

Foreword

On August 5, 1949, at Mann Gulch, Montana, Wagner Dodge entered history by standing in the fire. A veteran smokejumper, Dodge and the crew he led parachuted into Mann Gulch to put out a ground fire that had started from a bolt of lightning. When they boarded the C-47 military transport in Missoula that would take them to their work, the fire was small. But, by 4:10 pm when they parachuted in and arrived near the gulch, the fire was out of control.

Dodge and his men set up across the gulch so that the Missouri River and a large stand of pines were separating them from the fire. The terrain made it difficult to see the fire's path and when the group crested a ridge they saw that the fire had crossed the gulch and was only a few hundred yards away. Dodge yelled to his men to retreat and they began running up the steep canyon walls. But the fire was moving toward them at 30 miles an hour and gaining speed. Dodge realized that he and his men would soon be suffocated or burned to death trying to outrun it. So he stopped running.

Managing his fear of imminent death, Dodge invented a solution. Facing the blaze, he lit a ring of fire around himself. It quickly created a patch of burned earth, over which he hoped the blaze would "jump." Dodge yelled for his men to lie down with him in the newly burned patch, but the men kept running, either because they couldn't hear him or didn't listen. The fire swept over them. Thirteen men were left dead. Dodge Wagner emerged from the fire practically unscathed.

We who work with groups are often figuratively, rather than literally, standing in the fire. Our fires start when challenging issues flare up in groups and mix with fuel from our own issues. Still, the lessons learned from the Mann Gulch fire ring true for us as well:

- You never know when a fire will ignite or shift direction.
- What has worked for you in the past may not work now. Successfully standing in the fire often means inventing new tools and techniques in the moment.
- Fire can even be your friend if you respect it and know how to use it.
- Ultimately, successfully standing in the fire is about developing a mindset – how you think and feel – that enables you to be calm, curious, courageous, compassionate, and flexible. Without this mindset, you are lost.

In *Standing in the Fire*, Larry Dressler addresses a critical issue for those of us who help groups. Although it is important to have tools and techniques in our kit, they have little value if our thoughts and feelings undermine our ability to use them. I think of these tools and techniques as application software, like Word®, Excel®, or PowerPoint®. To run all of this software, you need a solid operating system that doesn't crash when the task becomes tough – like crunching complicated formulas in a large spreadsheet or formatting a huge document. If your operating system isn't up to the task, it doesn't matter how much application software you own or what it can do. In our work, the ability to think and feel clearly in challenging situations without distortion is the operating system. For the past thirty years I have helped OD and HR professionals, facilitators, and organizational leaders get better results and build better relationships. To help them achieve these results, nothing has been more important than helping them change their mindset or operating system.

Each of us faces issues that make us less effective at helping others become more effective. These issues distort our ability to see clearly and act in service to the group. Some of us get defensive when people with power challenge us; some of us get angry when others don't take initiative or responsibility; some of us want to be liked so much that we do things for the group that we shouldn't. I could go on, but I assume you get the point. Over the years I have been consulting to organizations, I have faced each of these issues, as well as others. And I am still learning.

Learning to stand in the fire means doing internal work. It is a discipline and a journey. The path differs for each of us and there is more than one way to stand effectively. We need a guide to help us explore when and how we lose our balance, help us learn how to regain it, and help us develop ways of showing up with groups so we are more likely to remain calm, curious, compassionate, and courageous. That is what *Standing in the Fire* delivers.

Doing this work is not only for helping others; it is for you. When you increase your ability to stand in the fire, you think and act authentically with compassion for others and yourself. You spend less time worrying about what might happen, what is happening, or what will happen. You feel less angry, less guilty, and less disappointed. You have more energy to do your work and enjoy it more. In short, you increase your mental health. Ultimately, this is a gift for yourself. Larry is an ideal guide to help us on this journey. He is the real deal. I first met Larry several years ago, when he was presenting a short workshop on *Standing in the Fire* to a conference of professional facilitators. When I walked into the room, Larry introduced himself. When I

introduced myself, he said something like, "I'm really glad you're here; I really value your work and your books have had a big influence on me. I'm also feeling anxious knowing you're in the session." What struck me was how transparent and calm Larry seemed and how willing he was to be vulnerable with me. We had met less than a minute ago and he was able to identify how he was feeling, toward me and articulate it in a way that quickly built a relationship between us. A little later I realized that, in his introduction, he had practiced what he was teaching us in the session. I thought to myself, "*This is a guy I want to learn from.*" Since that day, Larry and I have been colleagues, meeting virtually and regularly to learn with and from each other.

Learning to stand in the fire is personal work and Larry is a personal guide. To help us on our journey, he shares his own journey with us. He shows us how to challenge ourselves by challenging himself. He shows us how to laugh at ourselves by laughing at himself. And he shows us how to be compassionate with ourselves by being compassionate with himself. In sum, he helps us safely navigate challenging terrain and arrive at a better place. Enjoy the journey.

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