

Learning as a shared responsibility: Insights from a series of dialogic workshops with practitioners, leaders, and researchers

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Abstract:

For some time now, the wildland fire community has been interested in ‘organizational learning’ as a way to improve safety and overall performance. For instance, in the US, federal agencies have established the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center, sponsored several national conferences, and are currently considering how incident reviews might be used to further organizational learning. To assist in this effort, we embarked on a Joint Fire Science Program-sponsored research project to understand what organizational learning - even simply ‘learning’ - looks like currently, and to explore what facilitates or impedes learning in the context of escaped prescribed fire reviews. Results serve as a benchmark by which strengths, opportunities and challenges may be assessed and addressed.

In 2011, we held five two-day workshops at various locations around the US. Each drew an interagency audience with representation from all facets of fire management - from ground personnel to local line officers to regional and national positions. Over the course of these 10 days of discussion, we developed a rich dataset and conceptual models to describe the existing and potential learning cycles in wildland fire.

This pragmatic approach – based on the interaction of theory and practice – leads to some clear, concrete suggestions for improving individual, group, and organizational learning. Results have implications for both organizational structure and culture. For example, the widespread support we found for consideration of *all* outcomes, not just when something goes wrong, provides critical background and content information for the current effort to review and revise interagency prescribe fire guidance. However, improving learning has as much to do with *how* a review is conducted as it does with the *type* or *structure* of review. The clarity and transparency of the leader’s intent, the approach, tone and attitude of the review team, and the local atmosphere of trust all have significant impact on the learning environment.

Organizational level learning also depends upon effective transfer of lessons – across time and between units - which we found to be the weakest link in the learning cycle. Findings are presented through the lens of a comprehensive model of learning and performance.