

# ICS

The greatest strength of the Incident Command System is that it's widely known; its greatest weakness is that ICS is not widely understood. There are many misconceptions that even some of its most ardent practitioners believe. These misconceptions or myths are mostly the result of well-intentioned people using ICS without having a full background in its history, nuances and reasons for existence in the first place.

1. **ICS is designed to be used only on large incidents.** ICS is a very robust organizational concept. When fully engaged in a major fire or disaster situation, the entire list of key positions is filled, many with deputies and assistants. In addition, technical advisers are activated to attend to specific issues that the command and general staff are not trained to handle. Observing a large-scale incident managed with ICS for days on end is something to behold. Virtually all these situations involve the cooperation and support of firefighters and other emergency personnel from an array of federal, state and local agencies all working together.

Yet daily fire and other emergency services routinely use ICS in much smaller situations. In fact many departments use ICS on every incident. In ICS there is always an incident commander. Any function under the incident commander that is not activated is the responsibility of the IC. When a call for assistance comes into the fire department, the dispatcher is the first IC. Based on the information from the caller, the department's standard response plan and available resources, the dispatcher makes the first series of decisions regarding the incident.

Subsequently the first company arrives at scene, and the officer assumes command from the dispatcher. At this point the incident receives a name and the incident commander, regardless of who it might be, is known by that name. This eliminates a lot of confusion.

As incidents grow in size and complexity, additional parts of the ICS organization are implemented. Only a small fraction of incidents require full implementation of the organizational structure.

2. **ICS is a repackaged large fire organization.** After the disastrous fires of 1970 in Southern California, it was obvious that something had to be done to help the various agencies work together on large-scale incidents. Investigators found that the fire agencies could not communicate because they didn't share radio frequencies and used different terminology and radio codes. Their organizational structures also were incompatible, and they called personnel doing the same job by different names.

Federal, state and local agencies along with the Riverside Fire Lab collaborated on the development of the Firescope Incident Command System. The goal was to develop a system that used common terminology, common communications and a common organization. Of course each agency involved had its own agenda concerning these issues, and there was a lot of give and take in finding common ground.

After three or four years, the first Firescope Incident Command System was published. It was to be used only in Southern California by the participating agencies to work out the bugs. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection implemented ICS statewide in 1978, a year too late for the major fires that hit Northern California in 1977.

Many people immediately equated the ICS division supervisor with the old large fire organization division boss. Side-by-side comparisons of the position checklists reveal many important differences, probably the most significant being the division supervisors' responsibility for logistical support. Unfortunately, this led to other misconceptions that are only now being "trained out" of people.

ICS is very different from the large fire organization that CDF, the federal agencies and many of the large county fire departments used. Probably the most salient difference is integrated planning. (Unwittingly, some practitioners of ICS have bastardized the system by developing a

“planning/operations position.”) With integrated planning, the section chiefs operate as a team to prepare an action plan that meets the objectives of the incident and can be supported logistically.

3. **Only large fire departments can use ICS.** While it is true that ICS was designed by large fire agencies at the federal, state, county and city level it was designed because even those organizations couldn't go alone. In California wildfires this has been proved time and again. The Forest Service, CDF and Los Angeles County Fire Department don't need assistance for most incidents. These agencies routinely handle complex incidents that would tax smaller agencies to the breaking point and they all embrace ICS. Smaller fire departments really have no choice if they want to be able to deal with complex emergency incidents.

Mutual aid was the primary reason for ICS in the first place, and one of the lessons that all fire agencies are learning is that they need to help each other. The taxpayers will no longer stand for the cost of standalone fire departments whose full use is exploited very infrequently. They expect that leaders in the fire service will take the necessary steps to ensure that a mutual aid system works seamlessly; adopting ICS is the way to make that happen. Only when we all use common terminology, common communication and common organization will this occur.

4. **Command and general staff positions require training and certification.** Certification was not originally part of the ICS. Training in some of the positions was quite rudimentary. But interestingly, for the most part it worked. Firefighters were given assignments and, using a little initiative and common sense along with the Field Operations Guide checklists and the position descriptions, they managed to make it work and work well.

Certification came into being to ensure that non-fire personnel, primarily from the federal land management agencies, could handle fire-related assignments. There is nothing wrong with using non-fire personnel in emergency incident management; they simply come into the situation with a different mind-set, training and experience.

5. **ICS delays incident action.** If a fire department fully implemented the entire ICS organization on every incident, then a strong argument could be made that ICS delays incident action. Of course nothing is further from the truth. Only the part of ICS that's necessary to abate the nuisance or hazard is implemented at the time of the emergency. However by using ICS, perhaps only the incident commander, or maybe the IC, can activate operations and distribute information. The critical thing is to activate only the part of the system that is needed for the particular incident.
6. **One ICS is as good as another.** There are three incident command systems in general use by the fire service in the United States today. There also are other systems used by other agencies and in other countries. That any command system is better than no command system is absolutely true, and each has something to recommend it. The three systems referred to here are Firescope ICS, National Wildfire Coordinating Group ICS and Fire Ground Command ICS. Each of these has its partisans in the ongoing debate over what will eventually be the system.

There are basic management concepts that are the foundations for ICS: Common standards, common terminology, functional management, common organization and applicability from the smallest to the most complex incident and all-risk application. Firescope ICS does all these things.

All of these concepts have to be achieved if ICS is to have national acceptance. National acceptance is critical today because no jurisdiction is immune to an incident that could involve resources from the state and federal levels, as well as locally. Firescope ICS is used, not only in California, but throughout the country and even by the U.S. Coast Guard.

7. **ICS requires a written incident action plan.** On large-scale incidents that will last for days, a written incident action plan is commonly developed. The written IAP is merely another means of communication and aids widely dispersed forces. Many people are under the impression that in the wildland firefighting arena a written plan is used on every incident. The fact is that probably 90% of the wildland fires are quickly suppressed by first-alarm assignments without a written IAP. In most cases the first-responding units will jot down the assigned resources unless they receive that information electronically.

The responding battalion chief also will note the response as well, and if the first-alarm assignment is extensive, confirm it with dispatch if radio time is available. On wildland dispatches it's not uncommon to have 12 or more units (engines, crews, copters, dozers and air tankers) responding. If the incident requires the deployment of most or all of that large assignment, the responding battalion chief will indicate the assignment on his work sheet, which is often a modified ICS 201. He or she also will sketch a map of the incident showing the approximate location of the assigned units.

If the fire is fairly small and not growing only enough writing is done to keep track of things. Often that will be no writing. The critical thing is not the written plan but the mental planning process that is required of every officer on every incident. In its most fundamental form this is ICS, assigning command responsibility to someone and having a system in place that can grow as the need for it grows.

8. **ICS is always filled top down.** The documentation for ICS describes it as a top-down organization. Commonly this is a sound concept to follow in many if not most cases. But ICS is a lot more flexible than that. It is this flexibility that makes it work so well for us in virtually all types of incidents.

It's critical to recall that in ICS, any position not activated is the responsibility of the incident commander. Drawing from that concept, we can see many examples of incidents wherein only select components of the system are activated.

For example, a static incident such as a train wreck may not require a complex action plan. The IC can do that, but there are a large number of resources assigned so a resource unit leader is used to keep track of resources.

In another example crews may need feeding but require little other logistical support, so a food unit leader arranges to get them lunches or feed them at a local restaurant. Many other examples abound. The critical thing is to not get locked into one way of looking at ICS.

9. **ICS is all about forms.** Firescope ICS has a plethora of forms. Copies are available on their Web site. The important point is that like all forms they are merely pieces of paper organized to solicit information that is critical to an operation. I remember the first time my accountant included a standard sheet of typing paper with some information on it for the IRS as part of my tax return. I was aghast. I asked him why he didn't use an IRS form. He said that because they have no form for this, he simply puts the information on a blank piece of paper.

It is really easy to get caught up in the forms and forget that the important thing is the information. If the forms don't work for your incident, use standard sheets of paper and write on them. The key is communication.

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