

## The Expectation

*Jerry M. Mitchell*

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LOOKING BACK AT DIFFICULTIES IN MY CAREER—the episodes I had to work through to survive—I realize it all could have gone very differently if I hadn't experienced one particular episode early on. It included an opportunity to consider how I would address it, but at the time it didn't feel like an opportunity. It was presented to me more as an expectation. It became a valuable lesson, a factor throughout my career.

I don't really want to give names, except for the name of the man who taught me the lesson.

The story begins in Zion National Park, late '70s, my first job with the National Park Service. Any time there was a fire, the odds were high that I (as a resource management technician) would be sent by the chief to fight it. What concerned me most, as time went by, was being sent up to isolated mesa tops, by helicopter, to put out fires that would have gone nowhere, and really should have been allowed to burn. We should have been managing fires, not putting them out.

The chief? He said, "No." We couldn't work toward such a program because "the regional office won't allow it."

I don't know now if I believed that or not, but he had said *no*, so to him it was settled.

Then, two or three years into my time there, word came that Zion was going to have an operations evaluation.

We were given an opportunity to sign up to talk with someone on the evaluation team, so I did, to talk about fire.

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The superintendent—Harry Grafe—was curious about what I wanted to discuss with them. I went to his office and told him. What did Harry do? He told me he expected me to share with my chief what I wanted to say to the evaluation team. His point: He believed my chief deserved to know what would be said about his program, so he could present his side of the story.

What did I think? I thought Harry was being unfair. I also thought Harry probably disagreed with me, but he didn't say so. What did I do? I pulled my name off the list.

As the day approached for the operations evaluation to begin, it bothered me—we should be doing things that are good for the ecosystem, even if they're risky. If the regional office and my chief were keeping that from happening, then I should share my concerns. So, I put my name back on the list, and I also set up an appointment with my chief. On that day I told him what I planned to say. He, of course, disagreed.

When the operations evaluation occurred, I—a young GS-5— was assigned to talk to a man from the regional office. That scared me. He sat quietly, getting angrier and angrier as I voiced my concerns and gave my recommendations. I figured my career was toast.

Later I learned the fellow left my interview, went straight to Harry, and asked, “Who’s telling this guy this stuff?”

After the operations evaluation, there were several personnel changes (I was not one of them), *and*, I was given an assignment—an assignment that began a several-year process of writing a fire management plan, and getting the program started.

Looking back at Harry and what he had expected of me ... remember, I had thought him unfair, that he was possibly trying to shut the door on something I was suggesting ... as I thought about it afterwards, I recalled one set of words that he repeated several times—what he called *intestinal fortitude*. He expected me to have the intestinal fortitude to talk to the chief, eye to eye, and let him know what I was going to tell others.

Only later, when I saw how everything had fallen into place, did I fully understand that he had actually been supportive. But, he could see there were lessons I needed to learn.

He wanted me to learn about that “intestinal fortitude” thing. If I disagreed with someone, I needed to be able to look him or her in the eye and tell them why. It would help me, it would help them, and it would help the organization. It would not help any of those things if I simply went around people’s backs.

As I grew in my career, I learned those same lessons applied with regard to those I agreed with, enjoyed, supported, etc. They deserved my honesty, too. The occasional dose of supportive intestinal fortitude.

Harry’s lesson became engrained in me. As I climbed the career ladder, I became aware of another reality. People trying to: (a) *get to me first*, or (b) *control the message*, or (c) *give someone a reputation that served their purpose*. I had more than a few talks with subordinates, giving them my expectation that they sit down, eye to eye, with whomever they came in to complain about, that they give that person the opportunity to understand their complaint. Then, they both were welcome to come in together and talk to me about it. I can assure you I’ve heard I was being unfair, and I’ve told a particular story numerous times, one about intestinal fortitude.

Gray areas? Yes, there are some, such as when someone feels threatened or sexually harassed. Those issues are different, and require a different approach, and not a simple one.

What more could GWS do to promote sharing these kinds of lessons? A bull session at a future conference could be helpful. Stories could be shared with young people, new to their careers, and connections made to others with perspectives gained over a career. But, I realize I remember my lesson well because of the difficulty of that episode. One remembers those things. Still, I hope the recounting of the story is helpful to others.

Am I glad Harry Grafe required me to learn that lesson? That first time was maybe the most difficult. It was hard talking to the chief in that way, but yes, I am glad I did. So, other than that program at Zion, what was the consequence of Harry's expectation for me? It was deeper than that intestinal fortitude thing. It was discipline. It shaped how I conducted myself in the workplace, and it likely kept me from doing things that would have negatively influenced my reputation and credibility.

But I also see that having someone like Harry—who had those kinds of expectations—can also bring about discipline for the larger organization. With that discipline comes something that stems extreme conflict. It contributes to organizational resilience, a capacity for recovery from the conflict that does occur. Not really a firewall to conflict—I don't think there can be such a thing. There are people who feel entitled "to win." I'm here to say, it *does* matter how you succeed. And, I assure you failures will come. If your coworkers share in your failures, rather than celebrate them, you're probably doing something right.