

Measuring Success in Your Fuels Program: From the Report Card to Valuable Learning

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Abstract—How can a unit learn in everyday fuels programs and from program reviews? How can a unit move from living in the “report card” culture to discovering more effective ways to improve what it knows and how it learns? Six specific tasks are critical to organizational learning according to David A. Garvin of Harvard Business School. By engaging in these tasks a unit can significantly improve both its programs and its learning. To further assist field units, an organizational learning survey has been recently developed by the Harvard Business School in cooperation with the Lessons Learned Center. This tool is designed to measure how a unit learns. By examining the learning environment, learning processes and leadership one can measure a unit’s level of learning and its improvements over time.

Introduction

Fuels programs around the country are faced with their programs being evaluated in periodic program reviews. These reviews often follow a report card format rather than a true learning format. This paper is aimed at two audiences: fuels programs at the unit level and those who serve on program review teams. Unit level fuels programs who take the time to practice the six critical tasks of a learning organization and periodically take the learning survey should find they are better prepared for program reviews. Program reviewers who incorporate the six critical tasks into their reviews and then share the unit lessons and effective practices will improve the wildland fire organizational learning environment.

Critical Tasks in Fuels Programs

According to Garvin, a learning organization tries to accomplish six tasks:

1. Collect intelligence about the environment.
2. Learn from the best practices of other organizations.
3. Learn from its own experiences and past history.
4. Experiment with new approaches.
5. Encourage systematic problem solving.
6. Transfer knowledge throughout the organization.

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These six critical tasks can be directly applied in wildland fire fuels programs:

1) In *continually collecting intelligence about the fuels environment*, make certain to collect critical information and regularly incorporate it into your planning and implementation. Search, inquiry and observation are the three methods for collecting intelligence. When searching, use comparisons and remember to cross-check to validate the accuracy of the information. When using the inquiry method, be exploratory by asking open-ended questions. Observation is particularly important when a lot of the tacit knowledge at a unit is in individuals' heads. If "we know more than we can tell" than the observation method is particularly effective in program reviews. Although program reviews generally take place in the off season, everyone can learn more effectively if a review is done during a prescribed fire or wildland fire use event because lessons and effective practices can be more clearly illustrated.

2) *Learn from the best practices of other organizations* by looking at successful processes other fuels or fire management programs are using and see how they may be applied in your unit. One way to do this is through the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's myfirecommunity.net Web site which serves as an online community center for the interagency wildland fire community. The member directory identifies current projects on which individuals are working, particularly in fuels. The neighborhoods are specifically designed for communities of practice (networks of people) to share knowledge about their fire management programs.

Lessons Learned Center Information Collection Team reports (ICT) are another way to learn about the effective practices of other fuels organizations. Two recent ICTs have focused on wildland fire use (WFU) programs both from a unit that had its first WFU to a unit with a 35 year history. Both of these reports are at: <http://www.wildfirelessons.net/ICT.aspx>

3) *Learn from your own experiences and past history* by continually examining your unit's past performance. Use the After Action Review (AAR) process to learn from each project whether it be a mechanical fuels treatment, prescribed burn, or WFU. The four questions in an AAR are: 1) What was the plan? 2) What actually happened? 3) Why was there a difference? and 4) What are we going to do next time? (sustain/improve) To properly use the AAR process, it is imperative to take the answers to the fourth question and incorporate what will be sustained and improved into short and long-term planning. Units that successfully do this actually assign individuals to be responsible for incorporating the recommendations into the fuels program planning process.

4) *Experiment with new approaches* that you learn from other fuels programs or come from your unit AAR process. Try a different approach especially if what you have been doing has not been working the way you want. It is extremely important to listen to unit members who have a different perspective and be open to adopting a new idea.

5) *Encourage systematic problem solving* among all members of your unit. Follow a systematic path while trying to solve a problem by looking at what was planned, what happened, and *why* it happened. It is common to try and correct a problem without analyzing what happened and why.

6) *Transferring knowledge throughout the organization* is the true test of being a learning organization. Make sure you set aside time during planning and information meetings to share new knowledge with your fuels and fire

management staff as well as other units. The Lessons Learned Center is your resource center for sharing what you have learned beyond the scope of your own unit. The AAR Rollup is the format for units to record and share their lessons and effective practices. The Rollup captures the successes, challenges, training curriculum and unresolved issues recommendations. Individual units and program reviewers should submit these to the Lessons Learned Center. The AAR Rollup form can be found at: <http://www.wildfirelessons.net/AAR.aspx>

Organizational Learning Survey

The Lessons Learned Center has been cooperating with Harvard Business School as they developed the first of its kind organizational learning survey to help individuals and units measure their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the six critical tasks of organizational learning. During the summer of 2005, approximately 200 interagency wildland fire personnel took the draft survey online. Members of the wildland fire community completed it as an individual working unit, a wildland firefighting crew, or as an incident management team member. Initial results illustrated that the wildland fire community rated well in the sections compared with three other organizations that completed the survey.

The survey tool has three sections:

- 1) Learning culture and environment – this includes the interpersonal climate, how differences are valued and the openness to new ideas.
- 2) Learning Processes – six processes assessed are experimentation, information collection, analysis, education, training and information transfer.
- 3) Leadership – eight different aspects of how managers communicate and relate to employees are evaluated.

The survey tool is in its final completion stages and should be online for the wildland fire community and other organizations to use in May 2006. Individuals will be able to take the survey and have their scores measured against others in the wildland fire community. From the survey scores, individuals and units can see what areas they are strong or what areas need work. Units can then take the survey periodically to further improve their fuels programs.

Conclusion

Units can continually improve the learning environment of their fuels program by using the six critical tasks of a learning organization. Program reviewers can move away from a report card format by incorporating the six critical tasks into their reviews. Fuels programs and program reviewers should share the knowledge with the Lessons Learned Center so others in the wildland fire community can also learn from them. The organizational learning survey will also assist fuels organizations in measuring their effectiveness as a learning organization in comparison with others in the wildland fire community.

Acknowledgment

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References

Garvin, David A. 2000. *Learning in Action – A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.