Women Forest Rangers

Wendy L. Milner and Susan Odell became pioneers in USDA Forest Service line management in 1979. They were the agency’s first women rangers—newcomers to an elite fraternity numbering more than 620 people (Frome 1984; Odell 1992, pers. commun.). Odell was also the first pregnant ranger. When the birth of her son was announced to the Forest Service chief and staff, agency watchers knew that times were changing. Or were they?

In 1960, Herbert Kaufman captured the essence of Forest Service organizational culture in his exhaustive and accurate portrayal of the agency, entitled The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Behavior. Kaufman described a “conservative, hierarchical, and bureaucratic organization, richly colored by military ethos and imbued with a certain...culture” (Enarson 1984, p. 5)—an organization that later writers would call “male gendered” (Acker 1990, p. 145).

Kaufman explored what it took to have the “right stuff” to lead the Forest Service in the 1950s. In his view, promotion to the line was predictable and based on specific circumstances, actions, and attitudes that he described as “the will to conform” (Kaufman 1960). The will to conform, said Kaufman, meant voluntarily agreeing to accept the doctrine and expectations of the Forest Service in return for security, prestige, and other benefits. In truth, Kaufman describes an implied model for promotion in the Forest Service.

It is a testament to Kaufman that the agency not only agreed with his analysis, but, even 35 years later, some within it believe it still cleaves to such values (Kirby 1992; Reynolds 1992, pers. commun.). (There is, of course, debate about whether USFS organizational culture has changed or not. For example, contrast Twight and Lyden, 1988, with Cramer, Kennedy, and Krannich, 1993, and Tipple and Wellman, 1991.) It is these values that in large part contributed to the Forest Service’s reputation as a “superstar” among natural resource management bureaus (Clarke and McCool 1985).

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the tenets of Kaufman’s model as it applies to the Forest Service today. Do the growing number of women line officers in the Forest Service still essentially need to conform to the standards set forth in Kaufman’s work? If they need not conform, does it mean that there are alternative career paths for women in Forest Service line management? The answers to these questions might help us understand the culture of the Forest Service in the mid-1990s.

To accomplish this task, we conducted a survey of the Forest Service’s 127 women unit leaders serving in line positions in February 1992. Unit leaders were defined as decisionmakers in any of the three component organizations of the Forest Service, including national forest systems (district rangers, forest supervisors, regional foresters, assistant chiefs, research (station directors, assistant directors, and project leaders), and state and private forestry (deputy chief). Eighty-four of those surveyed responded, for a response rate of 66%.

Kaufman’s The Forest Ranger

In a chapter entitled “Developing the Will and Capacity to Conform,” Kaufman described basic practices in promoting employees to line-management positions (Kaufman 1960, p. 161–200). He called the Forest Service a “classic illustration of a career system” in which promotion is from within. Kaufman felt that certain characteristics—“willing-
ness to conform"—were necessary for promotion. This included waiving "personal preference as to locations, making inconvenient moves, and serving where most needed." Such waivers helped cleave individual Forest Service employees to agency values. It also prevented employees from being "captured" by the various interests they were helping to regulate (Culhane 1981).

Second among conforming values was "technical competency." Degrees in forestry and related sciences were prerequisite, particularly forest science, range science, and engineering. Experience in the practical application of science in the field rounded out and expanded what employees learned in school, and it completed the definition of technical competency.

The third value was "self-selection." Kaufman said that by the time young people entered the Forest Service they were under no delusions about how hard the work would be, what the relatively low payscale was, and what was expected in return for promotion.

A fourth conforming value was that more senior, powerful sponsors evaluated employee progress and actively mentored employees toward promotion. Fifth was promotion from within: in Kaufman's view, one had to be Forest Service to lead Forest Service. And the sixth value was the practice of "unhurried promotion," which encouraged employees to convert their personal doctrine to that of the agency.

Another Path to the Line?

In 1976, Debra W. Stewart wrote in "Women in Top Jobs: An Opportunity for Federal Leadership" that the federal government was in a good position to lead the way in providing "multiple career routes" or alternate career paths for women executives (Stewart 1991). Stewart studied the career paths of women in the federal government 15 years after Kaufman's work. Women were not making it to the top in the federal government, she noted. Stewart looked at the reasons for this and suggested methods for change. She proposed that the government could provide alternative career routes in a number of ways:

Today the federal service could move towards this ideal by acting on any of the following: the further development of flexible work schedules and the institutionalization of permanent, part-time, promotion tracks for men and women; the de-emphasis of "freedom of movement" as a criterion for advancement; the exploration of job splitting possibilities for husbands and wives, and the conscious development of career tracks for such couples; the establishment of government career counseling, advertising, and legitimizing these options; and, finally, the securing of government support for comprehensive quality child care (Stewart 1991, p. 279).

This would, said Stewart, help recognize employees as "whole people," free of traditional role definitions. Stewart believed that without such alternate paths women in particular would not succeed, being perhaps more encumbered by traditional organizational career paths. Applying her analysis, a developed alternate career path in the Forest Service would be one in which a woman would not necessarily have to fit the criteria Kaufman described to achieve promotion. Female employees using such an alternative path might not have to move nearly as often, possess one of a narrow set of scientific or engineering degrees, require traditional mentors, or even come from within the Forest Service itself.

The Forest Service has made significant progress in selecting women for top jobs since Stewart wrote her article in 1976. By August 1991, there were 127 women line officers, and their ranks were growing (Women Unit Leaders 1991). By 1993, more than 14% of line officer positions were filled by women. Most of these were district rangers (90), but there has also been one associate deputy chief for natural resources, a regional forester, several deputy regional foresters, eight supervisors and deputy supervisors, and several research project leaders and assistant directors. By comparing the career paths women have taken to top positions with Kaufman's study of expected career paths, it should be possible to discover whether any pattern of alternate paths exists for women in the Forest Service, or whether women who are...
promoted must still closely follow Kaufman's implied model.

Findings and Analysis

Our study findings indicate that women continue to transfer in order to be promoted. Forty-three percent of women in line positions transferred five or more times, as can be seen in Table 1. Almost 75% transferred at least three times. This confirms Kaufman's observation that mobility is important to being promoted to the management line. Additionally, when asked whether they would be willing to devote whatever time is necessary to their jobs in order to advance, a large portion of the respondents indicated that they would "to some extent."

Second, the study indicates that focused education and technical expertise are still important. Table 2 shows that success for women in line positions relates significantly to their level of education. Almost 70% have some graduate schooling, and the majority have master's degrees.

Women feel that their history of performance is of major importance, with 71.6% indicating performance was the most important factor leading to advancement. This statistic supports Kaufman's idea that technical competency is a primary factor in promotion. More than 84% of respondents believe technical expertise has a very positive to somewhat positive effect on promotion. In a related question, 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Forest Service personnel are promoted based on their competence. More than 84% of respondents believed technical expertise has a very positive to somewhat positive effect on promotion. In a related question, 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Forest Service personnel are promoted based on their competence. As a final indicator of the importance of technical competency, 56% of those surveyed indicated that their degrees were in forestry, engineering, or biology, with 40% possessing forestry degrees. Forty-four percent do not have degrees in one of these three fields but are classified under one of them by the time they are promoted to the line, indicating the power these three disciplines still have within the agency.

Third, the study demonstrated that while a woman's personal achievement is the most significant factor in promotion, the presence of a mentor is also important. Nine-and-one-half percent of the respondents indicated that having a mentor was the most important factor in promotion. In fact, this response finished in front of all other answers except performance, including work experience and developmental assignments. Additionally, more than 85% had male mentors to some or a great extent; over 34% had female mentors to some or a great extent; 82% believed having a mentor is an important part of advancement; and more than 80% answered that they personally had mentors who were very important to their advancement. These numbers confirm earlier work on the positive role of mentors in the Forest Service (Kennedy and Mohai 1987; Kennedy 1991).

The study findings illustrated in Table 4 clearly suggest that promotion still comes from within the organization. Simply put, one must still be Forest Service to lead Forest Service.

In The Forest Ranger, Kaufman quoted a 1957 Forest Service report that noted:

The average grade-9 Forester is 41 years old and reached his present grade in 8 years. For GS-11 the same statistic is 44 years of age and 15 years of service; for GS-12 the age is 48 and elapsed time from entry to present grade is 22 years; and for GS-13, age 50, elapsed time is 23 years. (Kaufman 1960, p. 181).

The fifth significant finding is that women who have served as long in previous jobs as Kaufman indicated before being promoted to management (Table 5). With over 86% of respondents saying they had 10 to 20 years experience, it appears that unhurried promotion is still the norm—years spent in each grade fell well within Kaufman's 1960 expectations.

Conclusions

Kaufman's implied model appears to remain applicable for women forest rangers. Although Debra Stewart urged the federal government to consider alternative career paths for women, full-scale development of those paths, at least for line positions, has not yet occurred. Yet, there may also be valid reasons why the Forest Service continues to hold so closely to many parts of its "willingness to conform" model.

Consider the willingness to be transferred. Some of the reasons that this standard was developed remain vital today. As the Forest Service struggles to maintain its organizational vitality during this tumultuous decade in natural resource management, both organizational loyalty and professional independence may well be crucial to bureau success.

Yet there are several important exceptions to the old conformist standard, and more surface each day. For-
est Service Chief Jack Ward Thomas announced in June 1994 that line officers may now be chosen from a broad range of professional series (the Forest Service titles assigned according to one’s background). Line officers will now be classified as 340-Series program managers, and line jobs will be open to any professional series. Public administrators and archaeologists will compete directly with foresters and engineers for line jobs.

In the early 1970s, new environmental statutes such as the National Environmental Policy Act led to professional diversity in natural resource management agencies. The current push to reorient toward ecosystem management will demand an even more diverse pool of professions, thus perhaps confirming the wisdom of Thomas’s decision.

As for other measures of organizational conformity, women believe mentors are important to promotions. And a person still has to be a long-time, loyal Forest Service employee to attain higher positions, a situation that may or may not change in the years to come, depending on whether the strategy of the “administrative presidency” is applied to the Forest Service (Durant 1992). That strategy uses political appointees at lower levels within federal bureaus to help more closely direct the president’s agenda. Finally, promotion is still fairly unhurried. Although it often appears that women are being “fast-tracked” and men are not, the numbers do not bear this out.

The Forest Service of Kaufman’s time has clearly changed in many respects as the agency adjusts to the chaos of massive social and political change. Former Forest Service Chief Dale Robertson said that the future of the agency lies in achieving a diverse (one must assume both professionally and demographically) workforce with true equal employment opportunities. While some evidence suggests that important changes are even now shaping the agency in ways Kaufman never imagined, we also think the most important precepts of management that Kaufman captured 32 years ago are still anchored in the organization. One must remember that the “willingness to conform” made for a very strong and cohesive organizational culture in the Forest Service. The challenge may well lie in, as James Kennedy noted, choosing “the components of the traditional culture that should be preserved or enhanced and those components that should be changed” (Kennedy and Thomas 1992, p. 235-36).

It is worth revisiting Kaufman every 25 years to find out whether the agency will ultimately be successful over the decades in creating a diverse workforce. This is, perhaps, one of the most important issues facing the Forest Service as it enters its second century. The question is whether the agency can find strength from the many, achieve diversity in an increasingly diverse world, and discover ways to continue to lead natural resource management in our complex democracy. Put another way, perhaps the challenge facing the Forest Service today is one of taking what worked for it in the past—what gave it one of the strongest organizational cultures in government—and learning how best to adapt that for the challenges ahead. This may be as daunting a challenge as the move to ecosystem management.

### Literature Cited


### Table 4. Number of women line officers in USDA Forest Service who were hired from within the agency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When you got your current position, was it a...</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change to a different agency</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change to a different organization within the same agency</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change within the same organization within the same agency</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry into government from outside</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5. Number of years of federal government (civilian) experience women line officers have in USDA Forest Service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–15</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–20</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–25</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–30</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
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</tbody>
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