

Professional Reading Program

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



K2: The 1939 Tragedy by Andrew Kauffman & William Putnam

Best Wildland Fire Leadership Level to read this book:

- Level 1, Follower
- Level 2, New Leader
- Level 3 and Level 4

Why Read K2: The 1939 Tragedy?

“This book states at the outset that the K2 expedition’s failure and catastrophe resulted not from a single event ... but from a chain of circumstances that could be traced back to the undertaking’s inception.”

“As expedition leader, Fritz was a good organizer, a skillful mountaineer, and a reasonably good planner; but the key element for any commander to observe, ahead of all others, is to take care of his troops.”

K2: The 1939 Tragedy is the story of a mountaineering expedition that occurred in one of the most remote places on Earth. A long chain of mishaps and unintended consequences resulted in one man stranded above 24,000 ft and the deaths of him and his three would-be rescuers. Although this story took place sixty-plus years ago, in a setting very different from what is usually seen in the wildland fire service, the lessons that it holds are still applicable for today’s fire leaders, who encounter extreme environmental conditions and stressors of their own.

This is a cautionary tale about how poor communication, environmental and human factors, and external pressures can affect a person’s decision-making ability, and how those decisions can have far-reaching consequences. It offers an opportunity to reflect on the roles and responsibilities of a leader, as well as our guiding values of duty, respect, and integrity.

For more leadership ideas and to dig deeper, check out the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program (WFLDP) blog, Facebook page, Professional Reading Program, and more at the links below:

Blog: <http://wildlandfireleadership.blogspot.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/WFLDP>

Professional Reading Program: <https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/prp>

Main WFLDP page: <https://www.fireleadership.gov>

K2: The 1939 Tragedy Discussion Questions

Chapter One: The Challenge

How do you calculate (probability vs. severity) risk? Are there times when being too cautious has caused a bad result/failed to achieve the desired result? How do you gather situational awareness in new or unfamiliar areas? Do you put eyes on it yourself or rely on others to gather the information?

Chapter Two: The Leader

Can someone be a good firefighter but not a good leader? What are the characteristics of a good leader? How can past experiences shape perceptions of responsibility for one's crew? Do you agree with Fritz's philosophy that "Every safety precaution should be observed, except in those instances where the prize justifies risk-taking."? Have you seen this play out in the fire service? What were the results?

Chapter Three: The Team

How does your crew build cohesion and trust? What can a leader do to learn their crew's individual strengths and weaknesses? Do you have a culture of openness on your crew? Does everyone feel able to speak up if they are not comfortable with an assignment?

Chapter Four: Bon Voyage

What are some ways that you can set your crew up for success? How do you ensure that they all have the proper gear and training for what is expected of them?

Chapter Five: Land of the Lotus Eaters

Have you encountered language barriers or cultural differences in the fire service? What are some examples, and how did you manage them?

Chapter Six: Blisters and Fleas

How have you handled injuries on your crew in the past? How can you prevent blisters, fatigue, and stress from wearing down your crew?

Chapter Seven: The Road to Xanadu

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt that you had to continue a certain path because of the amount of time and energy you already expended following it (i.e., sunk cost fallacy)? What are some controls (trigger points, re-evaluate) that could help prevent following a course that is not likely to succeed?

Chapter Eight: The Abruzzi Ridge

The authors describe several different leadership roles on an expedition: the leader, the deputy, the sirdar, and the point man. How might these roles translate into the ICS structure on an incident (IC, Ops, squaddie, single resource boss)? Why is it important that all members of a crew have some leadership ability? How can a leader support and challenge their team without overextending them? What are the risks involved with having an IC fill multiple roles? How can this be avoided?

Chapter Nine: Prelude To Disaster

Human factors affect decision making. How can a leader identify when stress, fatigue, or other distractions may be affecting their ability to make sound decisions? (Watchout Situation #5 “Uninformed on strategy, tactics, and hazards.”) How have you as a leader kept your crew informed and morale up? What are the risks and rewards of being an absent leader?

Chapter Ten: Into the Death Zone

What can you, as a leader, do if your crew is not performing as expected? Who is ultimately responsible for the actions of the crew? How would you address a situation where a crewmate is unable to perform their assigned role satisfactorily?

Chapter Eleven: The New Evidence

What could you do in Jack’s position? What could Fritz have done to prevent this unexpected change of plans? What are some examples of people getting stretched too thin on the fireline? What have you done to rectify that situation?

Chapter Twelve: A Mountain Was Lost

Does a leader have to always be in the front? How might the expectations of the team and Fritz been better managed leading up to this point? How does your crew set trigger points for retreat? Is it a group decision? How is it communicated? What are the risks/rewards of splitting up? Have you been in a situation where the crew has been split up, and how were the risks mitigated?

Chapter Thirteen: The Search

Did Fritz abide by the values of Duty, Respect, and Integrity while on the mountain and up to the point of giving Dudley and the three Sherpas up for lost? (Review bullet points in IRPG) Do you employ those values, whether you are serving in a leadership role or not? What are some things Fritz did well, from an operational leadership perspective? What could he have done better?

Chapter Fourteen: The Road Back

How does a leader respond (responsibility vs. blame) when a tragedy occurs? What is the role of the leader during an investigation? When does their responsibility for their crew end? Do you and your crew take the time to read reports from accidents and near-misses? Have you implemented any changes from the lessons learned?

Chapter Fifteen: The Unanswered Questions

What are some examples of external pressures and human factors (time wedge, overhead pressure, fatigue, stress, attitude, communication issues) that can affect decision-making on the fireline?

How can you, as a leader, identify and mitigate these factors? Have you ever been in a situation where an easy decision was made, instead of the right one?

Chapter Sixteen: Farewell to the Drama

How often do you have debriefings (AARs) with your crew? Has “poor/lack of communication” come up as a contributing factor to an undesirable outcome? What changes have your crew made to mitigate this common factor in accidents and near-misses? Do you agree with the statement, “the key element for any commander to observe ... is to take care of his troops”? Why or why not? What does it take to become an “excellent” leader, instead of a “good” one?