

# Leaders

## We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



## Interview with Craig Workman

by Elizabeth Cavasso

I grew up in the farm community of Tulelake, California. When I was 18 years old I decided I wanted to try something other than farming, actually my father suggested that I try something other than farming. I went around and interviewed in Klamath Falls for jobs in a couple of jobs working in nurseries and then one day I went into the Tulelake office and asked if there were any jobs available and the clerk, Natalie, sent me in to speak with Stan Fitzgerald who was the FMO at that time. He talked to me a bit and he said I've watched you play football and he asked if I could start work tomorrow... So that next day I started with the USFS as a GS-1. One pay period after that I was promoted to a GS-2 and by the end of the year I think I got a GS-3. During that period from 1971 through 1979, I was on the Modoc National Forest and worked several different positions. I was a dozer swamper for a year and also learned to run a dozer. I worked on the engine up at Medicine Lake; we call it the vacation station. For some time I really enjoyed being up there, it was a great place, but it did not have a lot of fire activity. I believe in 1974, I went to Dry Lake and started working there as a station manager. We had an engine, 2 FPTs and a dozer.

In 1975 I detailed to the Redding Hotshots with Charlie Caldwell, Ken Blonski and others. I was with that crew for one season. That's where I became very interested in the hotshot program and felt that was really what I like doing more than the other phases of the Forest Service.

When I came back and I was still running the engine crew as the station manager, and back then we were called Engine Foreman. In 1979, I had a Type 2 crew. We were on the Peavine Fire and Rusty Witwer, then Superintendent of Hobart Hotshots called me up and said "I'd like to meet you" and asked if we could meet on top of Mount Peavine. I walked up there and he offered me a position. I was offered the Foreman position at the Hobart Hotshots. I was with Hobart Hotshots until 1985. We moved the crew in about 1983 or 1984 from Hobart on the Truckee side over to Downyville or Camptonville. At that time my wife was working in South Lake Tahoe so I chose to take an AFMO job on the Truckee Ranger District. I was an AFMO for 4 seasons. After about 2 seasons I started to realize that wasn't the best job for me.

In the fall of 1988, I was offered a position to start up a new crew on the Toiyabe National Forest. I came over and I started the crew. The first season with the crew was the summer of 1989. I went on till February 2005, when I retired from the Forest Service.



Craig Workman, on a fire, ready for any assignment.

**“The biggest lesson that anybody can learn is to keep it simple, not over extend.”**

## What makes you want to follow someone?

I think the first thing if you want to follow someone is that you have to trust them. You need to have confidence that they are confident in themselves and then generally you'd follow them anywhere. I think that the biggest thing that we as leaders we also need to know is how to follow. If we don't know how to follow how can we expect someone to follow us ourselves, if we don't understand what it takes to do it?

## Who do you think is a leadership role model and why do you identify that person as a leader?

There have been several people throughout my career and I am just going to throw out some names and then describe why I feel that they are leaders. My father actually taught me what leadership was all about at a very early age. Then there was Stan Fitzgerald, my first FMO. He was the type of person that you wanted to follow and learn from. Then there were several people throughout my career that had influences on me such as Charlie Caldwell. I used a lot of his leadership styles; some of them didn't work for me and some of them did. Another that I have always thought was a great leader is Mark Linane; a person that I have respected throughout my career and I always enjoyed working with him when we were together.

I think that all the people that I have described were people who were very confident in themselves and also they were very influential to many different people. They had the ability to get the best out of a lot of different people. There were some people that without their influence may not have ever been able to strap up and go fight fire. I think they had that kind of influence; they were able to get the best out of everybody.

I have a story about Charlie Caldwell. When I went to the Redding Hotshots I was quite shy. When I went there I was the Foreman of an engine. We had a 6 or 7 person module I think at that time, but it was a group that I grew up with and knew really well. When I first went to Redding I couldn't get in front of three people and speak to them. Well Charlie saw that right off the bat so all through the summer I was always put in a position where I was put in front of people and had to speak to them. At the time I thought that was pretty cruel, but now I think it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

## If you were to pick the three most important character traits for effective leaders, what would those be?

I think the traits would be honesty, complete honesty with everybody all the time. Self confidence; in order to lead people you have to have self confidence and you need to be able to convey that on to them or they won't

follow you if you are not sure. And then I think the love of the job. In wildland firefighting if you don't just love it and enjoy it is really hard to get somebody else to go out and do the job at a level that especially that hotshots have. If you love it then a lot of people will follow that love and I think that is very important.

## Are leaders born or made...explain?

I think leaders are born. I think from a very young age most people I know that have gone up in the Forest Service started at a pretty young age showing some of those skills. And then I have seen in the past years where we have taken people and said OK we are going to make you a leader and we have put them through a lot of leadership training and they just don't make it. I don't think we can make them, I think you have to have the temperament before you start developing the skills.

## Regarding leadership, what quote comes to mind?

There is a quote that I heard clear back from when I was a kid and I even heard it from Charlie Caldwell. "You can't lead unless you can follow."

## Who are some of the individuals that had a significant influence on your life?

Well, my wife and actually my family life when I grew up, my father and my mother. They really taught me the value of other people and working with others. Then as my career went on, a lot of people I think I have mentioned: Stan Fitzgerald., Charlie Caldwell and Rusty Witwer. Those types of people really had an influence throughout my career. My wife was a great support throughout it and I don't know if I would have continued on with a Forest Service career if I hadn't met my wife. She really supported me in a lot of years. At one time I was going to retire or quit the hotshots at the age of 50 and either look at something else or retire, and well I did retire at the age of 53.

## Thinking back to your youth, what other influences helped you become a leader?

I grew up in a farming community and at a very young age I was put in the role of being a field hand, but also running crews. I was probably, at the age of 10 or 11, was out directing crews in the fields, laying pipers and sprinkler systems out and stuff like that. So that started very young in life, of directing people and leading people. In the farming community that was very much where you lead by example; you go out and work them and you do the work with and they follow you and do the job. You don't do that much directing, you get out along side them and that carried throughout my Forest Service career.

### **What do you consider your strengths to be?**

I think my strengths are that I had undying energy and undying love for what I was doing. I was just fascinated by wildfire and nature and how those correlated with each other, and I just love it. I also felt that my strengths were that I was always quite fit and able to work with anybody and lead by example. I preferred to lead by example. It's much more fun than just watching.

### **What do you consider your weaknesses to be?**

I don't think intellectually I was the strongest person. A lot of times I'd get bogged down trying to dealing with the administrative portions of the job. I was pretty weak at that and it took a lot of my time because I was not real strong and I think that took away from the time I could spend with the crew. I think another weakness, and I think it become less of a weakness throughout my career, at one time at a younger period of my career I could not understand why everybody couldn't do things as well as I could do. I would get real frustrated by people who could not work as hard or as long or have the interest to work as hard or as long as I did. I'd get frustrated with people that didn't want that. I think I started to understand that some people could offer in different ways and add to the group, but that took some years.

### **Since you started in 1971, what are the biggest improvements you have witnessed in the wildland fire service?**

I think the biggest improvement that I think has had the most effect is the use of heavy lift helicopters. I honestly feel that they are probably one of our most effect tools that we can have if they are managed well. One of the things that I have concern with is, and that I was beginning to see during my last few years, is that the control of the heavy lift helicopters was being taken away from the ground and given to Air Attack or somebody like that. I think we were much more effective when the control was with the ground forces and I hope that is corrected and dealt with. Firefighting is really a very simple task. I can't really think of many other things that have changed. Pumps have gotten better and chainsaws have gotten better, but the uses or the skills of people that use them have not really changed. It is still a very simple program and I think we need to keep it as simple as we can.

### **What do you consider the worst changes you have seen in the wildland fire service?**

Well, my opinion; I think the worse change we have seen is that we are getting awful large organizations on our teams. I think the teams are becoming almost unmanageable; there are just too many moving parts. I don't think they are as well coordinated as when things

were much smaller. I don't think people are as personal and as committed. Type 1 teams 15-20 years ago were maybe 20 people and now you may see teams with 50 or more. Personally I think it is just too many moving parts.

Why we don't just get really good at "The10" because all the others are based on The 10, every one of them. We keep on changing The 10 to make it easier to memorize them and I think that is one of the worst things we ever did. How do we get really good at something if we keep changing it? I think that we need to finally decide where which way we are going to go and stay there more than a year and then maybe we can get really good at it.

Another thing that I have a concern about is that we have a lot of different fire agencies. We have contractors, we have state, we have county, we have five different agencies of federal, and we don't all go be the same rules, the same standards. It is the same job. A fire is a fire is a fire, but all of us have different standards for it. That does not make sense to me. When we say that we are going to have the Red Book that is standardized for all agencies, but then we have see addendum so and so for BLM and an addendum for BIA and then for Forest Service that's senseless. Why can we have different skill requirements for the same jobs? Cooperating agencies do not agree with our standards and do not use them, yet we have them on teams and that does not make sense to me. I think that is where a lot of our problems arise. Not everybody is on the same page or even close.

I was thinking the last few days about what the perfect person would look like for a FMO. All the Forest and District FMOs that I really respected and that caught my eye were those that loved the job; they loved the place that they were at. They weren't looking at the next place that they were going to; they were interested in being where they were. They really were interested in that program not the next one or the one that was going to future their career next. Those are the ones that I feel really did a good job where they were at.

### **What are a few of the toughest decisions or dilemmas you have faced?**

That is an interesting question. I have always had a problem figuring out what is a tough decision because they were just decisions that needed to be made and I enjoy making them. I feel that a lot of the tough decisions I made were dealing with logistics and dealing with the tactics of, not just the piece of ground I was working on, but the combined tactics for the whole fire. Some crews will get zeroed in on their piece of ground and tactically working on it and not realize that the tactical work for that piece may influence another piece of ground and change the tactics. I always really enjoyed the tough decisions connected to the question

of how is what I am doing here going to influence the next 3 divisions over or even down the line 2 weeks later? The tactical decision that I do now affects how are we going to deal with the mop-up stage or even the and rehab stage. I think those decisions were some of the most fun, but maybe some of the toughest by needing to get out of the box and see how you affect the whole fire.

### **What helped you to guide you through those situations?**

I think anytime you make a decision, the more information you have, the more data you have gathered before you make the decision, the broader your data is, the better your decision is. I think that having the energy and the love of firefighting and you are involved in it and out in it and looking at all the different alternatives. I think just getting all the information that you can, a good ground based information standard.

### **Why do you think people follow you?**

I think people followed me because I was quite confident in what I did and I enjoyed what I did. I think a lot of time I made it fun since I enjoyed it some much it made it fun for others. I had several people comment that I was quite creative in how we did some things and tactics, and aggressive, and people really enjoyed doing that. I just loved it and I think that carried on to others.

### **When did you realize that you had a significant influence on others?**

Well, I think it was actually when, as far as working with the Forest Service, when I went to Redding. There I had an opportunity basically working with people that were my peers, basically the same level, same experience level and going the same direction. There I started to gain a lot of confidence and I think people really enjoyed working with each other. I think that is where I starting getting the feel that I could lead.

### **What handful of “lessons learned” would you offer to a young leader today?**

I think you can have a handful, but I think the biggest lesson that anybody can learn is to keep it simple, not over extend. You need to know your limitations. Each crew, I'll relate to hotshot crews, each season you can come back and say that you're going to fight fires this way. Well every year the group of 20 people is different even if it is the same 20 next year. It is different and you do things differently. So you need to be flexible, you need to change with the people that you have. I have had seasons where we've had the same people – all but maybe one or two – for four or five seasons in a row, but each year the crew wasn't the same. It was different because it had different dynamics. You need to not go with expectations that its going to be the same, not even from week to week. Then also when you start getting to where you think you've got it handled and that you know exactly what's going to go on with the fire, that's when you better be scared because it is a dynamic thing and it changes continually and when you get comfortable with it that's not good.

### **Do you think a legacy is important and if so, what do you want your legacy to be?**

There are some wonderful people that I have worked with through the years that have gone on and every one of them I am very proud of and they are doing very well. I think I have had influence and I am very proud of what they are doing. I am hoping that the legacy that I have passed on to them is the love of what you are doing. And then also, the most important thing is; each of those individuals that you are responsible for, it doesn't stop. You have basically your fire season when they are with you, but even on the off season they were a part of my life also, each of the individuals that I worked with and I think that was very important for me.

This interview with Craig Workman was conducted by Elizabeth Cavasso in Reno, Nevada on August 5, 2005.