

Professional Reading Program

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



Call Sign Chaos by Jim Mattis and Bing West

Why Read *Call Sign Chaos*?

“If you haven’t read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent because your personal experiences alone aren’t broad enough to sustain you.”

“I learned then and I believe now that everyone needs a mentor or to be mentor—and that no one needs a tyrant. At the same time, there’s no substitute for constant study to master one’s craft.”

“As an officer, you need to win only one battle—for the hearts of your troops. Win their hearts and they will win the fights. Competence, caring, and conviction combine to form a fundamental element—shaping the fighting spirit of your troops. Leadership means reaching the souls of your troops, instilling a sense of commitment and purpose in the face of challenges so severe that they cannot be put into words.”

Call Sign Chaos is an excellent book for leaders at all levels, from field leadership of small groups to leading large organizations. Retired General Jim Mattis is a highly respected leader who served for many years in the U.S. Marine Corps, and the leadership lessons he learned there are applicable to any leadership environment. This book will be especially valuable to leaders either rising through the ranks of their organization or preparing to do so, as the author shares his experience at different levels of an organization, from leading small groups to overseeing large organizations with complex structures and partners.

There are several videos featuring leadership lessons from the author available online. Find some of them at the links below, or by using an internet search engine.

- **Leadership Lessons from Gen. James Mattis (Ret.) (16 minutes):**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EYU3VTI3IU>
- **Assessing The Most Important Leadership Skill | Morning Joe | MSNBC (7 minutes):**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oE1GBQ1XixY>

For more leadership ideas and to dig deeper, check out the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program (WFLDP) blog, Facebook page, Professional Reading Program, and more at the links below:

Blog: <http://wildlandfireleadership.blogspot.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/WFLDP>

Professional Reading Program: <https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/prp>

Main WFLDP page: <https://www.fireleadership.gov>

Call Sign Chaos Discussion Questions

Chapter One: A Carefree Youth Joins the Disciplined Marines

What do you think about the three “Cs” in this chapter? How do you, or can you, apply the three Cs in your leadership role? Are you surprised that caring is one of these principles? How do the three Cs align or compare with the WFLDP’s values and principles found in *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*? <https://www.nwccg.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pms494-2.pdf>

Chapter Two: Recruit for Attitude, Train for Skill

What are your thoughts about attitude and skill after reading this chapter? How does that approach compare to how your organization recruits? What do you think about the “command and feedback” concept described in this chapter? How does it differ from the traditional “command and control” concept?

Chapter Three: Battle

Why is important to know your people and their personalities and abilities? How can you avoid mismatches of skills, attitudes, and assignments in your module, crew, or larger organization? What do you think of the idea of rehearsing (training) in a way that allows you to improvise in real-life situations?

Chapter Four: Broadening

What’s your take on “homework” and the idea of being physically and mentally on top of your game? Do you think we in the wildland fire service place enough value on the intellectual side of being a leader? How can you better train yourself, and those around, intellectually? Why is continual self-improvement so important to leaders at all levels? Why is it important to communicate leader’s intent in a way that lets those actually doing the work determine the “how” in order to accomplish the objective?

Chapter Five: Rhino

What do you think of the author’s comments about doctrine being a “guide but not a straitjacket?” How can you ensure that doctrine is used appropriately at your level? What does decision making “at the speed of relevance” mean to you? Why is it important to accurately share your view of reality to those above and below you in the chain of command?

Chapter Six: The March Up

Have you experienced any transitions from one level of leadership to another? If so, what lessons did you learn from the experience? Did you have to adapt to new realities of the position, or learn/hone a new skillset to succeed? How is leading a large fire organization within an even larger organization (different than leading a small team (crew, module, etc.))? What do you think of the idea of being an “opportunistic learner” as described in this chapter? How can the author’s comment about harmony based on trust apply in a fire organization?

Chapter Seven: A Division in its Prime

What can you learn about making tough leadership decisions from the examples in this chapter? How can you apply those ideas within the constraints of your own organization? Why is it important to keep basic leadership skills and concepts like “praise in public, criticize in private” in your toolbox as you advance in leadership roles? How you ever seen those in “upper” leadership positions practice poor basic leadership skills? What were the results of those actions or behaviors? What can you do to keep yourself focused on maintaining basic leadership skills and behaviors while developing new skills?

Chapter Eight: Incoherence

What do you think about “riding for the brand” as described in this chapter? How does that ethos apply in your organization? Might there be times when that way of thinking isn’t appropriate? Why or why not? As a fire leader, how can you respond to changing direction from above? In an ICS setting? In your own organization? How can you best provide your leader’s intent in those kinds of situations?

Chapter Nine: Cascading Consequences

What do you think of the author’s practice of “dropping in and getting face to face with the grunts” as a general? How and when could you do this as a fire leader? What are the benefits of this kind of “leadership by wandering around?” As the author mentions at the end of the chapter, sometimes you (or your crew, module, or organization) have to leave a job unfinished. How can you as a fire leader approach these kinds of situations?

Chapter Ten: Fighting While Transforming

How can you, as a leader, train your folks using the concepts described in this chapter? How can you scale those ideas to fit your organization, crew or module, large or small? What do you think about the ideas of leaders being “coaches at heart?” How does training lead to trust?

Chapter Eleven: Hold the Line

What’s your take on the difference between a “mistake” and a “lack of discipline” as it applies to leadership in the fire environment? What do you think of the example toward the end of the chapter? Should leaders be held accountable? Why or why not? How does this concept fit into the values and principles of the WFLDP?

Chapter Twelve: Essential NATO

What new leadership skillsets have you had to gain as you’ve moved up or around in your career? What skillsets do you see yourself needing to learn moving forward? What are some skills you could learn now that would prepare you for your next leadership position? How about in your current position or role?

Chapter Thirteen: Disbanding Bureaucracy

How (or why) can an organization’s culture be different than what the slogans say it is? What can you do at your level to promote a strong, positive culture in your organization? How can you keep it from being just feel good “bumper sticker” slogans that don’t reflect reality?

Chapter Fourteen: Central Command: The Trigonometry Level of Warfare

How important is leader's intent in describing what you want, as opposed to what you don't want, as described in this chapter? How important is "face time" in conveying your vision to, and gaining trust with, those around you, inside and outside of your organization? What are some things you can do in your leadership role to build and maintain those kinds of connections?

Chapter Fifteen: Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

You can expect to face setbacks as a leader—many times things won't go as planned. Why is it important to have multiple ways to meet your objective, and to make sure those around you are aware of those other options?

Chapter Sixteen: Friend or Foe

What do you think about the author's policy of not "agreeing by silence?" How might that concept apply in your situation? What do you think about the importance of clean, realistic, and coherent direction at all levels after reading this chapter?

Chapter Seventeen: Reflections

What stood out to you in this final chapter? How are you going to study to master your craft? What do you think about the author's statement about reading and learning from others who went before you? Do you ask yourself (and others) communications questions like "What do I know? Who needs to know? Have I told them?" to ensure information is shared with everyone? Do you have anyone around you who will call you out as a leader when you're wrong or your actions are inappropriate? Why is this important?