Leaders
We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

Interview with Jon Larson

by Paul Head and transcribed by Barb Stewart

Jon larson, Photo by Thomas Evans, USFS Region 5

Jon Larson began firefighting in 1971 in Oregon on the Ochoco National Forest. His first fire experience was on a crew as a high school student, supplementing a Forest Service district attack crew.

After graduating from high school, the local fire management officer offered him a fire lookout position. This led to seven seasons of various district initial attack positions, most of them supervisory.

In 1978, Jon was offered a WAE (when actually employed) fire operations technician position at what was then the Boise Interagency Fire Center (BIFC, now, the National Interagency Fire Center). At that time, BIFC Fire Ops fielded Type 1 crews and fire overhead positions.

In 1981, the National Park Service Office of Fire Management began funding three inter-agency hotshot crews. Jon, Jim Cook and later, John Allendorf became the crew superintendents of Alpine, Arrowhead and Bison Hotshots.

In 1984, Jon had the opportunity to help transition the Alaska Fire Service Type II fire crews to Type I status. The Chena and Midnight Sun Hotshots gained Type I status in 1985. He served as Chena Hotshot Superintendent until 1989, "when I felt it was time for new blood in the crew superintendent position and time for me to go back to where I started in a primary initial attack organization".

In 1989 he rookied as an Alaska smokejumper, where he spent the next 16 seasons "living the dream." Jon retired from federal service in 2005.

Jon Larson.
Photo by Mike McMillian, www.spotfire.com

“Esprit de corps is huge, especially when things get tough, so do what you can to keep morale high and the job fun.”

Who are some of the people that had significant influence on your life?

My father. Mainly through observing his personal work ethic, as well as both my parent's emphasis on giving us kids chores and ensuring that we completed quality work and took pride in doing so.

In firefighting, there's always been someone to look up to, "firefighting elders." An early example is Steve Lent who is now a retired FMO. When I first started working on the Ochoco he was a co-worker and supervisor. Steve showed me that hard work and fun went together. There were really too many other influential people to list (plus I wouldn't want to be accused of brown-nosing). Some supervisors, as well as many co-workers and subordinates were inspirations to me.

What other influences helped make you a leader?

I was given supervisory opportunities early on. What I respected in supervisors, I tried to emulate. I also tried to learn from traits that I didn't like in supervisors. For me it was a continual learning process where you develop a leadership style that fits your personality and tailor it to the specific supervisory situation.

What are the most important characteristics of an effective leader?

Many important characteristics come to mind: leads by example, shows respect, team player (develops good working relationships with supervisors and subordinates) treats employees fairly, no double standards, develops esprit de corps, maintains positive outlook - can do attitude, ensures good communications (both up and down the chain of command), approachable, improves employee skills, delegates, provides job ladder.

An important characteristic that I believe separates a leader from a manager is a vision for the future. Where your program is going and how to get there - sharing that vision.

An ineffective leader?

In fire and many of our "macho type" positions, some people think they must make quick decisions and stick by them, even if they are clearly wrong. I've respected leaders that made decisions and weren't afraid to change them or make adjustments when situations changed.

Leaders that look after themselves first and therefore lose the respect of co-workers and subordinates.

Leaders with negative attitudes (whiners) infect others making the job more difficult for everyone.

What biggest improvement have you witnessed in the past 30 years of fire suppression?

The emphasis on safety has improved since my early days.

The training is much better, especially the national training. I think this is because more people involved in training development now have stronger field backgrounds as well as writing skills.

Much of the equipment has improved over the years (radios, GPS, parachutes, chainsaws, specialized tools/equipment, aircraft, infrared…).

What changes over the last 30 years have not been so good?

It seems, in general, within the fire agencies that increased bureaucracy has made us less efficient. Many things which were a normal part of a supervisor's job (such as monitoring the safety and condition of your crew) are now driven by policy. A lot of the policies that are affecting firefighting seem to be reactionary, after tragic events, like Storm King and Thirty-Mile. They often don't work well on the ground level and it seems like there is not much input going back up the chain of command on the effects of these policies.

Photo by Mike McMillian, www.spotfire.com

The 14-day rules and the overtime rules… change the way you fight fire. There's more travel now, more transition periods on large fires. We are into "mega fire camps" instead of spiking out nearer to the work. It often creates more hazards, more transportation and less quality rest. You used to go to a fire and you stayed until it was over. Now that's not the case. You lose that continuity and you lose your stake in it. You lose the pride of seeing a job finished.

Fire management has become more of a top down organization which doesn't seem to seek nor value input from the field.

What should we do differently?

Return more decision making authority and responsibility to local levels. Periodically review policies, seek input from the field level and modify as necessary.

Demonstrate concern for employee welfare, particularly the seasonal and career conditional employees. Government should set the example by giving full benefits to all employees, regardless of their position and length of service.

Firefighters have never fit well within the Forestry or Range series (or as GS employees for that matter). If we had a Fire Management series, designed specifically for those employees hired as primary firefighters, we could address so many things; retirement, overtime rules and day off rules … I would like to see primary firefighters receive something more like a wage grade pay scale where hazard pay is reflected within the wage.

Why don't you describe a few of the toughest decisions or dilemmas that you faced as a supervisor.

Looking after the safety and welfare of your employees is often difficult in a fire situation since it requires continually making judgments in a dynamic, changing environment. So, finding a way to get the assignment accomplished in a safe manner could sometimes be a challenge.

As a supervisor, dealing with some of the personnel issues and the group dynamics could be difficult. You look at both individual employee performance and how it affects the whole group. Sometimes you have to make some tough decisions. You may feel empathy for an individual, but at the same time, it may not be good for the group. You're trying to build a team, so you focus with that perspective.

In your last 25, 30 years of fire suppression, you've spent most of that time in a group environment, with smokejumpers or hotshot crews, so I'm sure you saw a lot of examples of that.

Yes, that is probably where my experience may differ somewhat with other supervisors, but that’s the kind of framework I think in.

What helped get you through some of those tough situations?

It helps to have developed good working relationships within the organization. It's especially important to have competent employees whom you can depend on.

Any "lessons learned" that you'd like to pass on to some of the up and coming leaders out there in the fire world?

Esprit de corps is huge, especially when things get tough, so do what you can to keep morale high and the job fun.

When hiring, supervisors often look for the super-employee who is the most skilled at firefighting. In my experience, often a lesser skilled employee is the right fit within the "team" and proves to be more valuable in the end. Someone that is a motivator gets along well with others and keeps the fun meter up can really be a positive force.

Are leaders born or are they made?

Some people certainly are natural leaders, but I believe most leaders develop over time. I tried to learn from my past mistakes and hopefully my leadership skills improved over the years.

How do you initiate new ideas?

Some, you just try and see if they work. Others require more official sanctioning. I always try to work through the chain of command. If you're a team player, you're allowed more freedom to do those things. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but it's important to always be looking at ways to improve your job.

Any books you can recommend for future leaders?

History! As they say "those that fail to read history are doomed to repeat it". I think reading history and biographies is of benefit to future leaders in that they often illustrate "what went right and what went wrong" in many situations. It's usually better to learn from other's mistakes.

A book that I enjoyed for the character's personal philosophy and outlook on a bittersweet and adventurous life is A Soldier of the Great War by Mark Helprin. An entertaining blue collar look at working under a large bureaucracy (General Motors) and their attempts at motivating assembly line workers is Rivethead by Ben Hamper. I found Catch 22 by Joseph Heller useful, though it's not for everyone. Although out of context, I must shamefully plug my good friend Murry Taylor's book Jumping Fire which he would happily sign.

Do you think a legacy is important? And, if so, what kind of legacy do you think you're going to leave with these folks?

A legacy is important in a couple of ways; for one's self (that your career has been of value), and, if you've left something lasting that helps future firefighters.

In the simplest terms, I'd like to be thought of as a person that you would want to have on your fire, be it as supervisor, subordinate or co-worker.

As a leader, I'm very proud of former subordinates who surpassed my level and went on to greater things. Of course, I hope that I was a positive influence on them.

Any closing thoughts? Words of wisdom for leaders and up and coming fire folks?

Well, always try to put things in the positive aspect. Basically, I loved every job I ever had and thoroughly enjoyed the many characters and experiences along the way.

As firefighters, we get exposed to many things that you don't in other types of work. There are good experiences and bad experiences. The bad experiences can be as useful in the long run. When grunting on fires, no matter how lousy things got, you'd think back "this is nothing compared to the blah blah blah fire…"

You are thrown together in these situations with all these characters from different backgrounds, different parts of the country. You develop working relationships and friendships. It's something I've always loved to see, these diverse people gel into a team. And, teamwork itself is quite remarkable. You push each other, carry each other along and accomplish so much more as a team than you can as individuals.

The travel isn't bad either!

This interview with Jon Larson was conducted by Paul Head in May 2006.