

Introduction

The Power of Fire

Can you remember the most intense high-heat moment you've faced working with a group? One of my most memorable happened fairly early in my career, but I remember it vividly. Catherine, my consulting partner at the time, and I were working with a group of federal law enforcement officers. A conflict between two divisions of the agency had escalated over several months, and just prior to our first meeting, a few employees were caught vandalizing the vehicles of their co-workers by scratching the doors with keys. People could hardly remember the origin of the conflict, but both factions believed they were in the right. The rift had taken on a life of its own, now being played out in a cycle of revenge and retaliation.

At the first meeting everyone arrived on time, and as the officers sat down and positioned their chairs, the seating configuration started to look more and more like two circles. The geography of the conflict was clear from the outset, and the tension in the room was palpable. As they waited for the meeting to begin, people sat with crossed arms and legs, hardly able to look at members of the other group. Just as we were about to begin, Catherine and I noticed that every member of the group was wearing a gun.

All I could think about in that moment was the twenty or so guns strapped to people who were really angry at each other. My heart was beating fast, and my face felt flushed. I remember looking toward the exit for reassurance. In that moment, I had no idea what to do or say, and Catherine looked only slightly more composed.

What Gets Ignited

It doesn't take firearms to remind us of our vulnerability when we step into the room as the convener of a high-stakes meeting. Sometimes it takes only a skeptically raised eyebrow from a powerful person in the room; other times, the realization that the group will run out of time before achieving its goal. What creates heat for each of us depends largely on our personal hot buttons.

When these buttons are pushed, two kinds of energy can be ignited. One kind of energy connects to an age-old human survival instinct, the *self-protective reaction*. It's habitual, often emotionally charged, and designed to bring us back to our comfort zone. The second kind of energy can be accessed only if we can ask ourselves, *Who do I want to be right now?* This question ignites the energy of *deliberate choice and wise action*. This book is about building our capacity to ignite the second energy, even when our fears and ego encourage us to do otherwise.

What Is the *Who*?

Staring into the heat of a challenging group dynamic, we instinctively want to do something. We attempt to find just the right intervention that will make things easier for the group or perhaps for us. With little awareness of our internal dialogue or our emotional state, we take action. And too often that action turns out to be either the wrong choice or a reasonable choice poorly executed. Too often, no action was needed at all. What was needed was a facilitative leader who could serve as a steady, impartial, purposeful presence in the room, holding the space of the conversation with good humor, resoluteness, and compassion.

Who we are in these moments of fire is in itself a powerful intervention. We do not need to be the picture of charisma or Zen-like detachment. Instead we need to stand in a way that has integrity for us and is in service to the group we are there to assist. Our power comes from the realization that we always have a choice about which *who* shows up.

In Search of Hot Spots

Without passion, conviction, and yearning there would be no human fire. And without fire, groups would produce very little of interest or positive impact. We need fire to progress, but we also need to help people channel its heat. That's the job of *fire tenders*—people who know how to bring out the life-generating, creative potential of group fire.

Cultivating the creative potential of fire is the only useful approach, because fire suppression doesn't work. Too many leaders and institutions avoid or stifle the critical conversations that need to happen, and the results are often disastrous. Many case studies have been written about Enron and its predominant culture, in which challenging the status quo or raising concerns was simply not acceptable. Dissent was discouraged in a wide variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. The policy of suppression ultimately led to the demise of the company. In order to create organizations and communities in which people feel safe speaking their truth, we need leaders who are both skillful at process and who possess the capacity to remain self-aware, open, and fluid even as others struggle with dissent, confusion, and fear.

Fire tenders are drawn to the hot spots of social existence because they know that where there is heat, there is the possibility of transformation. Though they seek out and cultivate heat with great skill, they know their most important tool is their interior self—their mindset, emotional state, and the way they occupy their bodies. They understand that no matter what is producing heat “out there” in the group, they control their own thermostat.

Standing in Service to the Group

Standing is a word with many meanings. When we say, “My decision stands,” the decision remains valid or effective. When we say, “I can't stand it,” we mean endure or tolerate. When we “stand up,” we are rising to our feet or picking ourselves up. When we communicate “our stand” on an issue, the word refers to an attitude or outlook. “Standing in the fire” encompasses all those meanings. As

leaders, we must remain effective in our facilitative roles. Often we need to endure situations we experience as uncomfortable. Inevitably we are knocked off balance by the intense energy of others and must pick ourselves up quickly and regain our equilibrium. When we stand as fire tenders, we are choosing a particular set of attitudes—a way of seeing what is happening and who we are in the moment.

This book explores six interrelated ways of standing in the fire. You will learn what it is like to stand with self-awareness, presence, receptivity, intention, fluidity, and compassion. For each of these ways of standing in the fire, this book describes the capacities you need to succeed.

A Lifetime of Practice

Masterful fire tenders have a set of personal practices aimed at cultivating self-awareness and effective action. These practices help us choose our way of standing when we face the fire. Every moment, whether inside or outside a meeting, is an opportunity to practice. We can develop ongoing practices that aid us in developing everyday readiness. We can engage in special practices for our arrival at meetings, and we can use practices that help us recover during a meeting when a hot button gets pushed. We need practices that help us to reflect and to renew ourselves after we have come through a human firestorm. Contrary to the popular saying, practice does not “make perfect.” Instead, practice is where we can break through the illusions of perfectionism and control as we learn to become present to our own wisdom during moments in which others find it difficult to access theirs.

Inviting Fire

As we engage in practice and derive new insights from our experiences in groups, we come to realize that destructive fires like distraction, fear, and aggression are all self-inflicted. As we develop greater mastery, we learn to recognize dissent and confusion as familiar old friends. We welcome inconvenient surprises as useful

fuel, and we come to view group breakdowns as the natural precursor to breakthroughs.

The more we work with fire, the more we see it as a source of transformation not only for groups, but also for us as agents of change. Each time we invite dissent, possibility, suffering, passion, or confusion into the room, we must also invite that which is calm, clear, and courageous within us—our wisest, most centered self. Each time we accept this invitation, we honor a proposition as old as humankind's relationship with fire—that conversation and human connection will change this world for the better.