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THE WARNING AND VERIFICATION TEAM: A WCM PILOT PROJECT AT NWSFO BOISE AUGUST 1996 TO JUNE 1997

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Introduction

NWSFO Boise conducted a pilot project from August 1996 through June 1997 to experiment with the utilization of the team concept. To keep the project manageable but large enough in scope to allow experimentation, the team focused on duties related to the functions of the Warning Coordination Meteorologist (WCM). In this light, the collective group was named the Warning and Verification Team (WVT). This Technical Attachment documents the organization of the WVT, as well as its successes and challenges. Recommendations for improvement and future applications of the team concept are also addressed.

Background

According to Webster's Dictionary, a team is a group of people working together in a coordinated effort. Teams may be diverse in size, type, or workload (Dyer 1995). For instance, the Weather Forecast Office (WFO) can be considered a team which promotes the NWS mission of saving life and property. There are, however, certain events and duties which occur within the scope of the NWS mission that can be better handled through a specialized team composed of a subset of staff members of the WFO. Historically, these duties have been carried out by individuals. Utilizing a team concept here can reduce individual workload, encourage new ideas, and increase the professional opportunities of its members.

The Boise WVT was created with the above concepts in mind and according to the following guidelines:

- Limit the scope to WCM activities.
- Develop new goals to improve customer service, networking, and office promotion and optimal method(s) to address the goals.

- Create working groups for most WCM activities including: storm data, verification, spotter network coordination and upkeep, spotter network training, spotter newsletter, office promotion, and documentation.
- Develop policy and/or procedures within the WCM scope.
- Create new working groups as necessary.

The voluntary team was under the direction of the Boise WCM who acted as team leader. The team elected a facilitator responsible for planning and conducting meetings and a scribe to take meeting minutes. The team then drafted its own mission statement, which read, "To manage the Warning and Verification Program as a team, so as to improve communication and productivity, provide opportunity, and to enhance customer service." Working groups were designated for various focal point duties related to the WCM scope. These groups were intended to replace individual focal points and allow greater staff participation in these areas. With these organizational items in place, the WVT began meeting on a bi-weekly basis, meeting weekly when planning special events.

Success of the Warning and Verification Team

"When a small team attacks an individual issue, the results are quick and successful (Pritchett and Pound, 1992)." This was the case with the WVT as was demonstrated during the planning and conducting of more specialized, non-routine tasks. Several special tasks such as Weather Awareness Week, Spotter Training, and Emergency Alert System (EAS) training were superior events in 1996-1997. These tasks benefitted from a synergistic approach involving a number of different staff members with diverse ideas and talents. For special projects, the overall workload was greatly reduced, as well as the stress level of the individuals. Not only can teams produce higher quality events, team members are provided with new professional development opportunities.

For example, in October of 1996, the WVT organized and conducted the second NWSFO Boise Open House. By utilizing each team member's professional resources, the team provided a top-notch event. Many new displays and interactive tour ideas were created in relatively short period of time. With over 200 people attending the open house, individual stress level was greatly reduced by having several people to help with the preparations. Team members were able to develop their communication skills through direct interaction with the public and by conducting media interviews.

Another example of the WVT success was Weather Awareness Week of March 1997. The week's activities, which included a media workshop, were planned and organized by the WVT. Once again, the team capitalized on the professional resources of each member. Team members wrote press releases, provided local media interviews, and conducted a media workshop addressing the immediate concerns of the public (spring snowmelt and

flooding). Not only did the media and the public benefit from these activities, team members increased their communication skills through presenting talks, conducting television interviews, and having direct interaction with the users of their products.

Two other notable examples were spotter training and EAS training. This spring the team developed a new Web-based spotter training presentation tailored for southeast Oregon and southwest Idaho. Again, using team ideas and resources, the WVT produced high quality training that was well received and boosted the Boise spotter network to over 600 volunteers. Not only did the team create a quality presentation, the workload of presenting spotter training was greatly reduced. With the introduction of EAS into the Boise office, the staff needed to be trained quickly. Team members developed training plans and worksheets, educated themselves, and trained the remainder of the staff. Training was quickly completed by having a group of people to train as opposed to an individual. This also provided the Boise office with several experts on EAS.

The end result is that the team concept proved very successful with these types of non-routine tasks. The tasks could have been accomplished in the traditional way with the WCM assigning duties on an as needed basis. However, these events would not have benefitted from a cohesive team environment where diverse ideas and talents contributed to success.

Challenges Associated with the Warning and Verification Team

Despite the successes mentioned above, the WVT was not without its challenges. These issues included problems with the working groups within the team structure, time and workload conflicts, and meeting concerns.

Despite the formation of working groups for more routine tasks, focal point duties such as storm data, verification, and spotter network upkeep continued to be handled by the original focal point. This was largely due to scheduling conflicts, making it impossible for a group of people to work together on the duties. The number of working groups and broad interest of most team members posed additional difficulties. Ultimately, individuals became involved in every working group which defeated the purpose of implementation of these groups considering the size of the WVT (5-7 members).

Some members experienced significant time and workload conflicts while retaining focal point duties unrelated to the WCM scope. Individuals felt overwhelmed with the responsibilities of working on the new WCM focal point duties in addition to their current focal point responsibilities. Some members removed themselves from regular team participation, though they continued to offer assistance with special projects.

Finding a convenient time to meet for a half dozen or so rotating shift workers was always challenging. It quickly became necessary for many of the members to attend during non-

duty hours, requiring the offering of compensatory time. The team initially met on a bi-weekly basis, but workload and scheduling became overwhelming for many team members. In an attempt to alleviate scheduling conflicts and decrease the number of meetings, the team tried electronic meetings via e-mail. Unfortunately, these meetings proved to be unproductive and prevented interactive brainstorming sessions. Through trial and error with various meeting schedules, the team functioned best by meeting only when necessary.

Recommendations

The team concept has proven effective in achieving certain goals within the WCM scope. The following list of recommendations is based upon lessons learned at NWSFO Boise and may help others to successfully utilize team concepts in their office.

- ▶ Teams are most beneficial for temporary or seasonal functions or events which require extensive planning and effort over a tangible period of time (i.e. well-defined beginnings and endings). Individual workloads in these situations are reduced, while overall productivity and quality is increased. Further experimentation and implementation of the team concept could be beneficial for other office programs.
- ▶ As NWS staffs become leaner, special project teams may help offices become more productive in certain areas. This may reduce staff burnout, and allow greater professional development opportunities for the staff as a whole.
- ▶ Team membership and meetings should remain permanently open to all staff members and team members should keep the rest of the staff informed on the progress of the team. A perceived sense of separation between the team members and staff may, in some cases, breed resentment among non-team members.
- ▶ Working groups should be considered for large teams to subdivide the tasks to be performed. It might be helpful to limit groups to a couple of people.

Conclusions

The Warning and Verification Team created new and effective solutions which have improved NWSFO Boise's relationship with the media, the public, and the spotter network. By integrating each team member's professional resources, workload was greatly reduced and quality was increased for these special projects. This pilot project provided opportunity for other staff members to be involved in certain WCM functions.

Individual focal point duties and specialized teams can be the key to success. With a changing NWS and leaner staffing levels, greater overall productivity and innovative solutions to workload conflicts will become increasingly important. The team approach can

help offices maintain and improve specific program areas while increasing the professional development opportunities of its staff.

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