
“We’ve made huge improvements in how we address firefighter safety. It has been painfully slow, though. All things are doable over time; it’s just the speed of change that is difficult. We will change over time, but do we want to wait 20 years and sustain the 20 firefighter deaths per year and increasing public deaths?”

—Type 1 Incident Commander, Society Focus Group

A 10-year review of accidents and incidents within the USDA Forest Service wildland fire system.

USDA Forest Service photo by Jace Jacobs.
Abstract

This document seeks to describe the wildland fire system and culture within which U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service employees operate. To do so, this review presents a narrative of the Forest Service's wildland fire system based on the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of those who operate within it.

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Chapter 13. What’s Next? Continuing the Learning

“We are freakishly smart, but we need to start owning that and be responsible for this job. We are a select special group of people that have dedicated their lives to making the difference. We are supposed to lead.”

—District Ranger, Fatalities and Injuries Focus Group

This metareview is one large step on an ongoing journey the Forest Service set upon over a decade ago to become a learning organization. The safety journey, safety engagement sessions, life first sessions, and other initiatives have one thing in common: good people working hard to understand the work and the environment they operate in, with the hope of reducing serious accidents, injuries, and fatalities. It is in listening to each other and learning together that the agency will continue to move toward becoming a learning organization.

Each focus group yielded rich, far-reaching conversations that provided deep insights and valuable suggestions for organizational change. And as essential as the “voice of the field” is, it is inescapable that over time memory fades. Focus group participants readily recalled the challenges they faced in recent years, however they struggled when looking farther back to the earlier years covered by the 2007–2016 metareview. Do you remember what struggles you were dealing with last year? What about in 2013? Extraordinary events were readily called to mind, but the nuanced details were often lost to history. Without this context, and the connection to the shared history it provides, organizational learning will never reach its full potential.

Learning Strategy

As the 2007–2016 metareview evolved it became clear that a logical next step would be to develop a strategic learning plan for the agency. To better capture learning while the lessons are fresh, IOL proposes conducting an annual “year in review” and creating a report similar in structure to this metareview. Quantitative analysis is routinely conducted and distributed in the annual interagency safety gram and the Lessons Learned Center’s annual “Incident Review Summary” and infographic. The year in review would build upon these efforts using a qualitative approach. Like this metareview, the annual review would use focus groups to analyze what was learned, what changed, and identify needs for continued learning and change.

This organizational learning strategy is built upon increasing the ability for local-level learning to be shared globally. The learning challenges presented in each chapter of this review are an example of this. As participants undergo the challenges, they can share their insights with the entire organization through the linked StoryMaps.

Building upon the qualitative and quantitative data, the year in review annual report would inform the design and development of strategic learning investments for the coming year. The quantitative data would help identify specific challenges to safety and focus group participants would provide input, real world examples of learning, and suggestions for products or strategies that could help address those specific challenges.
A “flagship” learning review or FLA would be included to serve as a common frame of reference among the community. Content specific to the flagship review would be developed and distributed for annual learning events.

Learning How to Learn

The desire to revisit and clarify events years later, as highlighted in the quote below, is all too common with those close to tragedy events. While revisiting these events can be painful, it can also serve as an important opportunity for healing where hard-earned lessons can be shared with others in the hopes that another tragedy can be avoided. When those who were there are ready to talk, we as an agency should be ready to listen.

Learning reviews and FLAs are conducted shortly after events have occurred, and once a learning product has been produced the agency often moves on to the next issue that demands its attention. Sometimes we, as an organization, learn. Sometimes the organization just carries on as before. But for some, often those closest to the event, the learning doesn’t stop, and it may well be years before insights are gained and realizations emerge.

"I would give anything to be reinterviewed for Thirtymile and have somebody go, ‘What were you thinking about when you left the lunch spot and went back up the road?’ But that was never asked of me.”
—Crew member at Thirtymile

Triple-loop learning, “focuses on the ability to effectively utilize single- and double-loop learning. As such, triple-loop learning challenges one's existing learning framework as well as one’s mental models and assumptions. Ideally, triple-loop learning links all of the local learning units into a unified learning organization.” Staff rides and work by the NWCG, such as their “Week of Remembrance,” “This Day in History,” and their case study video on the 1994 South Canyon Fire all seek to revisit our history and set the stage for triple-loop learning to take place. This learning strategy will build upon this foundation and take learning to the next level by going back, revisiting history with those involved, and sharing their reflections gained.

Defining Success

As with any strategy it is important to review progress. As Brené Brown suggests in her book “Dare to Lead,” “collective courage” will determine if an organization is capable of honest self-assessment of its progress, or the lack thereof. As the year in review process becomes normal, the reports should serve as meaningful guides to reflect on our agency’s efforts and evaluate the success of its previous year’s learning strategy. Have we as an agency increased our ability to speak openly and honestly about the really challenging stuff? Did we move closer to our goals or farther away? Were there any unintended outcomes from our attempts to focus on a given topic? What can we as an agency do differently moving forward? How do we define success?
Metareviews as Normal Work

If an individual learning review or FLA is a single snapshot in time and the year in review provides an examination of a years’ worth of snapshots, then the need remains to periodically look at the entire system over time. While previous organizational reviews sought to achieve similar goals to this end, conducting the “Wildland Fire Metareview, 2007–2016” was uncharted territory for IOL, as well as for the current generation of Forest Service leaders. After completing this project, IOL can confidently say that each participant, regardless of role, found value in this effort. To continue the learning, IOL looks forward to your discussion on this body of work and sincerely hopes it resonated with you in a meaningful way.

One signal of positive change in our organizational culture that would indicate the agency’s commitment to being a learning organization is that metareviews such as this become a normal and expected part of work rather than conducted based on a unique event brought about by tragedy. Events would no longer be defined as good or bad, but simply valued for the learning opportunity each represents.

What will have been learned when the next metareview begins? Only time will tell, but with the aid of a decade of year in reviews, insightful focus group participants, and courageous people willing to share their stories of learning, one thing will be certain: the agency will be a better learning organization than it is today.
Learning Challenge

In a learning organization, continued evaluation of common business practices, friction points, ideas, or innovations must be on the table for discussion. To accomplish this, author Peter Senge suggests that members of a learning organization continuously practice a set of organizational learning disciplines:

1. Systems Thinking—“Learn to better understand interdependency and change.”
2. Personal Mastery—Developing a “coherent picture of desired results by balancing the tension between their vision and their reality.”
3. Mental Models—Developing “awareness of the attitudes and perceptions that influence thought and interaction.”
4. Shared Vision—Learning to “nourish a sense of commitment in a group by developing shared images of the future they seek to create.”
5. Team Learning—“Transforms a group’s collective thinking, teaching them to mobilize their energies and ability greater than the sum of individual members’ talents.”

In this metareview, incredibly heavy topics such as mental health and suicide or completely revamping the wildland fire system have been discussed, yet this report makes no claims of discussing everything of importance.

Q What other organizational friction points demand our attention?
Q What practices or systems that we take for granted need review?

A vision for the future here is one where all differing perspectives can be valued and discussed rather than left unspoken.

Q How do we eliminate sentiments like, “Nothing is going to change so why waste time talking about it?”
Q As you explored this metareview did you find examples of Senge's organizational learning disciplines in action?
Q Do you see opportunities to continue to apply the practices in your work?
Q What barriers to becoming a learning organization stand in your way?

To continue and share in the learning, IOL would be honored to hear your thoughts and opinions on the topics covered in this metareview. To share your thoughts, please reach out to us at SM.FS.OL_RMRS@usda.gov.

Tell us about your experience participating in this challenge at this team learning link!
Endnotes


4 Public Law 107–203. 107th Congress. (24 July 2002


7 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2015. The rising cost of wildfire operations: effects on the Forest Service's non-fire work. 16 p.


