

# The Ten Command-ments

## of Intelligent and Safe Fireground Operations

As told by BC Mark Emery

Last month you were introduced to *The 13 Fireground Indiscretions*. The Indiscretions are a collection of 13 fireground faux pas that have contributed to the death and injury of scores of fire fighters.

This month you'll be introduced to *The Ten Command-ments of Intelligent and Safe Fireground Operations*. Obeying *The Ten Command-ments* will help you prevent the *13 Fireground Indiscretions* from occurring on your fireground.

The *Ten Command-ments of Intelligent and Safe Fireground Operations* are:

- I. Thou shall have ONE competent Incident Commander.
- II. Thou shall maintain Teams of *at least* TWO personnel.
- III. Thou shall recognize THREE situations that kill fire fighters.
- IV. Thou shall ensure that FOUR Sides are seen and compared.
- V. Thou shall not exceed a span-of-control of FIVE.
- VI. Thou shall operate within one of SIX operational modes.
- VII. Thou shall perform the SEVEN-Step action plan process.
- VIII. Thou shall make EIGHT assignments early.
- IX. Thou shall address three strategic priorities with NINE tactical objectives.
- X. Thou shall evaluate the Situation, Mode, and Plan every TEN Minutes.

### Command-ment One:

Thou shall have ONE \_\_\_\_\_ fill in the blank \_\_\_\_\_ Incident Commander.

Can you provide missing word? The missing word is 'competent.' Thus the first Command-ment reads:

**Thou shall have ONE *competent* Incident Commander.**

Obtaining an Incident Commander is a piece of cake. Somebody declares ‘I’m in Command,’ dons a colorful vest, puts a bunch of other people in colorful vests, and narrates the ‘event’ using a radio.

Having a *competent* Incident Commander is more challenging—and more important. What is the responsibility of ‘Command.’ What are the elements of Command competency? What are the thoughts and actions of a competent Incident Commander? What are the characteristics of a fireground that is being managed competently; in other words, what does a competently managed fireground *look* like and *sound* like.

*Command-ments Two* through *Ten* provide elements of competent fireground Command and competent fireground incident management. Before discussing subsequent *Command-ments* you must first understand the characteristics of a competent Incident Commander.

### **Command Responsibility**

The purpose of your fire department is to solve customer’s problems. The purpose of an Incident Commander is to make sure that customer’s problems are solved *intelligently* and *safely*. The *competent* Incident Commander ensures that problems are solved intelligently and safety by managing three things: 1) Strategy, 2) Resources, and 3) Risk.

Command responsibly: Strategy, resources, and risk...That’s it, nothing more and nothing less. Whatever an Incident Commander is doing should fit into one of these three categories. If the ‘Incident Commander’ is on a ladder, on a hoseline, or at the pump you don’t have an Incident Commander (no matter what the lettering reads on the colorful vest).

### **Competent Communications**

First of all, a competent Incident Commander fosters (and models) competent fireground radio communication. Competent fireground communication is crisp, clear, concise, and disciplined. Conversational radio traffic is not tolerated.

Competent fireground Incident Commanders routinely incorporate the words ‘from’ and ‘on’ into their radio communications. At the most basic level, the word *from* is a key component of my ‘4-C Communication Cycle.’ This communication cycle must be followed whenever radios are used to communicate:

**Connect → Convey → Confirm → Concur**

**EXAMPLE:**

**Connect:** “Division-A *from* Truck-31.”

“*Division-A.*”

[Truck-31 and *Division-A* have connected and are ready to communicate. It is unacceptable for *Division-A* to simply reply “go ahead”...Who is ‘go ahead?!’...Who has Truck-31 connected with? There is no fireground designator called ‘go ahead.’]

**Convey:** “Primary Search complete, nothing found.”

**Confirm:** “*Division-A copy, Primary Search complete, nothing found.*”

**Concur:** “Affirmative Division-A.”

The 4-C Communication Cycle serves as the foundation for what is often called *radio discipline*.

Competent fireground communications are strategic and objective-level—never task-level. Task-level, micro-communication is a reliable sign of task-level, micro-incident management.

**Objective-level communication:** “Engine-66, confine and extinguish *from* Side-C *on* Floor-2.”

A competent fire officer will take it from there. Notice the incorporation of ‘from’ and ‘on’ into the communication of this assignment.

**Task-level communication:** “Engine-66, extend an 1¾” apartment bundle from 300’ of 2½” to Side-C, bleed the air from the nozzle, adjust the nozzle to a straight stream, wipe your feet and advance the line through the kitchen, up the stairs, into the master bedroom...blah, blah, blah”

You get the idea.

## Incident Equilibrium

A competent Incident Commander achieves and maintains what I call ‘incident equilibrium.’ *Incident equilibrium* is achieved when an appropriate balance of strategic-stuff and tactical-stuff has been achieved. (Subsequent *Command-ments* will provide an incident framework that will help you achieve and maintain incident equilibrium.)

Example: A routine house fire operation is in progress. The Command Post is doing business as ‘Main Street Command.’ The Incident Commander has sufficient resources operating and additional resources available in staging. Communications are impressive. Main Street Command has *proactively* established a Division, a Staging Area, and a Safety Officer. The Division Supervisor is supervising five Teams—including a Rapid Intervention Team. The Incident Commander is managing the Division Supervisor, the Staging Area Manager, and is supervising a Rapid Intervention Group Supervisor. (Reminder: An Incident Safety Officer is not considered part of an Incident Commander’s span of control.)

Main Street Command has achieved and is maintaining ‘equilibrium.’

Suddenly, Truck-1, performing Primary Search on Floor-2, announces ‘Division-A from Truck-1, emergency traffic.’ The Division Supervisor *connects* by answering: “Division-A.” Having connected with Division-A Truck-1 continues: “Truck-1 has two unconscious adults on Floor-2...low air...need rescue assistance.” “Division-A copy Truck-1...two unconscious adults Floor-2...low air...rescue assistance.” Truck-1 acknowledges, “Affirmative Division-A.”

Equilibrium has been lost. Now what? To regain incident equilibrium the Command Post would pluck this *tactical* problem from the Division Supervisor’s plate with a *strategic* solution: a *Rescue Group*. The Rescue Group would be comprised of Truck-1 and three or four additional Teams that would assist with the Rescue and subsequent medical care (recall that there were Teams available at Staging). A Medic Unit would be assigned to the Group. Now the Command Post would be ‘managing’ the Group Supervisor, the Division Supervisor, the Staging Area Manager, and two Team Leaders. With all this going on—including the addition of four Teams and a Medic Unit—Main Street Command’s span of

control has only increased by *one*—from four to five. (Status Report: The Rescue was completed and everybody lived happily ever after.)

Did you catch the strategic spirit of what happened? Truck-1 had a *tactical* problem—Rescue—that was managed with a *strategic* solution—a Rescue Group. Main Street Command was able to regain *incident equilibrium* (an appropriate balance of strategic stuff and tactical stuff). Had the Incident Commander started throwing Teams at the problem (without the Group Supervisor) somebody’s span of control would have increased with each Team assigned. (More on span of control with *Command-ment Five*.)

Recall from Part One that out of control span of control is one of *The 13 Incident Indiscretions*.

## **Command-ment Two:**

### **Thou shall maintain Teams of at least two personnel.**

Teams of *at least* two personnel mean that individual freelancing is not tolerated. Every assignment and every action must have Command Post roots. (Within the hazard area Teams comprised of three or more personnel is preferred.)

There are four levels of freelancing:

**Level One:** Command freelancing.

↳ **Level Two:** Supervisor (Division/Group) freelancing.

↳ **Level Three:** Team Leader (Company Officer) freelancing.

↳ **Level Four:** Fire fighter (Team Member) freelancing.

When a fire fighter freelances it is because the Team Leader has not maintained Team integrity—probably because the Team Leader is freelancing.

When a Team Leader freelances it is because a Division or Group Supervisor is freelancing. Supervisors freelance because they are not part of the overall incident action plan. For example the Incident Commander announces: “Battalion-2, *on your arrival* establish Division-C.” Battalion-2 arrives

at Side-C, looks around, and freelances strategically by devising a Division-C action plan. Without face-to-face dissemination of Division-C's portion of the *overall* action plan at the Command Post, the Division-C Supervisor simply freelances strategically.

*Strategic* freelancing begets *tactical* freelancing; *tactical* freelancing begets *task* freelancing. Freelancing produces a *strategically spastic* fireground operation.

It is impossible to monitor conditions, monitor remaining SCBA air, identify alternate egress, and monitor assigned objective progress when the Team Leader is functioning at task-level. Ten-minute notifications from the Command Post (see Command-ment Ten) prompt Team Leaders to ensure the Team's remaining air supply will provide for a safe withdrawal; ten-minute notifications are an essential component for managing SCBA air supply at the Team-level.

Recall that "Nobody Watching the Clock" is one of the *13 Fireground Indiscretions*.

## **Command-ment Three:**

### **Thou shall recognize THREE situations that kill fire fighters.**

A fire fighter is killed or injured on the fireground. If it wasn't because of a heart attack or if it wasn't caused by careless driving, it was the result of one of three situations: (1) Working *above* a structure fire, (2) Working *below* a structure fire, or (3) Rapid fire growth (flashover).

Collectively I refer to these situations as: *The Three That Kill*.

These three situations have killed and injured scores of fire fighters. Monitor and factor *The Three That Kill* and your response from the fire station will be a round trip.

Verbalizing the status of the basement, the status of smoke and fire conditions, and the status of the attic are essential components of a *strategically meaningful* sizeup. Competent fire officers monitor and report *The Three That Kill*—even if there is no basement, even if there is no attic.

**Example:** "No basement, fire venting from Side-B on Floor-2, attic stable, no exposure, unknown if occupied." (One again note the use of 'from' and 'on.')

Reporting the status of the basement and attic verify that the fire officer looked. (You don't get credit for secondary sizeup by lapping the building in record time.)

Require Incident Safety Officers and Division/Group Supervisors to monitor and report the status of the basement, the status of fire growth, and the status of the attic.

Before entering a structure, or area within a structure, require Team Leaders to check the overhead and to continuously monitor for signs of flashover. This means that fire officers should not be doing task-level stuff—fire fighters do task-level stuff. You have a major cultural problem if fire fighters routinely watch fire officers perform tasks (nozzle, chain saw, jaws, etc.)

The *Three That Kill* is closely related to the clock (See *Command-ment Ten*).

## **Command-ment Four:**

**Thou shall ensure that FOUR Sides are seen and compared.**

Even if you can't access all four sides, make sure somebody investigates and reports each side: "Truck-16, investigate Side-C and report."

Finally, do the risk management math: Four Sides + Three That Kill = Seven, which is a lucky number. Obeying *Command-ment Three* and *Command-ment Four* will improve your odds that everybody returns to quarters in one piece.

## **Command-ment Five:**

**Thou shall not exceed a span-of-control of FIVE.**

There is no need for the *square-foot* Incident Commander to exceed a span of control of five. (Different story for *square-mile*, wildland Incident Commanders.) Consider the following:

### **Command-O-Quiz**

You are the Incident Commander. *Without* exceeding a span of control of five, and *without* assigning 'Operations' (Section Chief), what is the maximum number of Teams that you could have *tactically active* at an incident?

- a) 5
- b) 25
- c) 50
- d) 125

**Answer:** d), 125 Teams

Here's how it works: The *Incident Commander* would be managing five *Branch Directors*. Each Branch Director would be directing a combination of five *Division* and *Group Supervisors*. Each Division/Group Supervisor would be supervising five *Team Leaders*. Five x Five x Five = 125 Teams.

No '*Operations' Section Chief*, 125 Teams, and everybody with a nice, comfortable one-to-five span of control. But wait there's more...

Impressed? Try this: Factor in *Strike Teams* and *Task Forces*. The math would change as follows: Each Division/Group Supervisor would supervise a combination of five *Strike Team Leaders* and *Task Force Leaders*. Each Strike Team/Task Force Leader would be leading five *Team Leaders*.  $5 \times 125 = 625$  Teams. If each Team has two personnel (one Team Leader, one Team Member) you would have 1,250 fire fighters tactically active. If each Team has three personnel (one Team Leader and two Team Members) there would be 1,875 tactically active fire fighters!

There is no need to exceed a span of control of five on the square-foot fireground.

## **Commandment Six:**

**Thou shall operate within one of SIX modes.**

Forget the traditional Offensive, Defensive, Transitional (offensive/defensive OR defensive/offensive).

Because fire officers now make *legal decisions* in addition to strategic and tactical decisions, the contemporary fireground requires contemporary operational modes. I recommend that you adopt T.R.I.P.O.D. By adopting the T.R.I.P.O.D. model, your fireground will always be in one of six operational modes: (1) Transitional, (2) Rescue, (3) Investigating, (4) Preparing, (5) Offensive, (6) Defensive.

For more T.R.I.P.O.D. information acquire or review the March 2004 issue of *FireRescue* magazine. If that is not possible send an email request for more information (email address at end of this article).

Not just strategic operational modes, T.R.I.P.O.D. conveys (what NFPA 1021 calls) an ‘initial incident action plan.’ It’s slick, it works, and it addresses the legal considerations of 2-in/2-out.

## **Commandment Seven:**

### **Thou shall perform the SEVEN-Step incident action plan process.**

I could devote an entire article to incident action planning; heck, I could devote an entire article to *each* of the *Commandments*.

For some reason the fire service focuses a great deal of attention on the fireground. Contemporary fire departments spend much of their response time mitigating a variety of incidents—most of which don’t involve a fire within a building. The fire service needs an incident action plan (IAP) model that will work for any incident—not just building fires.

The answer is my seven-step action plan process:

1. Identify and classify incident problems strategically,
2. Perform a quick risk/benefit assessment,
3. Communicate the T.R.I.P.O.D. operational mode,
4. Select and prioritize *appropriate* tactical and support objectives,

5. Determine if adequate resources are available to support the action plan,
6. Initiate command and begin managing span of control, and
7. Assign selected objectives to Companies and Teams.

Depending on the nature of the incident, number 4. is the only step that has to change: *select and prioritize appropriate objectives*. ‘Appropriate objectives’ to stabilize a confined space rescue are different than the objectives that will stabilize a fire within a building. The other six steps will work for any incident.

Examples: A technical hazmat operation could begin by ‘Preparing for Offensive’ or could ‘Transition’ from defensive to offensive.

## **Command-ment Eight:**

**Thou shall make EIGHT assignments early.**

*Command-ment One* identified the responsibilities of Command—the management of *strategy, resources, and risk*. *Command-ment Eight* establishes a framework for managing Command responsibility and for expanding the system should the incident not quickly stabilize.

The eight assignments early are:

1. Standby Team (2-out...until RIT deployed)
2. Backup Team (protecting egress for the 2-in)
3. Rapid Intervention (fireground insurance)
4. Base (designated apparatus assembly location)
5. Staging (people, tools, and equipment ready for assignment)
6. Division (a Supervisor supervising multiple Teams performing multiple objectives)
7. Safety Officer (fireground insurance)
8. Rehabilitation (rest, fluids, medical evaluation, nutrition, sanitation; co-located with staging)

Don't fret, it's easy to obey this *Command-ment*. First of all, the 'Standby Team' is your 2-out for an initial offensive operation. Once Rapid Intervention is deployed the Standby Team transitions offensively ("on air") as the Backup Team. The procedure for this fireground progression can be represented by the following 'formula': RIT = SB → BU (Shorthand for: *RIT* deployment = the 2-out *Standby Team* transitions to an offensive position as the *Backup Team*.)

By obeying *Command-ment Eight* you are providing a minimum standard of care for hazard area deployed fire fighters.

During a high-rise building fire every fire department in North America *Bases* apparatus in the street and sends personnel to *Staging* two floors below the fire. This arrangement can't be changed (try parking a fire engine on the 29<sup>th</sup> floor). Resource management at all other building fires *can* be changed, thus *Base* apparatus and have personnel report to *Staging*—even if the *Staging Area* is in a parking lot. Doing so makes resource management at square-foot incidents consistent, not to mention that it works. (Square-mile ICS-purists are pulling their hair out right about now.)

As the Incident Commander, proactively managing *tactical* span of control is essential (see *Command-ment Five*). To proactively remove Companies and Teams from the Command Post a *Division* is (usually) the smart assignment. At 99% of the square-foot firegrounds in North America assigning 'Operations' (Section Chief) is incident management overkill and can be used as a reliable indicator that the Incident Commander doesn't know how to use *the system*.

**Bottom line:** Supervising a bunch of Teams from the Command Post will effectively turn an Incident Commander into a *Division Supervisor*.

Establishing an *Incident Safety Officer* and providing for responder *Rehabilitation* is not only good business, it demonstrates that you care about your fire fighters.

Never forget the most important of my Command Caveats:

**If you need it and it's not there and available it's too late.**

## Command-ment Nine:

### **Thou shall address three strategic priorities with NINE (Primary Phase) tactical objectives.**

First of all, as a reminder, your ‘three strategic priorities’ (at *any* incident) are: 1) Life Safety, 2) Incident Stabilization, and 3) Property Conservation. Second of all, the ‘Primary Phase’ is a new incident management concept. The *Primary Phase* is that portion of an incident *before it has been stabilized*. Separating an incident into phases—*Primary* and *Secondary*—simplifies the development and management of an incident action plan.

Recall that your first step for obeying *Command-ment Seven* was to ‘identify and classify incident problems strategically’ during secondary sizeup. For example, during secondary sizeup you identify an incident stabilization problem: *an adjacent building is threatened by fire*. The tactical objective that will directly address this problem is *Exposure* stabilization. If you don’t stabilize the *Exposure* the incident will become more unstable than it already is.

In order to stabilize the square-foot fireground, there are just nine Primary Phase tactical objectives to consider:

- *Three* tactical objectives that will address fireground *life safety* problems: 1) Rescue, 2) Search and Rescue, and 3) Primary Search.
- *Five* tactical objectives that will address fireground *stabilization* problems: 4) Evacuate, 5) Exposure, 6) Confine, 7) Ventilate, and 8) Extinguish.
- *One* tactical objective will address fireground *property conservation*: 9) Primary Salvage.

Thus, you have *nine (Primary Phase)* tactical objectives that will address your *three* strategic priorities. In addition to Primary Phase *tactical objectives* there are *support objectives* that must be addressed: water supply, forcible entry, utility control, rapid intervention, lighting, SCBA refill, etc.

[Note: Once the *Primary Phase* is “complete” (read: the incident has been stabilized) there are three *Secondary Phase* tactical objectives to address: (1) Secondary Search, (2) Overhaul, and (3) Secondary Salvage.]

## Command-ment Ten:

### Thou shall evaluate the Situation, Mode, and Plan every TEN Minutes.

Forget the proverbial 'Dragon,' your enemy on the fireground is the clock. Lose track of time at the Command Post and bad things can happen.

When the Command Post is busy it is easy for the Incident Commander to lose track of time. Both NFPA 1500 and 1561 stipulate that Dispatchers provide ten-minute notifications beginning with the arrival of the first officer on scene.

Here's how I recommend you obey *Command-ment Ten*: Each time the Dispatcher notifies you that ten-minutes have passed do the following: Verbally (by radio) acknowledge the ten-minute notification and confirm the operational mode (*Command-ment Six*). For example:

**Dispatcher:** "Main Street Command from Dispatch...you're at 10-minutes."

**Command Post:** "Main Street Command copy, 10-minutes; Main Street Command is still Offensive from Side-A on Floor-3."

It's easy to lose track of time on the fireground. As 10-minutes becomes twenty, then 20-minutes becomes thirty, it becomes harder and harder to broadcast "still offensive." Heed your gut: If you're uncomfortable announcing "still offensive" after 20-minutes perhaps you shouldn't still be offensive.

It is imperative that you obey this *Command-ment*. Many fire fighters have died because the Command Post failed to obey *Command-ment Three* coupled with failure to obey *Command-ment Ten*. (Three + Ten = 13, which is bad luck.)

## Final Thoughts

After the Command Post has been terminated, the competent Incident Commander arranges for a *Post Incident Analysis* (PIA). I recommend that you use *The 13 Incident Indiscretions* and *The Ten Commandments* as PIA benchmarks.

In addition ask fireground participants the following four questions; these four questions provide a reliable indicator of incident management competency:

- 1) Was Command competent?
- 2) Were tactical objectives appropriate?
- 3) Was everybody *tactically* accounted for at all times?
- 4) Was communication clear, concise, and disciplined?

Don't accept a simple yes/no response. Pursue examples and evidence. Listen to the dispatch tape. Should participants respond to each question with thumbs-up *what else could you ask for?*

If you have addressed each of *The Ten Command-ments*, and you have not transgressed any of *The 13 Incident Indiscretions*, congratulations my friend, you are a competent Incident Commander.

SHARE: Send an email request and I'll send you T.R.I.P.O.D. information and a PIA form based on *The 13 Incident Indiscretions* and *The Ten Command-ments*.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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