

The **4-C** Communication Model

Radio communication is a skill that can be learned.

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When was the last time you received structured training on how to communicate on the fireground using a portable radio? (Perhaps a better question is: *Have you ever received fireground communications training?*)

Has your fire department adopted *basic* radio communication models and procedures? Are the models and procedures used routinely on the fireground? Are the models and procedures enforced? Does your fire department provide periodic training that reinforces your radio communication competency?

Congratulations if you answered *yes*.

If your fireground communications could use some fine-tuning—or could benefit from a major overhaul—you will appreciate this ongoing series of *Communication Solutions* articles.

The 4-C Foundation

Establishing a *foundation of communication fundamentals* is your first step toward developing fireground communications that are clear, concise, and disciplined. These fundamentals enable and support *all* communication models and procedures that build upon the foundation.

My *4-C Communication Model* will establish a rock-solid foundation for improving your fireground communications. Without the 4-C foundation it is impossible to experience radio communication that is clear, concise, and disciplined. Without a rock-solid communication foundation you will continue to experience persistent, consistent fireground communication problems.

Square the corners of your fireground communications, establish the *4-C Communication Model* as the foundation to your fireground communications. The *4-C's* are:

1. Connect
2. Convey
3. Clarify
4. Confirm

The following radio exchange demonstrates the *4-C Model* and will be used to explain each 'C' of the *4-C Model*:

CONNECT

Division-6 Supervisor: "Engine-12 from Division-6."

Engine-12 Team Leader: "Engine-12."

CONVEY

Division-6 Supervisor: "Withdraw from Floor-6."

CLARIFY

Engine-12 Team Leader: "Engine-6 copy, withdraw from Floor-6."

CONFIRM

Division-6 Supervisor: "Affirmative Engine-6."

CONNECT

Before you can impart information using a portable radio you must ensure that you are talking to the intended receiver of your message. As the sender you must *Connect* with the receiver. Consider this *flawed* radio exchange:

Division-6 Supervisor: "Engine-12 from Division-6."

Engine-12 Team Leader: "Go ahead Division-6."

Question: Did Division-6 'Connect' with Engine-12?

Answer: Maybe, maybe not. (Read the exchange again, noting Engine-12's reply.)

Discussion: *Maybe* will never solve your fireground communication problems. *Maybe* indicates the acceptance of rounded corners. True, Division-6 did connect with *somebody*. However, if *somebody* is not Engine-12 than the rest of the 4-C cycle could be a waste of time---no matter how clear, concise, disciplined, and meaningful the message *Conveyed* might be.

Connecting with the *somebody* could be dangerous. Bad things can happen if you are not connected to, and communicating with, the intended receiver of your message.

Consider the following revision to the previous *Connection* exchange:

Division-6 Supervisor: "Engine-12 from Division-6."

Engine-12 Team Leader: "Engine-12."

Question: Did Division-6 *connect* with Engine-12?

Answer: Absolutely, yes.

Discussion: Division-6 is now ready to convey the message and Engine-12 is ready to receive the message. So far so good.

Recommendation: Nobody in your fire department has the radio designator 'Go Ahead.' If you want to solve fireground communication problems eliminate the use of *Go Ahead*. *Go Ahead* is unnecessary radio fluff.

CONVEY

Having *Connected* with the intended receiver, Division-6 can *Convey* the message:

Division-6 Supervisor: "*Withdraw from Floor-6.*"

Notice that this message is *not* conversational; the message is clear, concise, and easy to understand. Conversational radio traffic is an indicator of people thinking with their thumb depressing the mic button. Conversational radio traffic sounds like this:

"Engine-12 *I need you guys to* withdraw from Floor-6."

The conversational words are *I-need-you-guys-to*. Speaking conversational words produces unnecessary radio traffic. Multiply the mouths speaking conversational words and you multiply the conversational radio traffic. Conversational words are *not* important. Unnecessary radio traffic gobbles up valuable 'air time' that could be silent; silence provides ample room for concise, meaningful, *important* radio traffic.

One of the keys to *Conveying* information with a portable radio is to be clear and concise---not conversational. This means that you *think* conversationally before you *Convey* concisely.

Example:

Think Conversationally: [Hmm, let's see, I need to have Engine-12 withdraw from Floor-6...]

Now you are ready to *Connect* with Engine-12 and *Convey* your concise message...

Convey Concisely: "Engine-12 withdraw from Floor-6."

CLARIFY

Engine-12 will now *Clarify* the message imparted by Division-6.

Engine-12 Team Leader: "Engine-12 copy, withdraw from Floor-6."

Question: Does the Division-6 Supervisor know with 100% certainty that Engine-12 heard the correct message?

Answer: Yes, absolutely.

What if Engine-12's response to the message *Conveyed* by Division-6 was:

Engine-12 Team Leader: "Engine-12 copy."

Questions: What did Engine-12 ‘copy?’ Does the Division-6 Supervisor know with 100% certainty that Engine-12 heard the message conveyed?

Answer: No, absolutely not.

Discussion: Without clarification another *maybe* has emerged...*Maybe* Engine-12 heard the correct message, *maybe* they didn’t. The only thing 100% certain is that Engine-12 did hear Division-6 say *something*.

Clarification means repeating the message---succinctly. *Clarification* establishes 100% certainty that the message received is the same as the message *Conveyed*.

CONFIRM

Now Division-6 must *Confirm* that the message *Clarified* is the same message that was *Conveyed*.

Division-6 Supervisor: “*Affirmative Engine-12.*”

Confirmation of Engine-12’s *Clarification* effectively places a period at the end of the *4-C Communication Model*.

4-C Communication ‘Safety Net’

The *4-C Communication Model* will help you ensure that important information--- emergency traffic, priority message, etc.---has been heard and understood, not just *Conveyed*. Misunderstanding is quickly identified and corrected. Once again consider the Division-6/Engine-12 radio exchange:

Division-6 Supervisor: “*Engine-12 from Division-6.*”

Engine-12 Team Leader: “*Engine-12.*”

Division-6 Supervisor: “*Withdraw from Floor-6.*”

Engine-12 Team Leader: “*Engine-12 copy, evacuate Floor-6.*”

Division-6 Supervisor: “*NEGATIVE Engine-12, WITHDRAW from Floor-6.*”

Engine-12 Team Leader: “*Engine-12 copy, withdraw from Floor-6.*”

Division-6 Supervisor: “*Affirmative Engine-12.*”

Words Mean Something

Evacuate and *Withdraw* are not synonymous.

Recall from a previous article (*The Words of Life Safety*) that the word ‘Evacuate’ means the proactive removal of *civilians* before they become a *rescue* problem.

The word ‘Withdraw’ means the proactive removal of *fire fighters* before they become a *rapid intervention* problem.

Imagine the potential consequences had Engine-12 replied to Division-6's order to *Withdraw* with a simple "*Engine-12 copy.*" Should this happen Division-6 must immediately reestablish radio discipline by saying: "*Engine-12 clarify.*" Or: "*Engine-12 copied WHAT?*" Can you see how rounding the communication corners---random, conversational, undisciplined communication---can create unnecessary radio traffic? Lots of radio traffic does not produce an intelligent and safe fireground. Listening to fireground radio traffic is a reliable way to judge fireground strategic competence. Random, undisciplined radio traffic is an indicator of a random, undisciplined fireground operation. Multiply the radios, multiply the undisciplined mouths, and you will have communication problems.

4-C SHORTCUT: Use With Caution

If there is a lot of radio traffic you can quickly squeeze an important message into the fireground cacophony by employing a slick 4-C shortcut. In order to obtain quick acknowledgement you can Convey an overhead message as follows:

Division-6 Supervisor: "*Truck-31 from Division-6, report to Staging, acknowledge...*"

Truck-31 Team Leader: "*Truck-31 to Staging.*"

Division-6 Supervisor: "*Affirmative Truck-31.*"

Hey, this is important: If you are going to use this 4-C 'cheat' be prepared for a bewildered reply such as: "Radio traffic for Truck-31?" This response means that you did not *Connect* with Truck-31. In fact, this response means that Truck-31 is not even certain that somebody was attempting to *Connect* with them. As a consequence additional (and unnecessary) radio traffic will be required in order to *Convey* your message and receive *Clarification*. (The net effect: It would have been quicker—and produced less radio traffic—had Division-6 used the 4-C Model to begin with.) That said, if used judiciously, given the right circumstances, the *4-C Shortcut* can work. (Caution: Institutionalize the *4-C Communication Model* before using the *4-C Shortcut*.)

Half-Full

Be of good cheer, you don't need to tolerate fireground communication problems. Your fireground communications cup is not half-empty, it is half-full and needs to be topped-off.

If you would like to fix *your* fireground communication problems you first must establish a solid communication foundation and then build upon the foundation with communication models, procedures, words, and training. The 4-C Communication Model provides an excellent place to start:

1) Connect....2) Convey....3) Clarify....4) Confirm.

Next time: Next time I will describe the two most important words on the fireground: 'From' and 'On.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

A fourth generation career fire fighter, BC Mark Emery is a partner with Fire Command Seattle LLC in King County, Washington. BC Emery is a National Fire Academy *Executive Fire Officer* and a National Fire Academy *Instructor Specialist*. He received a BA degree from *California State University at Long Beach*. BC Emery serves as a shift Battalion Chief with *Woodinville Fire & Life Safety District*, a *CFAI Accredited* agency near Seattle.

All that said, Mark assures you that what he does for you *today* is exponentially more important than all the stuff he did *yesterday*. Feel free to communicate with Mark at fci@usa.com.