



Organizational Culture, Decision-Making, and Integrity

The National Park Service and
the *Exxon Valdez*

RICK S. KURTZ

Abstract

This article focuses upon linkages between organizational culture and decision-making processes in the National Park Service (NPS). Traits, values, and traditions contributing to the Park Service culture are identified and discussed. These are then applied to an analysis of the relationship between culture and decision-making during crises. A case study approach is taken, drawing from NPS decision-making following the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. The analysis finds a strong relationship between the agency's organizational culture and decision-making during the crisis. It also suggests agency adherence to internal perceptions of organizational integrity, despite countervailing pressures from other spill participants. Lessons learned from these findings are discussed.

When the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on Bligh Reef in 1989, most National Park Service (NPS) decision-makers in Alaska held the opinion that the spill, although a terrible tragedy, was limited to Prince William Sound. They were thankful it had not occurred along NPS-managed shorelines and felt safe in the knowledge that the nearest national park, Kenai Fjords, was more than 100 miles away. This assessment was shattered when it was realized that the oil could not be contained within the sound. Ultimately, the oil struck three national parks—Kenai Fjords National Park, Katmai National Park and Preserve, and Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve—affecting resources along nearly 400 miles of coastline (Kurtz 1995).

Organizational Culture and Decision-Making

Past research suggests that organizational culture is a primary and often-overlooked key to understanding decision-making processes (Bolman and Deal 1997; Morgan 1997; Stone 2002; Van Wart 1998). Accordingly, it can be assumed that culture should be factored in when assessing an organization's crisis decision-making process. Before elaborating upon the links between organizational culture and decision-making, it is first necessary to establish a context for these terms. Schein (1985) describes an organization as an identifiable group having a significant shared history and long-standing traditions. Organizations are not static, however. They are open systems in constant interaction with their external and internal environments. Culture is a complex phenomenon. It includes the basic assumptions and beliefs that members of a group share. Culture can be understood as learned actions that assume a taken-for-granted attitude (Cook and Yanow 1993; Schein 1985). Thus, culture becomes associated with a set of decision-making norms and mores that facilitate the solving of problems repeatedly encountered in the workplace. The general success of these norms and mores contributes to their legitimacy, providing reinforcement for veteran employees, who teach them to new employees as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel about problems the organization frequently encounters.

One way that many decision-making norms and mores are transmitted to new employees is through stories. Stories are a powerful tool. They convey important messages about what has worked or not worked in the past. Stories help new employees make sense of an organization's unwritten rules and decision-making processes. They help new employees adapt to and overcome the surprise and bewilderment outsiders feel when exposed to a new culture. Stories also aid in setting the ground rules for peer interaction and between levels within the organization. As told and retold, stories become part of the organizational mythology that helps employees find meaning and purpose. Such retelling acts as a form of redundancy, reinforcing perceptions about how employees should act and what they should do in the workplace (Bolman and Deal 1997, 216–217; Louis 1980; Stone 1989; Weick 1987).

A well-integrated organizational culture can have significant implications for decision-making during crises (Petty 1995; Vaughan 1996). Culture creates a common set of decision-making premises, guiding the responses of lower-level personnel in the event of a crisis. Subsequently, although an organization may be decentralized, the decision-making process follows an implicit top-down pattern. Lower-level personnel make decisions reflecting institutional practices previously established at higher levels.

Critics point out that culturally derived decision guidelines can be a hindrance to effective decision-making. Decisions reflecting innovation and new ideas are suppressed. Employees stick with tried-and-true problem-solving formulas, despite evidence indicating a need for change (Bolman and Deal 1997; Cook and Yanow 1993). Stultification of this kind seriously hampers organizational effectiveness, and during crisis episodes it can be devastating. One example is the normalization of deviance that sometimes plagues organizations. Decisions viewed from the outside as inappropriate, ethically questionable, or risky are perceived as culturally acceptable within an organization. Small deviations from normal operating procedures become embedded within the organization as a taken-for-granted component of the operational environment. Such complacency is dangerous. Minor deviations that go un-

noticed during normal situations are magnified in a crisis, contributing to disaster and organizational breakdown (Vaughan 1996; Weick 1987).

The linkage that develops between culture and decision-making is further influenced by trust. Many organizations rely heavily upon trust to maintain organizational integrity. Integrity refers to the implementation of acceptable behavioral norms as defined through the organizational culture, missions, and mandates. Stories and myths, as well as the use of rituals and ceremonies, serve to indoctrinate and build bonds of trust between new employees and veterans. Proper cultural induction helps to channel the ideas and potential disruption that new employees bring to an organization. Bonds of trust are established, providing assurances that employees will make the right decisions in times of crisis—that is to say, that they will make decisions in keeping with accepted organizational norms and practices (Bolman and Deal 1997; Weick 1987).

Trust is often difficult to achieve when diversity increases. This is particularly so in large organizations where subcultures prevail and in inter-organizational systems. Many organizations operate based on inconsistent and ill-defined preferences. Members at various levels of the organization may hold loosely defined values and assumptions that conflict. Subculture members, as well as outsiders, may be unwilling to trust a set of norms that threatens their own values and decision practices. Crisis episodes act as a catalyst, furthering such divisiveness. Subgroups and outsiders challenge the legitimacy and integrity of the prevailing culture. They rebel against traditional decision practices, thereby contributing to organizational disarray (Bolman and Deal 1997, 226; LaPorte and Consolini 1991; Weick 1987).

Organizational Culture and NPS Priorities

Numerous federal departments and agencies have responsibilities of some type in resources protection and environmental affairs. Each has its own distinct history, traditions, and values (Kaufman 1960; Rosenbaum 2001). These factors, in conjunction with basic statutory mandates, define the collective conception of what a resources-management agency perceives as its protection obligations. The concepts play an integral part in the agency's decision-making process, helping to shape, define, and assign urgency and importance to the various challenges the agency encounters.

The cultural identity of the NPS begins with the national parks genesis myth, a well-known piece of venerated folklore among agency careerists. The story is told of how members of the Washburne-Doane expedition conceived of an idea during a September 1870 exploration of the Yellowstone region. One night, while relaxing around the campfire, the explorers recalled the many wonders that Yellowstone held. The discussion turned to the numerous opportunities for private profit that Yellowstone offered, particularly those related to tourism. Rejecting the notion of private ownership, the explorers agreed that steps should be taken to ensure that Yellowstone's wonders were readily available to all Americans. Accordingly, Yellowstone would have to remain in public ownership. From this inception, a drive was ultimately launched to press Congress into making Yellowstone a national park (Sellars 1997). The subsequent success of Yellowstone's creation provided a model for developing national parks throughout the United States and elsewhere across the globe (*NPS Legacy* 2002).

Such a myth fits well with the selflessness and sacrifice of national parks proponents in preserving the nation's natural and historic wonders. It instills a spirit of

organizational altruism and integrity extending beyond self-serving motivations. Myths of this type have an additional role. They are powerful factors in the formation of an organizational image. Proponents of government programs or policies go to great lengths in order to develop an image. Often this involves the use of emotive devices to create a dominant perception about an organization, its values, and integrity. Implicit in this understanding is the rejection of possible competing internal and external images as well as decision modes resulting from those images (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Bolman and Deal 1997; Morgan 1997).

The foundations of a distinct Park Service culture can likewise be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when U.S. Cavalry troops patrolled Yellowstone and other early parks. These hardy troopers and their ranger successors brought with them traditions of independent action and initiative that, in turn, fostered a Park Service culture of decentralized management. Living in remote, often isolated locations, Park Service rangers were encouraged to assume personal responsibility for resources in their respective parks. Their scope of responsibilities ran the gamut

from daily mundane custodial chores to emergencies involving substantial risks for life and property. Rangers were seen as "can-do" people, capable of managing any situation in their park (Tuler 1992; *Vail Agenda* 1992, 112).

These can-do traits manifest themselves today in NPS insider references to "green blood" or being "green." Green employees see themselves, and are perceived by others in the NPS, as individuals who strongly identify with the Park Service mission and values. They are independent and adaptable, committed to protection of park resources above all other allegiances. Green bloods are willing to go the extra mile and do whatever is necessary to protect resources in their park (Cochrane 1995; Foresta 1984; Tuler 1992). For many employees, the green blood socialization process begins during their summers as seasonal rangers. Friendships and bonds of trust are developed, networks created, and emotional ties made to the organizational culture. Newcomers learn the NPS way of doing things. Adherence is reinforced through rank and the promotion of individuals who are esteemed for being "rock-solid" rangers.

The proprietary attitudes created through these traditions become quite evident when park superintendents speak and act in terms of "my park." Park superintendents have traditionally tended to define issues and make decisions in terms of the implications for their own parks. Mandates to manage parks in keeping with high public values and the utmost integrity are perceived through a park lens. Critics charge that this has contributed to the adoption of policies that may be advantageous for an individual park but of questionable value to the national park system as a whole (House 5/18/89, 43; Sellars 1992; *Vail Agenda* 1992, 45-47).

A core group of federal statutes has also influenced NPS decision-making practices. The 1916 "organic act" most clearly spells out the NPS mission. Congress created the NPS as a bureau within the Department of the Interior to:

promote and regulate the use of the federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations . . . by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose of said parks, monuments, and reservations, which purpose is to conserve

Green employees see themselves, and are perceived by others in the NPS, as individuals who strongly identify with the Park Service mission and values.

the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. (NPS 1916, 16 U.S.C. 1)

The 1916 act charged the Park Service with the twin mandates of resources preservation and visitor enjoyment. This language, incorporated as a distinctive component of the organizational culture, remains at the heart of the agency's management philosophy (*NPS Legacy* 2002). How the Park Service chose to interpret and deal with the *Exxon Valdez* spill was influenced by these guiding principles.

The NPS Response

On March 24, 1989, at 12:04 A.M., the 987-foot tanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on Bligh Reef, 25 miles out of Valdez, Alaska, on a heading for Long Beach, California. The impact tore open eight of the ship's eleven cargo tanks and spewed out 10.8 million gallons of North Slope crude into Prince William Sound. Under federal guidelines, a predesignated U.S. Coast Guard officer, the federal on-scene coordinator (FOSC), was to oversee the spill response. Participating spill respondents were instructed to coordinate their efforts through the FOSC (Senate 5/10/89; Senate 7/20/89; State of Alaska 1989).

By April 1 it had become apparent to decision-makers at the threatened parks and in the NPS Alaska Regional Office that oil would exit the sound and affect parks on the Gulf of Alaska. A decision was made to mobilize a Park Service response independently, of the FOSC-directed effort. Agency personnel and local community officials, through a process known as defensive booming, worked feverishly to deflect oil away from sensitive habitat areas. According to FOSC guidelines, Exxon and the Coast Guard were supposed to direct such activities. Squabbles quickly ensued over jurisdictional authority, as well as the effectiveness of booming. Critics accused the NPS of squandering precious resources. It replied that since neither Exxon nor the Coast Guard was "on-scene," it was up to the Park Service to assume a leadership role (D. Ames, personal communication, June 9, 1989; A. Castellina, personal communication, June 15, 1989; Kurtz 1994).

Other evidence suggests that the Park Service's can-do spirit, proprietary attitude, and dedication to the protection of resources made such a response inevitable. The transcripts of more than forty post-spill interviews with NPS personnel bear this out. Agency mandates and the need to act, adherence to mission, and resources-protection obligations were repeatedly mentioned as agency priorities. The integrity of the agency and all that it stood for were at stake (R. Bane, personal communications, November 3, 1989, December 17, 1991, January 22, 1992; A. Castellina, personal communication, November 3, 1989; B. Evison, personal communications, May 12, 1989, March 9–10, 1993; D. Galvin, personal communication, May 22, 1989; D. Gilman, personal communication, August 3, 1989; D. Hamson and C. Roy, personal communication, September 8, 1992).

Launching a response also provided Park Service personnel with a way to control the emotional threat the spill posed to their cultural identity. Emotional control in emergencies has traditionally been an esteemed attribute among rangers. Taking action helped them to maintain a calm demeanor and outward sense of situational control. Action provided NPS personnel with a level of comfort they probably would

not have had if they had really contemplated the magnitude of the spill's impact (R. Bane, personal communications, December 17, 1991, January 22, 1992; D. Hamson, personal communication, September 8, 1992; C. Roy and D. Hamson, personal communication, March 20, 1992).

NPS decision-makers in the agency's Alaska region decided to muster all available resources and attack the spill as if it were a fire or similar resources threat. Addressing the spill as if it were a fire fit well with the Park Service management philosophy. The agency had a long tradition, and comfort level, with combating fire threats in national parks. The first step was to request support through the Incident Command System (ICS). The ICS is a nationally recognized crisis-management system first developed for wildland fire-fighting in California. Incident Command Teams (ICTs), often made up of non-NPS personnel, were tasked with providing administrative support to the superintendents in charge of threatened parks (Kurtz 1995).

Post-spill studies credited the Park Service's use of the ICS with doing an outstanding job of mobilizing resources and administering ad hoc NPS response operations. The official Interior Department spill report to Congress said that the non-fire

use of the system proved to be "a significant step in giving quick and orderly response to initial threats to widespread resources at risk" (D. Gilman, personal communication, August 3, 1989; Oil Spill Commission 1990; House 3/22/90. Howard

This desire for decision-making control was fed by the NPS tradition of "holding the fort."

1992). Still, the use of the ICS was not without problems. Decision-making channels were often tangled. The flow of communications between park superintendents, the NPS Alaska Regional Office, and ICTs was often unclear. Superintendents at the stricken parks felt they were not being provided with sufficient input and feedback on ICS operations. Rather they felt that the regional headquarters and ICTs were purposely working together to keep them out of the loop. Regional officials portrayed the situation as an attempt to relieve superintendents of an arduous administrative task (R. Bane, personal communication, November 3, 1989; A. Castellina, personal communication, November 3, 1989; B. Evison, personal communication, October 17, 1989).

Problems of this sort stemmed in part from the unfamiliarity of some Park Service officials with the ICS operational system. Miscommunication between different organizational systems is a commonly noted problem in disaster-response scenarios (Quarentelli 1984, 16-17). Likewise, although technically labeled an all-risk system, ICS had little experience outside of fire responses before the *Exxon Valdez* spill. Adaptations were required in order to make the system meet oil spill needs. Other problems were endemic to the NPS organizational culture. Agency traditions of decentralized management and superintendent control at the individual park level clashed with the integrated ICS management approach. Superintendents felt they were losing control to decision-makers outside the boundaries of their parks. Decisions were no longer being consolidated at the park level in keeping with long-standing tradition.

This desire for decision-making control was fed by the NPS tradition of "holding the fort" (R. Bane, personal communication, December 17, 1991). In other words, superintendents desired to maintain management control and preserve the resources

integrity of their respective parks (D. Hamson and C. Roy, personal communication, March 26, 1992). Feeding this cultural tradition was the psychological need for control that is associated with crisis events. Researchers have noted a relationship between a sense of control and the ability of organizations to begin the rebuilding process in the aftermath of tragedy (Gist and Lubin 1989).

Resources Protection

A primary goal of the Park Service spill mobilization was the protection of natural and cultural resources within park boundaries ("natural" in this case refers to the nonhuman ecosystem, whereas "cultural" refers to human historic and archeological remains). Of the numerous steps taken to protect park resources, the NPS clean-up restrictions best illustrate the influence of agency culture.

The failure to contain and deflect most of the spilled oil away from critical park resources had, from an NPS perspective, major implications. First, it took away the sense of control that many Park Service personnel had about the spill. As one NPS official put it, "I had a real comfortable spill in my mind" (C. Roy and D. Hamson, personal communication, March 20, 1992). The realization that a can-do attitude and traditional decision-making mechanisms would not suffice was like a physical blow to many personnel (R. Bane, personal communication, December 17, 1991; D. Hamson and C. Roy, personal communication, March 26, 1992; Spencer 1990).

The impact of the spill on park shorelines meant that there would have to be an extensive clean-up effort. An intrusive clean-up, involving hundreds of workers and mechanized equipment, would bring further threats to cherished resources (D. Hamson and C. Roy, personal communication, March 26, 1992; Oil Spill Commission, Appendix N). The Park Service quickly found itself mired in a series of intense arguments with the FOSC about clean-up methods on park shorelines. The NPS argued for natural cleansing in several areas where the oil threat to resources was minimal. This involved simply allowing the forces of wave action and weathering to disperse the oil. In some critical habitat areas, such as near salmon spawning streams or bird rookeries, the agency demanded "type-A" clean-up methods. This labor-intensive method involved cold-water beach washdowns, the extensive use of hand tools, and bioremediation (chemical applications to enhance the presence of oil-eating microbes) to remove oil. In contrast, Exxon and the Coast Guard aggressively advocated "type-B" clean-up methods involving hot-water beach washdowns, the use of heavy mechanized equipment, and harsh chemical applications to remove the oil. These type-B methods offered a quick and more cost-efficient means of removing oil (Dunford et al. 1991; Kurtz 1994, 273).

The NPS declared type-B clean-up methods unacceptable. Park Service decision-makers believed that type-B clean-up generally constituted a greater threat to fragile resources than spilled oil (B. Evison, personal communication, March 9–10, 1993). Giving in on such a critical issue would have been tantamount to selling out on long-cherished agency protection mandates.

To assure appropriate compliance with agency protection mandates, the Park Service implemented the use of resource protection officers. Drawn predominantly from the culturally dominant NPS ranger corps, protection officers were responsible for preventing negative impacts to resources. Among these were concerns about clean-up worker pot hunting—the theft of archaeological treasures. Another con-

cern was preventing encounters between workers and wildlife, habitat protection, and enforcement of agency clean-up restrictions (R. Bane, personal communication, November 3, 1989; F. Betts, personal communication, September 29, 1989; B. Evison, personal communication, October 17, 1989; Evison 1989).

Resource protection officers received endorsement, sometimes begrudging, from a number of sources. Coast Guard acquiescence came after the FOSC acknowledged their presence as a way to expedite clean-up on park shorelines. In particular, protection officers were useful in helping sort out many on-the-ground problems. This eliminated much of the time-consuming need to consult with agency personnel back at headquarters. The official Interior Department report to Congress on the *Exxon Valdez* spill credited protection officers with preventing unnecessary damage to park resources, limiting encounters with bears, and ensuring compliance with

To make financial costs the dominant concern at a time when "crown jewel" parks were under siege was unthinkable.

NPS special-permitting requirements (Operations Review Team 1990; House 3/22/90). To the affected park superintendents, protection officers were a reliable presence on the beaches. As members of the green culture, protection officers could be trusted to do the right thing when it came to resources protec-

tion. The hundreds of protection officers acted as a surrogate for the park superintendents. Or as one superintendent put it, "they acted as the eyes and ears for those of us back at park headquarters" (R. Bane, personal communication, November 3, 1989; A. Castellina, personal communication, November 3, 1989).

Cost Considerations

The on-the-ground placement of resource protection officers and other independent NPS actions were not without costs. First, there were the financial costs, including the labor, equipment, and other resources the NPS mobilized to combat the spill. In 1989 alone, the direct costs attributed to the spill response exceeded \$7.3 million (NPS Expenditure Summary 1992). The Park Service's authority to incur these costs became a major issue of contention with the Interior Department. The Interior Department's spill coordinator was adamant in his conviction that NPS should only initiate actions that were clearly reimbursable under federal law—primarily the Clean Water Act (P. Bergmann and P. Gates, personal communication, November 20, 1992; D. Galvin, personal communication, May 22, 1989). Park Service decision-makers chose instead to implement an aggressive response first and then worry about reimbursement. As one former NPS official put it, using the fire analogy, "You don't ask a fellow whether he can pay for the water before you let him turn the hose on" (B. Evison, personal communication, October 17, 1989; March 9–10, 1993).

Interviews with key NPS decision-makers suggest that this course of action had significant cultural overtones. To make financial costs the dominant concern at a time when "crown jewel" parks were under siege was unthinkable (D. Galvin, personal communication, May 22, 1989; B. Evison, personal communications, October 17, 1989, March 9–10, 1993). It challenged the foundation of the agency's mission, values, and beliefs. Such dedication and integrity, although commendable, came at a substantial cost. Ultimately, some \$2.7 million in NPS spill expenditures were not reimbursed. Factors contributing to this included Park Service implementation of

non-reimbursable activities, Interior Department consolidation and disbursement procedures associated with spill funding, and what agency personnel perceived as overly restrictive interpretations of federal reimbursement guidelines (D. Hamson, personal communication, September 8, 1992; NPS Expenditure Summary 1992).

The decision to mount an aggressive response also carried credibility costs. Critics have charged that the independent agency effort was simply another manifestation of the "my park" mentality. Faced with a major resources threat, Park Service decision-makers took action despite contrary recommendations and mandates from the Interior Department and the Coast Guard (P. Bergmann and P. Gates, personal communication, November 20, 1992; B. Evison, personal communication, October 17, 1989, March 9–10, 1993; D. Galvin, personal communication, May 22, 1989).

The official FOSC spill report (1993) faulted the NPS independent effort for hampering an effective spill clean-up. An often-cited example of this occurred at the Pony Cove beach site, where park service personnel reported significant oiling. A Coast Guard response team sent out, at considerable cost, to investigate, found less than a gallon of oily residue. Rumors sprang up about other erroneous spill reports. As a result, Park Service spill input became highly suspect. The FOSC report (1993, 442–444) went on to contrast NPS efforts with those of the U.S. Forest Service, an agency with similar wilderness-protection obligations. The relationship between the FOSC and the Forest Service was described as quite positive. Forest Service personnel participated in planning sessions and kept the FOSC fully briefed on agency activities. In contrast, the report described the NPS as "preferring a more independent course" (1993, 443). Park Service personnel were chastised for attending only about one-third of the interagency planning sessions. The agency soon gained a reputation as a lone ranger, unwilling to act as a credible team player.

More recent assessments have cited similar credibility issues that plague the NPS. Internal agency reports have acknowledged a history of insularity exemplified by an unwillingness to work with neighbors beyond park boundaries (*Vail Agenda* 1992, 45–47; *Vision* 1994). Recent interviews with officials from nearby communities portrayed Park Service officials as "talking a good line when it comes to intergovernmental cooperation, but not much else" (R. Widmer and W. Smith, personal communication, August 12, 2002). For example, attempts by the town of Estes Park to work with Rocky Mountain National Park on visitor traffic-flow issues have made little progress. Town officials complain that the Park Service has only been willing to adopt measures that benefit the agency while placing burdens on Estes Park.

Such perceptions are typical of the credibility problems that bedevil the Park Service. Instead of an altruistic concern for resources protection, agency actions have sometimes evoked images of an organization mired in an inflexible culture. With respect to the *Exxon Valdez*, agency actions constituted deviations that were deemed inappropriate and possibly illegal. For its part, the Park Service repeatedly cited its 1916 organic act and subsequent resources-protection statutes as justification for its actions related to the spill clean-up (Evison 1989). However, the agency generally failed to convince other spill participants of the legitimacy of Park Service resources-protection priorities. For example, at an April 1989 spill briefing with U.S. Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, the regional director of NPS, Boyd Evison, found himself repeatedly on the defensive. At one point in the briefing, Walt Stieglitz, Evison's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service counterpart, leaned over and said, "You

guys are way overreacting to this" (B. Evison, personal communication, October 17, 1989). In contrast to the NPS, Fish and Wildlife was closely coordinating its efforts with recommendations from the Interior Department and the Coast Guard.

During the ensuing clean-up, the Park Service repeatedly reminded the Coast Guard of the unique resources-protection values embodied in the NPS mandate. The perceived degree of impact, severity of oiling, and Park Service clean-up restrictions continued to be heated issues because the agency's resources values were misunderstood and its credibility was questioned. By NPS standards, even oil sheen

The perceived degree of impact, severity of oiling, and Park Service clean-up restrictions continued to be heated issues because the agency's resources values were misunderstood and its credibility was questioned.

was enough to profoundly alter the pristine image of the affected parks. The oiling of park wilderness was tantamount to war. It threatened the heart and soul of the Park Service's stewardship responsibilities.

Park Service decision-makers acknowledged the difficulty of trying to make the Coast Guard understand the agency's resources-protection values (B. Evison, personal

communication, March 9–10, 1993; D. Hamson, personal communication, September 8, 1992). The Coast Guard, in Evison's opinion, understood the scenery aspect of park values, but failed to grasp the concept of ecosystem integrity as defined in the NPS mandate. As a result, the Coast Guard pursued a policy of oil removal by any means, in the mistaken belief that restoring the scenic view was the only goal of clean-up in the stricken parks. The Coast Guard and other spill participants—most notably, Fish and Wildlife, the Interior Department, and Exxon—interpreted many of the NPS protection stipulations as absurd. Park Service resources-protection mandates were something they had never before encountered. NPS clean-up restrictions and protection demands were perceived as bordering on religious fervor. One Coast Guard official said that working with the Park Service was "like dealing with another country, never mind another federal agency." Such "severe demands" simply were not happening outside of the Park Service (R. Roussel, personal communication, June 19, 1989).

A possible contributing factor to these discrepancies was miscommunication. During a crisis, communication becomes more complex as a multitude of additional personnel and organizations enter the fray. Existing communication channels are overloaded, resulting in communication breakdown (Quarentelli 1986, 14–16, 18). A number of reports and interviews compiled in the aftermath of *Exxon Valdez* lend credence to this phenomenon (Kurtz 1995).

The Park Service's inability to successfully convey its resources-protection mission to the Coast Guard was also a reflection of its previously mentioned insularity. For too long, NPS superintendents had focused on what was happening within their park. The implications of activities outside park boundaries and the potential impact these activities could have upon park resources were largely ignored. Contributors to the Park Service-sponsored *Vail Agenda* (1992) and *Vision Plan* (1994) chastised the agency for a legacy of failure to actively enlist and become involved with citizen advocates, senior administrators, sister agencies, and organized interests whose mandates and goals complemented the Park Service agenda. Strengthening these ties would have provided NPS with allies in the political arena and helped prevent unwarranted misunderstandings during the *Exxon Valdez* aftermath.

Final Comments

The cultural landscape of the National Park Service is steeped in a set of values and traditions that provides a unifying identity for its employees. This identity has elicited an image of agency professionalism and integrity that many organizations can only envy. Park Service personnel have been praised for their dependability, altruism, and can-do attitude. Such traits are an asset in an organization where field personnel traditionally carry out many of their duties in remote locations far from the central headquarters.

However, the lessons of *Exxon Valdez* indicate that these same attributes, applied indiscriminately, can hinder organizational effectiveness. Faced with a devastating threat to the agency's protection mandate, Park Service officials fell back upon tried-and-true methods. Thus, fire-fighting provided the template for their initial response to the spill crisis. "Hold the fort," that is to say, protect the resources status quo, became the *modus operandi*. Through these devices, the spill was kept manageable and securely placed in a comfortable, but somewhat unrealistic, framework of control. This was true for both the NPS response operation and as a metaphor for thinking about the spill. Finally, dependable resource protection officer "green bloods" were called in to provide frontline oversight and serve as the eyes and ears of park superintendents. The presence of these "rock-solid" rangers ensured that clean-up stipulations in keeping with traditional NPS interpretations of the agency's mission were implemented.

This reliance upon a course of action imbedded in the organizational culture garnered some success. Post-spill assessments hailed the Park Service's use of the Incident Control System and resource protection officers as a worthy component of its spill-response mobilization. Both of these measures demonstrated positive adaptation of prior practices to a new situation. This conveys the lesson that past organizational experience, selectively applied, can be a valuable asset in crises.

Another lesson is the recognition that inter-organizational conflicts and misunderstandings may sometimes be unavoidable. The very magnitude of the *Exxon Valdez* spill overwhelmed the response mechanisms of all the participants. System breakdowns and failures were widespread during the spring and summer of 1989 (Kurtz 1995). Inclement weather, equipment shortages, logistic failures, and the reality of numerous agencies interacting in a crisis resulted in miscommunication.

The Park Service's difficulties, however, were heightened because of value choices, an overt reliance on traditional decision-making practices, and the inability to communicate agency priorities to other participants. The inability of the Coast Guard, the Interior Department, and the Fish and Wildlife Service to comprehend the Park Service's go-it-alone actions and clean-up stipulations provides good examples of what can happen. Ultimately, the integrity of NPS came into question. It was perceived as a maverick agency rather than a credible team player. Inaccurate reports of soiled park beaches, coupled with restrictive clean-up demands, reinforced these perceptions. Adherence to agency decision-making norms hurt the Park Service in other ways. Among these were the decision for independent action and the subsequent inability to obtain reimbursement for some of these actions. On one level, this failure could be perceived as a situation of wasted resources because of poor decision-making. At worst, it represented punishment for inappropriate use of taxpayer dollars.

A lesson drawn from these examples is the need to think outside the existing organizational box when confronting unexpected challenges. Failure to do so could result in the erosion of agency effectiveness and credibility. Organizations must be willing to try new methods and forge different relationships. Likewise, they must be selective in their application of experience to new situations. Only through this kind of proactive decision-making and learning will agencies be able to effectively implement their basic mandates.

NOTE

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2002 annual conference of the Western Political Science Association.

REFERENCES

- Alaska Oil Spill Commission Final Report. 1990. *Spill: The Wreck of the Exxon Valdez*. Juneau: State of Alaska.
- Baumgartner, Frank, and Bryan Jones. 1993. *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bolman, Lee, and Terrence Deal. 1997. *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cochrane, Tim. 1995. "A Review of Agency Traditions and Actions During the Spill." In *Lessons to Be Learned: The National Park Service Administrative History and Assessment of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill*, ed. Rick S. Kurtz, pp. A1–A27. Anchorage: National Park Service.
- Congress. House. Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands. May 18, 1989. *National Park System Review Board*. 101st Cong., 1st sess.
- . Subcommittee on Water, Power, and Offshore Energy Sources. March 22 and April 24, 1990. *Investigations of the "Exxon Valdez" Oil Spill, Prince William Sound Alaska: Part 4*. 101st Cong., 2nd sess.
- Congress. Senate. Subcommittee on Merchant Marine. May 10 and July 20, 1989. *Exxon Oil Spill: Part 2*. 101st Cong., 1st sess.
- Cook, Scott, and Dvora Yanow. 1993. "Culture and Organizational Learning." *Journal of Management Inquiry* 2: 272–390.
- Dunford, R. W., et al. 1991. "Linkages Between Oil Spill Removal Activities and NRDA." *Proceedings of the 1991 International Oil Spill Conference in San Diego, Calif.* Washington, D.C.: American Petroleum Institute.
- Foresta, Ronald. 1984. *America's National Parks and Their Keepers*. Washington, D.C.: Resources for the Future.
- FOSC Report. 1993. *T/V Exxon Valdez Oil Spill*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Coast Guard.
- Gist, Richard, and Bernard Lubin, eds. 1989. *Psychosocial Aspects of Disaster*. New York: John Wiley.
- Howard, John. 1992. Lecture at NPS Oil Spill Planning and Contingency School, Cape Cod, Mass., August 24–28.
- Kaufmann, Herbert. 1960. *The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Behavior*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kurtz, Rick. 1994. "Spill Planning, Preparedness and Response Capabilities for Public Land Managers." In *Prevention, Response, and Oversight Five Years After the "Exxon Valdez" Spill*, ed. Brenda Baxter, pp. 269–277. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press.
- . 1995. *Lessons to Be Learned: The National Park Service Administrative History and Assessment of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill*. Anchorage: National Park Service.

- LaPorte, Todd, and Paula Consolini. 1991. "Working in Practice but Not in Theory: Theoretical Challenges of High-Reliability Organizations." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 1: 19-47.
- Louis, Meryl Reis. 1980. "Surprise and Sense Making: What Newcomers Experience in Entering Unfamiliar Organizational Settings." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 25: 226-251.
- Morgan, Gareth. 1997. *Images of Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- National Park Service. 1992. "NPS Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Expenditure Summary." Alaska Regional Office, November 19.
- . 1994. *Vision: NPS Strategic Plan*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service.
- . 2002. *NPS Legacy*. Available at www.nps.gov/legacy.
- Operations Review Team. 1990. *NPS 1989 Response: "Exxon Valdez" Oil Spill*. Anchorage: National Park Service.
- Petty, M. M., et al. 1995. "Relationships Between Organizational Culture and Organizational Performance." *Psychology Reports* 76: 483-492.
- Quarentelli, Enrico. 1986. *Organizational Behavior in Disasters and Implications for Disaster Planning*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- Rosenbaum, Walter. 2001. *Environmental Politics and Policy*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- Schein, Edgar. 1985. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sellers, Richard. 1992. "The Roots of National Park Management." *Journal of Forestry* (January 9): 16-19.
- . 1997. *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Spencer, Page. 1990. *White Silk and Black Tar: A Journal of the Alaska Oil Spill*. Minneapolis: Bergamot Books.
- State of Alaska, Office of the Governor. 1989. "Exxon Valdez" Oil Spill Information Packet. Juneau: State of Alaska.
- Stone, Debra. 1989. "Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas." *Political Science Quarterly* 104: 281-300.
- . 2002. *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*. New York: Norton.
- Tuler, Seth, Gary Machlis, and Roger Kasperson. 1992. "Mountain Goat Removal in Olympic National Park: A Case Study of the Role of Organizational Culture in Individual Risk Decisions and Behavior." *Risk Issues in Health and Safety* 3: 317-340.
- Vail Agenda. 1992. *National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service.
- Van Wart, Montgomery. 1998. *Changing Public Sector Values*. New York: Garland.
- Vaughan, Diane. 1996. *The "Challenger" Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weick, Karl. 1987. "Organizational Culture as a Source of High Reliability." *California Management Review* 29: 112-127.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick S. Kurtz is an associate professor of political science at Central Michigan University. He received his Ph.D. in 1999 from Colorado State University. Before joining the academic world, he was a policy analyst and historian with the federal and state governments. His articles on public lands management have appeared in *Journal of the West* and *George Wright Forum*.

