

Strategic Priority Sizeup

The foundation of an intelligent and safe fireground operation.

The fourth edition of the *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language* offers the following definitions of 'size up':

To make an estimate, opinion, or judgment.

To arrange, classify, or distribute according to size.

The actual state of affairs.

Sizeup is a close relative of another word: *Triage*. The definition of triage is *not* restricted to the medical community; the same dictionary defines 'triage' as:

A process in which *things* are ranked in terms of importance or priority.

You are the first *Officer* to arrive at a 'routine' building fire...Your apparatus Driver slowly cruises past the building allowing you to view three sides from the right front seat (your initial or 'windshield' sizeup). After performing this initial sizeup you exit the apparatus and immediately:

1. Start doing tactical stuff
or...
2. Perform a secondary sizeup.

If you immediately start doing *tactical* 'stuff' you are thinking like a task-level resource, another fire fighter; on the other hand, if you continue to seek *strategic* information—by performing a 'secondary sizeup'—you are fulfilling your role and responsibility as a Company Officer. What you choose to do is what distinguishes a *reactive tactician* from an *informed strategist*.

As the *first* Officer to arrive it should not be a surprise that you (yes, *you*) have command responsibility; 'command responsibility' means that you are responsible for three things:

1. Strategy
2. Resources
3. Risk

It is impossible to manage strategy, resources, and risk *competently* without *information*; knowing what the problems are is the most important information you will obtain. You must also *quickly* develop an initial action plan based on sizeup information. Acquiring and analyzing information during an incident is called 'sizeup.'

This article will provide a model for quickly and consistently performing a *strategically meaningful* ‘secondary sizeup.’ (Recall that your ‘initial sizeup’ was performed through the windshield as you cruised past the building.)

If it is a situation you have seen many times—such as a car fire, dumpster fire, automatic fire alarm—you can employ a mental process called ‘recognition primed decision making.’ Using ‘RPD’ means that you are able to tap prior knowledge and experience—mostly experience—without having to slow down and ponder what to do; you are able to react quickly and initiate appropriate action. For example, if you notice a rock traveling rapidly toward your head you quickly size-up the situation and take appropriate action: *you duck*. (If you contemplate all alternative options it’s too late...Thwack! Pain! Drain-bamage!)

A fire burning within a building is different. There are many factors that require the contemplation of a Fire Officer: building construction features, occupancy type, fireload, location of the fire, available resources, time of day, occupied or unoccupied, personnel safety, etc.

Initial sizeup will tell you what you think is important; secondary sizeup will tell you what you what is truly important.

This article will assume that:

1. You *do not* have extensive fireground experience from which to draw, and
2. Buildings and building fires are *not* all alike—even if you do have lots of experience.

This article will place a great deal of responsibility *on you*, the *first* Company Officer to arrive. What happens after you arrive is based on your sizeup and subsequent decisions.

As a Fire Officer your decisions must be based on what you *know* is true, not based on what you *think* is true. *Initial* sizeup will tell you what you *think* is important; *secondary* sizeup will tell you what is *truly* important.

WHAT THE PROBLEM IS IS THE PROBLEM

If you are to receive benefit from this article you must believe the following Command Caveat:

An intelligent, safe, and coordinated incident action plan begins with the identification of problems.

Stated from a different angle, it is impossible to develop an intelligent and safe incident action plan if you don’t know what the problems are. Furthermore, the identification of the *most significant problem* is critical secondary sizeup information.

Often Company Officers will ‘attack’ a problem identified during their initial sizeup; the problem attacked might be an obvious problem *tactically* but may not be the most significant problem *strategically*.

Through the windshield everything can appear *routine* yet conditions elsewhere reveal a situation that you have never seen before.

Example: A Company Officer is first to arrive at a ‘routine’ fire and notices a large amount of smoke coming from Side-A, Floor-1, of a large two-story house. The Company Officer also

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notices light smoke along the roof soffits. The Officer makes a tactical decision to ‘fast attack’ this problem through the front door. Had secondary sizeup been performed the Officer would have discovered that the smoke was originating from a well developed basement fire. (The building was two-stories on Side-A and three-stories on Side-C.) This hasty moth-to-flame *tactical* decision (based solely on initial sizeup) placed the Team working *above* a ‘hidden’ fire. Even if *tactics* are being performed competently on the first floor, working above the undiscovered basement fire is *strategically* reckless. Thus another Command Caveat:

The foundation of an intelligent, safe, and coordinated incident action plan is the identification of problems.

Competent fire officers seek strategic benefit, not tactical entertainment.

(Especially true when there is no *compelling evidence* of a civilian life safety problem.)

STRATEGIC PRIORITY SIZEUP

Precisely what are your ‘strategic priorities?’

As a refresher, *at any incident*, there are three strategic priorities:

1. Life Safety,
2. Incident Stabilization, and
3. Property Conservation.

No matter what type of incident and no matter what problems you face when you arrive, each problem can be classified as a *life safety* problem, a *stabilization* problem, or a *property* problem.

At most incidents (building collapse, motor vehicle accident, confined space, hazardous materials, etc.) you will be faced with *life safety* and *stabilization* problems. In general, *property conservation* will only be a strategic problem on the fireground (also at flooded basements, broken sprinkler heads, etc.)

Consider the secondary sizeup of the following situation: Car versus pole; two unconscious teenagers in the front seats; fuel leaking; a power line down and draped over the hood of the car...

- **Do you have a *life safety* problem?** Yes, you have two ‘red’ patients—as well as the safety of responders and bystanders.
- **Do you have a *stabilization* problem?** Yes, the power line and leaking fuel—as well as stability of the vehicle itself. What about the stability of the power pole? Traffic?
- **Property** would not be a consideration at this incident (wallet, purse, backpack, 8-track *Credence* tapes, and other personal stuff that would likely be ‘salvaged’ by law enforcement).

Now consider this: Of your three strategic priorities, which is *always* your number-one *strategic* priority? There should be no debate that *life safety* will always your top *strategic* priority. That said which priority will you address first *tactically*? With fuel leaking and a power line draped over the cars hood you would be foolish to rush in and begin patient care. To ensure *your* safety—as well as the safety of bystanders and patients—you must first address the *stabilization* problems. Your initial actions—*tactics*—will be to *stabilize* the incident.

Author’s 2¢^s

The term ‘fast attack’ must be eradicated from the *contemporary* fireground lexicon.

How do you *attack fast* and at the same time address secondary sizeup, the development of an incident action plan, 2-in/2-out, and ensure a coordinated fireground operation?

Once the incident scene has been ‘stabilized,’ patient removal and care would be initiated. The action plan at this incident would transition from a *stabilization* action plan to a *life safety* action plan.

The point is this, although *life safety* is always your first *strategic* priority it is not always your first *tactical* priority.

Consider your arrival at a house fire...Your secondary sizeup produces no compelling evidence of a (civilian) *life safety* problem (which would require *Rescue* or *Search and Rescue*); the status of *life safety* is literally “unknown if occupied.” Accordingly you will address the strategic priority *life safety* with the *tactical objective* Primary Search. This means that *stabilization* objectives will likely be initiated *before* Primary Search. (Examples: Water Supply, Exposure Protection, 2-in/2-out, Utilities, Confine the fire). The fireground is *not* tactically linear so Primary Search would (at some point) be initiated concurrent with *stabilization* activities.

A professional Incident Action Plan is:

- Intelligent
- Safe
- Coordinated

Reflect on firegrounds you have *personally* responded to; if there was no evidence of a *Rescue* situation, which occurred first: life safety activities or stabilization activities?

Obviously life safety will *always* be addressed before property conservation—both strategically *and* tactically.

However, there are moments, albeit brief, when stabilizing the incident has priority.

Purpose of Strategic Sizeup

Did you notice that the *tactical* ‘activities’ described above were an extension of sizing-up problems *strategically*?

This article began with dictionary definitions of ‘sizeup’ and ‘triage.’ It then proceeded to discuss *initial* sizeup and the importance of *secondary* sizeup.

Why split hairs between sizeup and triage? Because many Fire Officers believe ‘sizeup’ entails nothing more than what they see through the windshield. This may qualify as *sizeup* but—by definition—does *not* qualify as *triage*.

The purpose of secondary sizeup is to develop and implement a professional fireground action plan. It is impossible to develop and implement a *professional* action plan—intelligent, safe, and coordinated—without first *triaging* the incident. In other words:

1. What are the strategic problems?
2. What is the *most significant* problem?
3. What order will problems be addressed?
4. How will prioritized problems be addressed tactically?

INCIDENT ACTION PLAN: Three-Step Progression

The following three-step progression is essential when performing a *competent* secondary sizeup:

Step One: *Identify* incident problems,

Step Two: *Classify* each problem strategically,

Step Three: *Prioritize* classified problems tactically.

This three-step Strategic Priority Sizeup progression establishes a clear and concise definition of *secondary sizeup*:

A mental progression which *identifies, classifies, and prioritizes* problems.

Now the Benefit!

After completing this three-step progression you will know what needs to be done; you will have your initial Incident Action Plan! Thus the following Command Caveat:

**Strategic Priority Sizeup is the foundation of an intelligent,
safe, and coordinated incident action plan.**

As problems are being identified during Step One, they can be quickly *classified* as either:

- A *life safety* problem,
- An *incident stabilization* problem, or
- A *property conservation* problem.

Once problems have been identified (Step One) and classified *strategically* (Step Two), each problem can be prioritized *tactically* (Step Three). Depending on the size and complexity of the incident, this mental process can happen very quickly.

Once you have *identified* problems—and each problem has been *classified* as a life safety problem, a stabilization problem, or a property problem—the last step is to *prioritize* the problems you have just classified. (Recall the car versus pole incident discussed earlier: If you deemed the ‘stabilization’ problems to be the *tactical* priority then stabilization problems would be addressed first. As a reminder, *life safety* is always your *strategic* priority. Often stabilization is the tactical priority in order to address responder safety.)

In general, a *classified* problem that is a high *priority* will be the first problem addressed tactically. This can be true on the fireground as well.

After the three-step progression has been completed an incident action plan will emerge—almost by accident. Strategic Priority Sizeup information guides you toward a logical action plan and the assignment of appropriate tactical objectives. You can now determine if your *initial* action plan will be a *Life Safety Plan*, a *Stabilization Plan*, a *Property Plan*, or a combination. (Heads-Up: More on *Strategic Priority Action Planning* in the July 2003 issue!)

QUICK REVIEW

1. You must *quickly* perform a logical and thorough secondary sizeup (triage).
2. Strategic Priority Sizeup entails *identifying*, *classifying*, and *prioritizing* problems.
3. Once problems have been identified, classified, and prioritized...
4. You will know what needs to be done.
5. Once you know what needs to be done you will have...
6. Your incident action plan.

ADDITIONAL SIZEUP CONSIDERATIONS

Additional sizeup considerations include building construction features, type of occupancy, time of day, weather, etc. These considerations—and more—can influence whether your action plan will be a *life safety* plan or a *stabilization* plan. Nifty acronyms are available that factor a broad assortment of sizeup considerations; for example: COAL WAS WEALTH or WALLACE WAS HOT; however, when selecting and assigning tactical objectives, your focus *must* narrow to your three strategic priorities:

1. Life Safety,
2. Incident Stabilization,
3. Property Conservation.

You do not have the ability to change the building and you don't have the ability to change the weather; you do have the ability to solve life safety problems, stabilization problems, and property problems...*If you know what the problems are.*

After emerging from the apparatus I strongly recommend that you perform a 'Strategic Priority Secondary Sizeup' so that three important questions are answered:

1. What are the *Life Safety* problems?
2. What are the (Incident) *Stabilization* problems?
3. What are the *Property* (Conservation) problems?

Once you have answered these questions, and have classified and prioritized each problem, you will know what needs to be done.

Part Two will help you 'manage' what needs to be done: my strategic priority *Action Plan Template*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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That said, Mark assures you that what he does for you *today* is exponentially more important than everything he accomplished *yesterday*. Feel free to communicate with Mark at fci@usa.com.