

TWO MORE CHAINS

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Is Your Task Book Process Serving You?

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"Each culture has rituals and tests that one is required to get through before becoming a full member or a leader of that culture. In wildland firefighting training, experience, and performance evaluation are prerequisites for certification as a firefighter and to advance to supervisory or IMT positions."

—1996 Wildland Firefighter Safety Awareness Study

In the [1996 Wildland Firefighter Safety Awareness Study](#) ("Tri-Data Study"), Tri-Data Corporation—a company charged with examining the safety culture in wildland fire—stated that *"each culture has rituals and tests that one is required to get through before becoming a full member or a leader of that culture."* In wildland fire, that translates to training, experience, and performance evaluation rituals we are all familiar with. If you've ever stepped foot on a fire or walked into a fire camp, you've likely already completed that process at least once.

Yet, despite being a unified system, the rituals we engage in as we work to obtain more qualifications vary widely across agencies and units. But, how could they not, when the NWCG Standards for Wildland Fire Position Qualifications, PMS 310-1, has built strategic ambiguity into each version.

In the 1993 PMS 310-1 that first unveiled and described the Position Task Book (PTB), it clearly states that: *"a key component in the certification process is the subjective evaluation by management of an individual's capability to perform in a position."* Meaning each unit, each supervisor, each individual evaluator can insert their perspectives, opinions, and ultimately their biases into that process.

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bit.ly/2mcfeedback



GROUND TRUTHS

By Travis Dotson
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Task Book Tyranny

I set out to write a standard piece pointing out a few ways we abuse the Task Book system to maintain the existing power structure.

I figured I could both praise and mock our culture simultaneously to encourage self-reflection. Oh look, I just described every Ground Truths I've ever written. Apparently, I have a formula.

Not this time! I'm going direct with a simple list of things you should NOT do.

1. Do Not Judge a Trainee Based on Appearance

Don't give Johnny Zyn Bro a pass because his bulging biceps with tree line tats stretch the sleeves of his fire groupie merch T-shirt. People can look the part and still suck.

Dialed operators come in a variety of shapes, sizes, color, and footwear—Birkenstocks included. If you judge by appearance, you are screwing up the performance-based system. You are biased because you are human, but don't let that keep you from consciously focusing on PERFORMANCE.

Clear Text: Don't be sexist or racist. This is exactly where unspoken prejudice will surface. When first paired with a trainee, a trainer might do an internal eyeroll the moment they see a person not fitting their "ideal firefighter" image. This stereotyping trainer then gives less guidance, judges more harshly, and signs fewer tasks. I repeat: Don't Do That!

2. Don't Make Stuff Up

If you are on the committee tasked with judging the validity of completed Task Books, don't contribute to the arms race of additional requirements. Don't make

up an arbitrary number of assignments, days, years, fuel types, etc. required to become qualified.

It's fine to have a documented standard with objective criteria applied consistently, but adding random barriers in the name of "quality" is called "Gatekeeping."

Gatekeeping is especially heinous when criteria are kept vague and shifts based on who the trainee is vs. how they have performed. Don't play that game.

Speaking of games, let's play the "*What If*" game. What if there were no names used in the Task Book evaluation? If it's really about documentation and performance, there is no need for any identifying information. Let that notion simmer for a second.

Maybe you are thinking of logistical challenges (how to redact names). Or maybe you are thinking it's a waste of time because on a small unit everyone will figure it out anyway.

We are creative folks, if you can imagine barriers, I bet you can also think of solutions. If you are unwilling to even ponder it, maybe you like the way things are.

What if a redacted Task Book package was sent to a neighboring unit's committee for evaluation? How does that feel? Does it worry you to have less influence—aka Power? Don't get mad. It's just a game.

OK, so this list approach didn't really work. I tried to do something different and ended up doing what I always do because it's familiar.

Imagine that.

Swing on, Toolswingers.

[Continued from Cover Page] This strategic ambiguity has been carried forward in subsequent versions, though the language is slightly different in the most current: *“Certification and recertification are subjective determinations each individual agency must make based on position task evaluations, position performance evaluations, and judgment of the quality of an individual’s experience.”*

While the intent of the strategic ambiguity is to build flexibility into the system so individual units and supervisors—who arguably have the most intimate knowledge of a person’s abilities—can make informed decisions about a trainee’s competency. But whenever flexibility is provided, it also opens the door for processes to creep away from the initial intent of the guidance given.

In my career, I’ve seen this play out in so many different ways. I’ve seen folks “pencil whipped” through the Task Book and certification process (signed off quickly). Not because they were competent, but because their unit needed someone with that qualification to fill a role. Or other folks who switched units and had their already-opened Task Book put on pause for a full season. This was done simply because the hiring unit had not been the ones to open it and *“needed to make their own determination as to the person’s readiness”* to work on that qual. This ties into the all-too-common lack of trust in final evaluators not being from a trainee’s home unit. Can this stranger *really* make an informed decision on a trainee’s competency if they only worked with them one time? Probably not . . . Right?

**How can you even judge the quality of an assignment these days
when so many people are going out as trainees without a trainer?!
Or they have a trainer, but complete all their tasks independently
(think: Division Actual and Division Trainee).**

Or what about the folks who are required by their unit to have a minimum of “X” trainee assignments without regard to the quality of those assignments? Often, that requirement exists simply because the supervisor had to jump through those hoops when they were working on that qual or because the Red Card committee deems it impossible to get quality experience in fewer assignments. And on that note, how can you even judge the quality of an assignment these days when so many people are going out as trainees without a trainer! Or they have a trainer, but complete all their tasks independently (think: Division Actual and Division Trainee).

So how did all this variation come into play in a system created to promote standardization? And how can we fix it? To get some more context around that question, let’s hear from Erik Aplan, our resident Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center history buff, about the creation story and purpose behind our current Task Book and training system:

Where Did Position Task Books Come From?

Organized wildland fire groups had existed all over the U.S. for decades when a wave of standardization, collaboration, and professionalization arose in the early 1970s. A slew of acronyms sprung up following the disastrous 1970 Southern California fire season, some of which we recognize (NWCG) and some of which have since been superseded (National Interagency Fire Qualification System [NIFQS]). Through the 1970s and ‘80s, the Incident Command System (ICS) replaced the Large Fire Organization (LFO).

On the training and certification side, we can piece together the trajectory through snapshots over the decades.

Efforts began immediately after the [1970 fire season](#) when the interagency fire community in California began to revamp the entire fire response system, including training and certification.

Around this time, Red Cards became mandatory and the NIFQS provided a standard process to track firefighter training and rate their job performance in a given qualification. Forest Service researcher James Davis wrote in the [July 1979 Journal of Forestry](#) that the system relied on four key components:

1. Prerequisite experience
2. Training
3. Current experience
4. Physical fitness

NIFQS was designed to track all of these. At the time, “current experience” meant that a firefighter was required to perform a job “at least once” in a five-year period to be considered qualified. Davis added: *“Most agencies require a formal job performance report.”* What he was describing encapsulates some of the key pieces of the Position Task Book (PTB) concept—but that idea didn’t yet exist.

Prior to Task Book and S-courses, the wildland fire community was based on a mentor/mentee program. This often led to questions around whether a person was competent in their assigned role or not. Someone just showed up and you had to trust them?

And then, suddenly, Task Books were there. OK, not suddenly, but with lots of effort from the NWCG folks over several years. Basically, the entire performance-based system that centered around PTBs started development in 1988. This came after a few years of transitioning from the Large Fire Organization to the Incident Command System.

With ICS in place by the mid-1980s, PTBs were the next target. NWCG spent the next few years developing standards for wildland fire qualifications, resulting in PTBs being made operational in February 1994.

Looking again at the 1993 PMS 310-1, Wildland Fire Qualification Subsystem Guide, it reads: *“This is a ‘performance based’ qualification system. In this system, the primary criteria for qualification is individual performance as observed by an evaluator using approved standards. This system differs from previous wildland fire qualifications systems which have been ‘training based.’ Training-based systems use the completion of training courses or a passing score on an examination as a primary criteria for qualification.”*

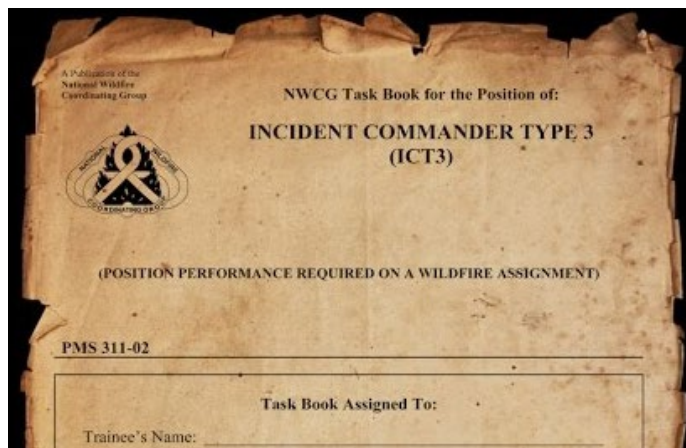
In other words, firefighters couldn’t test into a qual. They had to prove competency by performing the job and being signed off by a qualified trainer.

Intent of the Wildland Fire Qualification System

With that brief and informative interlude from Erik, let’s add some additional context as we try to answer the question: *Where did all this variability come from?*

When NWCG created the Wildland Fire Qualification system, it did so with the intent to standardize the way we determine whether a person is competent in a qualification. That way, when any qualified personnel show up on a fire, we can be confident they will be able to successfully perform in their assigned role. This was, and is currently, done through a multistep process:

1. Initiate the Task Book after verifying required experience, training, and recommended training has been completed.
2. Get trainee assignments and receive evaluation.
3. Document proficiency.



The 1993 PMS 310-1 provides further direction for these steps, including the clarification that:

- ❖ PTBs have been designed in a format which will **allow documentation of a trainee’s ability to perform each task.**
- ❖ **This guide does not recommend the number of times an individual should serve as a trainee** or how many times a given position should be filled before advancement. This is a determination that a supervisor must make based on task evaluations, position performance evaluations, and their own judgement of the quality of an individual’s experience.
- ❖ The **quality of experiences gained in a given position should be closely evaluated when making a determination for advancement** . . . The quality of experience may relate to the number of fuel types in which an individual has performed, size of the incident organization . . . and the number of assignments or complexity of operations.

Is the Current System Meeting the Intent?

Reading the guidance from the PMS 310-1, two things stand out to me:

1. There is flexibility—or ambiguity—purposely built into the system to allow for subjective judgement (the supervisor/Red Card committee knows best), and
2. feedback and documentation are of utmost importance.

If we go back and again reference the 1996 Tri-Data Study, we find some interesting observations collected from wildland fire personnel at that time:

“Many feel there is inconsistency in applying the standards, and in some cases, disregard of the standards for awarding Red Card qualifications, to the point that instead of being a powerful symbol of pride and status, many feel the Red Card to be questionable as proof of competence.”

Yes, I know this study was from 1996, but has that sentiment really changed since then? Let’s assume it hasn’t.

So, what’s the fix? Maybe we just need to reference the 1993 PMS 310-1 guide again: *“PTBs have been designed in a format which will allow documentation of a trainee’s ability to perform each task.”*

But what exactly does that mean? Do we simply need to write our evaluator number in the box next to the individual tasks that the trainee completed and send them on their way? Or, is there a need to have a discussion with the trainee to provide honest and constructive feedback paired with written documentation that can guide their next steps or provide context to the supervisor or Red Card committee that supports their evaluation.

How can a Red Card committee or supervisor truly know whether a trainee is ready to be certified if they are simply going off a few signatures and initialed boxes? OK, maybe they have a performance eval, too. But aren’t those often just some check boxes as well? Are those products valuable to the trainee, the supervisor, or the Red Card committee without context? Probably not. Unless there are existing relationships and trust.

I think we might all agree that constructive feedback is desirable. So why don’t we use that tool more? Well . . . it can be hard to give or receive that feedback. It’s uncomfortable. It can hurt our feelings or those of others. Doesn’t everyone want to leave each performance eval with the feeling that we are perfect—no notes? Of course! But we are far from it. We can’t grow unless someone gives us the honest truth. That means highlighting our weaknesses and areas for growth. And we can’t provide an accurate picture of that growth to our supervisors and Red Card committees if we don’t document that feedback!

So how do we push ourselves to use that tool more? How do we provide more context for our Red Card committees? Enter the Next Gen Task Books.

Next Gen Task Books and Incident Position Standards

“Next Gen PTBs are intended to be used in conjunction with Incident Position Standards to support constructive conversations between trainees and evaluators, set baseline standards, and enhance speed to competency.”

—NWCG, Next Generation Position Task Books

In May 2024, NWCG released three Next Generation Task Books as part of the Incident Performance and Training Modernization effort. These Next Gen PTBs are intended to support constructive conversations between trainees and evaluators, set baseline standards, and enhance speed to competency. They do so by changing the evaluation criteria for a completed task box from a simple numbered initial to a performance rating that stipulates whether the trainee:

N/O = [Had] No opportunity to perform the task.

D = Does not meet the standard for the task as described in the Incident Position Standards.

M = Meets the standard for the task as described in the Incident Position Standards.

E = Exceeds the standard for the task as described in the Incident Position Standards.

For those tasks rated “D,” the evaluator or trainer *“must provide written explanation with suggestions for improvement on the position evaluation record,”* and written feedback is encouraged for all other ratings. The Next Gen Task Books further explain that this change is *“meant as an opportunity to provide informative and constructive feedback to the*

trainee and the trainee's home unit, so they know what to focus on in the future." Which also has the potential to speed up the time to competency through that focused attention.

The new evaluation system also has benefits for the evaluator. It provides a thoughtful framework that, paired with the associated Position Standards [see "Shop Talk" on page 7], guides an evaluator or trainer as they assess whether an individual has the ability to put the complete package together to do the job on their own. And with the written feedback, Red Card committees and supervisors can be more confident in the evaluations themselves as well as the quality of the assignments.

Personal Accountability

How Do You Know If You're Ready to be Signed Off?

Back in 2017, Kipp Morrill (Bureau of Land Management) submitted an "Independent Action" essay to our Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center Blog. In it, Kipp discusses what it means to be qualified in a position and how that differs from one's experience, skills, and ability.

Does being signed off as competent mean you're ready for any scenario? Probably not. I don't think a few trainee assignments have ever prepared me for the breadth of complexity, ecosystems, and pressures I was exposed to after being signed off. But, as Kipp explains in his blog post, coming at that realization with humility can help us build experience and skills while also acknowledging our blind spots.

Check out the full blog post at the following link: [Qualified doesn't mean capable. Got humility?](#) Even better, read the Canyon Fire Shelter Deployment and Entrapment review that initially spurred the blog post at this [link](#).

Moving Forward

As we conclude this cover story, it might be a good time to reiterate the intent of the Next Gen Task Books—to support constructive conversations between trainees and evaluators, set baseline standards, and enhance speed to competency—and focus on that last piece, *speed to competency*.

Enhancing speed to competency doesn't mean we are just rushing people through. What it really means is that we are providing insights on a person's strengths and weaknesses so they can *focus* future assignments on those skills that they still need to build. It also means that through proper evaluations, Red Card committees will have more information so they can critically evaluate the final approval of certification based primarily on objective information rather than assumptions or making up "additional criteria" to ensure competency has been reached.

There will always be a combination of procedural "know-how" easily documented by task accomplishment and the less tangible ART of effectiveness for each position. Sometimes the artistry is not present with a trainee. But that is OK because we all start with mimicking. As we gain skills and confidence, we develop proficiency and our own style. The new system focuses us on getting folks through the mimicking stage—just the basics are needed to be qualified. Flourishing and artistry come later. We are trying to improve speed to competency, not speed to mastery.

Since 2024, NWCG has released a total of 36 Next Gen Task Books and are working diligently to update the remaining 67. Until then, do we really need to wait to apply the tenets of the Next Gen Task Books to those that remain unchanged?

With all of this in mind, when was the last time you reflected on whether your unit's training and certification process is still meeting the intent?

Shop Talk

Next Gen Task Books Aren't Just About the Task Book

Anyone who's been in wildland fire long enough to advance in qualifications knows those boxes in the Task Book—individual tasks for the trainer to initial when you complete them. Here's some examples from the old Firefighter Type 1 (FFT1) Task Book and from the FFT1 Next Gen Task Book.

Classic PTB

TASK	C O D E	EVAL. RECORD #	EVALUATOR: Initial & date upon completion of task
20. Serve as lookout. - Establish/maintain communications with assigned resources. - Choose position with good view of all aspects of hazard, values to be protected, and personnel. - Provide updates on any changes that may compromise the safety of fireline personnel. - Ensures escape routes and safety zones are maintained for lookout.	W/RX		

Next Gen PTB

10	Act as a lookout.	W/RX				
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At first glance, it looks like the Next Gen PTB leaves evaluation of this task fully to the subjective judgment of the trainer. But critical to the use of the Next Gen PTB is the associated Incident Position Standards publication that describes each task. Here's what the standards suggest for how to fulfill the role of "lookout" while acting as a FFT1 Trainee:

PODCAST!

Episode 43: How to Use Next Gen Task Books



Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center
lessons.wildfire.gov



[Link to Podcast Episode](#)

*Act as a lookout.

When to start task: Upon being assigned the task.

Resources to complete task: IRPG; IAP; radio; maps; compass; weather kit; strobe or signal mirror.

How to accomplish task:

- Obtain the IAP and a radio, map, compass, weather kit, and strobe.
- Navigate to the lookout spot and communicate to the appropriate personnel that you are in place.
- Take weather, smoke, and fire observations, and communicate information to the relevant personnel.
- Communicate with air resources and fire overhead.
- Account for the crew location.
- Recognize trigger points, escape routes, and safety zones for the work area.
- Identify personal trigger points.
- Provide updates for anything that could compromise safety.
- Function as a human repeater, if necessary.
- Communicate to appropriate personnel that you are leaving the lookout spot.
- Submit documentation when requested and maintain records.

When you print your Next Gen PTB,
PRINT OUT the associated Position Standards
to keep with it!

Here's how you find
the Position Standard:



NWCG
National Wildfire Coordinating Group

[Positions](#)
[Publications](#)
[Training](#)
[Tools & Technology](#)
[Communications](#)
[Alerts](#)

Firefighter Type 1 (Squad Boss)
FFT1 Standards and References
Incident Position Standards
• [NWCG Incident Position Standards for Firefighter Type 1 \(Squad Boss\), PMS 350-14](#)
Position Task Book
• [NWCG Position Task Book for Firefighter Type 1 \(Squad Boss\) \(FFT1\), PMS 311-14](#)
General References

Positions Menu
[Position Homepage](#)
[Incident Position Description](#)
[Standards and References](#)
[Position Qualification](#)



Taija Corso



Baker River Hotshot Crew sawyer Taija Corso.

Firsthand Insights from a Forest Training Officer

What problems have you seen with our Task Book system?

What makes a good/bad trainee assignment?

What should or shouldn't Red Card committees do to meet the intent of their existence?

As you will see, these significant topics—and others—are explored in this enlightening conversation between Taija Corso, Forest Training Officer for the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, and Travis Dotson, Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center Analyst.

Travis – Tell us who you are and how you got to where you are.

Taija – I started in wildland fire in the early 2000s. I went straight to the Sacramento Hotshots in the southwest as my first wildland fire experience. I spent a couple years there, then got on the Idaho Panhandle Hotshots for a couple years.

Next, I went to jump, got hurt in training, and ended up being on the Flathead Hotshot Crew. Once I got healthy, I moved back to Washington to be on the Baker River Hotshots. I finished out my hotshot career on Entiat Hotshots as a squad leader.

By that point, my wife and I were accumulating children. I love the hotshot world, but it wasn't working out to be gone for 100 to 130 days a year with kids. Being on those crews, I had experiences in which I saw friends and coworkers being medevacked off the hill. That drew me to training and Safety Officer work.

The Okanogan-Wenatchee has an Assistant Forest Training Officer and a Forest Training Officer. The Assistant was open. I put in for it and was lucky enough to get that job. Then I became the Forest Training Officer.

In all, I've had about 13 years hotshotting and the last 11 years in training.

Travis – What problems have you seen with our Task Book system?

Taija – Inconsistency.

You might see a hotshot crew that requires a trainee to have five to six-plus assignments for the superintendent to sign somebody off as a Firefighter 1. And you'll see another District come in with one or two assignments with a total of 10 days.

Also, different agencies use these Task Books, including firefighters from the state or from county fire departments. That introduces some inconsistency. For example, I would see a first-year firefighter getting their Firefighter 1 and then getting Engine Boss soon after. That's a different timeline than we see in the U.S. Forest Service.

It's all the same Task Book, but different agencies view it differently and judge their people to be qualified at different skill levels.

Over the past five years, I've been asked more to be part of some interagency review committees. I think things are getting better, becoming more consistent.

I think all agencies are trying to hold themselves accountable and that's a good thing. The current system allows for dramatic inconsistency. I get that all employees bring something different to the table and some of them have other life experiences that contribute to them being ready to be signed off a little quicker.

We definitely see different thoughts on what it takes to sign somebody off.

Travis – What does it mean to be signed off?

Does that mean you're ready to handle anything that could possibly happen in that position, like an expert? Or is it the minimum? Like OK, now that you've proven that you can perform at the lowest level, go do it on your own and that is when you will get *good* at doing this.

Taija – Yeah. I know both of those perspectives. I don't know if there's a solution to that. I think it's just something to recognize. In terms of review committees, it comes back to consistency. We just need to make sure we're treating everyone the same.

Travis – What makes a good trainee assignment?

Taija – It definitely needs to start with some kind of conversation as you first meet up. The trainee/trainer interaction should start off in a good way.



Taija spent 13 years working on various hotshot crews.

In terms of review committees, it comes back to consistency. We just need to make sure we're treating everyone the same.

It's tough that our responders don't get much instruction on how to be a trainer.

The trainer gets a feel for where the trainee is at in their process. Not just if it's their first, second or third assignment. But where they are in their career, what their background is, what comfort level they have with certain strengths—maybe with engines, maybe a structure background, comfort with firing or whatever.

It works both ways.

For the trainer, they figure out where they can lean on this person if needed. Also, if they can split up and just let them be independent and work on their own—or where they might need more oversight.

It's tough that our responders don't get much instruction on how to be a trainer.

Travis – What are specific elements of a “not so good” training assignment?

Taija – I think it goes back to the relationship with the trainer and the trainee. A trainer can make it a bad assignment if they're not really into it. A lot of times they're not even interested in having a trainee. It's just thrown onto them by the team. They just want to do their work and they're not really providing the trainee an opportunity to learn and have those conversations that can make all the difference.



Taija (far left) on the Entiat Hotshot Crew.

So sometimes people get poor training assignments just from a trainer feeling like it's not what they signed up for.

Travis – Yeah, it gets awkward, too. If you're the trainee and it's very clear you are unwelcome. It puts you in a tough spot. I've definitely been that trainee where it's just like, man, this person does not want to be doing the trainer role right now. And then you have to figure out how to try and be helpful, how to try and learn something—but stay out of their way. It gets super weird.

Taija – Another thing with this topic would be the ability to give and to

receive honest feedback. We need to be able to hear feedback on what you need to move forward with learning in this position. I know there are all kinds of great leadership classes that cover giving and receiving feedback.

I think more than other agencies, we in the U.S. Forest Service have a lot of good training available to us. You see it in some of the higher-level leadership classes. But not everyone gets that. So a lot of times, it's an intuitive thing and people can initially get it wrong until they're comfortable with themselves.

Another issue I've seen is people going from trainee to trainer without having any time on their own to really get the position down. I don't know if it needs to be a standard because I hate boxing things in too tightly, but ideally you would get some time operating on your own. Get a few assignments or a year or something on just serving in that position. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen very often.

Travis – Receiving feedback is a skill that is not just for trainees.

I've seen it where somebody that's fully qualified needs some tough feedback. Receiving and providing honest feedback is just a skill we all need, period. Sometimes it's easier to give the tough feedback because somebody's a trainee. You can say: *"Well, it's because you're still learning."* But when it's somebody that's fully qualified and they're not up to snuff, it's almost harder to tell them.

Taija – Exactly. There are some guides out there on the [Wildland Fire Learning Portal](#). Locally, I'm going to put together a one-pager on some expectations for trainees, trainers and the leaders that turn in the Task Books from their employees on what we'd like to see. It will include some of the resources available like job aids in the Wildland Fire Learning Portal.

Another issue I've seen is people going from trainee to trainer without having any time on their own to really get the position down. I don't know if it needs to be a standard because I hate boxing things in too tightly, but ideally you would get some time operating on your own. Get a few assignments or a year or something on just serving in that position. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen very often.

Travis – Yeah, there's just such a need for trainers—and you get tossed into it. There's a number of ways we could deal with that. We could also teach people what to do if you find yourself in this position, where you have a trainee and this is your first qualified assignment. We could teach people how to navigate that, but a lot of times people try to be more confident than they are.

Taija – That just speaks to the entire wildland fire community and the missing positions we have in our incident management teams. And in a heavy PL-5 year you're gonna see a lot of this.

Also, a lot of the trainees will not really have a trainer. They might be working for a Division Supt. as a Task Force Leader Trainee. That's just the reality of it.

Travis – There's people who really believe in the idea that if you need to learn how to swim, we'll just throw you in the deep end! Like a lot of things, there's a time and a place for that method, but if it's the only method used—somebody's gonna drown.

Taija – Exactly. We all learn differently. Some will thrive and some will just flounder. It can be a big liability.

Travis – It's definitely not the way the system is designed.

Do you have any specific advice on things trainers and trainees should and should not do?

You have to sit down at the end of the assignment and make sure everything is captured. Both the trainee and the trainer can look it over and have a feel for what was written and have a chance for some back-and-forth dialogue. Especially on what they can do better next time or what they need to work on.

Taija – Just having that openness and that dialogue between the two is really the foundation. If you start there, it sets up a quality training assignment.

And then there's just the proper documentation.

You have to sit down at the end of the assignment and make sure everything is captured. Both the trainee and the trainer can look it over and have a feel for what was written and have a chance for some back-and-forth dialogue. Especially on what they can do better next time or what they need to work on.

Travis – I know it makes it easier for me when I'm in a trainer role, if somebody hands me a very organized packet. This past summer I had a trainee hand me a folder with all their open Task Books and a list of their qualifications. And, of course, the Task Book they're working on. You flip it over and they had multiple evaluation sheets and blank performance ratings.

It was all there and when they handed it to me, it was very clear: I need to fill this out and do a performance eval. It makes it so much easier for me to provide good documentation for the trainee when they show up with a very organized packet.

Taija – And as a trainer, I really like to see the previous assignments so I can see where they're at. Sometimes, I'll just get that one page that I'm supposed to fill out, and it's like the 3rd or 4th evaluation. And there should always be a coffee stain on the front of the Task Book, too!

Travis – Absolutely!

Tell me about the Qualification Review Committee.

Taija – Per the Interagency Red Book, a Review Committee is required for every Task Book qualification. Essentially, every Task Book gets reviewed for completeness before it's submitted for certification.

Travis – And can you say what the intent is? Because, especially if you're new to the system, it's like: "Hey, I did all the tasks in the Task Book, somebody that is qualified said I'm good to go. Why is there this additional step?"

Taija – It's mostly about consistency. We're looking at the whole body of work they've put out there and trying to ensure it's consistent across the board. That one qualification, say, a Crew Boss, is the same over here as this other Crew Boss. Did they go through the same process to get where they were at?

The members of the review committee are usually AFMO types. Folks who have a lot of operational experience—with a lot of knowledge and experience—ensuring that there's some expertise looking at these Task Books. They have a critical eye in making sure that everything's covered.

We're looking to make sure that all the boxes in the Task Book are checked. We're looking to make sure that the signatures are in place, that the Task Book dates correspond with other records. Basically, making sure that all the documentation is solid.

When something goes bad in the wildland fire world, the question is always asked: *"Is this person qualified for the position they're doing?"* Everything is scrutinized.

In a committee meeting, someone might bring up that a trainee only had four days on assignment and this person is being signed off on Crew Boss. So they get a chance to do some follow-up with a representative from that District. Who was this person's trainer? Can you talk about this employee a little bit more? We get more background on the situation.

Even though the final evaluator may have signed them off, there might be some inconsistencies that require a little more follow up.

I saw a Helicopter Crewmember (HECM) Trainee, which is one of the lower quals, and they had seven or eight assignments over two summers. And this is their day job.

It's what they do daily. What's going on here?

Why are we waiting so long to send these in?

Travis – Have you ever had a time where you see Task Books come in and you'll be like, man, this person should have been qualified a while ago. And then give feedback to the home unit saying: *"Send these in sooner!"*

Taija – Yes, we do see that, too. It's typically the Type 1 programs. They hold themselves at a pretty high standard—the hotshot crews, smokejumpers and rappel programs.

I mean, I saw a Helicopter Crewmember (HECM) Trainee, which is one of the lower quals, and they had seven or eight assignments over two summers. And this is their day job. It's what they do daily. What's going on here? Why are we waiting so long to send these in?

Travis – It's interesting going and reading the Next Gen Task Book introduction. One of the reasons it states for this major update is increasing speed to competency. Because we know wildland fire is a place where it takes a long time to get quals, those of us who come up in it get used to it. But I think other people look at us and they're like, are you serious? It takes you how long to build a Crew Boss? What's wrong with you?

Taija – Yeah, exactly. Especially where we're at with hiring. I think we're at something like 70 percent of permanent positions are full. There are key positions going unfilled. And a lot of this is just due to a lack of applicants. So, we do need qualified people.

For us, in our operating plan, we don't have a definitive number of assignments needed. For the most part, we trust the final evaluator. When they say the person is ready to go out on their own as fully qualified, that's enough.

It's just a rare occasion that there's some inconsistencies within the Task Book—or something stands out.

Travis – Sure. I also know of scenarios where it makes sense for a person to get qualified after one assignment.

Taija – Yeah, for sure, I've seen that. A lot of it's the background of the employee. If they've been 20 years in fire and they are a Division Supt. or whatever it might be, and then they're looking to get Heavy Equipment Boss signed off and they worked with these things for quite a while. One really solid assignment. You know they're gonna keep people safe. Their background is solid.

Travis – That requires the system to be flexible for those instances rather than that rigid about "You have to have this many assignments," or "this many fuel types," or whatever.

Taija – Exactly. I think there still exist organizations out there that say you have to have so many assignments. A common one is three assignments. Well, maybe. But maybe they're good to go in one. And that's why you have to have that conversation.

I think a lot of times the trainee feels like they need more assignments.

So, a lot of times, people are policing themselves because they don't want to be sent into a situation without a trainer in which they are way out of their comfort zone. But sometimes they wait too long and say: *"I'm not quite ready to get signed off yet."* You have to encourage them and say: *"I know you're ready."*

Travis – Sometimes you've got to push them off the cliff so they can fly.

Do you have anything else to add about committees? What are some of your lessons about sticking to the intent?

Taija – I know we get a lot of the old-school trainers who talk how about the way things were. I suggest staying away from: *"back when I had to do it, it was five assignments!"* Those *"back in the day"* stories, this is how it used to be.

And these are members of the review committee coming out with that stuff. I suggest staying away from that mindset.

I think it's important also for the committee to be very clear on what they are looking for. Write it out so expectations are clear for everyone involved. Have an operating plan or an SOP or whatever you want to call it. But have something in writing.

We have an operating plan and I review it annually.

Again, my focus is consistency. We need to be consistent with every employee. We look at them all the same way. We have to hold ourselves accountable. If we deny one Task Book and we let another one go through with almost the same conditions, that's not good.

Travis – You know, this is part of why the Task Book system exists. It's to make it more objective. And part of what we're doing is trying to override our bias and our prejudices that we don't even realize we have.

There's times when people that look a certain way seem to get their Task Books done faster. Or people who work on this crew seem to always get through, and these folks over here that come from this program get judged a little bit differently.

So, I can see that having that plan and lining that stuff out is important. Like making it clear there's not a minimum number of assignments. Just having that written down and having that information accessible so people can read it. So there's not rumors going around saying: *"Don't even try sending it unless you have five assignments."*

Taija – Yes, firefighters seem to latch onto things. Like: *"The committee has a quota and they're gonna deny one Task Book every session."* No, that's not true. This is why having it all out there in writing for people, for transparency, is important.

Travis – And I know those of us in fire are convinced that it takes forever to get good. But on some fronts we can teach people fire stuff pretty quickly. That's another thing that has changed. These days, you can amass some pretty serious fire experience in a short amount of time.

Taija – That's true. It's different from 20 years ago. There are also different types of training now. Not your traditional S-course training, but some of these staff rides, like Twisp River. We have ways to create those "slides" in your head about how you're going to react. Plus, all the information from the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center. This all adds to the speed at which you develop competency.



Taija on vacation with his family.