

# **Incident Command System**

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by James F. Broder.

The Incident Command System (ICS) is a hierarchical management structure used by governmental agencies (fire and police) to respond to an emergency. It is primarily a field response management system, but is adapted for use in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Devised by the fire service in 1971, it provides guidelines for common multi-agency operating procedures, terminology, communications, and management. Its modular structure allows for a consistent and coordinated response to incidents of all types and complexity. Because of the growing interdependency between the response organizations of industry, business and governmental agencies, the use of the incident command system by business and industry is unavoidable. If NFPA 1600, Standard for Disaster Management Planning is adopted in its present form, the use of ICS may be mandatory for continuity planning in certain industries. Emergency Response Teams (ERT) or Industrial Fire Brigades may already be required by law or industry standard to utilize this system. If the organization's response requirements don't warrant the use of an ERT, business owners and responsible managers (including recovery planners) must still be aware of the methods and protocols such as ICS that are used by the local jurisdictions.

ICS is a management tool that relies heavily on the concept of Management by Objectives (MBO). Response objectives are set by the senior responder and delegated to the subordinate positions after agreement that the objectives can be met. The senior responder is referred to as the Incident Commander (IC). By using this approach, the Incident Commander can coordinate the response to complex and technical incidents without unreasonable expectations. It is also sensitive to the basic management principal of span of control that limits the ratio of subordinates. If the incident is small and the response is relatively simple, the ratio is eight subordinates to one. If the crisis expands, and becomes more complex, the span of control is reduced to provide the most effective leadership. Some believe the span of control in an emergency situation is 5 or less.

The Incident Command System is divided into five major functional units. The fire service version is expandable to 36 positions, but most are not relevant to business response. The five units or sections are (see figure 1):

- Incident Command;
- Operations;
- Planning and Intelligence;
- Logistics;
- Finance and Administration.

With small incidents, it is not necessary to establish all units (sections) of the ICS. In this case, the Incident Commander (see below) will directly manage or assume the duties of each of the units or activate the units as additional personnel arrive. Operational need is the primary factor in determining what is activated.<sup>1</sup> Each unit is headed by a Section Chief<sup>2</sup> and may be further divided into sub-sections as required by the complexity of the incident or need to maintain the proper span of control.

**Basic Incident Command System Structure**

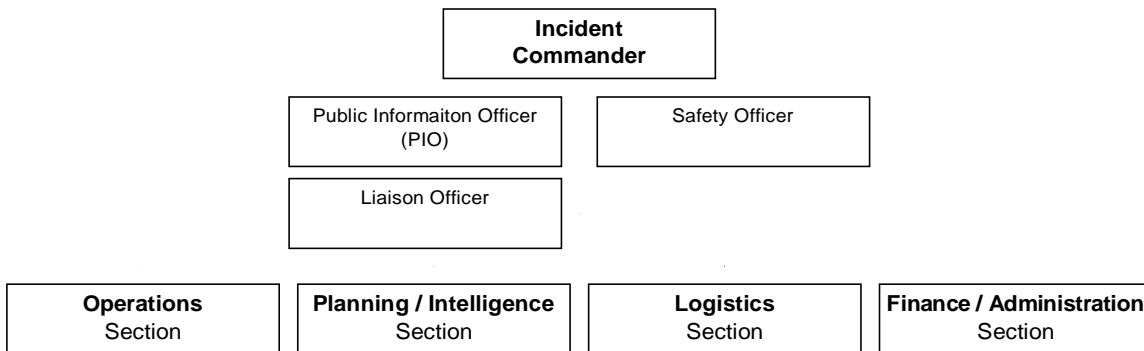


Figure 1

Incident Commander

The Incident Commander (IC) has overall responsibility at the incident or event. A distinctive vest that contains the words ‘Incident Commander’ usually identifies the IC. He or she determines objectives and establishes priorities based on the nature of the incident, available resources and agency (company) policy.<sup>3</sup> The role of the Incident Commander is usually filled by the first responder to arrive at the scene and relieved of this duty when a more senior responder or a designated Incident Commander arrives. A Command Post (CP) is set up a safe distance near the location of the emergency where the IC will manage the response. Once established, the CP should not be moved. It can be located in the field, at a vehicle, inside an office, or where reliable communications (electronic and verbal) and security (access control) can be maintained. When appropriate, it should be within view of the incident, but away from noise associated with the incident.

<sup>1</sup> ICS for Executives; Standard Emergency Management System Executive Course, Student Reference Manual, State of California, August 1995.

<sup>2</sup> The Law Enforcement version of ICS uses the term ‘Officer-in-Charge’ or ‘OIC.’

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Management must delegate (ahead of time) to the incident commander the authority to make the tactical decisions necessary to stabilize or end the emergency without interference. Management's role is in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to make strategic decisions based on the events or to allocate resources between multiple incidents. Reliable communications between the EOC and IC are essential. The Incident Commander follows pre-existing policy set by management.

Some of the specific duties of the Incident Commander include:

- overall field management of the emergency;
- coordination with the EOC or other IC's. The IC of the firm's ERT should co-locate with the Fire or Police Department IC (an element of 'Unified Command');
- ultimate responsibility for the safety of responders;
- approval of all plans and resources;
- situational analysis;
- setting objectives and priorities;
- delegating authority as necessary;
- primary responder until others arrive.

If the size of the emergency warrants the establishment of the following positions, assistants to the IC include an Information Officer, Safety Officer, and Liaison Officer.

#### Information Officer

The Information Officer or Public Information Officer (PIO) is the news media contact for the event. In a business environment, the Public Relations representative will fill this role and should be less (or not at all) subordinate to the IC as he or she would be under the government's version.

#### Safety Officer

The Safety Officer monitors safety conditions, ensures that compliance regulations are met, and develops measures to assure the safety of all assigned personnel.<sup>4</sup> The safety officer is often responsible for evaluating changing conditions and should have the authority to withdraw responders or to suspend an operation without clearance from the Incident Commander.

#### Liaison Officer

The Liaison Officer assists the IC on larger incidents where representatives from other agencies may respond by coordinating their involvement and providing them with information on conditions, objectives, and resources.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## Operations

The Operations Section implements the Action Plans and objectives issued by the IC. These are the 'doers' of the response. They participate in the selection and 'reality checking' of goals and direct all resources necessary to carry out the response. A constant flow of situational information and milestone achievement is communicated back to the Incident Command. Operations can be sub-divided into functional or geographical divisions as needed. Examples include first aid, search and rescue, and Hazmat cleanup.

## Planning and Intelligence

The Planning and Intelligence Section develops the Incident Action Plans to implement the goals and objectives of the Incident Commander. As part of their plans, this section will also determine what resources are needed to accomplish each task. Members of this section must gather information about the incident before they can devise a meaningful plan. In a large-scale incident this section will:

- collect intelligence (analyze conditions and the scope of the incident);
- project or predict changing conditions;
- prepare action plans;
- prepare contingency plans if conditions, events or resources change;
- track resources available, in service, and used.

Technical advisors are included in the Planning section to provide expert advice when needed. Chemists, safety engineers, toxicologists, Industrial Hygienists, Meteorologists, and Structural Engineers are examples of the types of experts that might be included in the response.

## Logistics

The Logistics Section obtains all resources and services needed to manage the incident. This section delivers personnel, equipment, food and supplies, restroom and shower facilities, etc. The Logistics Section simply supplies resources. The Planning Section is responsible for resource management and use.

## Finance and Administration

The Finance and Administration Section maintains records and documents the history of the response. It projects, tracks and approves expenditures by the Logistics Section, and completes a final cost analysis of the response. Documentation of times, events, and actions are important to the post incident analysis, insurance reimbursement, criminal prosecution, or in the defense of a civil action.

## Example

This is how it might work--the Incident Commander might issue the command (goal) to extinguish the fire. The planning section determines that the fire is small in origin, involves general combustibles and will require dousing with water by one hose team. The Operations Section will then grab a hose and put out the fire. This is noted by the IC and the Planning Section who is also responsible for tracking any resources used.

### Business Continuity

Many outages spawned by localized events are preceded by some type of incident response by the fire department or Emergency Response Team who should be using ICS. It then becomes necessary to transition seamlessly from response to recovery. By understanding this process, planners can better accomplish this goal and satisfy potential planning requirements.