

Another Incident Management Solution

Incident Equilibrium

The goal of a competent Incident Commander is to achieve and maintain an appropriate balance of strategic-stuff and tactical-stuff

By BC Mark Emery

In order for you to be a competent Incident Commander you must first understand the responsibility associated with ‘command.’ As the Incident Commander (IC) you have both a *duty* and a *responsibility*. Your *duty* is to ensure that problems are solved. Your responsibility is to ensure that problems are solved intelligently and safely.

You solve problems intelligently and safely by managing just three things: (1) strategy, (2) resources, and (3) risk. If you are not doing something that falls into one of these three categories you are not functioning as the Incident Commander.

An Incident Commander is managing strategy, resources, and risk is able to focus on the current situation and on the probability of how the situation might change. Any situation changes are addressed by managing strategy, resources, and risk. This means that the Incident Commander can not be buried with the supervision of *tactics*. Tactics are best supervised by Team Leaders (usually Company Officers), by Division/Group Supervisors, and occasionally by Strike Team/Task Force Leaders.

Thus, the *goal* of a competent Incident Commander is to achieve and maintain an appropriate balance of *strategic-stuff* and *tactical-stuff*. I call this strategic/tactical balance *Incident Equilibrium*. Incident Equilibrium is achieved when strategy, resources, and risk are managed so that problems are solved intelligently and safely.

An incident in equilibrium balances tactical activities with strategic activities. The concept of Incident Equilibrium encompasses the entire incident, from the initiation of Command responsibility to the termination of the Command Post.

Many of you may be thinking: “‘Strategy, resources, risk, equilibrium...What ever happened to good-old ‘command, control, and coordination?’” Excellent question? The answer is simple: Command, control, and coordination are the product of competent incident management. During the initial stages of the incident command, control, and coordination will definitely be an issue for the Incident Commander. However, by developing an incident action plan (IAP), and

by using delegation to manage span of control, the Incident Commander can narrow the scope of Command Post (CP) responsibility to just three things:

1. Strategy: Information, planning, operational mode, communications, cost, pre-incident plan consultation, situation status, resource status, decisions, accountability, risk vs. benefit, etc.
2. Resources: Companies, Teams/Crews, Divisions, Groups, Strike Teams, Task Forces, Branches, Sections, staging, move-ups, mutual aid, subsequent alarms, and other logistical needs.
3. Risk: Safety, passage of time, structural integrity, utility control, fire growth, hazardous materials, medical monitoring, rehabilitation, weather, traffic, decontamination, hazards, etc.

Webster's defines *equilibrium* as:

"The state of balance between opposing forces or actions that is either static or dynamic."

So how does this definition apply to the fireground? (Or to any incident for that matter.) It is quite simple: Strategy and tactics can become opposing forces unless carefully and deliberately balanced. Therefore, it is the Incident Commander's responsibility to 'manage' an incident so that equilibrium is achieved and maintained. This requires the Incident Commander to be more than just a spectator with a colorful vest and a portable radio. It obligates the Incident Commander to be an informed strategist rather than an uninformed tactician.

For example, an Incident Commander can quickly be overwhelmed by tactical activities and assignments, yet the incident is not being stabilized. Consider *Figure 1*. The scale graphically represents a fireground that is out of balance *tactically*. If you were observing this fireground from a distance *what would it look like* and *what would it sound like*? You would likely witness uncoordinated tactical freelancing and you would likely be listening to a cacophony of conversational radio traffic.

To bring this fireground into equilibrium would require that strategic-stuff be piled onto the opposite side of the scale. Assemble freelancing fire fighters into Teams, assign the Teams to Division Supervisors and/or Group Supervisors, communicate the mode and action plan to the Supervisors, and start solving problems intelligently and safely.

Just the opposite, an Incident Commander can quickly be overwhelmed by strategic activities and assignments, yet problems are not being solved. Now consider *Figure 2*. This scale

represents a fireground that is out of balance *strategically*. If you were observing this fireground *what would it look like* and *what would it sound like*? You would likely witness a fully animated command chart exhibited by a people wearing colorful vests running around talking into portable radios.

To bring this fireground into equilibrium will require that tactical-stuff be portioned onto the opposite side of the scale. Remove the vests, assemble people into Teams, assign the Teams to those who are still wearing vests (likely Division/Group Supervisors), give each Team a tactical or support objective, and start solving problems intelligently and safely.

Once the incident is in equilibrium the goal is to maintain equilibrium until the incident has been stabilized.

Bad things can happen if the Incident Commander

Duty: Ensure that problems are solved.

Responsibility: Ensure that problems are solved intelligently and safely.

Mission: Ensure that problems are solved intelligently and safely by competently managing strategy, resources, and risk.

Goal: To achieve and maintain *Incident Equilibrium*.

[Purpose, Goal, Duty? Purpose, Mission, Duty? Purpose, Goal, Responsibility?]



Figure 1.
Incident out of balance tactically



Figure 2.
Incident out of balance strategically

Show scale graphic in perfect balance with words on both sides
as shown in Figures 1. and 2.

Figure 3.
'Incident Equilibrium'
An appropriate balance of strategy and tactics