

Leading Through Fire- by Dave Verhulst
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As summer 2015 came to a close, all of southern Alberta and most of southwestern British Columbia was covered in a thick blanket of smoke. It turned the sun red, masked the mountains, made it challenging for some people to breathe and prompted Alberta Health Services to issue daily health advisories.



Photo Nick Woode

Events like these serve as a reminder that forest fires (and the smoke that accompanies them) are a fact of life in many parts of Canada – particularly the west. When fire and smoke moves through an area, it always prompts a response. Within the forests themselves, the response to fire is immediate and has long ranging impacts. The same is true for leaders who are confronted by the fires of change.

As leaders, we know we will be challenged by change on a personal and organization level. Knowing how to respond to change can be difficult, and some of the best-kept secrets for effectively leading through change can be found right outside the door...in the forest.

Last October, as part of the Canadian Society of Club Managers (CSCM) National Conference we had the opportunity to take members of the CSCM for a walk at Johnson Lake, in Banff National Park. Our objective was to explore how the trees in the forest can inform and enhance our leadership during times of change and stress. Johnson Lake is popular in the summer and it is enjoyed by visitors and locals alike for it's sunny slopes, warm(ish) water and incredible nature viewing opportunities. Most visitors to the lake walk through the forest completely unaware of the stories it has to share. We had a group that dared to be different and dig a little deeper. We not only learned how different trees respond to fire, we saw parallels in how our colleagues, our clubs and we as individuals respond to change.

Fire has moved through the area around Johnson Lake at regular intervals for thousands of years. Prior to the 20th century when Parks officials adopted a wide-ranging fire suppression policy, fires moved through the forests in Banff's lower valleys every 5-50 years. Each time fire comes through, the flames and heat demand and motivate a response from trees. The response varies according to the type of tree, intensity of the fire and the condition of the forest as a whole – just as a leader's response to change varies according to personality, intensity of the challenge and condition of their wider community.

It is important to emphasize that the trees in Banff's Forests were subject to disturbance from fire FREQUENTLY, not unlike the frequency we, as people, deal with disturbances or challenges. These fires were not all high intensity fires like those burning in the Northwestern U.S. that dumped a thick blanket of smoke on western Canada at the end of August. Some were lower intensity fires that only burned the understory and killed individual or patches of trees. We've all had these kinds of fires come through our own lives – it could be a break up with a partner, or a flood that damages part of a golf course. It hurts, could cost money to fix and there may be a lasting impact, but ultimately, we, and our organization, survive and are able to continue into the future. Trees like the Lodgepole Pine and the Douglas Fir can survive these kinds of fires too, and scars on their trunks are one of the ways we know how frequently fires moved through the forests in Banff National Park.

Life, however, is not just made up of "low intensity fire." On our walk one club member talked about a clubhouse that burned down, another about a complete change in the board of directors, another about losing an entire club to a hurricane. These are clearly changes of a different intensity and they result in a different response. In a forest, fires of higher intensity also elicit a different response from trees.

When we started our walk at Johnson Lake, we were in a forest made up of Lodgepole Pine trees. These trees may survive lower intensity fires, but will likely die in a big fire. That does not mean, however, that they don't have a plan B. Like resilient leaders, the Lodgepole Pine is ready for the "fires of change." It has co-evolved with fire, and evidence of its back-up plan for survival was littered on the forest floor all around our group – cones. We picked a few up – they were small (1-2" long), very hard and many were sealed shut. The majority of cones on a Lodgepole Pine are serotonous – they are fused shut and need temperatures over 45 degrees Celsius to open. When they open, they release tiny seeds that fly on the wind like a good business idea – an idea that didn't have the right conditions to take off before the fire, but is ready to take advantage of the perfect growing conditions that arise after the fire. Pines are sun loving trees and without a fire, they will slowly be replaced by spruce (a shade tolerant tree) and the forest will morph into a different "paradigm" or ecosystem. The fire not only releases the seeds, it also releases nutrients stored in the trees into the soil and opens the canopy to allow sunlight to reach the forest floor. Although the fire kills



the older trees, it creates perfect growing conditions for the next generation of Lodgepole Pines.

The story of the Lodgepole Pine and its need for fire prompted great discussion in the group. As we walked through the forest, we heard how a fire that destroyed part of one member's clubhouse was heartbreaking and challenging, but ended up providing the opportunity to fix other structural problems that

were previously too expensive or complicated to address. Ultimately, the club was healthier afterwards. Others talked about how they had been in situations where they had seen the fires of change eliminate some aspects of their club structure and, in the end, those changes allowed the club to grow and prosper in ways it could not have before the "fire" moved through.

When we think about our resilience as individual leaders or as an organization, we often feel it is about the survival of what we see on the surface (e.g. the brand of our company, our physical identity, the job we have in a specific area). Sometimes, however, it is what is underneath the surface that helps us (and some trees) be more resilient in the face of fire.

As our group moved along the trail at Johnson Lake, we went down a small hill and transitioned out of the pine forest and into an area dominated by trees whose leaves were glowing yellow in the October sunshine. The Trembling Aspen is one of the few deciduous trees in Banff's forests and it is a key component of one of the richest and most diverse habitats in the park. The bark of these trees is smooth, thin and a lovely whitish green in colour. It doesn't take much imagination to see how a fire (even a lower intensity fire) is likely to result in death for these trees. Or is it really that simple? Are they as vulnerable as they look?

What we see on the surface in an Aspen grove is just a small window into what lies underground. All of the "trees" in an Aspen grove are connected to the same root system and are genetic clones of one another. These root systems can cover several acres and they reproduce by sending up thousands of "suckers" after the Aspen over-story has been disturbed. One of the biggest challenges park managers were facing through the 1960s, 70s and 80s, was a reduction in Aspen communities because of fire suppression. Loss of these kinds of forests reduced habitat diversity and impacted many species of birds and animals. Fire often kills the stems of the Aspen, but rarely will a fire burn hot enough to damage the root system from which these stems arise. Fire, in the right

intervals, allows Aspen to thrive by providing just the right balance of disturbance and stability.

We all have something similar to the roots of the Aspen – something that may not be immediately visible, but provides the support, depth and strength we need to thrive in the face of change and stress. It might be ancestral lineage, faith, tradition, or a legacy and established history in a community. Some of the members on our walk talked about how the “roots” of their clubs were strong and how members rallied after a big change to re-build what was lost or damaged. Others reflected



on how the older traditions or members in their club could be a hindrance to supporting a change that was needed. Every individual and every club has different strategies that work for them in the face of change. If burning off stems and rebuilding off your roots isn't your style, perhaps thicker skin might be.

The next tree we saw on our walk was obviously different from the others. Tall, wide and visibly old, the Douglas Fir tree has thick corky bark and a commanding presence in the forests by Johnson Lake. This tree has evolved to survive low to moderate intensity fires and its primary secret to survival is its thick bark. The bark acts as an insulator or armour and protects the tree from the heat of a fire. Young Douglas Fir trees, however, do not have this armour – it takes at least 40 years for the first layer or thicker bark to form. If we compare this to people, we can see there are some interesting parallels. Few of us are born with the thick skin we need to manage all the changes that come our way. When we are children, we break down easily when things don't go our way and as young professionals, it is easy to get riled up about changes (or a perceived lack of change) in the places we work. Later in life, the same challenges we struggled with when we were younger don't seem as bad – we have developed a thicker skin through experience.

Standing on a hill surrounded by Douglas Fir trees, we could look across the lake and down the valley and reflect on how the Douglas Fir's response to fire relates to our life and work. We shared stories about how we survived conflicts and situations because of our “thick skin.” We also shared stories about how that thick skin made it challenging to embrace some of the changes that were

necessary. Thick skin, we decided, can be an asset or a liability depending on the situation.

We looped back to the parking lot on a trail along the lake passing pine, spruce, aspen and fir trees. The forest was no longer just a “carpet of green,” – it was a diverse community made up of individuals and groups that are challenged by the fires of change, just as we are challenged by fires in our personal and professional lives. Like the trees, our response to a disturbance varies according to our personality, the intensity of the challenge and the condition of the community to which we belong. Luckily for us, we have more choice and movement than the trees and we can draw from multiple strategies in the face of change. We can be an Aspen and draw from our roots, we can be a Lodgepole Pine and rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the fire AND we can be like a Douglas Fir, relying on thick skin to help us through low-moderate intensity changes. One thing we all agreed upon at the end of the walk was that we all need fire. Managing the forest or an organization knowing that fire is important and inevitable challenges us to embrace change and recognize that it is key to being resilient and successful as individuals and organizations.



Dave Verhulst

Dave believes the natural world is one of our most powerful teachers and mentors and is passionate about connecting people with the wisdom nature has to share. He has developed his own unique leadership capacities and style through experiences working in government, private and non-profit communities throughout Alberta. With 15 years professional guiding experience, Dave has also worked as Executive Director of the Interpretive

Guides Association, Fire Communications Officer for Banff National Park and co-founded Nature's Tracks Forest Play in Canmore. He has a Master's Degree in Recreation Management, is an accredited Master Interpretive Guide and is a Wilderness First Responder. Dave works as a contract facilitator with Pacific Center for Leadership, based in Canmore, Alberta.