Incident command system

Incident Command

The incident command system (ICS) has become a routine word in fire service circles. It is rare to read an article or watch a fire service video about a major fire or emergency incident without ICS being mentioned(Buck, 2006; 1-27). It has reached the point that when fire chiefs are asked what tactics they employed to extinguish a fire, some answer that they used ICS.

Some of the management principles built into the ICS are:

- The Scalar Principle. The actual fire ground organization with the chain of command from the firefighter to the incident commander.
- Unity of Command. Each person reports to and receives orders from only one boss.
- Parity of Authority and Responsibility. Each person receives the necessary authority to fulfill given responsibilities to accomplish the goals.
- Span of Control. The number of people or units that one person can effectively supervise.
- Division of Work. Sectoring to achieve efficiency, effectiveness, and safety in using labor.
- Logical Assignment. Assigning the most qualified people to handle each assignment.

One of the primary features of the ICS is that it is designed to expand as the incident expands. It is not designed to be put in place during the initial stage and remain static. (Buck, 2006; 1-27) Fire and emergency incidents are fluid and constantly changing, many times for the worse and not the better.

During the early stages of a complex incident, it is impossible to know or predict the amount of resources that are going to be needed and what positions or order the fire ground organizational chart will have to be filled. If you take the time to set up a worst-case scenario ICS at every incident, before dispatching the obviously needed resources, every incident will become a worst-case scenario.

Levels of Command to Deal Effectively With Large Scale Incidents

There are many schools of thought concerning the placement of command posts on the fire ground. The initial incident commander, particularly a location officer, has to make a decision: Should he set the command post inside on the“ fast attack” mode or outside where the entire scene can be surveyed and where the command post is much more visible to incoming companies?

The fire situation, the makeup of the location (number of personnel), safety of operating forces, the department’s SOPs, and the initial commander’s own knowledge and experience all contribute to this important decision (Hildebrand, 1997). For example, in a one-room fire, the first-in location officer, as the initial commander, may decide to stay with the attack crew and command from that position. In contrast, the first-in battalion chief may choose to set the command post in front of the dwelling and receive radio reports from the interior. For fires that are large-scale on arrival, the command post is set at a safe position that affords the largest view, often on the corner of a building.

If the fire progresses to several alarms, the command post may be moved to a command/communications vehicle, where command boards, phones,

maps, and vital information can be laid out and surveyed. (Hildebrand, 1997) All of these positions are valid, depending on the factors noted above. In short, the command post should be set where it is most advantageous and safest for that particular operation.

In conjunction with establishing a command post, the incident commander now has several other considerations. He holds a figurative“ deck of cards” that represents various functions that must be addressed in order to build an effective command network. Among these“ cards” are planning, communications, logistics, operations, and staging. At the start of the fire or incident, the incident commander holds all the cards. If the incident is entirely manageable by the initial commander, the cards are kept by that commander. For a one-room fire, it would be rare for the initial commander to“ deal out” any command functions. The only exception may be communications, which would be handled by the first-in chief’s aide or engine location.

As the incident progresses and the command function expands to the point at which the incident commander no longer can effectively manage it, then the card is dealt to another commander. For example, if multiple alarms have been called, the staging of apparatus may become a large and difficult task (Shelley, 2007). The incident commander would deal the staging card to another chief or officer. Thus the incident command system expands proportionally to the size of the incident.

The initial commander also must ensure that the fire ground is organized. Usually this is accomplished by sectoring the fire ground. It creates a fire

ground structure that is understandable and facilitates assignments and division of work and, therefore, span of control. Once the fire ground has been sectored and this information communicated to officers and companies, the commander can rapidly deploy companies to specific locations on the foreground. In a rapidly progressing fire in an apartment building with several critical exposures, the commander may assign an entire alarm to Bravo Sector.

There are several different systems used to identify sectors (numbers or letters). The important thing is that everyone–incoming companies, mutual-aid companies, and others–use the same designations.

The final responsibility of the initial incident commander is to pass command when relieved. The most effective form of passing command is in a face-to-face meeting with the relieving officer. One way to conduct this briefing is to start with the fire building and work around it, using the exposures as sectors (Shelley, 2007). The who, what, and where of each sector should be given to the relieving commander. Also, any problems and special considerations should be covered. Charts or incident command boards are very helpful in this process.

The initial incident commander has a critical job. He must analyze the situation, develop an effective overall strategy, call for required resources, establish a command post, sector the fire ground, and give a thorough briefing to the relieving incident commander. If these steps are followed and performed effectively, fire ground command will be established correctly,

which is always much easier than trying to play catch-up after hoses are laid, ladders thrown, and companies deployed.

Dynamic Risk Assessment That Would Have Been Implemented At the Scene

Goals were not successfully assigned. Incorporated command would have been a greater way to tackle leadership duties.

- No joint action plan was apparent. The Incident Commander was countering to progress instead of planning forward.
- The Incident Commander had lots of elements for a right duration of control.
- The Incident Commander was also actually behaving as security officer. He was possible suffering from an information overload, which put him in a reactive, instead of a proactive, mode.
- The record does not reveal any designated incident facilities.
- Management of resources was uneven and superficial. The IC apparently did not appreciate the danger of the position to which he had directed Unit 620 for refilling, and the importance of the Red Flag Warning and its existence were not communicated (Shelley, 2007). Further, evidently no safety officer was appointed, and no safety briefing was given to the firefighters.

Responsibilities of Various Public Agencies That Would Have Been Involved At Buncefield

The policy should state which area mental health professionals would have been designated to provide critical incident assistance to Buncefield Incident and explained both their pre- and post-incident responsibilities. The mental health professional’s role is important and should have been set forth clearly

in the policy. For example, mental health professionals could be called upon to provide pre-incident education for upper- and mid-level management or the entire staff. They could be available for consultation on an incident-by-incident basis(Kirsch. 2006; 61-72). They could assess the need for professional follow-up for employees after a critical incident.

In developing the policy, people should consider adopting the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) process endorsed by the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, which promotes using mental health professionals specially trained in the crisis intervention field(Kirsch. 2006; 61-72). This training is not part of the general mental health curriculum. Therefore, in seeking a mental health professional in your community to provide services in the event of a critical incident, do not hesitate to ask questions about the person’s critical incident training and experience.

A comprehensive incident response plan strategically supports the execution of emergency response plans and procedures (Kirsch. 2006; 61-72). It is not intended to subjugate those existing response plans or procedures that provide tactical guidance and are facility or asset specific. The focus ofthe incident response plan should be on defining what constitutes a incident for the organization and what is the correlating notification process and response to the incident. Functional roles, as opposed to personal names or titles, should be clearly defined in the plan. The use of checklists and sample documents should be used liberally to ease tasks and provide guidance during the response.

Firefighters are presented with a simulated incident (preferably with a graphic representation) involving a agencies asset and respond using the organization established in incident response plan. Such drills are designed to“ stay in the room’” and promote a common understanding of the elements and teamwork necessary for a coordinated response. At the other end ofthe spectrum is the full mock emergency exercise. Like the table top drill, firefighters use their crisis response plan during a simulated emergency. (Buck, 2006; 1-27) However, mock exercises should ideally evaluate both the strategic and tactical perspectives. They should be designed to help agencies’ test communications among functional areas, to evaluate the effectiveness of coordination between the incident response plan and tactical response procedures, to lest the ability of the agencies to response to simulated inquires from the media and public, as well as the interaction with local emergency responders. Public agencies that develop comprehensive crisis response plans and exercise them are in the best position to anticipate a successful outcome.

Need For Effective Liaison with Media and Other Agencies during Major Incidents

- For remote sites not accessible to normal fire apparatus and ambulances, ensure the availability of bulldozers, four-wheel-drive vehicles, and other all-terrain units to transport personnel, equipment, and patients.
- The availability of hoist-equipped rescue helicopters is extremely desirable for remote incidents. Agencies without their own helicopters can generally make arrangements with neighboring agencies, the military or other providers.

- If the incident site is determined to be inaccessible to ground units, consider staging units in a place where personnel and equipment may be transported to the actual rescue site by helicopters, four-wheel-drive units, or bulldozers.
- Be prepared to send teams of firefighters from the staging area for the following assignments:
- Rope rescue teams to extract victims from situations where helicopter hoisting is deemed unfeasible. If the construction sled had not been available at this incident, high-angle rope systems or vehicle-mounted rescue winch operations would have been required.

  Litter teams to carry victims (in litter baskets) to locations where they may be picked up by an air squad or a ground vehicle.

  Extrication teams to free victims trapped in vehicles or debris.

  Medical teams to treat multiple patients on the site as necessary, especially during extended extrications.

  Shoring teams if heavy equipment must be stabilized or lifted.

- Determine before incidents occur the manner in which communications will be established with on-site supervisors and workers, including the use of radios, cellular phones, or even“ runners” if necessary. Determine radio frequencies if possible.
- Meet with project supervisors to determine what equipment will be available on the site. This is the time to find out about resources like construction sleds, bulldozers, water trucks, and any on-site medical or

extrication gear. Discuss methods of transporting rescuers and equipment to potential accident sites.

- For major projects, and especially those with special hazards, consider joint training exercises to simulate likely scenarios. Consider including other public safety agencies that may be required to assist.
- Develop a written plan, and maintain it in prominent places so that“ overtimes,” move-up companies, and other“ newcomers” will be able to find and use them when an incident occurs.
- Above all, be prepared to consider unusual solutions for unusual problems. Some of the best solutions for unique fire and rescue problems may not be found in any book.
- Share information about lessons learned with others who may be confronted with similar problems.

No one can predict when a critical incident might happen or how people will respond to it. A crisis amplifies your role as manager and trains all eyes on you. The expectations are that you will lead. Will you be prepared to do so? The answer to this question, in large part, may be determined by actions you take now, before a crisis hits. If your office does not have a critical incident response policy in place, make it happen. Identify resources in your area willing to assist you and your staff. Talk with other managers who have formulated policies and who have weathered critical incidents in their organizations. Learn from their experiences. Gets a pre-incident education program going. Involve staff members at all levels. And, finally, do a personal inventory of your coping skills and how well they have served you. Identify other resources you think might help you personally in the event of a crisis.

Taking the steps discussed here will help you and your staff is prepared. Perhaps no one truly can be prepared for the devastation of a Hurricane Andrew or an Oklahoma City bombing. By taking certain proactive measures, however, you can be better equipped for managing the aftermath of a critical incident and thus increase the chances that your organization–and you–will recover quickly and successfully.