The forest fire season is upon us once again. A mild winter, with lower-than-average precipitation, produced major fires that have torn through western states. One 375-square-mile fire burned for more than two months outside Santa Barbara. Ironically, the fire was ignited by sparks from grinding equipment used to repair a water pipe. This year, the problem is global. In Greece alone, more than 3,000 forest fires have raged since June, with extensive loss of lives and property.

There are fires to be fought in the transportation industry, as well. Increasingly, industry managers are evaluated on their ability to extinguish these flames, and firefighting skills are routinely expected of operating, sales and customer service personnel.

What does this skill set entail? According to Gary Klein, a civilian cognitive psychologist who addressed this issue for the U.S. Air Force 10 years ago, the accepted knowledge of artificial intelligence, which maintains that rules-based systems allow machines to reach decisions faster and more reliably than humans, are flawed. Klein made his observations while studying fighter pilots. At first, novice pilots used classic decision-making models, no doubt out of fear of making a fatal mistake. But over time, all procedures became internalized, and there was no need for formal rules.

Klein then extended his research to professional firefighters who claimed they relied on their intuition to fight fires. The research indicated that there was strength to these methods. Intuition started with recognition and perception — looking for patterns and cues from previous experience — that guide the immediate action plan. This conclusion challenges traditional evaluation techniques, where multiple options are simultaneously rated to determine the best outcome. Instead, the firefighter makes a gut choice and proceeds accordingly. If unintended consequences occur, the solution is discarded and replaced with a new gut choice.

Simply put, it is not necessary to come up with the best choice — only one that works. However, “just good enough” may not be satisfactory for a complex industry such as transportation. Increasingly, we see gut decisions solve one problem, only to give rise to new problems. The increased popularity of network operating plans often means suppressing the firefighter instinct. The lone-wolf firefighter model may no longer be desirable in our industry, but can the transportation industry’s culture embrace a team-based approach?

In a book review of Norman Maclean’s Young Men and Fire, Karl Wieck argues that corporate leaders need to heed the lesson of the 1949 Mann Gulch fire, which killed 13 trained firefighters. Groups — not individuals — need to be capable of improvisation, wise behavior, respectful interaction and communication. When these are present, small groups can function as a resilient source of “collective sense-making.”

Unfortunately, the success of group decision-making in our industry is mixed. So perhaps firefighting is the wrong skill set for an organization to reward. Roger Bohn, a professor at the University of California at San Diego, maintains that firefighting is a serious business problem characterized by recognizable symptoms. If more than three of the following symptoms exist in your organization, you have a chronic problem:

- Not enough time to solve all the problems.
- More problems than problem solvers.
- Solutions are incomplete.
- Problems recur and cascade.
- Performance drops.
- Urgency supersedes importance.
- Superficial remedies don’t address underlying problems.
- Problems become crises.
- Problems smolder, then require heroic responses.
- Performance drops. (So many problems are unsolved, and opportunities are lost.)

Bohn might want to add one more symptom — the company rewards firefighters. They may retain the firefighters when headcount reductions take place, or, they may promote the firefighter, not recognizing that this skill set will not save or sustain the company.

Our industry is a complicated asset-based, network operating entity, challenged by formidable externalities such as capacity, globalization, security and regulation. We are increasingly being called upon to do more with less. A new type of management — one that solves rather than postpones problems — is needed on the front lines. To achieve this result, however, may require more drastic changes.

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