

# 1 When Leaders Can't Lead

The dry conditions were just right for a forest fire. And that's exactly what broke out in the Helena National Forest, in an area of the world known as Mann Gulch.

Fourteen firefighters were called in to put out what they believed to be a "10 o'clock fire." A 10 o'clock fire, in the parlance of the forestry service, means a fire that will burn itself out by 10 o'clock the next day.

It had been an especially long, hot summer in Montana. On this August day in Missoula, the mercury topped 97 degrees Fahrenheit. It was the hottest day of the year.

The leader of the team was a gentleman named Wagner Dodge. Dodge was the oldest and most experienced of the group. So, naturally, he was in charge. Because of experience. Right?

Most of the men were between the ages of 18 and 28, what we might classify as Millennials, based on their age. Many had seen active military service. These men climbed aboard a C-47 transport plane for the 100-mile flight from Missoula to Mann Gulch. Flying over the flames, the men saw the small fire burning near the river—easily contained. Easily managed.

However, the temperatures were so high on this particular day that the plane had to climb to an altitude of 2,000 feet

(instead of the normal 1,800 feet) for the parachute jump. As a result of the higher altitude, or the temperature, or some other unknown reason, one chute did not open. Their communications equipment fell swiftly to the ground, instantly and irreparably crushed on impact.

The men landed in Mann Gulch at 4:10 p.m.

Upon arrival, Wagner Dodge met with his second-in-command, a gentleman named Harrison. Harrison, a ranger stationed in the Helena National Forest, was the first to spot the fire.

Right after their initial meeting, at 4:10 p.m., Dodge and Harrison made their first leadership decision. That decision? Separate themselves from the team. They went off together and had a little dinner. The leaders ate first, a departure from military tradition, while the men waited.

At 5:40 p.m., Dodge and Harrison led the men down into Mann Gulch, an area of the world that's characterized by hidden ravines inside a valley near the Missouri River.

At 5:40 p.m., Wagner Dodge saw something he didn't expect. Flames!

Not six feet high.

Not sixteen feet high.

But sixty feet high.

The men were on a ridge, heading into the gulch, when the wind shifted. A strong downdraft blew the fires up the 18 percent grade, toward the men. Snaking through the dry trees, the once-hidden flames revealed themselves in an instant. The path to the river was blocked.

In mere moments, Dodge and his team were surrounded (on three sides) by flames, advancing at a rate of 200 feet per minute. The only escape? Run uphill, away from the river, to the top of the ridge. On an 18 percent grade. In two-and-a-half-foot-tall grass.

The firefighters were trapped.

Two men found themselves standing near a crevasse. Abandoning their group, they shimmied through a narrow opening to safety—and survival.

Dodge headed for the high ground, yelling at his 13 remaining men to follow him. Dodge knew that he had to do something. Wagner Dodge cried out to anyone who could listen: “Men! Men! Drop your tools!”

Could the men even hear their leader's voice over the sound of the flames? The wind? The exploding trees? The men did not listen . . . they could not listen. The fear. The fire. The utter shock at their circumstances.

Running uphill from the flames, Dodge suddenly stopped. He reached into his pocket. At that moment, Wagner Dodge pulled out a pack of matches.

*Matches? In the middle of a forest fire?*

Wagner Dodge struck a match. Reaching down, he began lighting fire to the tall grass all around him. He moved in a circle, burning the grass quickly to ashes.

Wagner Dodge somehow knew that you could fight fire with fire. And burning the grass all around him was his only path to safety.

He continued to cry out to his men, begging them to join him. Join him in the middle of his own private forest fire.

None of them did.

And as the flames grew closer and closer to Wagner Dodge, suddenly there was nothing left to burn. The flames stopped at the edge of the burnt grass.

Dodge laid down in the middle of his ashen circle. Alone. In the middle of the burnt grass, safe from the flames, Wagner Dodge survived the Mann Gulch Fire. Thirteen of his men, including Ranger Harrison, did not.

We know from the hour and the minute hand on Harrison's broken wristwatch what time the men expired.

*5:56 p.m.*

From 5:40 to 5:56 p.m.: sixteen minutes. Sixteen minutes of pandemonium. Sixteen minutes of terror.

Sixteen minutes where nothing made any sense.

Ultimately, it took 450 men five days to put out this "10 o'clock fire." On this fateful day, August 5, 1949, a leader had the right idea, at the right time. Yet, the cautionary tale of the Mann Gulch Fire is the quintessential story of a failure in leadership. A failure to connect. A failure to communicate when the stakes were highest.

What happened? And what can we learn from this story of a leader with the right idea, but the wrong result?

In his retrospective, "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations," Karl Weick points out the confusion for the men. Weick points to the elements that led to the men's demise: an uncertainty about their leadership. What kind of leader would ask firefighters to drop their tools—removing their only defense against the blaze? How serious can this fire really be if our leaders go eat supper while the flames are burning? The focus of the team is on unity—yet, the three men who survived did so because they abandoned the team (the two men who escaped through a crevasse) or the team abandoned them (Wagner Dodge).

Ultimately, the men's understanding of the way things worked was challenged. They confronted the unexpected, and they failed.

In other words: the wind shifted, and nothing looked the same. No one was equipped to deal with the change. Except the leader. Alone with his idea—the right idea.

The results on that ridge were not the leader's fault. But they were his responsibility.

What will you do, and what will you say, when the wind shifts? *Leadership Language* will equip you with the skills to deliver your message—to create influence in the face of uncertainty. You will see how to change the conversation and change your results.

As you consider the story of the Mann Gulch Fire, what comes up for you when you consider the idea of trust? Connection? Crisis? And what comes to mind for your team members?

The crazy thing is how this story from 70 years ago, from a remote location in Montana, is really the story of all of us. We are all only moments away from some unexpected shift. A competitor's move. An employee's departure. A surprising technological advance. We live in an era of rapid and constant change, and we work hard to minimize the surprises. But what shows up, in spite of our efforts?

Life. Life shows up. And it's up to you, as a leader, to show up ready to help others to understand how things work.

Guidance in the midst of unexpected change is the need, and the new normal. The words you choose and the actions you take will teach people how to follow your ideas. How to connect with your vision. How to engage with your innovation. Or not.

Today, leaders must have more than the right idea. Ideas without action are just dreams. Ideas without action are what happened in Montana. The good news is: Shifting winds don't have to create disaster. You can have the right idea at the right time and get the right result.

That's why this book is here: to help you to understand how to create results when the stakes are highest. Results for your team. Your organization. Your clients. Your employees. To understand more about the way to make your message matter.

Because no matter what your circumstances or where you are in your life, leadership starts with your story. Leadership is not a title nor a status. Leadership is seen in *action*. It sounds counterintuitive,

and it's not what they teach you in English class, but here it is just the same: Leadership is a verb.

Leadership is demonstrated in action, in *connection*, every day. Those connections bring your story to life, for yourself and for those around you. In my work with thousands of business leaders, from Fortune 100 companies to start-up entrepreneurs, I've shared how to turn insights into action. My intention is to share what I see and what I have researched, to help you to see things differently. For yourself. For your career. For the people who matter most to you.

## Resources

- McLean, Robert. *Young Men and Fire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Rothermel, Richard C. *Mann Gulch Fire: A Race That Couldn't Be Won*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, May 1993.
- Weick, Karl E. "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Volume 28, 1993.