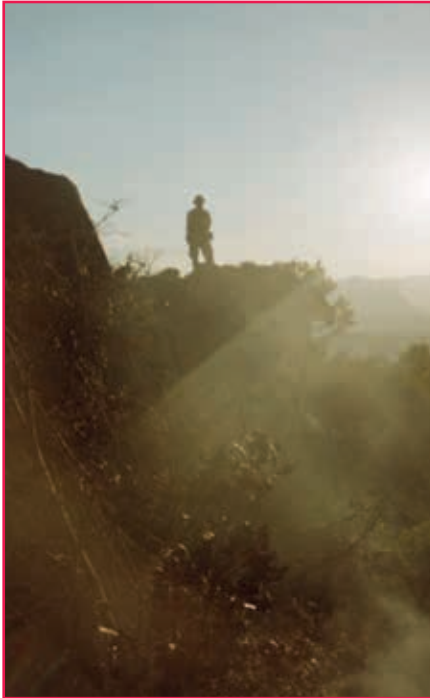

BECOMING AUTHENTIC: THE HEART OF LEADERSHIP IN WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Alexis Waldron and Mike Alarid

The wildland fire environment is entering a new age of complexity in terms of not only the biophysical fire environment but also the social environment. More and more attention is being paid to the human side of fire and the role that leadership plays in the performance, safety, and well-being of firefighters.

In the early 2000s, the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Leadership Subcommittee introduced three core leadership values—duty, respect, and integrity—as a basis for shaping the kind of leaders we as fire professionals would like to follow. The core leadership values are associated with 11 principles.

However, evidence suggests that more than following the 11 principles outlined under duty, respect, and integrity is needed to truly become an accomplished leader (Waldron and Ebbeck 2015). Leadership necessitates interconnectedness—the understanding of others and the subsequent development of relationships. Peter Drucker, a



Sup's Rock. Photo: Alexis Waldron, Forest Service, 2004.

famed scholar known as the father of modern-day management, may have stated it best when he said that “management is doing things right [what is done]. Leadership is doing the right things [the way and why we do things]” (Peter Drucker Quotes 2016). Drucker understood that, whereas management is the vehicle to making organizations function, leadership is the driver to making organizations function well.

The guiding leadership document for the U.S. wildland firefighting service, titled *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*, substantiates Drucker's comment

(NWCG 2007). Leadership is defined on page 1 as “the art of influencing people in order to achieve a result.” If leadership is truly an art of influencing people, then the values of duty, respect, and integrity alone only get us to the starting block. Leadership is as much about the way and why things are done as about what is actually done.

Leadership is as much about the way and why things are done as about what is done.

In essence, duty, respect, and integrity are the bricks, and the way and why behind them are the mortar that holds them together and makes them function. The strength and usefulness of the structure (leadership) depends upon the strength of the mortar that holds the pieces together. The mortar must be authentic and cannot be faked; otherwise, the structure will give way. Authenticity is characterized by high self-awareness, value-driven decisions, personal growth, and honesty and transparency with oneself and others. The aim of this article is to shed light on the heart of leadership in wildland fire and the why, way, and importance of authentic leaders in the wildland fire service.

Alexis Waldron, Ph.D., is a human performance specialist for the Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, Big Bend, TX, with 10 years of experience as a seasonal firefighter; and Mike Alarid, former superintendent of the Bear Divide Hotshot Crew, was the district zone fire management officer on the Angeles National Forest, Los Angeles, CA (retired in 2015).

Why Lead?

Waldron and Ebbeck (2015) reported that wildland fire leaders often feel isolated and alone in their roles; what's more, they carry more responsibility than their subordinates, feel pressure to succeed, are criticized for mistakes, and believe that their actions are not always understood or appreciated by those they lead. With these often heavy burdens, why would anyone want to lead?

In the simplest terms, according to wildland fire leaders, "We lead because leading is where we make a difference" (NWCG 2007). As one leader was quoted as saying, "The burdens of leadership are often heavy, but the world's a better place because we have borne them." Authentic leaders lead not because it is easy but because it is a way to better themselves, those they lead, and the environment they affect.

Other leaders lead for various reasons, including as a means to advance their careers, to gain qualifications, or to make more money. Some fall serendipitously into leadership roles because of circumstances. Others want to exert power over others, are driven by ego, or use leadership positions as a crutch for personal insecurities.

With this in mind, three key questions arise:

- Why do motives matter?
- What is the difference between the motives of authentic leaders and those of other leaders?
- What does this have to do with performance?

Motives

A distinguishing characteristic of authentic leaders is that they



Mopup in the desert. Photo: Alexis Waldron, Forest Service, 2005.

A distinguishing characteristic of authentic leaders is that they are motivated from the inside out and their decisions are steered by a moral compass.

are motivated from the inside out and their decisions are steered by a moral compass. In a study of 10,000 West Point graduates over the course of their careers, former Brigadier General Tom Kolditz found that those who were motivated by intrinsic reasons (such as a desire to make a difference, serve and help others, or grow and develop personally) were much more likely to lead successfully than those who were motivated by extrinsic reasons (such as a desire for pay increases,

job promotions, and increased status) (Kolditz 2014).

With that said, being authentic and consistently operating from motives that come from within is often much more difficult than being easily swayed by outside influences. Kolditz found that if graduates who had purely intrinsic motives began to acquire extrinsic motives, it would poison their success and growth. Therefore, another critical aspect of authentic leaders is consistency. In research with wildland firefighters, Waldron and Ebbeck (2015) found that consistency was at the core of one of the key leadership characteristics in wildland fire management—integrity. Consistency in our motives must deeply resonate within us so that even in some of the most trying times leaders have a solid guiding beacon.

Developing and Maintaining Authenticity

In examining exemplary leaders such as our own Paul Gleason—or Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, and the famous coach John Wooden—certain commonalities become apparent:

- Authentic leaders have had a tremendous influence not only on those directly around them but also on exponentially more.
- Authentic leaders have held a steadfast commitment to their values, as manifested through their actions and words.
- At the heart of the influence, actions, and words of authentic leaders was genuine care, compassion, and concern for the well-being, development, growth, and overall betterment of those under their charge.

Wildland firefighters who had been through burnovers, entrapments, and close calls expressed this last commonality as “care and compassion;” they deemed it critical for leaders to possess (Lewis 2008).

The Heart of Authenticity

Genuine “care and compassion” (different in meaning from the dictionary definitions of “care” and “compassion”) are at the heart of the best leaders in wildland fire management. Capturing the meaning of the phrase in a single word is difficult, but it is just that—*heart*. Heart is the driver behind great leaders’ desire to continually better themselves and those they lead. Put simply, heart is *why* they lead and directs the *way* they lead.

This does not mean that it is always “easy” to lead or that leadership consists exclusively of care bears, hugs, and sunshine.

Genuine care and compassion are at the heart of the best leaders in wildland fire management.

Sometimes the kindest thing one can do is to let someone who is drowning know that they need to start swimming and encourage them to do so, helping them to swim. True compassion is often difficult; it requires thought, concern, and making decisions that at times can be difficult for a leader or a follower. Compassion is ultimately about pushing others and yourself to be better.

Compassion for yourself is critical to finding peace and resilience within yourself. By learning to forgive yourself and accepting the fact that you’re human, you can heal deep wounds and bring yourself back from difficult challenges. Authentic leaders act with compassion because it will benefit others, solve problems effectively, fulfill themselves

at a deep level, and create the interconnectedness required for true leadership. Notably, compassion also establishes a true leader’s intent, allowing followers to understand the meaning behind the words a leader says because everything that leader has done has reinforced the why behind it.

Performing from the heart does not look exactly the same from one leader to the next. Consistent leaders take the time to understand, reflect on their own motives and values, and truly commit themselves to the values and motives that make them better people and better leaders. This rarely, if ever, fails to include caring and compassion for others. The authenticity of leaders can be felt by those around them and is easily distinguished from false or superfluous motives. For instance, duty, respect, and integrity—as expressed from the heart—might sound like the following (from one fire manager):

- Instead of telling someone it’s his or her *duty*, show him or her the importance of duty through example and successes.
- When you further someone’s well-being through your own daily actions on behalf of his or her body, mind, and spirit, he or she will understand the true meaning of *respect* and will become respectful themselves.
- *Integrity* is doing the right thing, but compassion is having the integrity to do the hard thing or make the hard decision for the benefit of the total person.



Ignite the spark. Photo: Alexis Waldron, Forest Service, 2009.

Taking time to reflect, understand, and commit to the internal motives that make us better often leads to serendipitous events (finding agreeable things or events not sought for) and better outcomes. Employees will be more willing to engage, will go the extra mile without being asked, and will perform better individually and collectively under your charge and in the course of their careers. For an authentic leader, greater success and fulfillment is often a result.

Authentic Leadership

In interviews as they entered retirement, when great fire leaders have been asked how they did what they did, they often couldn't describe it, except to say that it was like developing an art

form (as stated at the opening of *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*). In becoming an artist, technique can take the artist only so far; influential art comes from the artist who understands the techniques and has the skills but performs them authentically. As Simon Sinek has said, "People don't buy what you do—they buy *why* you do it" (Sinek 2009).

Leaders must therefore go beyond the mechanics of leading to articulate the compelling, genuine, authentic *why* for others to follow. To lead to their fullest potential, leaders must lead authentically from the heart. ■

References

Kolditz, T.A. 2014. Why you lead determines how well you lead. Harvard

Business Review. 22 July. Available at <https://hbr.org/2014/07/why-you-lead-determines-how-well-you-lead>.

Lewis, A.B. 2008. Safety in wildland fire: Leadership and employee voice. Moscow, ID: University of Idaho. Insert M.S. thesis.

NWCG (National Wildland Coordinating Group). 2007. Leading in the wildland fire service. NFES 2889. Boise, ID: National Interagency Fire Center. Available at https://www.nwcg.gov/sites/default/files/products/pms494-2_0.pdf.

Peter Drucker Quotes. 2016. Quotes.net. Available at <http://www.quotes.net/quote/37418>.

Sinek, S. 2009. Start with why. New York, NY: Portfolio/Penguin.

Waldron, A.L.; Ebbeck, V. 2015. The relationship of mindfulness and self-compassion to desired wildland fire leadership. *International Journal of Wildland Fire*. 24(2): 201–211. doi: 10.1071/WF13212.

CONTRIBUTORS WANTED!

We need your fire-related articles and photographs for *Fire Management Today*!

Subjects of published material include:

- Aviation
- Communication
- Cooperation/Partnerships
- Ecological Restoration
- Education
- Equipment and Technology
- Fire Behavior
- Fire Ecology
- Fire Effects
- Fire History
- Fire Use (including Prescribed Fire)
- Fuels Management
- Firefighting Experiences
- Incident Management
- Information Management (including Systems)
- Planning (including Budgeting)
- Preparedness
- Prevention
- Safety
- Smoke Management
- Suppression
- Training
- Weather
- Wildland–Urban Interface

Contact the editor via email at firemanagementtoday@fs.fed.us.