshot, in order to drive home a lesson on fuels, fire behavior or additional learning points such as the importance of a size-up, resource capability or managing an incident within an incident.

Creativity: The original plan was to use scenarios from the S-course workbooks. Once the S-course instructors saw the beauty of the table they would request a specific goal and/or learning points and then each facilitator would build a scenario around the requested objective. Almost all of the scenarios used were designed on the fly with the exception of the ICT3 (one hour of prep with two role players). The ICT3 scenario ran for 3 hours with a total of seven individuals rotating through the hot seat. Each individual worked through a single decision point in the scenario, an AAR was conducted, and the hot seat then rotated to the next individual as the scenario continued.

The S-336 scenarios were based on geographic areas and distinct fuel types plus at least one leadership objective. *Example: The Boundary Waters of Minnesota; working in blow-down with canoes and pumps, wilderness challenges such as logistics and a tactical dilemma on working at night.* Each facilitator designed their own S-336 scenario and the STEX Group coordinated to ensure no duplicity. Following the outline for designing TDGS in the STEX Reference Guide proved simple. The S-336 instructors enjoyed the combination of education on fuel types coupled with leadership and decision making challenges.

Organize and Schedule: For a brief moment we had folks stacked up outside the door. A loose schedule with time for setting up tables between classes and allowing the facilitators a moment to relax is critical.

Evaluation: The best part of a STEX Group is that it allows the S-course instructor to roam the STEX Room and evaluate the students; it also allows the student to interact with six more individuals who are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the material.

In summary, TDGS provided a crash course in AARs. The S-336 class for example, participated in at least 6 AARs in a three hour window. These were not staged AARs but real scenarios they had just completed. The Use of a STEX Group will most likely be a standard tool in future Academies. Pre-planning is essential to handle a large number of students.

We were also given a few recommendations from participants. These included the use of photographs to coincide with the scenario, additional role players and a continuation on the use of an introduction to TDGS/STEX (the full TDGS/STEX power point was the preferred approach but time limits support the use of a modified 20 minute introduction to TDGS/STEX based on the first half of the TDGS/STEX power point).