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***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## I C Said the Blind Man

It would seem that when a person who is blind says “I see” that statement would be a misrepresentation of the literal truth. However people who are deprived of sight can see in their own way. Some of you may have heard about the idea that six blind men would “see” an elephant with different definitions as it related to which portion of the elephant’s anatomy they had access to. According to the old fable, an individual who was blind and touched an elephant’s trunk thought it was like a snake and another one who touched his leg thought it was more like a tree. The mental image that a person sees in their mind is not always what is seen with a physical eye.

And, when it comes to the “I see” on the on the fire ground it stands for two letters; IC– The acronym for the incident commander. And it just might be that there are many ways of interpreting what that means also. I am not talking about the necessity for one but rather how different people see their role as an IC. Not unlike the wide range of leadership styles that individuals exercise in non-emergency scenarios, incident commanders have a wide range of leadership styles under stress conditions. Some are absolutely and totally dictatorial – the totalitarian approach. Others are liaison to the point of benign neglect. There is a tendency sometimes for people to think that because they call themselves the IC that automatically all sorts of things accrue to their benefit including respect and admiration for the fact that they are there. Nothing could be further from the truth. An incident commander is not a person, it is a position.

Setting up the incident command has sometimes been the subject of some criticism. I have even heard the term “I-C’ing” a fire to death is a common form of avoiding any danger on the fire ground. The way it works is that an organization arrives at the scene and starts setting up the incident command structure instead of putting water on the fire. I C’ing a fire to death is a perversion of what the process was created for in the first place.

The opposite of that is refusing to set up an incident command system even when the proverbial bottom is falling out of the bucket when it comes to dealing with the issue. Allowing chaos to rain supreme on the fire ground is almost a sure fire predictor that somebody is going to get hurt. If we truly believe in the national fallen firefighters mantra of everybody goes home then somebody better be in charge.

In essence being the incident commander and acting like the incident commander are actually two things. You can assume command and start giving orders without too much effort but maintaining command and control requires a set of behaviors that are not only structured but are also responsive to the needs of those who are being commanded.



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If you go to the field operations guide and read the definition of the position of an incident commander it is a relatively straightforward if not outright simplistic formula. The field operation guide describes and IC as follows:

## **"ICS POSITIONAL CHECKLISTS**

The references following position titles in the checklists refer to the Incident Command System (ICS) position manuals, which describe the full duties and responsibilities of that position.

**INCIDENT COMMANDER (ICS 220-1)** The Incident Commander is responsible for incident activities including the development and implementation of strategic decisions and for approving the ordering and releasing of resources.

- a. Obtain incident briefing and Incident Briefing Form (ICS Form 201) from prior Incident Commander.
- b. Assess incident situation
- c. Conduct initial briefing
- d. Activate elements of the Incident Command System
- e. Brief Command Staff and Section Chiefs
- f. Ensure planning meetings are conducted
- g. Approve and authorize implementation of Incident Action Plan
- h. Determine information needs and inform command personnel of needs
- i. Coordinate staff activity
- j. Manage incident operations
- k. Approve request for additional resources and requests for release of resources
- l. Approve the use of trainees on the incident
- m. Authorize release of information to news media
- n. Ensure Incident Status Summary (ICS Form 209) is completed and forwarded to Operations Coordination Center (OCC) and dispatch center(s)
- o. Approve plan for demobilization"

Now let me ask you a real tricky question. Just exactly how well does the incident commander do at the scene of an emergency if they treat those parameters lightly. And, how much problem can an incident commander create for himself if he believed that those parameters are mandates that force an extraordinary amount of pressure on subordinates?

The reason for raising this question is to reflect a little bit on how society is now beginning to place blame upon "the person in charge". In the good old days the person who wore the white hat stood out in front of the building and shouted orders was some kind of hero. More and more however we are



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finding that the person who is given that responsibility is accruing liability depending on how they perform the job. Incident commanders are responsible for everything that happens under their jurisdiction. Along with that responsibility comes a high degree of accountability. Seasoned and competent incident commanders are very much aware of the fact that if it happens on their watch it is their problem and nobody else's.

In spite of the fact that incident command systems have been around practically since the creation of the industrial age of fire protection there is still an awful lot about being an incident commander that is being left up to personal wit, wisdom and judgment. And while our training programs have done a fairly successful job in showing people what to do it has not necessarily done a very good job in telling them how to do it and simultaneously giving them the impression of how important their personal behavior is in doing it.

Let me be a little more specific. At one point in my career I worked with an individual who perceived themselves as being an excellent fire ground commander yet he demonstrated a personal behavior that was extremely predictable. The bigger the fire the louder he shouted. In other articles you might have heard the term "command presence". I defy anybody to actually define what command presence is. Yet, I can almost swear that most of you out there in the land of firefighters know when it exists. It is a form of quiet confidence that emerges from an incident commander who knows fully well that he or she is responsible for what is happening and yet doesn't transfer the pressure of that responsibility to anybody else in their near proximity.

The "I see" of being an IC is being able to see yourself in terms of personal skill sets and behaviors that you exhibit when you are an incident commander. Some folks get this and other folks don't. What is true about this process is that over behavior demonstrated by incident commanders is very, very quickly judged by both superiors and subordinates in the context of expectation.

Nothing shakes up a group of individuals on the fire ground than a semi-hysterical incident commander. Nothing is more frustrating when you have active, competent and aggressive fire officers than to have an incident commander who is disorganized and indecisive. There is a relationship between what the IC thinks, says and does and what actually happens in accordance with the various boxes we plug in, in an incident command structure.

Many people have forgotten that the overall incident command system was originally spawned by reviewing the techniques that were used to plan the invasion of Europe. General Dwight B. Eisenhower may well have set the bar very high for most incident commanders when he was planning for that event. What has been revealed many, many years after the invasion was that he had pinned the letter to the President of the United States simply stating that if this letter had reached the desk of the President it was because the landing on Normandy was a failure. And I (Dwight B. Eisenhower) am the person who



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is solely responsible for that outcome. He set the bar very high by saying that accountability and responsibility rest on the shoulders of whoever is responsible for giving direction to large numbers of individuals in combat conditions.

Secondarily, many modern firefighters are unaware of the fact that the Chief Fire Officer of the London Fire Brigade in the early 1870's published an extensive paper on the need for the officer in charge of a fire scene to manage the event using military techniques. His background was as an Army Officer – Sir Eyre Massey-Shaw was writing about the incident command system before it even had a name.

It is unfortunate that the process of being the incident command often places that mental responsibility on the shoulders of individuals who are incapable of understanding that simple concept. A term I have often expressed is called "on my watch". Literally speaking that means that if you are in charge it is happening not to the people that are working for you but it is on your shoulders. It is my personal belief that every incident commander who arrives at the scene of an emergency has two very basic responsibilities to be concerned about. The first of these is when to take over; the second is know when to relinquish command.

Taking over incident command is not a trivial thought process. Most people just automatically assume that it is happening when a company officer roles up on the scene and as soon a chief officer arrives command is immediately transferred. I do not make that assumption at all. Moreover, I believe that anybody else that makes that assumption has never looked at the ICS position description. The incident commander has some very specific responsibilities that need to be elaborated on. They are not just handed over by tossing them over your shoulder to the next person. Upon arrival on the scene a command officer needs to "take command" not assume that he is taking command. This would involve going back to the list that I just referred to in the beginning of this article and spending a sufficient amount of time to make sure that all of the adequate check points have been administered to.

This for example often raises the question of what is meant by a transfer of command. In many texts you will hear the term "face to face". One might also replace that with a term "eye ball to eye ball". The implication is that when you take command you look the person in the eye that is now accepting that mantel of responsibility and you make sure that they clearly understand what has transpired. It is not an accidental disclosure. It is one of very specific personal behavior.

One of the other things that is very definitely lacking in the specific policies and procedures of many fire agencies is how to make the determination of transferring command to other individuals when it is appropriate to do so. Just because someone of higher rank shows up on the fire ground there is no reason to transfer command. To the contrary if you are the IC everybody else is an observer until you are longer the IC. One cannot assume that proximity on the fire ground means the exchange of responsibility. Again, referencing back to the position description the role of an incident commander is



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something that has to be kept under control. Not unlike the person who is flying an airplane, you are the holder of everybody else's destiny when you have your hands on the yoke.

Last and certainly not least is another concept – the termination of command. When an incident commander has determined that the status of emergency condition is over with then it is all together appropriate that the status of the emergency situation be verbally terminated by radio. Depending upon departmental policy some organizations do this in rather formal fashion. Other chose to treat it rather casually. In my opinion it should be done as formally as conditions will allow. A radio transmission at the end of an event I believe is a time stamp that clearly indicates “all clear”.

As this article is being written I have no doubt that there are hundreds, maybe thousands of chief officers responding on the streets of local communities going to the scene of an emergency. There is a high degree of probability we will never hear a thing out of 99.9% of those incident commanders. On the other hand, one has to look into the archives of the NIOSH reports to see over and over again how important the role of an incident commander in the handling of incidents in which there are firefighter injury or mortality.

We seldom think of the man or women standing out in the street as being the hero of an event. Yet, we all know that the Fire Chief of the New York City Fire Department who was the incident commander chose to go into a set of circumstances in which his name has been etched on the memorial of the fire service for eternity.

In various brainstorming sessions with members of my staff, I have joked about the term IC. Among our humorous versions of it was IC stands for I'm crazy, it's chaos, - I can. Depending upon your brand of humor we can make fun of the job of being the person out in front of the building all we want. But in reality everything that happens at the scene of an emergency that is under the aegis of that individual is the responsibility of that individual. And, stealing one of the humorous labels from a previous paragraph I once read an article that if a person says I can or I can't they are right both times. IC may also stand for I'm competent and in charge. Or I care.