

On an overcast day in the middle of June 1988, Jim Barrett and two friends were driving up Daisy Pass on the northern edge of Yellowstone National Park when they spotted something. Off in the distance to their left, they saw two figures meandering aimlessly through a grassy, tree-lined meadow. As the pair got closer, Barrett realized that they were a man and his dog clad in “scorched clothing and fur.” Jim Barrett slowed his car to ask if the man was okay. When the stranger and his companion reached the vehicle, Barrett remembers thinking that the duo smelled like they had just rolled around in a campfire. He also noticed that the man needed first aid. Fast. Barrett and his friends tucked the strangers into the car and drove back down Daisy Pass into their hometown of Cooke City, Montana.

Along the way, the man explained that he had been camping at Yellowstone when he and his dog were completely overtaken by a raging fire they hadn’t seen coming. With no other choice, the man hurried his dog to a nearby creek and leaped in. When the flames roared overhead, he held his dog under his arm beneath the surface of the frigid, mountain-fed spring until the blaze passed.

With their camping supplies smoldering under a pile of ashes, they spent the night huddled together under a tree until the next morning, when they could finally begin hiking again. It was at that point when Barrett spotted them. Neither Barrett and his friends nor the stranger could have known then, but by the end of August, the Storm Creek Fire would join over 250 other fires. Collectively, the firestorm would end up transforming more than 1.5 million acres of America's first National Park into a blazing inferno. It would cause public outrage from the Pacific Northwest all the way to the steps of Capitol Hill.

But the Yellowstone Fires of 1988 also did something else. They illustrated one of the most profound yet widely misunderstood lessons about the nature of excellence and the decisions that make excellence possible.

## **1. Let it Burn**

The summer of 1988 began peacefully at Yellowstone National Park. Just like every summer before it for almost a century since Yellowstone became a national park, thousands of visitors each day flocked to the real-world home of Yogi Bear. Hoping for a brief escape from the fast-paced hustle of the daily grind, recreational campers, family vacationers, and nature-lovers all sought to lose themselves in the majestic pine trees. They wanted to breathe in the fresh mountain air and to catch an up-close glimpse of a bear, or maybe a wolf or an elk. Some would spend their days hiking through the woods, while others set out to try their luck with a

fishing pole and a tackle box, while still others marveled at the wonder of the Old Faithful geyser. These were the things that Yellowstone National Park was all about in the summer months. Perhaps that explains part of the reason why the Storm Creek Fire that Jim Barrett had witnessed was conspicuously absent from June's Daily Park Briefings for the Yellowstone ranger staff.

Instead, June's briefing focused almost entirely on rather commonplace happenings such as bear sightings near camping trails, or on national news like the drought that was sweeping the nation. When lightning struck a lodgepole pine tree on the southwest edge of the Park and sparked another small fire a little more than a week after the Storm Creek Fire began in the north, the event went largely unnoticed by the park's rangers.

Finally, on the first day of July, the Yellowstone Daily Briefing noted that another fire was triggered near the pristine shores of Lake Lewis. Over 2,000 miles away in Washington D.C., National Parks Director William Mott received notice of what was happening at Yellowstone. Mott did nothing. He issued no order to extinguish the fires. Minute after minute, day by day, the flames crept through the forest, swallowing one tree after the next. Two weeks later, an approaching fire forced Vice President of the United States George H.W. Bush to cut short a backcountry fishing trip on the eastern edge of the Park. It wasn't until the week following the Vice President's return that Mott finally began ordering fire crews to contain the blaze. By then, however, it seemed to be too late. In spite of the valiant efforts of thousands of firefighters on the ground, in addition to helicopters and airplanes dousing the Park with water from the skies, the fire's intensity only grew. On August

20, a day now referred to as “Black Saturday,” flames climbed more than 200 feet in the air and consumed over 150,000 acres of forest. More of Yellowstone National Park turned to ash on Black Saturday alone than the previous 100 years of wildfires combined. *The Washington Post* compared the carnage and chaos of Black Saturday to the attack on the U.S. air base in Da Nang, Vietnam.

The question that an outraged public, a skeptical Congress, and a critical media wanted answered was *why didn't the Park Service stop it?* More specifically, *why didn't Bill Mott stop it?* Was Mott simply a pawn for a Reagan Administration whom Mott's predecessor at the National Park System claimed “had the most obscene environmental record in history?” Or was the incident just another piece of evidence pointing to the ineptitude of government agencies—a tragic foreshadowing of the bungled government response to Hurricane Katrina two decades later? Or perhaps Bill Mott was just another career bureaucrat who had failed his way up into a leadership position and was destined to defy common sense when his nation needed him most?

While each question hinted at a plausible explanation, in fact, none was correct. There was another reason behind Bill Mott's curious behavior that almost nobody considered. The real reason was so counterintuitive that it seemed patently absurd and illogical to the majority of people. The fact of the matter is too strange to be fiction: Extinguishing forest fires is an enormous fire hazard. That's why Bill Mott adhered to a strict “let it burn” policy for forest fires within national parks.

## 2. The Paradox of Quitting

The late Bill Mott had a trim build with square shoulders and a white tuft of thinning hair. After declining President Nixon's request to take command of the National Park Service in 1969, William Mott somewhat reluctantly agreed to take the post when it was offered to him again in 1985 by Ronald Reagan. By 1988, his distinguished career had made Mott the only 3-time winner of the Pugsley Medal, which honors the outstanding efforts of Americans who champion the cause of parks and conservation. Although nearing his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, William Mott's wrinkled blue eyes and contagious smile still exuded the vigor that characterized his five decades of civil service. Mott had earned a reputation for being both a visionary and a pragmatic man of action with a relentless passion for protecting and expanding public spaces. During the last three decades of his life, it was generally accepted that if you cared at all about your public parks, Bill Mott was the guy you wanted taking care of them. It was that reputation that made his response to the Yellowstone Fires all the more puzzling. The confusion was widespread and included just about everyone—everyone, that is, except for a handful of experienced, well-informed naturalists and ecologists.

Think about the last time you've either visited, driven by on the highway, or saw one of America's national forests on TV. Chances are, you found lush vegetation and a beautifully dense blanket of green cloaking the scene. That is due almost entirely to the efforts of the federal government. Ever since the mid 1940's, a series of

Public Service Announcements starring the U.S. Forest Service's (not to be confused with the National Park Service) most famous employee, Smokey Bear, urged Americans to prevent forest fires. By the time of the Yellowstone Fires four decades after Smokey's debut, the message had stuck. Virtually every American, including representatives in congress and broadcast journalists, agreed that fires are a destructive force. From there, the logic went like this: Trees are good. Fire burns trees. Ergo, fire is bad. The line of reasoning was simple, perhaps deceptively so.

In the 1960's, ecologists who made their living studying forests began challenging the wildfires-are-evil argument. What the ecologists knew that few other people did is that wildfires are essential to the health of a forest. Forest fires are like nature's way of gardening. Seedling trees are able to establish themselves after fire clears out the underbrush and returns nutrients back into the soil. Possibly the strangest and certainly the most counterintuitive benefit of wildfires is that small fires are necessary for preventing big fires. It works like this: Periodically, lightning will strike a tree in a forest. Flames grow. The fires burn some but not all of the vegetation, and then eventually die out. In the case of lodgepole pines, seeds actually require the intense heat of a fire to germinate. For millions of years, this cycle of burning has taken place. Early European settlers and ancient Native Americans knew that putting out fires not only deteriorates the health of a forest, it also significantly increases the risk of unnaturally large and ultimately uncontrollable fires that frequently ravage nearby homes and businesses—precisely the kinds of fires that are sparking with increasing frequency today throughout the western United States.

When those natural fires are extinguished by human intervention, the grasses, saplings, and shrubs create what ecologists call a “fuel ladder”. Imagine a very long ladder that starts on the ground and extends to the top of the tallest trees. Like any ladder, the ladder’s purpose is to help its climber climb higher, only the climber of a fuel ladder is not a person; it is a flame. Rung by rung, a fire that ignites on the ground can climb up the smaller brush until it reaches the highest trees. When the tallest trees start to burn, the entire forest as well as the surrounding homes and businesses are in danger. But ever since 1908, the policy of the U.S. Forest Service (again, not the same as the Park Service) has been to attack all wildfires with severe prejudice. As a result, the lush forests we admire are now crawling with fuel ladders. As author and UCLA scientist, Jared Diamond writes in his book *Collapse*, after the 1980’s “people began to realize that the U.S. Federal Government’s fire suppression policy was contributing to those big fires, and that natural fires caused by lightning had previously played an important role in maintaining forest structure.” It was that body of evidence that inspired the National Park Service’s leaders back in 1968 to make a decision. In order to insure that America’s national parks continued to thrive, and in order to protect the people and the homes and the businesses near those parks, the National Park Service decided to *quit* fighting fires.

It turns out that Bill Mott’s failure to extinguish the Yellowstone Fires of 1988 was no failure at all.

I think our organizations, our careers, and our lives are a lot like forests. In the spirit of full disclosure, I am not an ecologist or a naturalist. In fact, the only times I’ve voluntarily “camped”

in my adult life I've been within arm's length of a central air conditioning unit, a full kitchen, and a flat screen TV inside of a 31-foot motorhome. Regardless of your camping prowess or nascent interest in forestry, people like you and me can learn something very important about the power of strategic quitting from wrapping our minds around the curious relationship between forests and wildfires.

### 3. From Mediocrity to Excellence

At its heart, this book is about the counterintuitive idea that quitting is vital to the pursuit of excellence. Many talented teams and highly competent individuals find themselves trapped on a plateau of mediocrity because they can't decide what *not* to do.

In the following pages, I want to do two things for you. First, I want to convince you that producing volume is not the same as pursuing excellence. Doing *more* is not the same as doing *better*. The pursuit of excellence requires some projects to be swallowed by flames. Some opportunities need to go up in smoke. Some options need to be rejected. Sometimes, nature will start the fire for you, but most times you must strike the match with a conscious decision. We will meet a group of people who have tapped into the power of quitting to outperform their better educated and more privileged peers. We will meet a practitioner-scholar whose research reveals why the combination of thinking strategically and acting decisively amounts to what is almost a super power that saved Apple Computer and elevated Starbucks back to prominence. In

these and other examples, you'll see that quitters win because they pursue excellence with decisive focus, not scattered productivity.

Second, I want to provide you with an elegantly simple 3-part framework for putting this idea into practice with every decision you make, every day. You will discover what a Decision Pulse is and how to use your Team Pulse to provide a new level of clarity for your team. I will present a surprisingly simple way to improve the quality of your decisions without getting lost in a jungle of data or becoming paralyzed by the fear of making the wrong choice. In the real world, the pursuit of excellence does not happen with a single decision at an annual retreat. It is not a quarterly event or even a monthly meeting. Every organization, every team, and every person must pursue excellence one decision at a time, multiple times every day. In the final chapters, you will learn how you and the people on your team can leverage the forces of process, personality, and pressure to pursue excellence every day both personally and professionally.

*Why Quitters Win* is not a book for everyone. If your deadbeat cousin has never held onto a job or a mate for longer than a month, then an inability to quit is not his biggest obstacle to excellence. Similarly, if you are content with mediocrity in your work and a mundane existence for your life, then this book is probably not for you, either. On the other hand, if you are inspired by the pursuit of excellence in your work, in your community, or in your home and you are ready to make an impact on your world that outlasts your time in it, then I encourage you to read on. The rest of this book will challenge you. At times, it will even make you uncomfortable. And that's a good thing. It means the message is sinking in.

But the rest of this book will also excite you. For you, this book might be a reminder of the way you used to operate before complexity got the better of you. Or maybe, for the first time in your life, you'll see that the pursuit of excellence can start right now with one small decision, followed by another decision and another and another. It will finally dawn on you that you don't need more hours in the day. You don't need to wait for more opportunities to fall into your lap. Whether you're picking up a pursuit that got sidetracked or starting your pursuit for the first time right now, one decision is all it takes to set the wheels in motion.