

Professional Reading Program

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging by Sebastian Junger

Why Read *Tribe*?

“We have a strong instinct to belong to small groups defined by clear purpose and understanding – ‘tribes.’ This tribal connection has been largely lost in modern society, but regaining it may be the key to our physiological survival.”

Tribe is a book about how humans are almost hard-wired to belong to small groups, and how that dynamic can play out in modern life. It’s not a book that’s about wildland fire management or leadership, but it is a book that explains a lot about the people who work and lead in fire.

It’s an important book for a few reasons. First, many of our wildland fire managers are veterans who have served overseas, and this book provides insight into their experience. Second, we as wildland fire managers are by default an organization and culture that exists to respond to natural disasters, which are often unusual and sometime traumatic events for those involved. Third, it allows us to take a more thoughtful approach to those we work with that have seen trauma at work... while most of us will hopefully not be exposed to something terrible in the workplace, there are those that will. This book provides some insight into how we can better support those who have gone through some trauma... in essence, it can help us to take care of our own.

There are several videos about the book available online. Find some of them at the links below or by searching for “Sebastian Junger *Tribe* video” in any internet-based search engine.

- **Sebastian Junger *Tribe* TED talk (14 minutes):**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9DNWK6WfQw>
- **Sebastian Junger PBS Newshour interview (8 minutes):**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfz3omgnSF4>

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.nwccg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/prp>

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

Tribe Discussion Questions

Intro

Fire people are often drawn to working in fire management because of a sense of solidarity, or to prove something. Other are drawn to it because they like physical work, or the outdoors. Why do you work in fire? What motivates you to keep coming back?

The Men and the Dogs

Are there aspects of our fire culture and work environment that are similar to the historic “tribal” ways of life? What do you think about the idea of “intrinsic” values discussed in this chapter? Do you think that fire (or your workplace) places emphasis on these values? Why or why not?

War Makes You an Animal

In this chapter the author talks about examples where mental health improved during periods of turmoil (the London Blitz, for example). Have you seen anything similar in the wildland fire culture? How about the offseason versus the heat of a busy fire season? What do you think about this phenomenon in light of the increasing awareness of wildland firefighter suicide, especially in the offseason? What do you think about social resilience in natural disasters? Based on the information in this chapter, how might that apply to an organizational culture that revolves around responding to natural disasters, specifically fires? What’s your take on the “physical” and “empathetic” leadership styles/roles mentioned in this chapter?

In Bitter Safety I Awake

Often fire managers spend long periods of time somewhat long periods of time “disconnected” from many of the norms of modern American society – think of a crew that’s on the road most of the summer during a busy fire season, doing 14 and 2 for a few months at a time. How might that temporary disconnection and reconnection with societal norms create stress in firefighters and others who support wildland fire? What do you think about the potential for “stresses in isolation” in wildland fire? How do you manage the transition from work life to home life? Is there a transition for you?

Calling Home From Mars

This chapter mainly talked about how society can help veterans coming back from war, but there are things we draw from it that apply to wildland fire. For one, do we as a larger group “welcome back” or talk through our shared or unshared experiences? How do crew events fit in this way of looking at things? How do we “welcome back” those that have been through real trauma – the death of a coworker, a severe accident or injury, for example? Is there anything we as a larger culture should be doing better? What are we doing right? Think a moment about veterans that you interact with (or if you are a veteran, think about yourself and those around you)... Have there been any ideas in this book that have changed how you think or act about the people around you? Why or why not?