



UNDERSTANDING FIRE DOCTRINE: THE DOCTRINAL PYRAMID

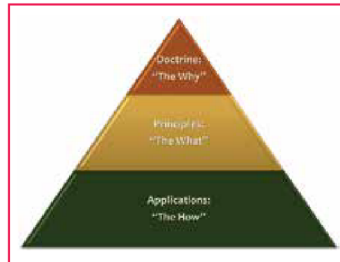
What is doctrine? Eight years after the Forest Service adopted this thing we call “doctrine,” I still hear people say that they don’t understand it.

Definition: Doctrine is the body of principles that sets the moral or ethical standard and forms the foundation of judgment, mode of action, decision, and behavior. It is authoritative but flexible, definitive enough to guide specific operations, yet adaptable enough to address diverse and varied situations.

The Doctrinal Pyramid

So what does all that mean, and how do we apply it? Perhaps it would be helpful to imagine a pyramid divided horizontally into three sections. The top of the pyramid is “Doctrine”—the why. The middle part is “Principles”—the what. And the bottom, the largest portion of the pyramid, is “Applications”—the how.

Good examples of basic applications of doctrine include guidance such as Lookouts, Communication, Escape Routes, and Safety Zones (LCES); the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders; and 18 Watchout Situations (“10s” and “18s”). These practices are easy to understand and guide preparation and response behaviors. They are the foundation of our operations, just as “Applications” is the foundation of our pyramid. Based on this foundation, we need to learn from



The Doctrinal Pyramid.

and build on our understanding based on the foundation.

When we started in our first jobs as wildland firefighters, we were taught that preparing a good foundation (rules and applications) would assist us in mitigating the risks associated with our roles in wildfire incident response. As we grew professionally, although we started to gain an innate sense of things, too often we devoted more time and attention to the applications (the *how*), and less to the doctrine (the grand “why”) and the principles (the “what”).

True doctrine, properly understood, changes behaviors. We need to change our behaviors to align with our understanding of *why* things are. Therefore, we need to teach all three parts of the pyramid: doctrine, principles, and applications.

Doctrine and Objectives

Now is the time to focus on better objectives. Objectives should guide our actions and must be shaped by the “whys” and the “whats,” while

our actions must be carried out through applications. We cannot focus only on topographic or mundane objectives that we repeat by rote.

Yes, our actions are based on operational objectives. But, I want recognition of the complexity in objectives (strategic vs. tactical; largescale vs. smallscale; broad vs. focused, etc.). We need to think much more about the “whys” and the “whats,” rather than always the “how.”

This starts with a clear understanding. Leaders and firefighters should understand wildland fire or prescribed fire incidents and what the assigned agency administrator wants them to accomplish. The incident commander or the burn boss needs to clearly translate those agency administrator objectives into specific objectives needed to accomplish the “whys” and “whats” of the job to be done.

The key to our success is based on a clear understanding of our fire doctrine. Doctrine is (to repeat) authoritative, yet flexible; definitive, yet adaptable. It creates an organization guided by well-stated principles that represent the scope of the work, the work environment, and the mission. It must be understood and be meaningful to every employee and be at the heart of safe and effective mission accomplishment. ■