

Incident Command System

THE INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEM AN INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION TO THE INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEM THE NEED FOR A MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Successful organizations do not happen by chance or blind luck. Success requires dedication and professional management on the part of those responsible for the organization's achievements. Lack of good management can have disastrous results. This is true in any organization whether it be business, military, team sports, or the fire service.

Some examples are:

Business success: Any Japanese carmaker.

Notable business failure: Edsel.

Military success: Operation Desert Storm.

Notable military failure: Iraqi Army/Navy/Air Force.

Sports success: Vince Lombardi as coach of the Green Bay Packers.

Notable sports failure: 1961 New York Mets.

Firefighting success: Your last fire.

Notable firefighting failure: First-in company to Mrs. O'Leary's cow, Chicago 1871.

Successful incident management is not totally unlike a team sport such as football. In football the coach puts together the game plan the players are to follow rather than each player deciding on his own where to run and whom to block.

Managing emergencies requires that an IC determine the plan that others will follow. Not all football players have the same skills. Running backs, linemen, and wide receivers each have different skills. The same can be said for those who function at an emergency. Law enforcement, fire, EMS, public works, and social agencies all may be required at the same incident and each needs to concentrate on its area of expertise if it is to be effective. If a team or a fire department is to perform to its highest level, it must be well trained, well conditioned, and well managed.

The consequences of a football team not having good leadership and not playing together in a coordinated manner may result in losing a game. Should an emergency incident suffer from lack of leadership and coordination of efforts, the results could be loss of life or injury to civilians and firefighters, additional damage to the property, and failure of those responsible to provide their communities with the level of service they deserve and expect.

Unlike other organizations, emergency response agencies must fulfill their responsibilities under conditions that are hazardous and often confusing. While other organizations can take time to form a committee to study a problem, decisions at the emergency scene must be made based on limited information and under severe time restrictions. Just because an emergency exists does not relieve those responsible for managing the emergency from doing so in a professional manner. Because of the risks and dangers involved, the need for effective incident management is greater than in other organizations.

Elements of an Effective Incident Management System (IMS)

For an IMS to be effective, it should share some common elements. Those elements include:

- Suitability for use regardless of jurisdiction or agency involved
- Ability of the organizational structure to adapt to an incident regardless of type of complexity.

- Applicability and acceptability to users throughout the community and region.
- Readily adaptable to new technology such as computers or improved communication capability
- Expandable in a logical manner from initial response to a major emergency so as not to have one plan for "everyday" use and a separate plan for "the big one."
- Basic common elements in organization, terminology, and procedures.
- Cause the least possible disruption to the existing system during implementation.
- Fulfill the above requirements effectively and simply to ensure low operation and maintenance costs,

ICS as a Management System

ICS meets the requirements of an effective incident management system in a manner that makes its use practical to all emergency response agencies. In doing so ICS:

- Provides for manageable span of control.
- Definition: Span of control is the number of subordinates one supervisor can manage effectively.
- A basic management axiom states that for managers to be effective they must limit the number of subordinates they supervise to a manageable level. Experience has shown that a workable span of control is somewhere between three and seven, with an optimum of five. ICS provides an organizational structure that allows managers to delegate responsibility when they are approaching or have reached the limits of their span of control
- Ensures unity of command so that all personnel are managed and accounted for.
- Unity of command means that each individual participating in the operation reports to only one supervisor. This eliminates the potential for individuals to receive conflicting orders from a variety of supervisors, thus increasing accountability, preventing freelancing, improving the flow of information, helping with the coordination of operational efforts, and enhancing firefighter safety.
- Provides a standard set of terms for communicating designation of resources and facilities.

ICS uses plain English rather than 10-codes to communicate. Called clear text, it uses a standard set of words and phrases in lieu of the sometimes confusing and conflicting 10-codes. ICS also offers a set of standard resource designators to identify the range of resources and facilities that may be needed at an incident.

Examples of clear text and standard resource designators can be found in the materials of the ICS classes offered by the National Fire Academy, the National Interagency Incident Management System (NIIMS), manuals offered by Fire Service Publications at Oklahoma State University, as well as other sources.

Lines of authority provide for lines of communication. Based on the simple principle that communications follow the same lines as the organization, the amount of communication is minimized and also limits the number of individuals needing to talk to each other.

This improved flow of communications prevents messages from being missed by those for whom they should be intended.

ICS can be adapted to any type of emergency whether it be fire, mass casualty, hostage situation, natural disaster, or any other type of emergency. Because it can be used by all agencies involved in the incident, coordination and communications are improved and the amount of confusion reduced.

Many departments, agencies, and jurisdictions have disaster plans that are used only when a major incident occurs. These plans are often out of date, inappropriate to the emergency, and not understood or trained on by those not involved with drawing up the plan. ICS can be used

every day at every incident and eliminates the need to have different management systems for different sizes or types of emergencies.

- Provides for safety of personnel
- Span of control and unity of command assure that personnel are accounted for and their efforts are coordinated in a manner that provides for firefighter safety.
- Improved communications and reduced confusion also facilitate protecting their safety.
- Provides for modular expansion. As the incident grows or additional resources become available, the ICS organization can expand in a modular fashion to meet the demands of the emergency and still allow for maintaining effective span of control.
- Improved resource utilization. With a clear organizational structure, each resource can concentrate on its assignment and eliminate duplication of effort. This maximizes the effectiveness of each resource.

HISTORY OF ICS FIRESCOPE

In the early 1970s Southern California experienced a series of major wild land fires that required the involvement of a vast number of resources and the participation of local, county, state, and federal jurisdictions and agencies. In trying to manage the complex incidents, a number of problems were identified.

They included ineffective communications, lack of a common command structure, lack of accountability, and the inability to coordinate the available resources. The agencies involved formed FIRESCOPE (Fire Resources of Southern California Organized for Potential Emergencies) to identify solutions to the problems they encountered. What they developed was the first generation of ICS. Although it was designed to deal with wild land fires, it has evolved into an all-risk management system

Fireground Command System:

Needing to improve how incident operations were managed in the Phoenix Fire Department, Chief Alan Brunacini developed the Fireground Command System (FGC). Originally developed to be used primarily for structural firefighting, FGC has been adopted by many departments in the country as their all-risk emergency management system.

NFA Model System:

The National Curriculum Advisory Committee, which is made up of representatives from all the disciplines involved in emergency management, recommended development and adoption of an all-risk system that could be used by all response agencies. The National Fire Academy has produced the Model Incident Command System that can be used as a model by agencies and jurisdictions wishing to adopt ICS.

Each of these management systems is based on the same management principles, emphasizing the safety of personnel, coordination of incident activities, clear lines of authority and communication, maximizing the effectiveness of resources, unity of command, and a manageable span of control.

DEVELOPMENT OF REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS

The success and acceptance of ICS nationally have led to its inclusion in a number of regulations and standards. The primary reason for this is ICS's ability to be adopted and utilized by jurisdictions and agencies needing one common emergency management system capable of dealing with all types of emergencies and suitable for use when multiple jurisdictions or agencies are involved.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)

As a result of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (SARA) of 1986, OSHA has implemented regulations that require departments in states that have adopted OSHA standards to use an ICS at all hazardous materials incidents.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

For those departments in states that do not require following OSHA standards, the EPA has adopted regulations that impose the same requirements in non-OSHA states. The regulation states, "The incident command system shall be established by those employers ("employers" includes fire departments) for the incidents that will be under their control and shall be interfaced with the other organizations or agencies who may respond to such an incident."

NFPA 1500

The NFPA Standard 1500: Fire Department Occupational Health and Safety Program states that all departments shall establish written procedures for ICS, and that all departmental members shall be trained in and familiar with the system. It fixes responsibility for firefighter safety at all supervisory levels at an incident and requires a method of tracking and accounting for personnel. It places strong emphasis on scene safety and the role of the incident safety officer.

NFPA 1561

The NFPA Standard 1561: Fire Department Emergency Management Systems provides broad guidelines for what should be included in any emergency management system; the appendix gives examples of successful systems currently in use. It does not provide a new emergency management system or impose rigid rules for adoption.