



Using 'Sensitivity to Operations' to see the work clearly

Text by Jonetta T. Holt



Photos courtesy Redding Hotshots

Working at night on the Cub Fire, 2008. Some firefighters say they prefer to work at night because they can always see where the fire is.

Psychologists say, when individuals are involved in a situation, they often lose sight of the situation they are in. How do fire managers and other leaders who regularly lead people into intense, rapidly changing situations remain cognizant of the reality of the situations they are in? Are they, too, in danger of losing sight of the "real work?"

Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe say, in *Managing the Unexpected*, "When we say HROs (High Reliability Organizations) are sensitive to operations, we mean that they are responsive to the messy reality inside most systems. Sensitivity to operations is about the work itself, about seeing what we are actually doing regardless of what we are supposed to do based on intentions,

designs and plans." To be sensitive to operations, we must monitor a messy reality and respond to the unexpected.

How does this apply to fire managers, crews, and the teams they form to work in dynamic environments? Incident Management Teams (IMT), over the years, have been asked to perform a multitude of assignments. Some of them were not even remotely related to fire management. IMTs have become true "Incident" management teams, not only "Fire" management teams. Applying the High Reliability Organizing principle of Sensitivity to Operations to "Incidents" vs. "Fires," becomes even more challenging. When we work in a fire environment, being sensitive to operations often means we are acutely aware of small changes in fireline activities. When the assignment changes, applying that same principle may mean that we need to re-identify where "operations" are actually taking place. In the case of one assignment in 2007, the Deputy Incident Commander immediately realized that the team itself was in fact "the field" where operations were taking place.

Steve Gage defers to Paul Gleason's systems approach to fireline safety, by using LCES. LCES stands for Lookouts, Communications, Escape Routes and Safety Zones. "This systems approach can also be applied to an incident management organization. The question should arise 'what does fireline safety have to do with an incident management organization?' If the management organization or team does not recognize that things are not going well on their incident, then those that stand the most to lose are the firefighters assigned to the incident."

Reading the story below about the team assigned to "Support Esperanza 57," may provide new insights about how we remain aware of the work we do in the environment we work in.

In October 2007, a Type 1 IMT was called to the San Bernardino National Forest that was experiencing a large complex wildfire. Instead of taking command of the wildfire, the team was assigned to the "Engine 57 Support" mission. The crew of San Bernardino National Forest Engine 57 had been burned over. Four of the crew died on-scene and a fifth crewmember was in critical condition and struggling for his life.

Deputy Incident Commander Dan Kleinman realized that the sudden change in assignment could have potentially instant and long term profound effects on the IMT. Some team members had previously received training in responding to serious injuries

and fatalities. Their assignment now was to support the families of the affected firefighters and plan for the firefighter's funerals and memorial services. Dan was convinced the team would need help with this assignment. Deferring to a concept developed years earlier by then-Incident Commander Steve Gage in a white paper titled "[LCES for Incident Management Teams](#)," Dan discussed this proposal with Incident Commander Don Feser who was understanding and supportive of this concept. Dan called in a "Team Lookout."

Steve had written that: "Team Lookouts are not unlike the lookouts used on the fireline. It is someone assigned to watch what is going on and signal when they perceive something is about to go wrong. This would be a person or persons who could move from functional area to functional area looking for the situations that shout watch out. The folks doing this should be knowledgeable of team interactions and have functional background at the level of the team they are observing."

To fill this role, U.S. Military retiree Boone Emmons, became the Team's Lookout.

"I was the clean eyes and clean ears for the team," Boone says. "I was assigned to monitor the duties, functions and responsibilities of team members. My first job was to check the welfare of the team members. The new assignment had triggered a tremendous change at the time – it became very emotional."

Boone said he could see that team members were trained in teamwork, philosophy and values. The team's normative behavior was open and displayed in communication patterns like: "Well, how do you see it? Let's talk about it."

"The degree of commitment was notable," Boone said. "I've never seen a level of commitment like that in a team except one other time. The commitment was to the mission of taking care of their firefighters. They didn't know what to do – but that didn't make any difference, they were going to do it anyway. They had an immense willingness to go after a very sticky and very emotional situation."

However, the commitment translated into working extended hours, Boone said. "I had to keep checking on the number of hours team members were working. Some team members were becoming fatigued and dysfunctional. I told the Deputy IC, one of the problems we have here is that there are good people killing themselves doing a job. I often told team members to go get some rest. A couple of them accepted it, but others would blow up and the IC and Deputy IC had to intervene a number of times."

Frequently team members would forgo eating, drinking and getting exercise, Boone said. "I told the Deputy IC, we needed to look at this, because there was unresolved conflict among team members due to fatigue, lack of hydration, lack of eating. People would work rather than eat or sleep. Efficiency went down by a third, is what I estimated."

Boone said he observed dramatic changes in team dynamics because members were neglecting themselves and their own needs. Ultimately, he said some of the team's ability

to understand and focus on smart objectives diminished. Additionally, inadequacies surfaced in short-range planning and some team members struggled in an atmosphere of unresolved conflict. This, in part, was caused by the politics of the event but mostly by the lack of mission focus due to emotional state of some of the responders.

Boone said he also encouraged team members to actively reach out to the important people in their own lives. "I kept harping while I was there, 'who touches you?' 'who talks to you?' And it worked, except for me: I didn't have anyone to talk to except one person. I walked out of there with a heavy load because I didn't follow my own advice."

This assignment, Dan said, offered many trials and challenges. It was a challenge due to the lack of experience, the lack of established protocols, and it was charged with emotions. Many of the responders had not experienced this environment. They had human factors to deal with including sadness, stress, fear, prejudice, and others. "The Team Lookout was able to focus on the responders and provide clarity and direction on dealing with others or their own emotions. This provided team members with the self awareness and understanding about what they were feeling and why. Through this safety net, it empowered the responders to be successful and provided the necessary services and support to the families and coworkers."

Weick and Sutcliffe say that "What is distinctive about better HROs is that when they put the principle of sensitivity to operations into practice, they perform activities that accept the ambiguities of intentions and work hard to give undivided attention to small deviations and interruptions in operations."

Threats to maintaining a high level of sensitivity, include the complacency that comes with working in an environment we consider routine. Other barriers to sensitivity may include placing a higher value on knowledge that is quantitative or measurable instead of the knowledge we collect that is intuitive and more complex in meaning.

On the assignment in this situation, the team became its own "field of operations." Although Steve's recommendation to use "LCES for Incident Management Teams" would be fully applicable on any team assignment, it was extremely important for the team on this assignment to remain sensitive to its own situation because they were in an unusually intense emotional environment. Why should this same sensitivity to operations be applied on every assignment and how can it be adapted?

Questions related to this event:

- If a Team Lookout had not been assigned in this situation, would the team have functioned just as well or better?
- What do you think team members learned or appreciated hearing from the Lookout?
- Did team members understand the role of the Lookout and how best to take advantage of a person in that position?
- If you were a crew team member working on assignment, how do you think you would respond to feedback from a Team Lookout?

Broader questions to ask ourselves regarding our teams and organizations:

- As crew or team members, are we capable of doing our job at the same time we are evaluating our effectiveness in completing the work?
- Do we realize the importance of feedback from objective sources or "outsiders" to help us remain alert to the reality of our situation and our relationship with it?
- How could a Lookout help us remain sensitive enough to see the messy realities of our actual work clearly?



For more information on High Reliability Organizing and Organizational Learning, please visit the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's website at www.wildfirelessons.net, or contact the LLC staff:

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