

TWO MORE CHAINS



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The Big Lie

Did you read “The Big Lie”? If not, stop right now and read it: <http://wildlandfireleadership.blogspot.com/2016/06/the-big-lie.html>—it’ll just take you a couple minutes. Then come right back. We’ll wait for you.

Did it make you mad? Did you exclaim: “*Who the hell does this guy think he is?*” Or did you shout: “*Yes! Finally, someone said it!*”

Chances are, your reaction was fairly close to one of those two ends on the spectrum of reactions. This piece of writing entitled “Honor the Fallen – The Big Lie,” a five-page essay by Mark Smith has been circulating in all of our various networks for several months now. In a nutshell, “The Big Lie” exposes and discusses the notion that wildland firefighting is not “safe.” Reactions to the essay have been uniformly one thing: Polarizing.

The way we see it here at the Lessons Learned Center, “The Big Lie” has now provided all of us a common reference point from which to rally. It has become a catalyst for dialogue at a national level—not unlike other recent polarizing acts or opinions constantly covered by national media.

So how do we make the message from “The Big Lie” useful? Each of us could take the now—unfortunately—normal approach which is to dig into our existing perspective, simplify our thoughts down to an almost clever meme, post it on our social media echo chamber of choice, and pat ourselves on the back as like-minded “friends” offer endorphin inducing emoticons for us to count and covet. Not real productive.

We want something else. We want thoughtful discourse as a path forward. We want to talk about “The Big Lie.”

To help shed some significant light on this topic, we went straight to the source and asked the “The Big Lie’s” author, Mark Smith, for his insights. Mark obliged us. We’re very grateful to him. In the article below he shares what “The Big Lie” aftermath means and where it needs to go.

Next Step: Generate Discussion Involving Many Viewpoints

By Mark Smith, Author of “Honor the Fallen – The Big Lie”

The question has been asked of me: “*What do you think the next step is in the dialogue around ‘The Big Lie’ essay?*” The end state for the Honor the Fallen Group (see sidebar on right) is the achievement of a rigorous introspection of the wildland firefighting culture focused on how to best cope with the high risks involved. “The Big Lie” was meant to be only one small slice of that much larger pie.

In my view, it seems like the next step should be to generate more discussion in a way that involves as many viewpoints as possible.

The content of “The Big Lie,” the observation and conclusions shared in this essay, is what I’ve seen. What I’ve heard. It was designed to provoke a strong reaction in order to get people talking. Its facts and opinions need to be validated or debunked, defended or attacked. Not because the objective of the essay is to be “right” or to be “wrong,” but because the objective is the *interaction*. **[Continued on Page 2]**

Honor the Fallen

As Mark Smith points out in his “The Big Lie” essay, it reflects two years of dialogue within a group known as “Honor the Fallen” that was born in the wake of the 2013 Yarnell Hill Fire and loss of the 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots.

At the time “The Big Lie” was released and distributed last spring, Honor the Fallen included approximately 30 “seekers” within the wildland fire community, Mark informs. He says this group includes: hose-draggers, fire directors, dirt diggers, academics, ‘ollies,’ agency administrators, ICs, and FMOs.

Mark explains that to call this assemblage of folks “a diverse cross section” would be an understatement.

As Mark tells us at the beginning of his essay, “The Big Lie” benefits from their critical eyes and input.

Also in this Issue

 **Helpful Insights on “The Big Lie”** Pg. 5

 **In Defense of Bias** Pg. 8

 **Reader Calls Out Travis Dotson** Pg. 10

GROUND TRUTHS

Travis Dotson's "Ground Truths" column that normally appears on this page will return in our next issue. Travis' "We are the Problem" column in our last [Summer Issue](#) triggered a lengthy response from a reader who respectfully disagreed with Travis. In this issue, Travis dedicated his contribution to responding to this reader's concerns. For both the reader's and Travis' input, see page 10.

[Continued from Page 1]

So far, the most thoughtful response I've seen is Mike DeGrosky's article "The Biggest Lie Never Told" that appeared in the March-April 2016 *Wildfire Magazine*: <http://wildfiremagazine.org/article/the-biggest-lie-never-told/>. DeGrosky disagrees with the "Lie" part of the essay's premise.

In his piece, Mike points out that a lie implies, by definition, an intent to deceive and therefore a conspiracy to hide the truth. I would advocate anyone interested in "The Big Lie" essay to read Mike's well-written article and to consider his viewpoint.

Why is it So Hard to Talk About This Subject?

I agree with Mike that there's no conspiracy at work here. What I am saying is that a lot of people are choosing not to see the truth. I've received feedback that large numbers of people agree with the essay, and yet these same people are afraid to talk about it. Why should it be so hard to talk about this subject? That alone warrants some introspection.

Someone recently shared the following interaction with me. After reading "The Big Lie" a District FMO spoke with their District Ranger. "When you first talk to new hires for the season, do you tell them that the job might be dangerous? Suggest they have a will? Things like that?" the FMO asked. "God no!" the Ranger responded. "That would not be politically correct!"

Is that a lie? An intentional omission of truth? Certainly, the Ranger was not being malicious. But it sure smacks of intentional avoidance. People report that this is common. It happens all the time. What does it mean for wildland fire culture if it is that widespread?



Who is Mark Smith?

Mark Smith is a partner in Mission-Centered Solutions, a national consulting firm. After the tragic 1994 South Canyon Fire, MCS started working with the federal land management agencies to address needed cultural change and leader development.

Mark is responsible for the overall performance of MCS's training and consulting programs. "I am in the trenches with some incredible people on my right and my left. I draw strength and inspiration from them. My best days at work are when I hear one of the hundreds of great stories from former program participants about how they achieved success in a thorny situation by using a tool or technique they got from working with us. That's when I truly feel I'm fulfilling my purpose."

I can relate from first and secondhand accounts that there is a sizable number of people that had a very strong emotional reaction to "The Big Lie" and simply don't want to believe its assertions to be true.

The intent of "The Big Lie" essay is not to accuse and certainly not to divide. It is an attempt to unify. To openly talk about the truth in front of us.

There's a quote widely circulated from the 2013 Boulder County Floods in Colorado. Colorado National Guard Lieutenant Colonel Mitch Utterback briefed the assembled resources: "People say: 'Be safe out there.' I'm not going to say that. This is dangerous shit we're doing. So go do dangerous shit. But come back alive."

No one would ever consider that quote to be politically correct, but it sure smacks of a lot more truth than the earlier response by the District Ranger.

Risk Statistics: Guarantee Fatalities

Let's examine the data and evaluate the metrics. A cursory review of fatalities per capita reveals that wildland firefighting is significantly more dangerous than over-the-road trucking and only slightly less dangerous than military special operations.

For more insights on "The Big Lie" see Dave Williams' input in the One of Our Own feature on page 5.

In almost any probability/severity risk matrix, the lower right hand corner (lowest probability/highest severity impact) is yellow: Medium Risk. When decent risk assessments are done by Incident Management Teams on modified 215As, they show that most firefighters operate on most days in Medium Risk. So, let's multiply the odds of that lower right corner by the total number of operational periods in a year of wildland firefighting. [Continued on Page 3]



Photo by Kari Greer.

[Continued from Page 2] I am betting that it's going to statistically guarantee fatalities. Possibly double-digit fatalities annually.

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The intent of "The Big Lie" essay is not to accuse and certainly not to divide. It is an attempt to unify. To openly talk about the truth in front of us. To prove to ourselves the data and the science behind it. To align the systems of systems to that truth.

Another area of resistance to "The Big Lie" that I've seen is understandable and stems from a lack of experience. Growing numbers of Line Officers do not have the same ground-truthing experience as earlier generations who carried a compelling depth of fire knowledge in their backgrounds. Well-meaning but ineffective objectives such as "vector to zero" (zero wildland firefighter fatalities) expose that reality. Subscribing to this policy reflects neither the intuitive nor the data-driven basis to appreciate the degree of danger in the wildland fire environment and the

mathematics involved in managing its risks. You cannot organize an effective system around an objective that is impossible to meet.

Times Have Changed

I've also heard comments from people whose experience predates much of the current bureaucracy—whose frame of reference was not based on a PowerPoint presentation of the 10 & 18. Their mutual refrain is: *"No one told me that firefighting was safe!"*

I think there are a couple of important factors to this perspective. One, when the 10 & 18 were ingrained into the DNA level of a young firefighter's brain, the 10 & 18 were a lot more effective. Two, the complexity level is exponentially higher than it was even 20 years ago. What was adequate to imprint the thinking behind the 10 & 18 at the molecular level then is not adequate now.

An adjunct to this is a category of resistance from those who subscribe to the compliance model of human behavior. Of course, in hindsight, every accident is going to point to one of the 10 or the 18 or downhill checklist etc. as a major factor. This school of thought contends: *"If they just follow the rules, no one can get hurt."* This type of thinking leads to more layers of policies, resulting in even more checklists and policy that contradicts itself.

You cannot organize an effective system around an objective that is impossible to meet.

Informed Dissent

What we really need at this point in "The Big Lie" dialogue is informed dissent. What are the valid opposite or alternate viewpoints? What's the logical basis or the data that support those viewpoints?

I heard one example from one person whom I greatly respect. He said the idea that the 10 & 18 should be anything other than bedrock rules was "wrongheaded" and that the Fire Orders were measurable and quantifiable and based on hard data (the post-Inaja Fire work that led to the Fire Orders).

Now that's good feedback. There's a logic there to debate. Personally, I'd respond that the data supports the Fire Orders as essential core *principles* of wildland firefighting, yes. But overwhelming amounts of research going back to the 1960s debunk the notion that rules are as effective at governing behavior as values and principles.

The "compliance" mindset would present the Fire Orders, have you memorize them, take a test annually, check the compliance box, and move on. I think the 1980s effort to reorganize the Fire Orders out of order of priority to make them easier to memorize reflects that approach.

[Continued on Page 4]

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But “Be alert. Keep calm. Think clearly. Act decisively” is not measurable and quantifiable given how much the wildland fire community now knows about human factors—except in hindsight—after a failure.

“Obviously, Mark was not alert, calm or clearheaded or decisive otherwise he wouldn’t have had a negative outcome.” Perhaps that could be true in a controllable environment where there’s no stress, no fatigue, no fear, no uncertainty, no challenges to communication, and so on.

A culture that treated the Fire Orders as bedrock principles would acknowledge they are eternal and would always apply in balance to every situation. They are a compass to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty. That culture would seek to embed them at that DNA level consciousness of every operator. Accepting their imperfect application in the real world, it would align a very hands-on, experiential, simulator-driven training and evaluation system to achieve that.

While there are crews and units today who attempt to train that way within their limited means, this approach is not institutional. An evaluation of a typical “S” course validates that. What’s the first thing that always gets cut in a budget crunch?

Next Steps

So what’s the next step? First, everything that I’ve just presented and discussed here is open to more debate. More rigor. More examination. That is exactly the objective of “The Big Lie” essay and of the Honor the Fallen effort.

DeGrosky disagrees with many points of my essay. He agrees with some others. That does not equal division. It means there’s common ground to move forward.

Once again, I was really excited to see Mike DeGrosky’s article in *Wildfire Magazine*. Here’s a senior leader. A guy I like and respect. Weighing in. Visibly. Committing. Participating and encouraging more. DeGrosky disagrees with many points of my essay. He agrees with some others. That does not equal division. It means there’s common ground to move forward.

I would really love to see more leaders come to the forefront to present their thoughts and opposition, support, or alternative views and their basis. All have equal weight and importance in this dialogue.

It’s Time to Walk the Walk . . .

There you have it, folks. The ball is now in your court. What will you do? What action will you take?
Senior leaders, you have been called upon to weigh-in on this topic. Write your article. Call us here at the LLC and schedule your interview for our Podcast. Send an invite to your sister agency counterparts to sync calendars for a filmed panel discussion webinar. (The LLC can help with that.)
We have all espoused the value of dialogue. It’s time to walk the walk.
At the very least, please fill out the feedback form below.

Continue the Conversation

What You Think is Important. Please Click on this Link and Provide Us YOUR Feedback.

<https://goo.gl/forms/amJhmAx91rHMFCX2>



"The Big Lie" Feedback

Use this form to provide Feedback on the essay titled "The Big Lie"

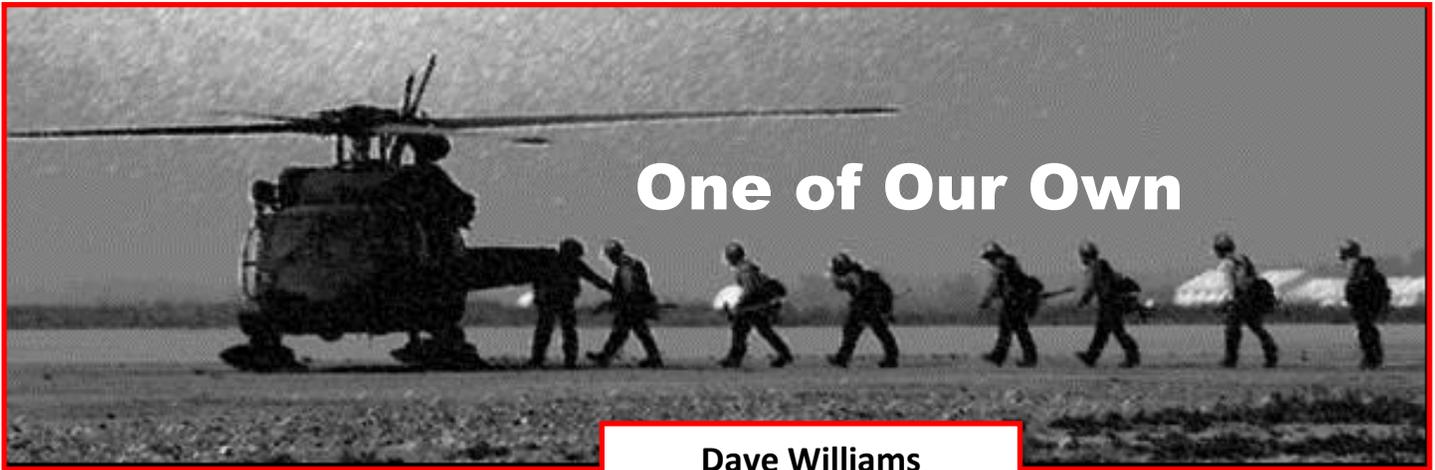
What is your position?

- Firefighter
- Fire Manager
- Line Officer
- Other

This shows the first page of our 2-page online questionnaire.

In general - do you Agree or Disagree with the concepts put forth in this essay?

- Agree
- Disagree



One of Our Own

Dave Williams

Helpful Insights on 'The Big Lie'

From someone who enjoys learning from diverse perspectives in an effort to improve how we accomplish our mission

By Travis Dotson



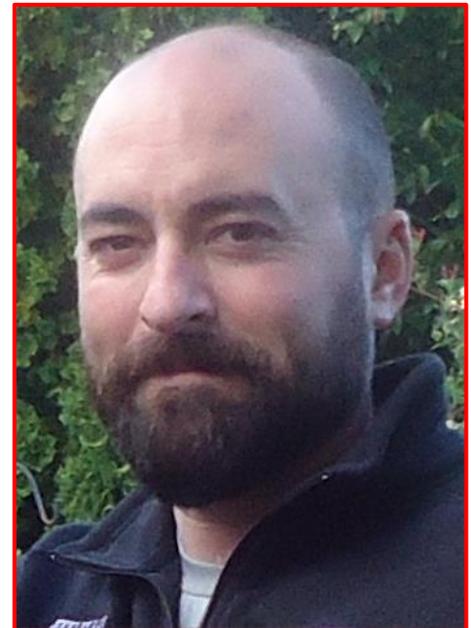
This is not Dave Williams.

Dave Williams is a funny guy. We asked him to send us a picture of himself for this article and he sent us the photo over on the left. In case you miss the reference because you have never operated a VCR, this is *not* a picture of Dave Williams. Dave only dances in Nomex. (It is a picture of a young Tom Cruise in the 1983 movie Risky Business.) As you'll see in the following interview, Dave also has some serious, no-nonsense observations to share with us.

Dave started his wildland fire career in 2000 working on a Type 6 Engine with the Montana DNRC. Since then he has worked primarily on hotshot crews (Wyoming IHC and Lolo IHC), including one detail with Teton Helitack in Jackson, Wyoming, and another detail with the Missoula Smokejumpers.

In 2015, Dave transitioned from an Assistant Superintendent position with Lolo IHC to his current job as a Zoned Fuels AFMO on the Lolo National Forest.

While Dave does not proclaim to be an expert in wildfire or risk, he is a self-proclaimed "seeker" who enjoys learning from diverse perspectives in an effort to improve how we



This is Dave Williams.

accomplish our mission.

What are your general thoughts on 'The Big Lie'?

[Editor's Note: For a complete discussion on 'The Big Lie' see our cover story that begins on page 1.]

"To me, Mark Smith's 'The Big Lie' essay is about accepting risk in the wildland fire culture. It's about how we talk about risk and safety and ultimately the roles they serve in our culture.

I've had a lot of discussions about risk in the last few years and one of the things I've learned is that we can't even talk about risk without first understanding the role that 'perspective' plays in it. We all come at this from different angles. We all have different experiences. At the end of the day, we all have different motivations that help shape our tolerances.

I may not think a political smoke is worth risking much of anything for, but it's important to understand that a Line Officer dealing with the public may have a different perspective. 'The Big Lie' gets us thinking about how we accept risk and, maybe even more importantly, gets us thinking about the consequences that come with it.

The biggest revelation I had reading 'The Big Lie' was understanding and admitting to myself that this job can't be done safely.

[Continued on Page 6]

[Continued from Page 5] I guess even after 15 years of engines, rappelling, jumping, and hotshot crews I just assumed if I did everything 'right' I would be safe. What I understand now is that there are too many variables we cannot control in our work environment. If we're there, the potential for serious accidents exists.

As one of our primary means of managing risk, mitigations are a vital factor to understand. Although we may change the probability of an accident occurring, if we don't affect the severity, we're essentially relying on hope.

Undesired Outcomes: Still Possible

I hear the argument that life's risky and if we didn't accept risk we'd never leave the house. The difference is, we're not basing our everyday life decisions on a fallacy. I don't leave my house thinking I'm somehow free from harm. How do you look someone in the eye and tell them that their safety is the number one priority and then send them into an environment as inherently dangerous as ours. Perfection is a lofty goal and, guess what, even if you and those around you do everything right and don't make any mistakes, undesired outcomes are still possible.

I believe most wildland firefighters today understand the risk; but I also believe most of them don't think it will happen to them. Until it does. The worst part of the actual 'lie' that the essay is titled after is that it keeps us from having meaningful risk management discussions. If after all



Dave Williams says how after 15 years of engines, rappelling, jumping, and hotshot crews, he assumed that if he did everything 'right' he would be safe. "What I understand now," Dave explains, "is that there are too many variables we cannot control in our work environment."

our mitigations and situational awareness we decide we're at moderate or low risk, then a discussion on how important it is to be there isn't even necessary. That's the 'easy button' because the discussion to go when the risk is high is much more complicated. The difference is, the latter forces us to have a conversation before we accept the risk."

What does 'The Big Lie' essay say about our culture?

"Just the fact that we're talking about our culture implies progress and we should feel good about that. Unfortunately our proud 'Get It Done' culture may be hurting us as much as it helps us. Like Mr. Heaton writes in his 'Risk, Gain, and Loss' piece in the [Spring 2015 Two More Chains](#): 'It doesn't take much motivation to get our people to engage a fire. It is who they are. It is why they signed on. It is also why we have mass casualty events.'

The challenge we're facing today is figuring out how to use all that valuable pride, duty, etc. in a manner that truly values safety above all else. Even stopping the fire."

Is 'The Big Lie' evidence of progress?

"There is a new generation coming up in the ranks and they're rarely satisfied

with the status quo. I think we're seeing a lot more questions being asked. This is good. And we need to be prepared to answer the tough questions, such as: 'Why are we here?'

Hopefully, we're moving toward a culture that accepts working smarter not just harder. This doesn't mean that we don't fight fire and it certainly doesn't mean that we don't accept risk. It means that we take a harder look at our options. It's my perception that not having good options is not a reason to accept more risk, certainly not the kind of risk that can kill people."

What is the work to be done on this front?

"Push the conversation about how important accepting the risk is. Sometimes it is; sometimes it's not. Being in the culture, we need to do our part in affecting change. The path forward may be tough. But if we hold our course and stick to what we've always done, I can tell you with certainty what next season has in store. It's up to us to be having the conversations with our leaders about the challenges we're facing out there. And it's up to us to be honest about the risks we're taking and the consequences that come with them. We're all in this together and the more alignment we can foster between all levels of our organizations the better off we'll be.

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[Continued on Page 7]

[Continued from Page 6] We also need to collectively define what ‘success’ in today’s environment looks like. Specifically, when accomplishing objectives means accepting the risk of severe consequences. If success is everybody coming home at night, we may not be able to keep operating the way we’re accustomed to. We may not be able to meet the expectations of our partners and our public. We may need to lead that conversation.

How and when we engage may look different if the values we’re trying to protect aren’t worth what we’re risking. It’s easy to say it in hindsight. We need to be better at saying it before accidents happen.”

Why is ‘The Big Lie’ hard to talk about?

“I think ‘The Big Lie’ is difficult to talk about because it challenges deeply-held beliefs and values which are very personal and very important to most of us. Firefighter safety tops the objective list on every incident, right? What does it mean if we admit we can’t do this job safely? How much risk is too much? What risk is necessary to accept?

This topic can be excruciatingly painful to folks primarily because of all the uncertainty involved. Most of the time, nobody gets injured or killed so why do we even need to talk about all this, right? As firefighters, it’s our duty to manage fire in such a way that minimizes undesired impacts to identified values at risk. If those values aren’t worth the potential consequences of being there, we need to rethink our strategy. For the times when they are, everyone from the top to the bottom needs to understand what’s at stake.

Agree or disagree with ‘The Big Lie’ essay, but people are losing their lives doing this every year. The problem is, we’re saying safety is our number one priority which, at times, is in direct conflict with achieving objectives.

Why are We Risking So Much to Interrupt a Natural and Necessary Process?

As an example, I’ll share some of my beliefs and values. I personally believe that the role we can serve as firefighters is crucial to our natural resources and the future sustainability of our forests. The kicker is, fire serves a purpose of its own on many of our landscapes in providing for those very things we’ve become accustomed to ‘protecting’. So for me, when I start thinking about accepting risk, I can’t help but think about why we’re risking so much to interrupt a natural and necessary process.

Managing fire for me looks less like suppression and more like maximizing opportunities for fires to do what nature intended. I understand that we have a social responsibility with our partners and our public to minimize the undesired impacts of wildfire, but continuing our suppression-centric strategy at this point seems ridiculous.

Other than climate change, suppression is one of the main reasons we’re forced into our current position ‘between a rock and a hard place’. Until we shift our culture, I’m not sure why we should expect to be anywhere else.

I’m sure many folks out there disagree with me and believe that as firefighters it’s our responsibility to ‘protect’ or ‘prevent’ these undesired impacts at all costs and that because of climate change and our ever-growing WUI, we can’t just stop our aggressive suppression campaign. I get it. But if that’s going to be our strategy, we need to reprioritize our stated objectives.”

Why do we all react so strongly to it—whether we agree or disagree?

“Like I previously said, I think we react strongly because it’s so personal. For many of us, fighting fire is what most of our adult life has been about. It is how we provide for ourselves or our families. It’s how we satisfy basic human needs such as comradery, achievement, adventure. ‘The Big Lie’ essay forces us to take a deeper look into what we’re doing out there and ultimately what’s at stake—and that can be uncomfortable.”

Is the pen mightier than the saw? In other words, what good does writing do in our culture?

“When I was running a saw on a hotshot crew, nothing was mightier than me. I understand the importance of that in our culture. But I also see the need to reign it in.

“‘The Big Lie’ essay forces us to take a deeper look into what we’re doing out there and ultimately what’s at stake—and that can be uncomfortable.”

I spent the better part of my career in fire feeling invincible which is why I had no problem accepting all the risk in the world—whether cutting line, jumping, even rappelling out of helicopters.

There is value in what we do. I’m not saying that we stop accepting risk or that we stop fighting fires. I believe there is room for improvement though and I believe thinking about essays like this one can help us. The pen is mighty when it makes us think and that’s the goal of ‘The Big Lie.’ If you disagree, write an essay of your own and share it with us. Maybe a little more perspective is exactly what our culture needs to continue learning.”

Please Provide Us with Your Input on this Issue of Two More Chains
bit.ly/2mcfeedback

In Defense of Bias

By Matt Carroll

The way bias is usually talked about implies we would make *good* decisions if not for its distorting influence; that bias can “cloud” our otherwise rational and *good* judgment. By default, this implies that bias is *bad*. Whether it is the mental shortcuts known as heuristics, helping our brains deal with the dizzying complexity of everyday life, or the influence of, as Brit Rosso references in the opening of the [Summer Issue of Two More Chains](#), “prejudice,” bias is ever-present in our feelings, decisions and actions—and it’s not going away.

Therefore, judging bias as either *good* or *bad* is unhelpful and misleading. Bias is not something we can get rid of and it is not always harmful. Importantly, it is not the bias itself that is often so troubling, rather it’s the bias’s work on our behalf without our knowledge which can be damaging. Individual bias typically resides in the automatic, intuitive places of our minds, not easily accessed by our consciousness. Similarly, cultural bias thrives in the hidden assumptions that underpin the way we do things.

Acknowledging that bias is often hidden from conscious view does not in any way suggest that it is inconsequential. In fact, bias can have significant, sometimes fatal consequences. We cannot meaningfully address bias in our wildland fire culture by simply judging bias as good or bad. Rather, we must bring it up from the hidden depths to the surface so that we can openly examine its effects on our decisions and actions.

Former McCall Smokejumper Matt Carroll currently works as a Human Factors Specialist with the U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, Office of Innovation and Organizational Learning (IOL). In this “In Defense of Bias” article, Matt responds to—and expands on—themes and perspectives shared in the last issue of *Two More Chains* that focused on “Gender, Leadership, Bias and Diversity in Wildland Fire.”



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Gender, Privilege and Fairness Toward Meaningful Change

The bias that Brit Rosso described—whether it involves gender, ethnicity, geography, etc.—is an expression of power inequalities. Or, as Rachel Reimer in her cover story in that last issue of *Two More Chains* puts it: “privilege” is enforced by accepted norms and behaviors. The behaviors that stem from bias often feel natural to the privileged but can be unfair to those who are not. As these behaviors become normalized, they are pushed to the routine (intuitive) part of our brain and culture. They become invisible, especially to the privileged.

Last Two More Chains Issue was Way Off Base

I have heard from many people who think that this most recent *Two More Chains* that focused on “Gender, Leadership, Bias and Diversity in Wildland Fire” was way off base. These folks explain that they work hard to treat everyone fairly and equally, or had many women on their crews and treated them with respect, no different than any other crewmembers.

It is uncomfortable to be called out because we—the majority of well-intentioned people—are honestly and actively trying to be “fair.” It is unsettling to be told that the path I (white male) have been on my whole career, the one I have struggled with to get quals, classes, assignments, and experience is not level, but, as Rachel Reimer points out “slopes slightly downhill all the time.”

It sure didn’t *feel* downhill to me.

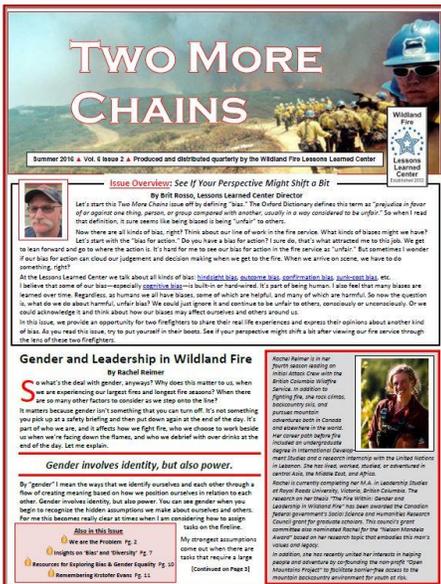
Accepting Rachel’s perspective has a tendency to throw people off balance a bit. Importantly, admitting that Rachel’s perspective is valid does not necessarily stand as a judgment of character. It does not make me (or anyone else) a bad person. Rather, it questions the culture that has emerged. The current culture in which I (the very white male firefighter) am in—the “privileged” group—is the result of, as Edgar Schein, former Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor and author on organizational development, puts it: “...the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and have worked well enough to be considered valid...”

An Imbalance of Privilege

Our wildland fire culture wasn’t “created” by people like me for the singular purpose of subjugating others. It was collectively “invented, discovered or developed” through the millions of decisions to solve problems of “external adaptation and internal integration” by *everyone*.

Prejudice and privilege creep into our culture because some of the solutions to external adaptation and internal integration seemed natural and necessary—and resulted in an imbalance (which the privileged group typically does not perceive as an imbalance). The assumptions that now underpin the imbalance have, for the most part, become invisible. They are unconscious.

[Continued on Page 9]



Matt Carroll sheds some light on why he says many people disagreed with some of the premises they interpreted from the last issue of *Two More Chains* that focused on “Gender, Leadership, Bias and Diversity in Wildland Fire.”

***The capacity to solve the issues
that face us today—and will challenge us tomorrow—requires
insights from diverse perspectives.***

[Continued on Page 8] Again, part of what defines biases is their work on our behalf without our knowledge. Importantly, just because we didn't consciously create this prejudice does not mean it doesn't affect our decisions, nor are we absolved from addressing it. Learning therefore is not judging this or any other bias as good or bad, but bringing it to the surface so that we can openly examine its effects on our decisions and actions.

Why Do We Need Meaningful Change?

Why, as one of the privileged, should I desire any change? The path *feels* level to me. Interestingly, it is not to be fair. In fact, I don't come to work to be fair; I come to work to do a job. I come to work to manage a resource. If we attempt to address the cultural prejudice by making things fair we have missed the point. Fairness should be an outgrowth of examining the current cultural paradigm and that begins simply with the surfacing and critical examination of the biases and assumptions ingrained in my, and the cultural, subconscious.

So if it is not to be fair, why is bias important to address? Remember how Rachel's perspective of the inclination of our paths was different than mine? Rachel's perspective is not "right" or "wrong." What is most important is the realization that there is a diversity of perspectives with regard to any situation and they can all be valid (true to those who hold them). A diversity of perspectives, especially those perspectives that challenge the dominant or privileged perspective, can be very revealing. Access to these perspectives is vital to building resilience in the face of uncertainty; and access is dependent on surfacing and examining the biases and assumptions that influence our decisions and maintain privilege within our culture.

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by making things fair
we have missed the point.***

How Do We Begin Meaningful Change?

One of the greatest follies our bureaucratic machines have made in addressing issues of cultural prejudice and biases is through the manipulation of its artifacts—such as hiring practices, advancement, training, etc.—without first surfacing the underlying assumptions that enable these artifacts to exist.

For example, think of a lobster trap buoy floating out on the ocean's surface. We all see the buoy and we can see that it is not in the position we would like it to be. So we motor over to the buoy and move it to where it should be to be fair and without prejudice. As soon as we let go of the buoy where does it

go? Correct. It floats back over the top of the trap, which sits unseen at the bottom of the ocean.

In other words, when we attempt to adjust the system by manipulating the visible stuff, more often than not it produces rapid desirable shifts that are quickly undone, resulting in even greater entrenchment in the current culture—the buoy is initially moved, but it quickly returns to its position over the trap.

Meaningful change begins with the recognition that moving the buoy without addressing the trap is not meaningful change at all. The capacity to solve the issues that face us today—and will challenge us tomorrow—requires insights from diverse perspectives. Accessing that diversity will require that we surface, examine and address the biases that restrict access to these diverse perspectives.

Don't confront bias to be fair, do it to be the best we can be. Because that's what's required in order to meet the challenges that await us.

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Your **FEEDBACK**



EDITOR'S NOTE – The following is an emailed letter that we received in response to Travis Dotson's "Ground Truths" column that appeared in our [Summer Issue](#). After Caleb Finch's input, Travis responds.

We Respectfully Disagree with Your Perceived Reality of the Male Workforce in the Wildland Firefighting Service

Dear Mr. Dotson,

I wish to inform you that your recent Ground Truths column entitled "We are The Problem" has caused concern for me and my colleagues. We respectfully disagree with your perceived reality of the male workforce in the wildland firefighting service. With a broad sweeping brush we feel your recent article has stereotyped all males as chauvinist and classified every federal male wildland firefighter as discriminative against all females. It's our duty, as leaders, to stand up for the class of firefighters that do exist and perform to the utmost standard of leadership and excellence not mentioned in your "We are The Problem" "Ground Truths" column.

This article failed to mention any specific examples, data, surveys, cultures, specific incidents, demographics, geographic locations . . . This list goes on and on. We feel the material presented in the article is subjective in nature through the cognitive bias of your life's career events that shape your own specific viewpoint. The problem herein lies in using a platform such as this to disseminate subjective cognitive-biased viewpoints that stereotype all males.

The experience level of my colleagues and I consist of 15-35 years of wildland fire experience which includes professions on multiple national forests, dispatch centers, hotshot and engine crews. We all currently hold supervisory leadership positions within the U.S. Forest Service and Department of the Interior agencies. We recognize that forms of discrimination still exist within the wildland fire environment, albeit in small and localized locations—and not to the large degree that is portrayed in your "We are The Problem" column. We believe this behavior you cite was more prevalent in the 1990s. But in our experience since 2000 we have seen a substantial decline in this behavior, at least in our geographic and demographic areas and programs of work where we provide leadership and influence.

In visiting with my fellow colleagues, we feel that under our supervision, leadership, and sphere of influence we have been successful partnering with, hiring, training, mentoring, and effectively building firefighting teams not limited to females but to all genders and ethnicities. Through our supervision, leadership, and mentorship we have seen female wildland firefighters find permanent wildland fire positions and excel within those positions. We are proud to see our female firefighting teammates move onto successful careers in the wildland fire environment.

It's our jobs as leaders to lead by example, mentor, and provide opportunity for wildland fire positions regardless of gender or ethnicity. My peers and I take great strides and pride in building effective wildland fire teams every year and representing the wildland fire service and the respective federal agencies we work for.

To provide comments or statements that encapsulate all federal wildland firefighters into one person's cognitive bias is unprofessional.

Comments and statements such as these (taken from your column) do not represent me or my colleagues, nor the majority of male wildland firefighters: "I'm trying to connect with a bunch of blindly privileged whiners who vie for victim status every time a female is hired." "Face it fellas, WE are the problem." A subjective opinion allowed to be disseminated in an article such as this, or other documents with far reaching effects, stand on shallow ground when looked at from the context of the entire U.S. Forest Service and other federal wildland firefighting professions.

The generalized, all-encompassing description of behaviors of wildland firefighters described in your article is misrepresentative of firefighters. Do not judge a man or an entire race until you have walked in their shoes. To provide comments or statements that encapsulate all federal wildland firefighters into one person's cognitive bias is unprofessional. I suggest producing objective and specific data with the correct context in order to adequately tackle the forms of discrimination you describe in your article.

In closing, we as fire leadership and non-fire leadership and, most importantly, management across all federal agencies must put aside our own opinions that are cognitive-biased and not allow gender or ethnicity to influence our relations with the entire human race. On a final note, I and my peers are proud to work for our respective federal agencies regardless of the difference of opinions. We all have daughters of various ages and we all would support our daughters choosing this career path because we know they will get a fair shake.

It's my hope that this professional response will reach far and wide just as your article has reached far and wide.

Caleb Finch, Assistant Fire Management Officer, Battalion Chief 82; Sacramento Ranger District, Lincoln National Forest

Travis Dotson's Response:

I See My Job as Influencing the Occurrence of Dialogue Around Subjects We Tend to Avoid

Caleb,
Thank you so much for taking the time to write your response. After all, the point is conversation. I'll address a few points. But, most of all, we would like to help you get the far and wide distribution you ask for. Do you give us permission to print your email/letter in a future issue of *Two More Chains*, email it to our subscriber list, and post it on our social media outlets? This will certainly start more conversations and we are in total support of that. [Editor's Note: Caleb provided his permission to disseminate his emailed letter via these outlets.] **[Continued on Page 11]**

[Continued from Page 10] So, onto the items you point out. One of your concerns is with the article being nothing more than my opinion. Yes, you are absolutely correct. That's what "Ground Truths" is—the world according to Travis Dotson. One of the many times that my opinion really upset someone, I published this response in the next edition ([Winter 2014](#)):

"OK, first off, let's get one thing straight: 'Ground Truths' is the world according to Travis Dotson. That's all. Just like some incident reviews are the world according to that author or team. I have no power over anything other than maybe what people talk about in line for chow. Some people like reading my rants. But, then again, people like watching monkeys at the zoo. So if you want to complain to my supervisor about what I say because it's different from what you think, go for it. But keep in mind, I'm not writing policy or even influencing it. I'm just a knuckle-dragger with no education who stumbled onto a keyboard."

So you are absolutely correct in observing that what I wrote is simply my opinion. I know not everybody sees the world as I do. I see my job in writing "Ground Truths" as influencing the occurrence of dialogue around subjects we tend to avoid. How I do that is by getting a bit pushy. We all have different styles and I understand that not everyone likes being poked in the chest. Maybe that's just my little guy complex coming through. I acknowledge I'm a bit rough around the edges, but that quality happens to be common and supported in our culture. I use it to put current topics in a voice our readers are familiar with. Anyway, you are correct that what was written was all my opinion.

On your contention that that gender bias is a thing of the past or "more prevalent in the 1990s," I hear that. Has it gotten better? Of course. But better than awful is still bad. Here are just a few excerpts of feedback I have received since this article was published: *"I am still a little emotionally unraveled by what I have just read because you described 17 seasons of my desperate attempt at a career in one page."* *"I am a female firefighter and I have a two-year-old daughter. I am glad to hear what you had to say and I 100% agree with what you wrote. Thanks for calling it how it is."* *"Your thing in Two More Chains made me cry! I have NEVER EVER known a man to show more empathy and understanding of what it's like being a woman in the world of wildland fire."*

"In my opinion, that took a lot of courage to write and express the truth within our community. I know that part of your job is to be relevant and tell the hard truths but this article had a different vibe. You and everyone who contributed to this issue got it right and got a lot of us out here to think critically about this important issue." *"As a father of two daughters your column hit very close to home and I am certainly more aware of this bias and will continue to champion equal opportunity for all. I, like you, do not want my daughters to take up this profession that I have been at for almost 30 years now. However, the very fact that you all have written about this and there are Dad's like us still on the fireline gives me hope for the future."* *"Thanks for putting out a great newsletter on gender. Having been on a fire crew as an undergrad and deciding I'd rather go to grad school than continue that route—mostly because of the men I worked with—I can relate."*

"Good article. Hard truths. I don't have children, but have a 2 ½ year old niece & 2 nephews. I agree with you. Anything but wildland FF for my niece." *"DEAD ON!!!!"* *"Right on the money."* *"A group of us on the [NAME OMITTED] National Forest have been wrestling with these exact same conversations for the past three years and had no idea how to broach the subject within the fire and aviation community. It has seemed like something that is so sensitive, especially within the fire culture, that even saying the word gender (let alone bias!) has caused downcast eyes, seat squirming, and heads down as you pass in the hallway."*

I see how rough this is to those who envision themselves as unbiased, but patting you folks on the back is not what I was after. I wanted to pull the curtain back on the unspoken dark reality of overt sexism experienced by many women in our workforce.

So it may not be statistically significant, but there are a few data points relating to whether or not gender bias is a widespread issue. Almost every region of the Forest Service is represented in the responses above. It is good to hear that there is no gender bias occurring on the Lincoln National Forest. That is truly commendable and difficult to believe given the unconscious nature of most bias. Did you happen to take the ["Implicit Bias Test"](#) provided in that issue of *Two More Chains*? I did and my results were that I'm "moderately biased" in terms of gender and career (I unconsciously associate men with career and women with family). This may seem like no big deal, but it's scary how it plays out in ways we can't even imagine. Check this out: [What is Unconscious Bias?](#) There are so many resources out there about unconscious bias, I highly encourage you to look into these. When I did it blew my mind and made me really have to sit with some uncomfortable realities about my perspective and behavior.

The sentence you pulled out and referenced is a pointy one for sure. I can see how that stings a bit if you don't consider yourself one of the people it's aimed at. It's aimed at the folks I know I can't convince—the ones way out there on the bias spectrum. Chances are you know some of them, the folks that will openly tell you they don't hire women and complain about how they can never get promoted because they are male. They still exist. I would be thoroughly impressed if you couldn't name a few yourself. I did get one other note similar to yours, a man offended that I didn't acknowledge all "the good guys" and the progress we have made. I see how rough this is to those who envision themselves as unbiased, but patting you folks on the back is not what I was after. I wanted to pull the curtain back on the unspoken dark reality of overt sexism experienced by many women in our workforce. Do you think these instances aren't real? ["In the years I served in the military," she said, "I never encountered such discrimination and harassment as I have working for the U.S. Forest Service."](#)

I'm sure there are lots and lots of folks just like yourself who felt slighted by my article because I didn't leave them the comfortable escape route of "not everyone is this way." But the minute I put that in, it allows folks to put themselves in the "good" group and not do any real digging on whether or not they have something to work on. I wanted folks to react and do some work—which you did, thank you! **[Continued on Page 12]**

[Continued from Page 11] This conversation is what I was after, and I got it. I know you are a topnotch leader and I'm sorry to offend you. But sitting back and saying "Not me, I'm a good guy" doesn't help the victims among us. We need to acknowledge this stuff is happening and work together to stamp it out.

Travis Dotson, Fire Management Specialist, Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

Your **FEEDBACK**



EDITOR'S NOTE – We also received the following input from readers regarding our [Summer Issue](#) that focused on *Gender, Leadership, Bias and Diversity in Wildland Fire*.

Together We Can Make Strides to Change

I wanted to take a moment to congratulate you on this issue of *Two More Chains*. What a solid piece of work! I felt both sides were represented well. We both have parts to play in the current environment, and together we can make strides to change.

This parallels my work for the 2017 Wildland Fire Leadership Campaign on authenticity. What you all presented is spot on to what researchers believe is the path forward. I am tired of women playing the victim and men holding tight to their patriarchal ways. The time is here to bridge across the spectrum of masculine and feminine traits to find a solution, to change the system, to do what's right.

Thanks for you leadership!

Pam McDonald, Writer/Editor, BLM Fire Training Unit, NIFC;
Logistics and Social Media Coordinator, NWCG Leadership Subcommittee

I Dream for a More Gender-Balanced Workplace

I want to reach out and say THANK YOU for all of the efforts that you are exhibiting on this topic that is near to my heart. I am so thankful that you are getting the word out to impact the world for the better. In my 16 years as a hotshot, I have had a dream for a more gender-balanced workplace.

After reading your articles and continuing to achieve my fire goals, I see hope for this dream to come true and the hard truth to be addressed in a productive way. As I apply for hotshot superintendent positions, I am encouraged by you to continue going after my dream and supporting others so that they, too, can do anything they set their minds to.

Pamela Messal, Assistant Superintendent, Mesa Interagency Hotshots

Brought Extremely Difficult Topics to the Surface

A couple weeks ago a hotshot friend of mine sent me a link to your summer edition of *Two More Chains*. I read it from front to back. By the time I was done I had nodded my head off, cried at least twice, and my mouth hung open for at least five minutes. I want to write to give you my most sincere and deepest gratitude for writing about gender and bias in wildland fire. You didn't just write about how diversity is valuable in a superficial way. You dug in deep and brought some extremely difficult topics to the surface in a way that is essential and unique.

A group of us on the Umatilla (National Forest) have been wrestling with these exact same conversations for the past three years and had no idea how to broach the subject within the fire and aviation community. It has seemed like with something that is so sensitive, especially within the fire culture, that even saying the word "gender"

(let alone "bias"!) has caused downcast eyes, seat squirming, and heads down as you pass in the hallway.

I would love to help continue this discussion. Thank you, again.

Carrie Spradlin, Forester
North Zone Silviculture Staff,
Walla Walla and Pomeroy Ranger Districts

Thank You for Taking This Subject On

Nicely done. Thank you for taking this topic on and for your efforts to boost the diversity of folks you have highlighted over your last several issues of *Two More Chains*. Much appreciated.

Dana Skelly, Deputy Fire Staff-Fuels
Malheur National Forest

Ensuring that Firefighters are Emotionally Safe

Wow. What an amazing and courageous issue. Thank you! I think we're only beginning to recognize the deep connection between safety and inclusion.

This may be squishy to talk about, but firefighters are physically safer when they are emotionally safe—when they feel included and valued and don't feel like they have to "prove" something or live up (or down) to stereotypes of gender (or anything else). Well done.

Jerry Ingersoll, Forest Supervisor
Siuslaw National Forest

We Need Men to Speak Up About This

Thank you so much Travis for your essay in "Ground Truths" in the last issue of *Two More Chains*. Seriously, great stuff. I keep saying we need men to speak up about this; it can't just be women. I hope you didn't get too much blowback. It was important and needed to be said, and I for one really appreciate you doing it. I think you made a lot of people pause.

Riva Duncan, FMO
National Forests in North Carolina, Region 8

A Systemic Problem That Few Want to Talk About

I just read the latest issue of *Two More Chains* and felt compelled to reach out and thank you for a great edition! Great articles on gender bias in the fire service. It is a systemic problem that few want to talk about.

Thanks for bringing it to light. You are a great voice for a larger audience. Please keep up the great work!

Hal Spencer, Fire Chief
National Park Service