

NPS Operational Leadership Program

<http://inside.nps.gov/waso/waso.cfm?lv=3&prg=892>

(National Park Service employee internal website)

NPS Operational Leadership empowers employees to be assertive about their safety and the safety of their team, and encourages them to participate in the decision making and risk management process. As a component of the NPS Safety System, a goal of NPS Operational Leadership is to assist the NPS workforce achieve a higher level of professional excellence by creating and fostering a culture of safety that seeks out and values input from employees who are the best equipped to make risk management decisions within the organization.

NPS Operational Leadership is an invitation for all employees to assist you to increase your awareness of risk and safety in day-to-day situations.

"...I'm asking each of you, out there, to embrace the principles of operational leadership. Think through each of the activities that you are doing on a day-to-day basis and apply the very best standards to make sure that you come home safe and well..." NPS Director Jon Jarvis

HISTORY

The National Park Service (NPS) has the highest accident and fatality rates within the Department of Interior; experiencing the on-duty loss of nearly 60 Park Rangers and fellow employees in the past 25 years. From 2001 to 2006, 4,609 employees were hurt in such manner they were unable to return to work the next day, or for some, many more days. The combined medical and worker compensation costs for the same six-year period was a staggering \$120 million dollars. In FY2009 NPS recorded 1,779 DART cases meaning nearly 10% of the total workforce missed at least one day away from their jobs due to an injury or illness. On average, NPS spends \$21 million annually for workers' compensation with the majority of expenditures due to past injuries which the NPS must continue to pay. Continuation of Pay costs in FY09 totaled \$1,139,888.

These dollar figures also highlight considerable employee pain and suffering that also affect coworkers and family members. They represent resource loss, both in people and in money that could have and should have been available to carry out the NPS mission. Considering this human toll, and the drain on personnel, funding and the resource, the Safety Leadership Council (in September 2008) adopted "operational leadership" as 1 of 4 action items to better integrate safety into the NPS mission, work ethic, and behavior.

In July 2007, then NPS Director Mary A. Bomar sent a memo to all employees providing her thoughts on the current state of safety within the agency, and her vision for the future. "Safety must be integrated as a leadership practice and become part of our

culture, and not viewed as an isolated program or initiative. A culture change of this magnitude demands vision and credibility from the top down, and will not succeed without the visible commitment of NPS leadership.” The Director related the level of severity and frequency of serious accidents among the NPS workforce and stated that the National Leadership Council chartered a “Safety Leadership Council” to “help the NLC create, deliver, and sustain an effective safety strategy for the Service.”

For several years prior, operational leadership principles and the fledging operational leadership program had been introduced to a few national park areas. Formally known as Operational Risk Management or Team Coordination Training (by the U.S. Coast Guard), the training program was first introduced into the NPS by the Pacific West Regional Chief Ranger. The program steadily grew, was revised to reflect the NPS workforce, and was experimented with at other park areas. In 2007, the program became known as “operational leadership” and the staff at Lake Mead began to produce an NPS student manual and convert all of the USCG PowerPoint presentations to NPS content. At the first Safety Leadership Council meeting in November of that year, members participated in a briefing on the newly renamed Operational Leadership program. In turn, the Council began the mechanisms to fully establish Operational Leadership as a significant program within the NPS.

In 2008, Operational Leadership protocols were drafted outlining a viable footprint for NPS implementation including provisions for interim program coordinators, and beginning in Fiscal Year 2010, a permanent program manager with initial start-up funding. Operational leadership concepts have been developed as tools to reduce human error. Human error is a significant cause of NPS accidents, mostly due to inattention, poor judgment, and ineffective supervision. NPS Operational Leadership focuses on reducing these occurrences. According to current private and public business standards, operational leadership principles identify key risk factors that affect individual and team performance and provide a standardized approach to assist employees in assessing and managing risk – tools to avoid human error.

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