Operational Art and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Lessons from the Conservation Corps World

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NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Operating in many jurisdictions throughout the US and territories

Mix of remote and office-based staff positions

MANY MOVING PARTS

Nearly 1000 staff and members at peak season

Over 1,000,000 hours annually

Regular turnover

CREW MODEL

Traditional conservation corps programming

Housing provided to program participants

EPIC MODEL

Individual placement internships with land management agencies as the host

Partner provides day-to-day oversight and guidance

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What were your biggest fears as you became aware of the seriousness of what we were facing? Were those fears realized?

The Crisis Begins

January 7, 2020 - Novel coronavirus first identified

February 6, 2020 - First Covid-19 death in the United States

March 11, 2020 - WHO declares the novel coronavirus a pandemic

March 13, 2020 - United States declares Covid-19 a national emergency

June 11, 2020 - United States passes 2 million confirmed cases

December 14, 2020 - First doses of Pfizer vaccine distributed

…some time passes

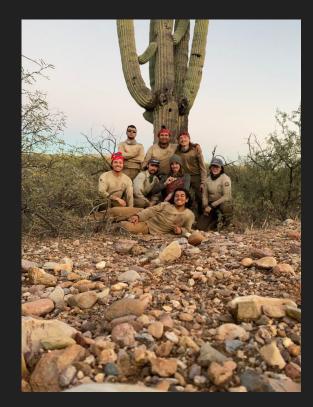**April 10, 2023** - United States declares the Covid-19 national emergency is over

There's no way I'm qualified…
… Is anyone qualified?

…But I do know how to run our programming

USE YOUR STRENGTHS

Adapting existing systems is easier than implementing completely new ones - do you need to reinvent the model?

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Solutions that attempt to fix everything at once are unwieldy and difficult to implement

GET PEOPLE INVOLVED

Prioritizing engagement early on saves future effort explaining or justifying the 'why' of a response

… And I can interpret expert advice to apply to ACE

BECOME THE EXPERT

Your programming is full of important quirks and nuance unfamiliar to outside experts

PUT ADVICE INTO CONTEXT

Subject-matter experts are just that. Watch for topic drift as you explore issues and filter accordingly

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

You're still in the driver's seat, don't expect anyone to make decisions for you

So where do we get our information from?

PRIMARY SOURCES

News articles on press releases can have their own spin, find the original and reference it

NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

Prioritizing national over local guidance can simplify communication efforts

INDUSTRY PEERS

Did someone already figure this out? Are they happy with it? Can we just adopt their approach?

What if that information isn't very helpful?

CONTRADICTORY SOURCES

Confusion and disagreement between and within regulatory and partner agencies, state authorities, etc.

CONFLICTS WITH PROGRAM MODEL

Is there a fundamental conflict between our program model and what we're being directed to do?

CONSTANTLY CHANGING GUIDANCE

How likely is it that this information will be true next week? Next month?

Take the lead where you can

PRIORITIZE WHAT'S USEFUL

Focus on the things that are achievable and have the impacts you want to see

SLOW THE TEMPO

Responding to new information too quickly generates confusion, give it a minute to develop

FIND THE COMMON THREADS

Distill slightly different guidance down into universal approaches, don't paint yourself into a corner

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What was the best/most helpful decision you made as you shifted to the "new normal" of managing COVID-19 in your program? What was the worst/least helpful?

Managing the Unmanageable

Where do we start?

What are our goals?

So what do we do?

OUR DAMNDEST

Mission-type orders: Focus on the goal, leaving specifics open-ended

REDIRECT QUESTIONS TO RESOURCES

Answering questions directly instead of directing people to resources guarantees you'll answer them again

"WHAT AM I HALF-ASSING TODAY?"

Manage the sandbox, not the sand. Perfection won't resolve the crisis.

What we did at ACE

THE BASICS

Hand washing
Face covering
Staying home
when sick
Housekeeping

COHORT MODEL

Implemented a
cohort model in our
crew program to
limit the spread of
infection

RELY ON PARTNERS

Interns could generally
follow what the partner
organization put in
place with some
support

REQUIRE VACCINATION

Required vaccination
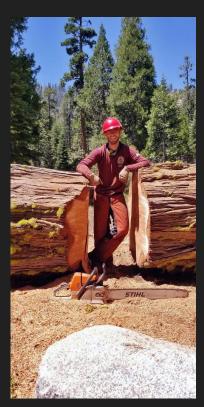for all non-remote
positions once they
were widely available

That sounds great…

What if we're wrong?

What if they don't like it?

Embrace that you might not get it right the first time…

EMPHASIZE ITERATION

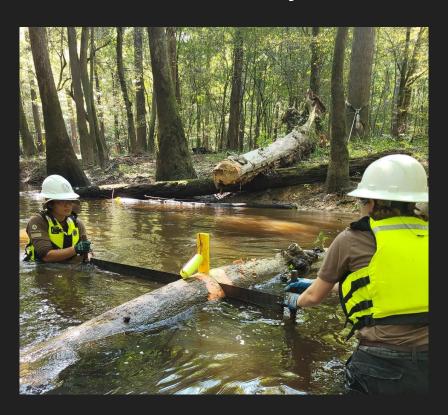Let everyone know that plans will likely change as new information and approaches are identified

KNOW YOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES

Be clear about where the grey areas aren't - protect your teams from their own creativity

GET CANDID FEEDBACK

Collaborate with the people closest to the work, own your mistakes

…And that not everyone will be happy

PUT COMPLAINTS IN CONTEXT

Does it invalidate your foundational premises? Undermine operational effectiveness? Make you upset?

EXPECT UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Time spent on 'why this/not that' conversations pays off - build your own advocacy network

DID WE NORMALIZE DEVIANCE?!?

Distinguish deviance on objectives from deviance on methods and process

Why is everything an edge case?

Trouble we made for ourselves

"IT'S A ONE-OFF"	**EXPOSURE TRACKING**	**LOCAL LEADERSHIP**	**VERSION CONTROL**
Individual handling of situations can be a lousy way to set precedent	What a mess! Did we really think this would work?	Missed opportunity to specify a local rep for COVID issues	Keeping everyone using current documentation remains a struggle

I don't like this and want to scream

The Crisis Wanes

Is it over?

Did we learn anything?

Other organizations are handling the situation differently

Does that matter?

Am I asking people to do things that don't make sense anymore?

Easing off, not abandoning

Emphasize that relaxed policies could be put back in place if the situation deteriorates

What's the alternative?

Since we're not going to not do anything, what does the new something look like?

Reframe the issue

Is there some other similar issue we can rally around?

What best practices that were developed in response to Covid can we retain and repurpose?

Breakout Groups

What resources, lessons learned, or best practices that come out during the pandemic are you trying to retain and repurpose?

Action Steps

- Assess existing rubrics, matrices, decision trees, etc. - How useful are they for guiding operations? Are they mostly satisfying compliance needs? Was the process of developing the resource more valuable than the resource itself? Who is better able to interpret the resource into context-specific action, those who developed it or those who it was delivered to?

- Identify where you're comfortable with ambiguity - perfect knowledge is impossible and tools developed that lean too heavily on the idea of it being available are more of a liability than asset
  - Do you talk about leaving well-enough alone or does it just happen organically?

- Work through issues as a process of goal-oriented exploration, not the identification of an ideal solution

THANKS!

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More information about American Conservation Experience can be found at www.usaconservation.org