

HP&IOL Meta-Review Focus Groups
Initial Themes from the Culture of Wildland Fire
May 9, 2019

Introduction

The qualitative analysis in the following report is a very high-level (10,000 feet) analysis from four of the five HPIOL focus groups conducted from November 2018 through April 2019: Society, Communication (without Work Environment), Fatalities & Injuries, and Ecological Soundness. One Research Social Scientist, and two PhD level social science analysts located at RMRS Human Dimensions, Fort Collins, CO independently reviewed focus group transcripts. Each analyst independently evaluated transcripts for major themes, and then met weekly to consult one another throughout the process, compare initial findings, and ensure consistency across analytical approaches. The initial intent was to generate specific themes within each focus group, and then identify more general themes that cut across all focus groups. However, we quickly found that specific themes were not isolated to one particular focus group. Thus, the themes below emerge, overlap, and inform all of the focus groups regardless of topic area. Themes are organized in the following order: General theme and definition (i.e. Authority), subtheme and definition (i.e. Accountability), quotations from FG participants in relation to subthemes.

The purpose of this analysis is to provide chapter authors with an initial sense of themes that they can draw upon for writing their assigned chapters. The definitions for these themes are subjective and were reached through consensus by the team of analysts. Therefore, please feel free to use (or not use) this report as needed for your own data analysis and write-ups. In other words, you are not restricted to using these particular themes, rather, this report is intended as simply a tool for you to use as needed (or not) for your own writing purposes.

A final note on the purpose of qualitative research. Qualitative research is not about numbers. It is about rigorous research into the meaning and context about people and their environment. The aim is to understand the world from the point of view of participants. In addition, quantitative and qualitative research use different sampling techniques. The difference in sampling between quantitative and qualitative research is that qualitative research is not representative of the total population and sampling is not random. Moreover, qualitative sampling is purposeful because we choose participants based on shared characteristics, in this case, experts within the field of wildland fire. Therefore, qualitative research is a deep-dive into the how and why and is used to tell a rich story regarding the phenomenon under study.

Focus Group Themes

Authority

Having the weight of power and justification. Authority has the power to define the narrative. Here, authority is marked by having experience in wildland firefighting, and is not necessarily based on rank. Does not necessarily come across as authentic, but often “firmly entrenched.” In other words, it becomes socially and politically accepted and followed. Politically, it is also congressional and connected to appropriations.

Accountability

Taking responsibility in word and action; being legally liable, and reputationally liable. Accountability is an importance aspect in cultures of blame. Hence, it associated with systems that work toward causality, explanation, assigning responsibility or blame.

*“...blame enables us to maintain our illusion of control because as long as there's somebody at fault, somebody's in control. It might not be us, but somebody's in control. If we acknowledge that nobody's to blame, it's a terrifying but really liberating thing to consider. **Nobody's at fault here.** Rather than putting the problem in between us and then fighting over it, we can put the problem out in front of us and sit on a couch together and come up with a solution. So, it's about working together.”* [Fatalities & Injuries FG]

Knowledge

What constitutes knowledge, what and whose knowledge is valid or legitimate are contested by participants. Participants often relate this to misinformation or changing information. There is a mismatch between knowledge and practice. Scientific knowledge is variably used to justify governance and/or for industrial gain; either type of knowledge (science or practice) may be suspect in the local community.

*“Many scientists say from an ecological perspective our current approach to wildlife firefighting is unsustainable. Fire managers and senior leaders **have access to this info but often select other tactics and strategies that go against what science would suggest. Why?**”* [Ecology FG]

Facilitated Learning Analysis (FLA)

A learning tool which records and shares incidents. Participants question the role of FLAs and hold the perception that only those close to the incident learn from the FLA. Participants share a desire to move learning beyond the immediate people impacted to organizational learning.

Leadership

Qualities that persuade others to action, decision, and ways of being. Historically in the fire community, expressed by characteristics associated with traditional masculinity or strength. Both reflects and is authorized (or legitimized) by the culture it leads. The role of line officers and their relationships with Fire Management Officers (FMOs) is critical in fire decision making.

*“Leadership was viewed as a male trait, right? It was **a masculine trait.** That's the way they viewed it back in the 1840s. Belief that people were born with these traits.... The great man approach emphasizes charismatic leadership. ... bestowed upon you by your Creator.”* [Fatalities & Injuries FG]

Political Interests

Participants cited several examples of decision-making based on political interests. Perception that several decisions to suppress fire are based on political influence rather than ecological benefit or safety.

“And the chief's become a politicized position now. And that means that the chief is gonna be more responsive than formerly to political winds and that in turn means that if the forest level decisions are gonna be supported the congressman, senators from that area need to understand the forest service's basis of it's local decision and be supportive rather than being jacked around by the congressman's campaign contributors who have a different view of what should be done on the forest.” [Society FG]

Change

Change is negatively expressed as ‘inconsistency;’ and positively expressed as ‘innovation.’ Participants also express collective change as ‘collaboration.’ This way of talking about change emerges most in discussions between suppression and ecological cultural paradigms within fire management and within the Forest Service more broadly. Change is also managed by AAs and FMOs as large and small scale political/economic pressures between community and national interests. The FG participants expressed qualities of cultural **change** in the following ways:

- *Change is hard to sustain,*
- *Change avoidance is easy,*
- *Change is inconvenient,*
- *Change takes effort;*
- *Extreme change is taking place between cultures of suppression and ecology,*
- *Change is facilitated by experience and education,*
- *Change is expected too fast, with too little,*
- *Change must be exciting and have popular support;*
- *Change is painfully slow, difficult to appreciate (time),*
- *Change occurs generationally,*
- *Change is difficult to imagine at large, meaningful scales (extents);*
- *Change gets no traction, gets resistance in old narratives,*
- *Change is confronted with fear of financial insecurity;*
- *Collaboration of fire planning is hard – with multiple stakeholders,*
- *Collaboration of forest planning is complex – proficiency gap among collaborators,*
- *Collaboration requires compromise and innovation,*
- *Collaboration is bounded by resource allocation of time, budget, personnel;*
- *Innovation is not rewarded,*
- *Innovation is organizationally suppressed,*
- *Innovation is legally redacted, censored by communications, edited out, reduced,*
- *“Innovation diffusion” or flow through FS is fractured by “mosaic work” ethic of targets.*

“I see the way that FEMA and the administration talk about hurricanes now and floods, and how to communicate about risk and the limitations of the agencies in terms of what they can and can't do and what to expect. And it's a transition from the kind of can-do, and for the Forest service, as a can-do agency, I think this is a big thing in the sort of history of the Forest Service, and some of our frustration, we live in these communities, and some of the Forest service retirees are your biggest critics and some of these communities, because they came through a different era with a different agency culture.” [Society FG]

“The other thing too though is that I think sometimes we, our leadership, or at work expect too much to change as a result of something... so I guess two things. One, sometimes this organization doesn't have enough persistence. When we introduce something it's just sort of pile

*it on. The other is that sometimes I think leadership where we all will do something and we expect it, we want it. **We hope, we fantasize that it will actually change something much bigger and that when it doesn't then we throw the baby out with the bathwater. It's not working. We can't do that.***” [Communication FG]

Inconsistency / Contradiction

Misalignment is considered a ‘default’ characteristic of the FS. Participants identify misalignments between plan and action, between broader narrative (what the story should be) and reality. This theme emerges through discussions of regional differentiation, terminology confusion, variability in professional standards, inefficient team management, and dismissal of public input. Inconsistency / contradiction is perceived as an organizational weakness and a contributor to public distrust in the FS. Within the work environment, there is also a negative perception of how the organization works to achieve plurality and/or diversity in the workforce. Participants also associate this theme with intentional obfuscation or censorship for legal cover.

*“So Region 5 will not let you manage fire. You got to come up with a different name for it. And you have to have a full strategy for what you're doing and how you can cut it off with the early assistance. And if there's any other fire activity in the area, you can't even play with it. It's that regionally policy sets which is again societal and politics conversation. And yet, on that backing up piece, I'm not going to name any names, but I know a number of forest supervisors that are no longer forest supervisors where they were because of choices they made on how to manage fire, and so [crosstalk]. Or retired, and it's because it's left to 112 forest supervisors to figure out **how to make sense of those written words and put it into action while still playing with the local politics.**”* [Ecology FG]

Polarization

Multiple, opposing value positions across the public, within the FS, and between the FS and partners. Polarization contributes to miscommunication, misunderstanding, difficult collaboration, and unsatisfactory outcomes. What emerges in the data is a predominantly negative expression of working with others, contention, and conflict. To a much lesser extent, the term ‘differentiated’ was used in a more tolerant manner. For example, in discussions about advocates for a National Fire Service and advocates for National Cohesive Strategy.

*“The national cohesive strategy makes a nice talk shop, but there's not any sense of fire constitution, that really specifies what the rights and duties are. All the other federal agencies got new charters or charters for the first time during the 60s and 70s, and that all took what had been this sort of large melting pot in land use, multiple use, for which the Forest Service was designed and they were all given special charters. So we go from a melting pot to a mosaic, or salad bar. And all those agencies that got those charters have special targets, know who they are and what they're doing. **The Forest Service was left with all the other land, multiple use. The agency had to make those choices within itself, in effect having to do what Congress should have done, but didn't, but without being given the power, to make those choices. All you had to do was to absorb all those tensions, that are national, within the agency.**”* [Ecology FG]

Communication

The FG expressed the technological and cultural influences on the fire community’s manner of communication, and how pre-established social relationships are “workarounds” for those restrictions. The FG participants described **communication** in the fire culture as:

- *technical to relational,*
- *minimal to complex,*
- *verbal to visual,*
- *literal to meaningful;*
- *a magic skill, practiced,*
- *inhibited by the organizational structure (hierarchical and decentralized),*
- *inflected by leadership style and personality,*
- *inflected by gender performance and ascribed sex;*
- *changes in terminology and communication style signals change in (work) ethic,*
- *containing a generational split between taking orders and refusing risk;*
- *requires authenticity,*
- *inflected with marketing/persuasion;*
- *in need of listening skills and followership,*
- *better in trusting relationships,*
- *happens at the level of local politics and partners,*
- *accelerates during resources scarcity and sharing.*

Communication between agencies, partners, stakeholders, and the public is consistently unclear and changes. (This theme is the most dominant theme throughout all of the focus groups and needs further analysis because there is much more that needs to be unpacked).

Audience

The target of the narrative, but not necessarily the receivers of it. The public and FS employees are prone to developing filters against information overload. Participants discussed the users of information and simplicity or complexity in which information can be communicated to them.

*“[H]ow do we highlight flagship reports that everybody in the agency should read? Who is the group that evaluates that? So you say, I don't want to hear it, I don't want to read another guys report. Right? But on the other side you say, well one data point, we need to collect a bunch of data points before we can track and trend. And how often does this happen? Well, don't tell me about that anymore because I've already heard it. You know, **different audiences have different needs** and there could be a core group of people that say for this audience, this should be your flagship report for this audience.” [Fatalities & Injuries FG]*

Interpretation

The ability of employees to digest a single message according to their own knowledge base or position of authority. Influenced by the decentralized structure of the agency. Some expressed need for uniform terminology. Non-uniform vernacular allows for interpretation, often as a “workaround” policy or a way to negotiate objectives.

Narrative

The dominant, not necessarily official, storyline adopted by and retold by an entity, whether it is the fire community, the agency, the media, etc. Narrative may be used to encapsulate or promote the culture of interest. The common parlance was “Telling our story.” The desire to “tell the same story but tell the right story,” creating a coherent mix of opinion and fact (emotional values and scientific values) that is palatable to a particular community or culture. Seen as a need, something for employees to identify with; needed to empower the reticent culture of fire and FS employees to speak articulately and clearly to the public. Often focused on several contradictory narrative

bodies, which differ in authority and in proximity to the incident: leader's intent, forest plan, fire plan, incident briefings, actual field action, community/stakeholder meetings, WO policy, state law, databases. Prone to misalignment between narrator and audience. Prone to entrenchment beyond its expiry date. In classic parlance, 'doctrine.' Example: Line officers may cling to old narratives about safety in order to veil the ecological purposes they may actually pursue, for political cover.

*"...individually they're like, 'I know we have the social license.' But as a group they will immediately default to social license. And I think that's the conclusion I've come to for **why all these social narratives stick**, because it's the easy way to avoid change. And because it's an external. Like you don't have to confess, 'That's going to be really hard for us to do.' It's just, 'Well we'd really like to do it but they won't let us.' And I think that's one reason why I kind of keep pushing saying, 'That data doesn't report it.' Because I see it, I don't want to allow for that false narrative to get used for reasons that are... if it's true, if it actually holds up, then let's try to change that narrative. But if we're using a narrative that doesn't stick to avoid other changes, then that's not a very good use of that narrative." [Society FG]*

Transparency

Clear and honest disclosure. Especially in communication and purpose. Necessary to 'tell the story' and build trust between the public and the FS, within the FS, among partners. Perceived as lacking, that the Forest Service is not transparent with the public about how the FS makes decisions, nor the complexity behind their decision making. The Forest Service feels that the public will not understand.

*"I want to [go] back to...terminology and **what we're allowed to say, and what we're not allowed to say**. I think I experienced that this summer on a fire in southern California, and when our team got to the fire we were told that the fire was a managed fire, that was the terminology used, then when we got there, it was gonna be changed to be 100% full suppression. One of our regional staff officer was bothered by that point, and made the point of saying, 'We manage all of our fires, there's not just a certain kind of fire we manage, we manage all of them, so why are we all of a sudden we're not managing anymore, but we're just doing 100% suppression.'*

*But there had been a lot of outreach done on this particular fire before we got there to talk about the benefits of fire. This was one of several forests that had an MOU, and you're probably familiar with the MOU..., that between these forests of how we're gonna talk about fires. There are a lot of fire ecology messages that were incorporated in this MOU, and this understanding of how we would talk about fires. So, **a lot of effort went to the public to talk about the benefits and then we had to all of a sudden switch gears and we couldn't talk about any of those benefits anymore**, and we needed to just talk about the fact that we were actively suppressing the fire, which we were, and that was important to get that message out, it definitely was. There was a lot of work going on to suppress those fires, but it just became very confusing from a public information point of view, and an agency point of view." [Ecology FG]*

Culture

The accepted know-how, how-to, and what-for shared among a specific group or community. A value-based mindset, which is manifested in behavior, often learned onsite, and instituted or entrenched over time. A difficult concept, used frequently and imprecisely in the focus groups, often interchanged with the organized 'system' of resource flows. Here, includes communication styles, terminology, education, skills training, explicit policy and procedure. More importantly in wildland fire, however, culture includes the informal, "tacit, embodied, corporeal **knowledge transfer**" from person to person in the field, on the line.

Has regional and unit characteristics: some fire cultures spread (e.g., California to Colorado) while others are nontransferable (e.g., Florida to California).

A need is seen for a common cultural identity, as a precursor to effective communication and leadership. There is a strong desire to change the culture of wildland firefighting. Focus group participants stated that it is not the policy nor the science, but the culture that remains resistant to change—change toward sustained dialogue, humility, mission coherence.

*“[W]e have **a lot of fire cultures** in the community. I would say we have three national cultures and then three that are reaching distinctive, and they don't transfer. You're not going to take California's model and put it in Florida. You're not gonna take Florida's model and put it in Montana. And so we think these things must be universal, they're universal management principles that are based on universal ecology principles. They don't. They're grounded in local cultures, local time space and experience, and we keep trying to transfer and it doesn't work. And the California one is interesting, I think, too, because it's not just suppression, it's going to an urban model. [Cal]Fire's basically an urban fire service out in the woods. It'd hard to remember that it began as a land management agency.” [Ecology FG]*

*“Communication between ground forces and the decision makers. Some of the barriers actually are the biases on both sides. Ours and the folks up here. And cultural perceptions. Like...we're talking about what are the biggest fears of some of these folks, is.... **We don't know what they do.** Who are they? They run around and they're dirty. Then our cultural perceptions too. Like, ‘Oh, the Ivory Tower. The Oracles.’ We call them the oracles. These people up here.” [Fatalities & Injuries FG]*

*“I keep thinking that **we just don't train our people to be good communicators, good listeners**, things like that. So gonna try to find some contract or somewhere locally that can come do that with our fire folks. Active listening, emotional intelligence, and understanding what motivates our own decisions.” [Fatalities & Injuries FG]*

Decentralization

Participants describe how the multi-level, multi-branch, organizational structure of the Forest Service, featuring both top-down and bottom-up flows of power impact communication, and contributes to contradictions between policy and practice. Throughout the decentralized structure, there is much variability in leadership quality and professional skill. Decentralization facilitates an incoherent, “mosaic work” ethic of production targets.

*“I know that in the Forest service leadership level, there's a lot of talk behind closed doors that, ‘Damn them, that's their responsibility.’ But maybe in the shared stewardship sort of frame when we are knocking at the state regional office and the state talking and having a conversation, the Forest service being willing to put that pressure on and sort of say, ‘Hey, **this is your realm, this is your zone of responsibility**, a big piece of it. And you need to start naming this and talking about it in a more transparent way so that at the community scale people can grapple with it and take ownership and take action.’” [Society FG]*

*“...that sort of **misalignment across jurisdictions** and I think that's a huge challenge the agency faces is that especially the state fire service in almost every state, primary purpose, sole purpose, perhaps, suppression, right? And then you have this much **more complicated** fire management paradigm. And everybody knows that, the leadership in the agencies know that **right down to the ground** people know that. But society doesn't understand that at all. And so there's definitely a coming together that the agencies have to have among themselves to sort of tap some share of appreciation for what each other are doing and to coordinate it. And then there's a whole sort of how do we engage society in a*

conversation about the **different purposes across these jurisdictions** and how they're gonna work together and manage risks and trade-offs **across landscapes**. I think there's definitely another week to make in the shared stewardship doctrine sense, about, 'Okay, now we've talked to each other. What is the engagement with society around what that unearthed?'" [Society FG]

Financial Incentives

Motivations associated with monetary gain. Financial incentives is discussed on two levels, on the agency level in relation to commercial interests, and on the employee level in relation to hazard pay. Dubbed "perverse incentives."

Overtime

Financial incentives for firefighters to work an extreme amount of overtime and as a result being exhausted by the end of the year, which leads to safety risks.

Values at Risk

Comparisons of what values, including natural resource values and physical infrastructure, are most important and justify putting firefighter lives at risk. Human-built developments, especially high-dollar communications infrastructure, private property, or commercial timber have historically had more weight on decision-making in the suppression culture.

*"If you want to solve a problem, don't look at who suffers from the problem. **Look at who profits** from it. And unfortunately, kind of, the way the system is constructed now, I don't think it's conscious, really. You know, it's not, like, pernicious or anything. But it's, like, we're all in cahoots to keep things the way we are because we all ... That's how we make a living. You know, it's, like, there's incentive at every level in the organization to push it too far and stay too long and put ourselves at risk. You know, for the extra hours or whatever it is."* [Fatalities & Injuries FG]

Risk

Variables we don't know; uncertainty, especially regarding probability of harm, spoken of in terms of physical, emotional, and professional harms. 'Risk' is identified as *the* wildcard concept of contradictions in fire management because it has multiple interpretations or applications of meaning, depending on what position that you are in or problem that you dealing with. Speaking about 'risk' relates to support for whatever narratives of security and safety are beneficial to your purpose. There is contention around what type of risk is socially licensed: risk of firefighters' lives for the protection of homes and infrastructure, versus risk to those for ecological burns.

In the context of fire suppression, risk is about exposure to fire, and it is manageable and quantifiable; it is also a signature of hard, traditionally heroic, necessary work of emergency response. Risk is inherent in the job and therefore normalized, paradoxically making immediate fire suppression the 'safe' status quo because immediate suppression aligns with firefighter training and simplifies decision-making. Risk then becomes about an inability to be forthcoming about constraints, and not being able "to do everything."

In the context of ecological fire, risk is expressed about career uncertainty, organizational imbalance and fragility, political lack of support, criticism of industry, litigation; and signals adapting work to the inherently uncertain factors of climate change. For participants, 'Risk' and 'risk management' are more palatable terms than 'safety.'

*"One of the themes that we saw if you line up all the tree strikes, the firefighters assume, maybe that's the wrong word, believe an expectation has been put on them **that society members want them to go out there** and do the absolutely best they can and sometimes they are snagged. And they're willing to take that*

risk. That would be a thing that we could say that was trend across all of these. Which is why we're looking at society, is that true? I don't think we can answer that right now, right? [Speaker] says, majority of public says this. What we hear from managers is 'Yeah we feel like there is an expectation for us to go do that but we are trying to do **as safely as we can.**' Well what's as 'safely as we can?' **This is all so nebulous.**" [Society FG]

"It was something about how are we doing in safety or whatever, I went on a diatribe probably like I tend to do now. In that **what we do isn't safe, by definition, nor can it be.** So we're going to continue to have injuries and we're going to continue to have fatalities. It's going to happen. There's a reason we pay our firefighter's hazard pay. **If it wasn't hazardous we wouldn't pay them hazard pay.** If it wasn't hazardous, by law, we can't even pay hazard pay. So when we talk about safety in the context of fires this is one of the reason that I wanted to be here. I used to get so pissed off at... he's a commander that disallowed my safety officers from saying it but you get the morning safety officer comes and goes, 'Be safe out there.'" [Fatalities & Injuries FG]

"And that to me is the underlying problem with the entire culture, is that **you never doubt when you suppress. You're always putting your career at risk when you either manage the wildfire or put in the prescribed fire.** So that's one of the causal mechanisms behind the culture. I think another ... And this is not to disparage you guys, but we promote guys in the leadership positions from the fire suppression community. And they got absolutely the wrong tools to understand the big picture of why we let fires go and all that stuff. And that they should be on the ecology side, on the other side rather than knowing how the engine's going, all that stuff. When you're only a hammer, you only see a nail. And if you had confidence in decisions about that, you would ... if you were a fire ecologist, you'd let it go. I think that's another causal mechanism behind the whole culture problem is that we need to integrate fire ecologists in there or have them give the fire people more ecology." [Ecology FG]

Society

The Society FG very quickly expressed difficulty distinguishing social data from personal experience and determining their positions within and opposed to society, which are classic and longstanding matters of confusion between social scientists and laypeople and among social scientists themselves: "Social science is hard, and it's icky." The FG participants expressed meanings of **society** as (1) the public, external to the FS and divided in participation, in political voice, in reasoning, and often oppositional to the agency; and as (2) the local community of values to which the FS is incorporated, to which local officers belong and are mediators between the community and the FS. There is often a perception that the relationship between the organization and society is about changing society through education. Participants more easily described, not defined, **society** as:

- *supportive but silent majority of the 'public',*
- *local community members 'who show up';*
- *strong-voiced minority which captures political attention,*
- *people who do not participate, do not want education, and elicit defensive reactions;*
- *lacks understanding of the complicated, uncertain fire management paradigm,*
- *is influenced by media, not history nor science,*
- *needs local, historical data to 'tell the story' of fire ecology;*
- *values saving lives and property,*
- *has a very low tolerance regarding amount of fire and acceptable smoke,*
- *values ecological purposes,*
- *expects our best efforts, including risk taking;*

- everybody, not just FS voices,
- my own community,
- includes the local FS officers as local community members.

*“Depending on how we are defining society, the example that you just used with our partners and our shared stewardship is, I think can be super successful in that **definition of society where you have all these people at the table**. When I look at when we have a fire, and who shows up, and a lot of people at the public meeting and the people that are screaming and saying you're responsible party, those people do not show up at those. And I've tried to get them.”*

*“[T]he forest staff were opposed to [pipelines] and it didn't comport with the forest plan so they were told to change the forest plan. I don't know what level that was but it was a letter at Washington at the secretary's office for the White House. But everybody in Western Virginia's **really pissed off at the foresters right now** including judges, who were telling the foresters they didn't do the right thing when they changed their forest plans just to respond to the gas company's for-profit damn pipelines. Foresters got a real black eye.”*

*“Well, one of the things I've observed just in the last few years is just the increased amount of dialogue that we are having internally with their agency about these topics that we're talking about. And a real increase those conversations between line officers and fire managers on the ground. But one of the things that I **think we're missing is having that dialogue with the public**. Because I think sometimes too often we're trying to have that right during the fire. And I think that's critical that we do have those conversations in the fire, but I think we also need to have those conversations ahead of time before the fires start.” [Ecology FG]*

Suppression

Process of squelching, putting out, pushing down, restraining, terminating. Focus groups described fire **suppression** as a culture (not operations, here):

- evolving slowly regarding fire actions,
- which ignores the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy,
- resistant to policy, science, and technology for managing fire for decades;
- claims to have no tools to transition to ecological fire use,
- welcomed by local politicians and publics,
- which errs on the side of public wants;
- which needs to convince the public of beneficial fire,
- having no common vernacular for beneficial fire,
- not transparent to the public nor to its firefighters,
- inhibited in communication—training, legally, policy;
- now under the purview of the Forest,
- lacking agency leadership on fire objectives,
- regionally divided regarding alternative practice;
- still all about timber,
- fixed or constrained by public, political, and commercial interests.

Unclear Objectives

Discussions about whether the fire organization has a clear objective when it comes to fighting fire (Ecological benefit, Social acceptance, Political justification, Suppression). The perception that the mission and objective for fighting fire is unclear.

*“One thing I think about is also the, I won't even say deference to expertise but **deference** to experience and the culture, the what we have and the not having the ability to speak up or **don't want to speak up** because of the position that somebody might be in and whether you're out on the line or whatever and just the assumptions well they probably, they got to see that. They got to know what's going on. They're hot shot superintendent or based on that position alone **so a lot of assumptions that take place** based on that experience or that perceived experience or expertise that's in that position.”* [Communication FG]

*“We have focused for so long as a culture about communication but it really focuses on the sender, right? Focusing on what you're saying. **We have not taught people how to listen.** A lot of times we don't listen to hear, we listen to speech, reflect, provide our own perspective. I hear that a lot. I don't know how to fix that but I think we need to really focus on that empathy piece, some of those introspective things that when we're listening because I think when a lot of people say well, this is my leaders intent the people are already trying to incorporate and then make it their own which already starts to mutate it. Then the information virga is my number one peeve about this organization, listening.”* [Communication FG]

*“**What is the objective?** I haven't been on a fire in years where I actually knew what success looked like.”* [Fatalities and injuries FG]

Values

Centering ideas or ideologies that establish boundaries for meaning, provide identity, serve as cultural centers of gravity. More often spoken of as emotional rationales, and financial rationales—instead of scientific rationales. Tremendously variable cornerstones of individual moral behavior and socially acceptable ethical standards. Values described by participants tend to create cohesion for the in-group and division for the out-group(s). Values of meaning are distinct from classically financial ‘values at risk.’ In other words, there are two cultural paradigms of full suppression vs ecological benefits.

Authenticity

The quality of bearing truth; credibility or believability; legitimacy. Necessary for communication to resonate with or ‘hit’ its target audience. Accepts liability, accepts accountability. In fire culture, authenticity is risky, and exposes individuals to vulnerability. Yet fosters trust.

*“Part of it is a thing I picked up on the last 15, 20 minutes is a **desire to be authentic.** When I'm talking to forest FMOs in California or forest service people in California, I can be very authentic. When I'm in a room with Cal Fire partners it's hard to be authentic. Very, very hard to be authentic. Especially about their crazy approach to all this. I could pull out there. I keep on my phone a quote about our firefighters are sure, at least this one guy was one day when he put this up that they're out to kill him, that Cal Fire leadership is out to kill him. To have an authentic conversation with Cal Fire is just impossible. You don't do that.”* [Communication FG]

Coherence or Cohesion

An understandable logic that unites concepts; a clear and uniform hanging-together or adjudication of multiple (often competing) concepts or objectives. Here expressed as a quality that is missing and needed, and which would resolve understanding of inconsistencies surrounding: agency mission, purpose, strategy; leaders intent; contradictions in inter-agency partnerships, intra-agency authority, or partner collaboration. Seen as needed for the redistribution of investments between fire, ecology, and community in the National Cohesive Strategy. Necessary for communication efforts toward understanding of complexity.

Trust

Fundamental and necessary extension of relationship credit. Acceptance of and belief in authority, credible logics, explanations, rationales; but also faith in persons or entities. Easily tarnished; may be rebuilt with transparency, authenticity.

Public Trust

The level of trust that the public has toward the Forest Service is always in question. Public trust is difficult to gain when political leaders provide false expectations about fire outcomes.

Trust in Leaders

Trust in leadership is highly variable across the organization. This particularly pertains to questioning Line Officers who are perceived to not have received enough leadership training prior to their assignment. In fire, people are consistently being trained for leadership, and there is skepticism toward line officers who are perceived by fire to have not received an equal level of leadership training.

Work

Actual paid labor, employment; both rote accomplishment and creative endeavor. Participants describe an exchange of risk management for wages or salary, but also deeply meaningful activity related to cultural identity. A theme so fundamental and ubiquitous in some focus group conversations, it becomes less explicit than other themes that are related to work, like culture and risk. This theme is strongly related to fiscal incentives.

Contracting

Contracting work also may entail contracting out responsibility. There is a notion that the number of harmful incidents is inaccurate because of how labor (and with it, responsibility) is being contracted out. This makes it appear that the USFS is not responsible, and some participants take issue with this.

Identity

Participants describe a combination of ingrained qualities of individual personality and enculturated (learned) characteristics within the wildland fire community. Identity is defined by the value of work and mission, especially work experience in fire; and subsequently, the experience of trauma. With mission confusion comes identity confusion, which reinforces an incapacity to communicate. Here, direct discussion of the concept of identity, specifically regarding threats to identity, because they are unsure of their core mission or they are unsure how to manage a changing mission.

*“...the clear, vision, mission of what we do and why are we here and what are we trained to do? What's our purpose? Then the barriers to think about is there's fire, and then there's the bigger FS. There's a conflict there, and we're trying to get to that end state of what we are. Then there's the bigger, the FS versus Wild Land Fire Community, whatever you want to put into that. So, that question, **what is the organization that we're talking about?**” [Fatalities and injuries FG]*

(Value of) Experience

When participants give examples of prior experiences they describe a very strong value toward the job experience. Experience is valued over formal education.

Fatality

Physical death. Also, trauma which may effectively end a life in other ways; less spoken about. Participants question and contest how fatalities are counted (not suicide, not civilian) in multiple focus groups. As the connector of all five focus groups, the reduction of fatality and injury was addressed with solutions from all sides: need for adequate compensation (financial incentives); need more clear mission and vision (ecological soundness); improving trust and leadership (communication and work environment); disconnecting risk from respect (society).

*“I’m going to piggy back on this one. Communication is big.... I don’t remember conversations or their faces, but recently, somebody was talking to me about the Camp fire in Paradise [CA]. They were like, ‘**We didn’t lose any fire fighters.**’ When they first said that to me, I’m like, ‘What? We lost about 88.’ 85? It’s great we didn’t lose any fire fighters. So, that was a strong statement in my mind. It’s like, ‘Where is that disconnect on how we serve our public?’” [Fatalities and injuries FG]*

*“And not to complicate things further, but we’re talking specifically about fatalities and injuries, you know, and... or not in that area. And what I see out in the field and on the line, you know, is **other kinds of collateral damage.** The firefighters get burnout. You know, the emotional stress, PTSD, mental issues, substance abuse, suicide. I mean, I wonder, is that ... I don’t know. In my experience, when there’s certain suicides, just for example, that feel like line of duty deaths to me.” [Fatalities and injuries FG]*

Professional Development

Job training, educational attainment, career track availability (PDs) leading to hiring and promotion. Favorable for fire suppression tracks; lacking or nonexistent in fire ecology.

Refusal

The denial of risk or risky work. Accomplished when employees feel capable of critical evaluation and speaking in their own interests. Referred to negatively as the ‘safety card.’ On occasion, positively related to organizational learning initiatives like the Safety Journey or Life First. An example of fairly recent and generationally adopted cultural change—in both communication and action.

*“This might be a little bit naïve but when I started in the agency, my first impression was it was fun and it was exciting and we were saving babies, and then over time, the longer you’ve been in the agency, you see more of the negative impacts of it. And also you deal with more people getting hurt and dying. And then you start internalizing, what is the objective, and why are we doing it if it isn’t what’s best? I think some people come to that score and some people never get to it. But eventually if you’ve dealt with people in accidents or getting killed in situations that seem, what were they doing here in the first place? It’s like, **maybe there is a better way we can do this,** without killing people and it might be better in the long term and natural environment or what have you.” [Ecology FG]*

Workforce

Full-time firefighting employees vs. seasonal firefighters and perception that the current model of seasonals is inefficient and does not save the organization money due to the cumbersome process of hiring new seasonals each year.

Work Arounds

When the policy is too cumbersome or prohibitive to efficiently complete the task employees find other ways of getting the work done.

*“We wrote the contracts. We gave them those options. And then, we act like we’ve got no control over the consequences. Just that one little week of driving around, it was, like, oh my god, I’m going to go nuts. We just act like we have no influence on it. And we had most of the influence. We’re just choosing not to use it. I think it’s a great question. I don’t think there’s any way to talk about the stuff without looking at the **financial incentives. I mean, it just pervades every single issue that we’re talking about.** And I don’t think there’s any way to effectively achieve a consistent level of paradigm shift either unless there’s, you know, bottom line financial, you know, needs that are met, too. So, that’s a huge consideration.”*
[Fatalities & Injuries FG]

*“There’s a lot of issues that I’m interested in moving forward. I thought my guys would have a little less bias toward what we can prove, but yeah **morale is kind of low when it comes to having confidence in the Forest Services and agency with our current fire hire and our current temp hire.** It’s very challenging to get the job done correctly. And then I’ve also been close to some fatalities, including a couple of suicides of people that I knew. So yeah, I’m looking to see that one day there can be a better work environment for everybody hopefully before I retire.”* [Communication FG]

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