On the Confluence of Wildland Fire and COVID-19

By Travis Dotson

Spring of 2020. How can this issue of Two More Chains be about anything other than the confluence of wildland fire and COVID-19? It can’t. We do not have our head in the sand. We are paying close attention and doing our part to contribute. But as the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (LLC), what is our part?

We capture and share the experience of those navigating this unprecedented scenario in an effort to smooth out the communal learning curve. Dialogue inspired by the sharing of lessons aids our collective progress.

What is the Role of Two More Chains?

But what about Two More Chains? What is our role here? What useful insight can we possibly provide in this handful of pages?

We want to give voice to the frustration felt by everyone involved. From those at the highest levels gaming it out on daily conference calls to those already in the smoke. We can acknowledge the pain of being firmly wedged between a hard place and a giant pile of rocks. But how does that move us forward?

Organizational Learning

The LLC has often described itself as a sort of a lookout for the fire service. From our unique position we are able to provide perspective and challenge existing norms for the sake of progress—but it needs to be productive.

We won’t downplay the concern by not giving the topic its due focus. Just about every industry and workforce imaginable is struggling to adapt in this new theater. We have a tremendous advantage. And that is our previous investment in organizational learning. Let’s make the most of the value we have placed on learning.

We won’t stick our head in the sand—we will remain heads-up, eyes forward.

In the Now

Our basic organizational structure and foundational principles are not a bad place to orient from.

By Travis Dotson

Operating in the now with an expectation rooted in yesterday is dangerous—and inefficient.

Let’s take a moment to reminisce about the good ‘ol days (2019).

Remember shaking hands with people? Oh yeah, high fives and fist bumps? Remember when briefing was not awkward?

Remember getting on the plane for Alaska without looking like a ninja?

Good times!

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Recently, I was prompted to ask myself “Who do I want to be during this pandemic?”

I immediately recalled one of many staff ride integrations I have been so fortunate to experience.

(If you have yet to experience a staff ride, move it up on your bucket list.)

The “integration phase” of a staff ride occurs after the trauma bonding on the hill. Meaning you just physically and emotionally walked hallowed ground with fellow fire folk, collectively loosening your grip on pre-conceived notions formed prior to the visceral experience of touching the crosses. Blood soaked dirt will tear your heart open. And when your heart is open you are capable of considering more.

More than the facts.
More than the judgements.
More than the rules.
More than the hindsight.

Just more.

Eventually your heart closes back up and the familiar armor will reinstall itself piece by piece. Our protective instincts are well honed.

But at that integration your heart is still open.

People say all kinds of stuff at integration. Most of us swing for the fences and fall a bit short of profound. Some keep it simple and so sound wise. Others wander around in left field until we side-eye them back into their seat.

But someone always goes yard with wisdom that widens your eyes. All you need is one and the night is not lost. It’s not even what is said that is magic. It’s just the coalescence of the moment and the atmosphere that seems to produce profound perspective-shifts and genuine growth.

Here is one of those moments for me.

After spending the day with two hotshot crews discussing modern day pyro-dilemmas through the context of a civil war battle on the very ground upon which soldiers suffered, I heard this:

“People are just like tea bags. You want to see what they are made of—put ‘em in hot water.”

Now, this saying, and all the variations on it, has been attributed to a multitude of people. That does not concern me. That night was the first time I’d heard it. I also admit that I am likely not recounting it exactly as it was stated. Again, not a big concern of mine. The purpose here is its effect on me at that point in time.

The impact on me was profound. Context matters, of course. I was surrounded by peers I respected and we were in the afterglow of shared struggle. The teller of the tea quote was a bad-ass grizzled Marine. The intensity of our collective care for the people beside us and the quality with which we carry out our operational endeavors was more than palpable.

At the time, my personal life had placed me in some hot water. That hot water was in the process of revealing what I was made of.

That moment inspired me to consciously foster the qualities I most admire in myself and others. I am how I behave. You can’t fake who you are. Adversity just turns the lights on. What a gift.

Hot water reveals who we are.

Right now, as a community, we are in warm water. It’s going to get hot.

Let’s take a moment to remind ourselves who we are and who we want to be.

Brew Strong, Toolswingers
Let’s now take a moment to grieve the loss of how things once were. As we have set down our baggage from the past, we can maybe move around a bit more comfortably in the present. Isn’t this exciting? We get to re-imagine our approach to just about everything. It sure is inconvenient, but we know how to navigate inconvenience. We don’t focus on how things aren’t—we get busy experimenting.

Experimenting involves guessing and trying and failing—again and again. It also involves taking notes. Individual experiments might not be very efficient, but sharing notes on our failures and our advances makes our collective experimenting much more effective. So, fail often, take good notes, and share the learning.

But don’t share your chew. In fact, this would be a good time to quit. It’s always a good time to quit because lip dirt is bad for your wallet (and your gullet). Quit now. Science says so. And listening to science is another thing we should do.

**Embrace the Opportunity**

Who will you be when faced with this most recent hardship?

If you are a person that likes to blame stuff on the “higher ups”, you just got a golden goose. You will have a field day pointing out all the stuff that is and is not happening. This would be a good time to quit doing that. It’s always a good time to quit doing that. We all know blame is generally useless.

Be productive.

Embrace the opportunity.

Know that hardship shows our strengths just as much as it highlights gaping holes and single-point failures. Hardship is a bright light that shines on what we have honed and polished, while at the same time revealing the work we missed in the comfort of darkness. Much will be revealed. Are you willing to see it?

Did I mention acceptance?

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**Our core principals and concepts that have gone nowhere will serve us well as the steady foundation they are intended to be.**

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key elements have not changed.

Our core principals and concepts that have gone nowhere will serve us well as the steady foundation they are intended to be.

ICS hasn’t changed. It’s designed to be flexible and scalable. That’s a good thing. You add positions you need, even if they have never before existed. Use it like you have never used it before. This hyper-flex quality is something we witness every time we take an “All-Hazard” assignment (hurricane, flood, eclipse, etc.).

Tweak ICS to your needs.

Here is an excerpt from the 2017 Frye Fire Strep Throat Outbreak RLS:

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**Incident Health Group** Created

*This medical Incident-Within-an-Incident occurred as the Gila/Las Cruces Type 3 IMT was preparing a transition with the Type 2 Southwest IMT Team 3. As information became available regarding the Strep Throat outbreak, the two IMT Incident Commanders discussed options and potential action plans.*
As the Type 2 Southwest IMT Team 3 prepared to take over the Frye Fire, it was decided to create an “Incident Health Group”—to be completely separate from the operations-focused Medical Unit operations—to concentrate solely on the Strep Throat incident.

Directives were given to ensure that:

- This bacterial infection outbreak was contained;
- Firefighters were treated and isolated as necessary to minimize/stop the Strep Throat spread;
- Immediate contact be initiated with the Graham County Health Department and subsequently the State Health Department and whomever else was needed to investigate the outbreak.

Incident Health Group . . . hmmm . . . Maybe we should be standing that up more often. “Health” is a broad brush and we all could use some guidance, support, and direction in this arena. Just a warning: Watch out if you ever end up with me as your Health Group Supervisor (see earlier bit about chew).

Easy to Understand – Tough to Actually Do

What else won’t change?

You guessed it: **Duty, Respect, and Integrity**.

We all have a Duty and we will continue to fulfill that duty. The mission may shift, the tactics may differ, objectives may look different. But our duty to serve one another will not go away.

**Duty**

- Be proficient in your job, both technically and as a leader.
- Make sound and timely decisions.
- Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised, accomplished.
- Develop your subordinates for the future

**Respect**

- Know your subordinates and look out for their well-being.
- Keep your subordinates informed.
- Build the team.
- Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.

**Integrity**

- Know yourself and seek improvement.
- Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.
- Set the example.

I am confident you can attach new significance and nuance to each of these bullets. Make the effort to study them and envision what this list asks of your behavior specific to our current situation. You may find these bullets’ demands are rather simple—and difficult.

Yes. You read that right: simple AND difficult. As in, easy to understand, tough to actually do.

**The Changes will Continue**

Not convinced?

Do you always set the best example? As you answer that, let me remind you this bullet is under **INTEGRITY**. So, do you always set the best example? Probably not (because you are human). That is okay. We all have a whole new suite of behaviors to practice with (that is part of the know yourself/seek improvement part).

I’m telling you, this stuff is deep. Get in there.

Another thing that has not changed: Growth is hiding in the hardship. It’s there, waiting for us. Just like it does at the gym. Embrace the suck. Don’t cheat yourself.

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**Growth is hiding in the hardship.**

**It’s there, waiting for us.**

**Just like it does at the gym. Embrace the suck. Don’t cheat yourself.**
Eyes forward, see the opportunity. It’s staring us in the face. This is exactly how adaptation works. We will come out of this with some incredible new abilities and perspectives that we would never have arrived at without this specific adversity.

Make no mistake. This will be difficult. It will likely be fatal. It is entirely possible we are headed into the deadliest wildfire season to date.

We all hope the number of firefighter fatalities is not especially high this year. But I have prepared my head while knowing I cannot prepare my heart.

Much has changed and the changes will continue.

Some things have not changed.

Our basic organizational structure and foundational principles are not a bad place to orient from. Again, a simple review with the current circumstances in mind may serve as a useful grounding exercise.

And then we advance.
The concerns surrounding COVID-19 are real and cannot be taken lightly, but neither can firefighting. The hazards of firefighting are not any less prominent because COVID-19 entered the scene. Both firefighting and COVID-19 deserve top billing of our full attention.
**Fluidity vs. Rigidity**

As folks have begun to engage with fire in 2020 there’s been a swift recognition that COVID-19 related mitigations can be adhered to well enough right up until it’s time to engage—and then the majority of it goes out the window. Why? *Because you can’t fight fluidity with rigidity.* For example: Imagine a vehicle is suddenly in the path of the fire and needs to be moved quickly. Do we let it burn-up because we won’t have time to Lysol wipe the door handle and steering wheel before driving it to a safe location?

The wildland fire environment is dynamic with a multitude of factors affecting the fire at any one moment. If firefighters refused to adjust their tactics according to the shifts in fire behavior, weather, terrain, etc., catastrophe would ensue. Fluidity is a non-negotiable aspect of the job.

The COVID-19 protocols are akin to throwing a monkey wrench of historic proportions into our whole operation, which creates a significant struggle to find workable solutions.

Does that mean that we can’t adhere to the protocols? *Maybe.* Does that mean that we can’t fight fire? *Maybe.* Is there a middle ground? Yes. The middle ground is what we just acknowledged two seconds ago. Our operations are fluid and the COVID-19 protocols are the element that we have no choice but to adapt to. Of course, it’s not at all convenient to be building the bike as you’re riding it. But as it turns out, we don’t have control over things that are out of our control, timing being one of them.

**Our Strengths and Our Weaknesses**

Perhaps now more than at any other point in history, a mirror is being held up to our way of doing business. It’s showing us our strengths and weaknesses in the clear light of day. Not only that, but COVID-19 is shifting our perception of what we consider to be our strengths or weaknesses. Prior to the current pandemic taking hold, who would have considered shifting resources around the country to support the greatest need a weakness? *That’s not a weakness, that’s resourceful!* COVID-19 is muddying-up the waters in relation to what might fall on the pro or con side of the list.

Having a plan is good business. However, all of our current plans have been hurried and are based off of previous experiences with “the known” and/or conjured-up hypotheticals. Making a plan is a good idea, so long as we are okay with throwing it out and operating on the fly when it’s warranted. This has clearly been the case for those who have had the opportunity to test out their plans (see table below).

**Want Some Examples?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLAN</th>
<th>PRO</th>
<th>CON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use more vehicles for crewmember spacing.</td>
<td>Less potential for exposure to the virus.</td>
<td>Increased number of drivers, potential vehicle maintenance problems, navigating tight narrow roads with additional vehicles, parking issues once on scene.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear face coverings or masks at all times.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling overheated and tired, excessive face touching to adjust mask, and an added distraction during operations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual trainings in place of face-to-face crew training.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Less crew cohesion and less acclimatization to be prepared for the job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive Initial Attack.</td>
<td>1) Fewer total personnel on an incident= Less potential for exposure to the virus. 2) Less smoke in the air.</td>
<td>Increased engagement on adverse terrain vs. advantageous terrain and a loss of expanded ecological benefit due to keeping fires small.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep Resources Local.</td>
<td>Less interaction with out-of-area resources = Less potential for exposure to and spreading of the virus.</td>
<td>When additional resources are needed, it will promote more “throw together” crews due to lack of available reinforcements—thereby potentially increasing exposure to the virus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Read these COVID-19 related Rapid Lesson Sharing (RLS) reports: [https://www.wildfirelessons.net/irdb?executeSearch=true&LibraryKey=b58e5b48-1c09-4f15-ad0d-c26639dab1a2&SearchTerm=COVID&SearchMatch=exact](https://www.wildfirelessons.net/irdb?executeSearch=true&LibraryKey=b58e5b48-1c09-4f15-ad0d-c26639dab1a2&SearchTerm=COVID&SearchMatch=exact)
This hazard has a very real potential of coming home with us to meet our family.

When have we ever brought a burning snag home to prop-up in our living room?

The “Con” list on the previous page’s table is not filled with guesses. It is filled with lessons derived by resources who have had the opportunity to put their plan to the test. It sounds like an excellent idea to be extra aggressive in putting out fires this year in order to avoid the logistical nightmare that awaits us all once fires begin going Type 2 or Type 1 in size. However, the other side of being extra aggressive is what you see listed in the “Con” column.

When talking about fire size, smaller doesn’t equal safer, which I can’t imagine comes as a surprise. The takeaway here, to put it simply, is: there are always tradeoffs for actions that we take or don’t take. Sharing information with one another (like these lessons in the previous table) has never been so critical to our operations so that we can build off of each other’s knowledge toward successful operating procedures.

Current circumstances dictate that our “best” option is to choose the way with the least (foreseeable) negative ramifications.

As COVID-19 is busy holding up the mirror to how we do business, one of the most prominent realizations to take note of is that the fire community is incredibly interconnected. Whether it be crew/module spring training, PT sessions, helicopter rappel certifications, smokejumper rookie training, riding in rigs for hours on end, sitting side-by-side in dispatch, digging fireline, or coming together on large incidents to get the job done.

People may feel compelled to place our interconnectedness in the “Con” column during the era of COVID-19. But I refuse to do so because the fragmentation of the fire community will ultimately be to our detriment, especially as it relates to real-time learning. In this arena we need to be more connected than ever before.

Oddly enough, in the era of physical distancing and “Module as One” guidance the only way to navigate through this is by relying heavily on our existing interconnectedness. And so far, we have been doing just that.

Innovative concepts are being implemented left and right in order to find workarounds for the approximately 1,000 barriers that COVID-19 has placed in our path at a time when it feels like we’ve just experienced a 180-degree wind shift. The easier route would be to just grasp for the familiar amidst the frenzy, but we’ve never done things the easy way. So why start now?

If nothing else, this pandemic is providing the fire community an opportunity to truly reevaluate our priorities as well as the way in which we approach firefighting as a whole. These are some of the biggest questions we’ve ever had to grapple with as a community.

Our willingness to rise to the occasion is crucial.
Adapt & Share

The current pandemic requires us to adapt some of our typical ways of doing things. We are no strangers to adaptation.

This Shop Talk page provides you a rather simple process for getting time “signed.”

Some adaptations will be simple, others will not. Either way, the sooner we share our individual adaptations with each other, the more efficient we will be with our collective adaptation.

Do you have a Rapid Lesson to share? Click Here:

Share Your Lessons
One of Our Own

Alex Plascencia

Our COVID-19 Fire Season –

What’s Prepared You for Leading in It?

What are Your Fears?

By Alex Viktora and Paul Keller

We thought it would be good to check in with a new engine captain to explore his thoughts and see how he is preparing for leading in our new, unprecedented coronavirus pandemic environment.

This is Alex Plascencia’s first season as SFEO (Supervisory Fire Engine Operator) for Engine 652 on the Chiloquin Ranger District on the Fremont-Winema National Forest in Oregon. His first day on the job was March 16—right about when the COVID-19 national health emergency began to disrupt and challenge our previous reality.

“I started my fire career on the Chiloquin Ranger District, so this has been a ‘full circle’ thing for me,” Alex informs. “In 2006 I got a job there as dozer swamper. I did two seasons on the dozer crew and filled-in on some hand crews—including filling-in with the Winema Hotshots.”

Next, Alex became an Apprentice, working: one year on the nearby Klamath Ranger District on a Type 4 Engine, one year as a crewmember on the Winema Interagency Hotshot Crew, and one year on the Malheur Rappel Crew. At the end of the 2010 fire season he converted to a Senior Firefighter position on the Winema Hotshots.

“Up until this year, I’ve been on Winema ever since. I spent four years as a Senior Firefighter and five years as a Squad Leader,” Alex says. “Then, last fall, I decided to apply for this captain job.”

What made you decide to apply for this captain position?

“We were a number of important factors. I’m a father of two and husband to a wife who’s dealt with a lot of me being gone the past 14 years. That’s a lot of summers of me being way from my wife and two kids. So I was faced with the dilemma that many fire folks must deal with. Do you stay on the crew or do you find a job that gets you a little closer to home? So I looked for opportunities that allowed that. Luckily, there was one right here in Chiloquin, Oregon. As difficult as it was to leave one family on my crew, I was gaining more time with my family, with my children and my wife.

Another important consideration were some of the opportunities for my career development such as time as an “official” supervisor. I could see myself applying back to the Winema Hotshot Crew at some point when the time is right. But, for right now, it felt like the time was right for me to try something new.”
Who is Alex Plascencia? What defines you?

“Some key principles I try to hold myself to are Poise, Confidence, and Class. Those three things have helped shape who I am today in all aspects of my life, both professional and personal. They were first introduced to me by a mentor, Doug Wilson, who was my high school football coach and one of the best leaders I’ve had the pleasure of being around.

And I think if you ask anybody who has spent much time with me, they might say that one of my main attributes is that I’m competitive. It doesn’t matter what the game is. I just love to compete! I like to play pick-up basketball, softball, and my all-time favorite, Ultimate Frisbee. Yes, anything competitive is kind of fun for me. Just hanging out with friends.

My older son is almost nine. He’s getting to the age where he thinks he can take dad on in whatever. You know, we have these little competitions for everything. So that’s been great. We go shoot hoops or go out for walks or runs or whatever.”

Alex says he also likes to take his family on trips to see the different parts of this country, as well traveling down to Mexico. When he was nine he spent almost an entire school year in a little town known as San Pancho, located north of the Puerto Vallarta area.

“At first, I didn’t know a lick of Spanish. That experience provided me a good foundation and perspective regarding what life can be like outside the norm of American life. I wanted my own kids to see that. Getting them down there to visit family and see what it’s like in a different part of the world is important.”

What has prepared you for the challenge of a new leadership position during the coronavirus pandemic?

“A few things come to mind. One is the amount of time that I spent on Winema with the different superintendents, squad leaders and other seniors and crew members that I’ve interacted with and all the different situations that we’ve experienced.

It’s not often where the crew is called in, everything’s hunky-dory and we’re just rolling up to a fire and there’s no stress and everything’s cool. More often than not we’re rolling up to a fire where things are all chaotic. There’s all kinds of different operations happening. People are going all over the place. At first, early on in my career, that chaos tended to be overwhelming. I was often like, ‘Whoa, I’m not sure what to do. I’m just going to sit here and let somebody tell me what to do’.

... things that I try to do—especially responding to a fire—is just breathe, do some breathing exercises, and take everything in.

And the more I was on the crew, the more I saw and realized the importance of a slowdown—to think about what’s going on and don’t let other people’s level of stress or anxiety impact you. You have control over your own actions and the way that you take in the information or react to the situation. And so, seeing that over time, and then as I progressed in my movement up the chain in the crew, the more important that slowdown process became. I started to become that same model for the people around me as well as up and down the chain-of-command.”

Alex explains how he has been fortunate to be mentored by many leaders who helped shape his current leadership style, which is to remain calm, cool, and collected during those stressful, up-tempo situations.

“Sure, sometimes you need to be a little more assertive. But knowing how to balance that and creating that sense of calm around you so the people around you witness that and don’t get hyped-up is important. Through your example, they can also have that sense of calm and take things in, rather than just reacting to the next thing somebody’s asking them to do.”

Alex (on left) with his partner Joel Stack for what was called the 2nd Annual Disc Slam Tournament. Alex and Joel were the event’s Disc Slam Champions. “It was something to keep folks’ spirits up and engaged while we were pre-positioned in Pocatello, Idaho last August,” Alex explains. “We had nine teams of two in a double elimination bracket. All teams were made up of crewmembers.”
Can you share some thoughts on how we can all slow things down a little bit?

“I think, personally, for me it comes down to prioritizing the key things that I want and need to do. If it’s on an incident, if I’m responding in my current position, my job is to establish a chain-of-command and provide good Leader’s Intent and clear objectives for all the personnel around me in a high-stress environment.

So things that I try to do—especially responding to a fire—is just breathe, do some breathing exercises, and take everything in. I’ll also try to make a list of what I don’t know. This way, when I first show up on the incident, I feel like I’m in a more calm, collected mood and mode.”

What are your fears this season?

“Oh, man. I suppose the obvious thing is how people are currently reacting and how they will react once we really get into this fire season during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the fears I have is the stress that could be put onto interpersonal relationships. We already have the stress of the fire environment and all the normal stresses we had prior to this. And now we add this into the mix.

I’ve seen it already just within my local District where some people are super comfortable. For them, it’s not that big of a deal. They can just show up to work and follow these new COVID-19 guidelines—but they’re still going to accomplish this or that other non-COVID-19 activities. And then there’s the other people who might have their own health concerns. The possibility of contracting COVID-19 could severely impact them to the point where they’re in the hospital. So, right now, these folks might be feeling severely distraught.

I also worry about these people when they’ll be interacting with other resources who might take a more nonchalant attitude toward COVID-19 precautions. Then, if they do end up with a COVID-19 related illness, I worry about how these people are going to be able to navigate the process through the Department of Labor and Workers’ Comp.

I’m afraid that if somebody is severely impacted by this, what that kind of impact it will have on them and their family. So, yes, there’s just a lot of things that involve COVID-19 that I worry about.

On the other hand, I’m not super worried about how I’ll react on a fire with my people. I plan on doing a lot of open talk as far as how people are feeling, how we’re reacting to the different situations, and what my expectations are for how we’re going to be doing the daily guidance on COVID-19 prevention type checks and activities.

But I do fear the things that other people might be dealing with and reacting to outside of fire that will be distracting them from the normal hazards that we already have in our business.

Therefore, one of my biggest priorities is to promote communication. I can’t make you tell me stuff but I can be open with the things I’m comfortable with. And hopefully, together, we can create an environment in which people are willing to share the things that might affect other people.”

Looking back on your first six weeks that you’ve been in your current new leadership position, is there anything that jumps out to you as a particular lesson that’s already been made available or you’ve already learned?

Alex explains how in his current position, when the initial COVID-19 information and directives were being dispersed, there was a lot of communications—such as group texts—between many different people. He says, for him, this seemed a bit overwhelming. Often times, he believed the original intent of the texts were being lost.

“There was an abundance of different group messages that were making it difficult to ensure that we were adhering to the proper channels of communicating up and down the chain-of-command.
So I had a phone conversation with our detailed AFMO. I was like: ‘Hey, can we just boil this down a little bit and tighten these communications up to prevent us from being so overwhelmed?’ I explained how if we could just establish a better standard for how we’re going to communicate, everything would operate a lot smoother.

Thankfully, this input was listened to. Now our communications are much less stressful. I don’t have to see my phone buzzing from 20 different people replying to the same thing—while I’m trying to become familiar with and navigate my new supervisory duties and responsibilities. Now myself and the two other captains can successfully communicate this info to our subordinates instead of three different group texts with the same information.

I think we did a good job of clearing that up. We did a good job instituting a standard for folks to know how they were going to receive information and a proper avenue to voice concerns that they may have. We started to recognize this wasn’t going to be a two-week thing. This was going to be something that will require us to adjust how we work together and how we’re going to communicate with each other.”

Alex says another dilemma became the necessity to telecommute and using computers for meetings.

“So we just started to document what it was specifically that we were all having trouble with. We set up a “Microsoft Teams” Captains’ Group Meeting every Tuesday. This enabled us to discuss all the various topics that needed attention. We were able to line everybody out for the coming week. Using this specific communication platform technology, things just seemed to roll a lot better for us.”

What do you think about not having big fire camps this season?

“This is how I plan on preparing my engine. If we do get on a big fire, I want my engine to be able to get the radio briefing—or however they’re going to do that—then go to work and be able to self-sustain ourselves for three days. I want us to have enough supplies we carry with us that will allow us to do our own thing and minimize the need to be in camp unnecessarily.

Maybe we go into camp one night or go into town or whatever to resupply and just kind of function as our own little spike camp. Just like you do in Alaska or if you’re a jumper or a rappeller or whatever.

Like I was telling one of the other captains the other day, wouldn’t it be cool if on our own District we had these three-day kits. I don’t know. I was just thinking outside of the box. Nothing that we’re implementing now. Just a continuing conversation that we’ll be having.

I don’t mind not being in fire camp at all. In fact, I prefer that. Spiking out always seems better. Better sleep, not having to miss out on that much needed rest. Yes. I’m a huge fan.”

What other areas of the way we “normally do business” do you think we have opportunity to modify or even improve during this unusual COVID-19 fire season?

“For one, this need for people to telework has created more extensive methods for communicating and being aware of how to utilize the available technology. In the past, people have gotten away with letting somebody else on their module or unit be responsible for that.

Therefore, I think our current situation has pushed people to take a hard look at what their deficiencies are in terms of how knowledgeable they are with technology. I can do a fair amount of things on the computer. But prior to this year, I’d never used Collector or InForm, the new method for submitting fire reports and other things associated with it, or Microsoft Teams. I’d never used Adobe Connect. Never used Zoom.

Now, you get an email that says: ‘Hey, Zoom meeting at 2 o’clock . . .’ And it’s like, okay. And, of course, it’s a blessing and a curse.

Obviously you don’t want to have to learn in this kind of environment with all the challenging negative COVID-19 impacts. But at the same time, it’s kind of a blessing to have to be thrown into all this to learn these things that we’re going to have to know how to do to continue to function going down the road. Because this isn’t going away.

More than likely, at some point things might ease. Modern medicine might figure some things out. But this is going to be something that we’re dealing with for quite some time. We’re going to have to find ways to continue to get things done and operate safely and get the messages we want out to people in efficient ways.

Technology is a huge asset to do that. And yes, it’s definitely helped me become a better supervisor just even in the last six weeks.”

Alex with his fellow Winema Hotshot crewmember, his father, Richard “Wally” Ochoa, Jr, on a fire in Alaska in 2013. Wally was featured as the “One of Our Own” in the Fall 2017 Two More Chains.
NEW!
Discussion Forum:
COVID-19 and Fire Season 2020

Got questions—or answers—about COVID-19 and Fire Season 2020?
Come Join the Discussion!

This new forum provides a platform for the greater fire community to ask questions or share ideas, information, and solutions.

COVID-19 and Fire Season 2020 Community