

# Professional Reading Program

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



## *Yes to the Mess* by Frank J. Barrett

### Why Read *Yes to the Mess*?

*“How do organizations thrive in a drastically changing world predicated on uncertainty? By building a capacity to experiment, learn, and innovate – in short, by engaging in strategic, engaged improvisation.”*

*“Everyone,’ (Mike) Tyson once said, ‘has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.’ This book is about building a mind-set for our complex, fast-moving world in which even the best laid plans are likely, figuratively, and sometimes literally to get punched in the mouth.”*

*Yes to the Mess* is a book about leading well in dynamic, complex environments, where conditions are frequently changing, chaos and confusion are common, and innovation in the face of adversity is needed. At its core, it’s about how leaders and followers can adapt and find success when things get “messy,” when plans fall apart and leaders are confronted with new or unfamiliar obstacles and challenges. Using his experience as a jazz musician, as well as examples from other areas of business and industry, the author shows that adaptability and innovation in groups is critical to success.

At first glance, a book that uses lessons learned from jazz musicians might not seem to make much sense for reading by wildland firefighters. Leadership in wildland fire takes place in a dynamic and complex environment, where conditions change by the minute, goals and objectives frequently shift, communication can be difficult, and small groups of people must work together to take action on decisions made quickly, under great pressure. While leadership in jazz takes place in much different settings, it similarly involves a shifting and changing environment where conditions are often in flux, communication is difficult, and small groups must work closely together to accomplish a common goal.

Wildland firefighters operate in a system where the ability to innovate under pressure, in adverse conditions, defines our success. Using the ideas found in *Yes to the Mess*, we can become better leaders in those situations where improvisation is needed.

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>

## Yes to the Mess Discussion Questions

### Chapter One: All That Jazz

The author talks about organizations needing "... a group of diverse specialists living in a chaotic, turbulent environment; making fast, irreversible decisions; highly interdependent on one another to interpret imperfect and incomplete information; dedicated to innovation and the creation of novelty." How does this compare to your organization? Do you think this description fits wildland fire organizations? Why or why not? What types of innovative actions or behaviors have you seen or done in your job in wildland fire?

### Chapter Two: Yes to the Mess

Early in chapter two, the author talks about learning by doing. How does this concept fit into teaching and training programs in your organization? Is there room for learning by doing in a high risk environment? How about in a high reliability organization? How can you create opportunities for learning by doing without compromising safety or mission results within a program?

### Chapter Three: Performing and Experimenting Simultaneously

Chapter three dives deeper into organizational learning, specifically important it is for organizations to learn to treat errors as opportunities. One question the author asks early in the chapter is "*What does it mean to live in a team culture in which it is OK to bring your errors forward, to publicly discuss mistakes?*" What do you think about this? How do you view errors? How about your organization? How can errors lead to improvements, at the personal or organizational level?

### Chapter Four: Minimal Structure – Maximal Autonomy

In this chapter there's a lot of discussion about group interactions and how minimal structure and maximal autonomy can lead to successful outcomes in chaotic situations. How do you see this idea tying in to wildland fire operations? Is this idea similar to how ICS works? How does a minimal structure that creates maximal opportunity for action relate to leader's intent?

### Chapter Five: Jamming and Hanging Out

Building on the idea of learning by doing from chapter three, the author explores ideas about how jazz musicians learn and experiment by working with diverse groups of people. How does diversity of ideas and experience help people learn in wildland fire? How about in your organization? In wildland fire, think about how different geographical areas and crew types have different ways of doing things, and think about how sharing those ideas stimulates creativity. Are there any examples from your experience where you learned a new skill or tactic from someone with a different set of experiences than yours?

### Chapter Six: Taking Turns Soloing and Supporting

Leadership and followership go hand in hand. What are some ways that leaders can promote good followership? What are some ways followers can promote good leadership? How is the leader/follower dynamic in your organization or group? How is being an innovative, active follower important in wildland fire? How is letting your followers participate in leadership (i.e.

letting them “solo”) important? How does Steve Nash, the NBA point guard, approach the leadership role on the court? How could that way leading be applied in your role as a leader and follower?

### **Chapter Seven: Leadership as Provocative Competence**

How is it important, in jazz as well as wildland fire, to know what the people around you are best at? Their strengths and weaknesses? How is “provocative competence” about building relationships and influence? What are some ways you can keep things “fresh” and avoid complacency in a leadership environment?

### **Chapter Eight: Getting to “Yes to the Mess”**

This chapter is an “improviser’s toolkit” that serves as a summary of the ideas found in the previous chapters, along with some tips for how to implement them. As you read it, think of how the different concepts and ideas discussed in the can fit in your organization or crew.