

# INCIDENT MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

## Operations Overkill

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Raise your hand if you've heard the Incident Commander assign *Operations* during a single-alarm building fire where? ('Operations' being, what is technically, an *Operations Section Chief*.)

Assigning 'Operations' at a bread-and-butter house fire is like assigning a Coast Guard crew to 'lifeguard' at the local YMCA swimming pool ...it's overkill.

No one will argue that pool frolickers would be well protected, but that doesn't mean that it was an appropriate decision to assign the Coast Guard. The assignment of Operations at a small incident — one, two, and perhaps even three alarms — is a reliable indicator that a fire officer knows the *words* of incident management but could use some help with the *music*.

I bet you've never heard somebody assigned the other three Sections — Planning, Logistics, Administration — during a routine house fire. Nobody will argue that doing so would be incident management overkill. The same logic applies to Operations. *It's overkill.*

Please don't be offended, and for goodness sake don't just take my word for it; if you truly want to understand why the assignment of Operations is often *incident management excess* you need to do some math. Consider the following challenge...

**Command-O-Quiz:** You are the Incident Commander at a many-alarm building fire. Without exceeding a one-to-five span of control AND without assigning 'Operations' AND without including personnel in Staging, what is the maximum number of *Teams* that an Incident Commander can have *tactically deployed* on the fireground?

- a) 25
- b) 75
- c) 125
- d) 625
- e) Unlimited

**Answer:** c. 125 Teams!

If your calculations produced the correct answer (125 Teams) — Congratulations! — you obviously understand the *music* that makes the *words* of incident management work; however, for those of you that are not entirely certain how we arrived at 125 Teams, here's the arithmetic:

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- One Incident Commander *managing* five Branch Directors:  $1 \times 5 = 5$  **Branch Directors**
- Five Branch Directors *each* directing five Division and/or Group Supervisors:  $5 \times 5 = 25$  **Divisions/Groups/Sector Supervisors**
- Twenty-five Divisions/Groups/Sector Supervisors *each* supervising five Teams:  $25 \times 5 = 125$  **Teams!**

Reality Check: At an incident requiring 125 Teams, all Sections would likely be established — Planning, Logistics, Administration, and yes, Operations.

Think about it: 125 Teams, no ‘Operations’ (Section Chief), and everybody with a nice comfortable one-to-five span of control. If each of the 125 Teams has *at least* two members (one Team Leader *leading* one Team Member) that’s 250 personnel! ( $125 \times 2 = 250$ .) Should each Team have four members we’re talking 500 fire fighters! (A ‘Team’ = One *Team Leader* leading at least one *Team Member*.)

Notice I forgot to mention Strike Teams or Task Forces! If you include Strike Teams/Task Forces the arithmetic is even more impressive:

- Twenty-five Division/Group/Sector Supervisors *each* supervising five Strike Team/Task Force Leaders:  $25 \times 5 = 125$  **Strike Team/Task Force Leaders**
- One-hundred and twenty-five Strike Team/Task Force Leaders *each* supervising five Teams:  $125 \times 5 = 625$  **Teams!!**

Let’s say that each of the 625 Teams has three members (one Team Leader *leading* two Team Members = a Team of three), now you’ve got 1,250 fire fighters tactically deployed on your fireground!...and that doesn’t include Teams that might be in Base, Staging or Rehab!! Finally, in case you forgot, a subtle reminder:

**NO ‘OPERATIONS’ AND EVERYBODY MAINTAINING  
A VERY COMFORTABLE ONE-TO-FIVE SPAN OF CONTROL.**

Is the ability to manage span of control important? (Here’s a big hint: *It’s impossible for you to be a competent incident manager without managing span of control!*)

**Top–Down Incident Commanders**

Now, back to assigning ‘Operations’ at a single-alarm building fire... Incident Commanders that *routinely* assign Operations at small incidents are what I call *top-down* incident managers; they begin using the system from the top down. That is, they drop down to the level directly below the Incident Commander (the Section-level of the incident management system) rather than build their ‘system’—*as needed*—from the bottom up. (Invariably this is done

Incident Commanders that routinely assign *Operations* at small incidents are *top down* incident managers. Rather than build their ‘system’ from the *bottom up* they begin implementation at the Section-level.

most often by calling somebody “Operations.”) This may not seem like a big deal until you consider what it means when you assign Operations.

With the assignment of Operations, the IC gives away (literally) the entire operations-side of the incident. Specifically, with the assignment of Operations, the IC has given away (delegated):

- management of Staging
- management of Branches
- direction of Divisions
- direction of Groups
- coordination of Strike Teams
- coordination of Task Forces
- supervision of individual Teams (companies/crews)

In fact, with the assignment of Operations, the IC should no longer communicate with Staging, Branches, Divisions, Groups, Sectors, Strike Teams, Task Forces, or individual Teams. Once Operations is assigned, all operations-related communication will go no higher than the Operations Section Chief. In other words

With the assignment of Operations at a single-alarm building fire, the IC’s *operational* span of control is reduced to just one-to-one: The Incident Commander manages and communicates with the Operations Section Chief. In other words, the IC talks to the Operations Section Chief. Except for a Safety Officer and maybe an Information Officer, that is it.

With the assignment of Operations, all operations-related *stuff* is shifted from the IC’s plate onto the Operations Section Chief’s plate. *Shifted* is too polite; what really happens at a *small incident*, to put it bluntly, is that the IC *dumps* all operational responsibility—solving strategic and tactical problems—onto the Operations Section Chief.

At a one or two alarm incident, life is good for the IC that has *dumped* everything operations-related onto ‘Operations.’ The IC will become a tactical spectator.

By assigning Operations many ICs don’t realize the significance of what they’ve done. Consequently you will routinely find the system being mismanaged and customized *on-the-fly*. For example, after assigning Operations, you will often find ICs continuing to dabble in operations-related stuff such as talking to Teams, assigning tactical objectives, talking to the Staging Area Manager, asking a Division Supervisor for a Status Report, etc.)

### **What’s The Big Deal?**

Okay, time-out. I know what you’re thinking: *what’s the big deal?* Many of you are thinking that I’m splitting strategic hairs. Not so, not a single strategic strand has been bisected.

Here's why...

You can get away with assigning Operations during small incidents for decades; in fact it can foster an illusion of strategic competence: "I assigned 'Operations,' gee don't I *sound* competent?!"...this illusion of strategic competence will perpetuate *until* the fire department experiences a MAJOR (read: REALLY BIG, VERY COMPLEX) event/incident that *does* require top-down implementation of the system.—including the *prompt* assignment of an Operations Section Chief. Should this happen, it is *very* likely that the IC and Operations Section Chief will function *exactly* as they did during all of those years at each of those small incidents.

During a MAJOR, COMPLEX INCIDENT it is neither the time nor the place for an Incident Commander and Operations Section Chief to figure out their role, responsibility, and how the system is *supposed* to work. If you use the system correctly *all of the time* it should be no surprise that the system will do what it was designed to do during a major incident.

### Bottom-Up Incident Commanders

At a small incident the Incident Management System is a *bottom up system*; after establishing Command, the Incident Commander will normally start at the very bottom of the system: individual Team assignments. This means that the IC will talk directly to Team Leaders. In fact, at a small incident (say a house, multi-family, or strip mall fire), the first officer to arrive has Command responsibility and will talk to members of his *own* Team (Company).

Proactive management of span of control is the most powerful tool in an Incident Commander's 'toolbox.' Thus one of my favorite Command Caveats:

*Manage your span of control or the incident will manage you.*

Competent incident managers <i>routinely</i> manage from the bottom up; incompetent incident managers <i>routinely</i> manage from the top down.
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(Important Note: *Command Staff* — Safety Officer, Information Officer, Liaison, Staff Assistants — should not be considered part of the IC's span of control.)

In order to maintain a comfortable span of control, the system will develop vertically — bottom up, rather than top down. For example, as the Incident Commander's span of control approaches one-to-five (five Teams), the IC will consider establishing a *Division* or *Group*. Later, should the Incident Commander's span of control again approach two or three Divisions/Groups (say two Divisions and one Group), the IC will consider establishing a *Branch*. Finally, should the Incident Commander's span of control include a couple of Branches and perhaps a couple of Divisions/Groups, the IC will consider assigning 'Operations.'

Competent incident managers *routinely* manage from the bottom up; incompetent incident managers *routinely* manage from the top down. (Note: When I say ‘routinely’ I’m talking about *square-foot* incidents, not incidents encompassing *square miles*.)

Should the management structure need to grow, the level directly *above* Teams/Companies/Strike Teams/Task Forces is *Divisions* and *Groups*. The level directly above Divisions/Groups is *Branches*. Finally, directly above Branches, directly below the Incident Commander, you will find *Sections*, including the *Operations Section Chief* (commonly referred to as ‘Operations’).

Should the scale and complexity of an incident warrant that *Operations* be assigned, the Operations Section Chief should not talk to tactical resources. (Read: individual Teams, Companies, Strike Teams, or Task Forces). Up-stream Operations will talk to the IC, or down-stream to Branch Directors, and perhaps to Division/Group Supervisors. At same level Operations will plan and coordinate with other Section Chief—and (I recommend) to an *Operations Aide*.

The Incident Commander is responsible for the *management* of just three things: *Strategy, Resources, and Risk*. That’s it, nothing else. Piece of cake.

Speaking of talking, if the Incident Commander is designated “Main Street Command” then the Operations Section Chief correspondingly should be called “Main Street Operations.” (Not just “Command” and not just “Operations.”) This is not just being picky; this is a component of what is commonly referred to as *radio discipline*. (Most fire officers will agree that ‘radio discipline’ is important, but when asked what ‘radio discipline’ means many of those fire officers struggle to explain, let alone agree.)

### OPERATING OPERATIONS

First of all, an Incident Commander assigns *Operations* because the role and responsibility of the *Operations Section* is needed, not because there’s an empty box—OPERATIONS—on an ICS chart.

If the Incident Commander will assign and supervise the assignment of tactical objectives then the incident should probably be managed from the bottom up. If the Incident Commander will communicate with Teams, Divisions, and Groups, then the incident should probably be managed from the bottom up.

Manage your span of control or the incident will manage you.

Recall from a previous article (*Incident Equilibrium*, issue/date) that an Incident Commander is responsible for the *management* of just three things: *Strategy, Resources, and Risk*. That’s it, nothing else. Piece of cake. ; )

If the *tactical portion* (read: operations) of a complicated incident will quickly consume the IC’s time and focus, the assignment of an Operations Section Chief will free the IC to focus on:

**Strategy:** operational mode, action planning, communications, span of control, cost, evacuation, EOC activation, situation status, consult pre-incident plan, etc.,

**Resources:** personnel, accountability, apparatus, equipment, food, shelter, logistics, etc., and

**Risk:** passage of time, structural stability, fire load, timely rehab, safety, weather, environment, decontamination, medical monitoring, utility control, fire growth, traffic, etc.

Should you be assigned ‘Operations’ you should not ignore the most versatile — and yet for some strange reason the most overlooked — level of the incident management system: the *Branch*.

As Operations Section Chief, continuing to manage Divisions, Groups, Sectors, and individual Teams will quickly overwhelm even the most competent strategist. The prudent Operations Section Chief will quickly obtain an *Operations Aide* and establish a Branch or two in order to help manage span of control and frontload for incident escalation and expansion of the system with the *proactive* addition of Divisions, Groups, Sectors, etc. (Recall one of the most important of my Command Caveats: *If you need something, and it’s not there and available, it’s too late.*)

An Operations Section Chief is a high-level strategic resource that is responsible for the development of the operations incident action plan. This plan is coordinated with Planning, Logistics, and Administration Section Chiefs. The Planning Section Chief is responsible for coordinating *Operations Section* planning, the *Logistics Section* planning, the *Administration/Finance Section* planning, and of course *Planning Section* planning.

## The Bottom Line

If you are still not convinced that the assignment of ‘Operations’ is frequently abused incident management overkill, return to the beginning of this article and review the *span of control math*. After doing the math there should be no dispute that by assigning Operations many levels of the system have been overlooked. But don’t discard the notion of Operations completely; there will be times when the *prompt* assignment of an Operations Section is not only appropriate it is *crucial*.

Communication span of control must be proportional to resource span of control.
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Remember that the key is to assign Operations *when it’s appropriate*, not simply because ‘Operations’ is a *word* in a box on a Command Post ICS chart. Likewise, don’t assign Operations simply because you believe it will make you sound as though you know what you’re doing.

You assign *Operations* because you need the managerial benefits offered by an Operations Section, not because you need somebody to supervise Teams performing tactical objectives.

The bottom line is this: When you call somebody ‘Operations’ you want them to function like an Operations Section Chief, not like a Division or Group Supervisor. If the person will function like an Division or Group Supervisor then for gosh sake make them a Division/Group Supervisor.

The Incident Management System is flexible, reliable, powerful, and best of all, it's simple...*if* you know the music. Most fire officers are familiar with, and capable of invoking, the *words* of the incident command system; however, words alone do not a competent incident manager make. It is the *music* that makes the incident management system work, not the *words*. Therefore, to become a competent incident manger, it is essential to learn, understand, and use both the *words* and the *music* of the incident management system.

In closing, I'll leave you with one another of my Command Caveats:

*Communication span of control must always be proportional to Resource span of control.*

*(Communication Span of Control just happens to be the subject of a future article in this series.)*