

FIREHOUSE[®]

Weekly Drill

DRILL #64: FIREGROUND DECISION MAKING

Introduction

One of the most fluent events is that of the incident scene, because the dynamics are ever changing. More often than not, during any given incident, a firefighter will be relying on instinct obtained from his or her experience and training to help make decisions. But it is always better to have some type of incident action plan to assist in these decisions.

At every incident there will be an Incident Commander, be it a chief officer or the first-arriving volunteer. The Incident Commander is going to take some sort of action, which is the start of the decision-making process.

This process of decision making is the start of an Incident Action Plan (IAP). For the more normal incidents, the process might be discussed among the command staff. For the larger incidents, however, a written plan will be needed. Each IAP will have a goal and a set of objectives to help reach that goal. In most cases, it is a way of putting together a set of strategies and tactics.

The process starts with the Incident Commander performing a size-up. When possible, this size-up should entail a 360° walk around the structure to observe conditions. During this size-up, the Incident Commander should be taking into consideration any current or possible hazards that could potentially injure firefighters.

First among our incident priorities is life safety. Above all, firefighter safety is our number one concern. This is closely followed by the safety of civilians and then other emergency responding personnel. These other personnel will include police, public works, utility company personnel, American Red Cross and others.

After life-safety issues have been addressed, the next item is that of incident stabilization. This process requires confinement of the fire. It is hoped that we will be able to confine it to the point of origin, but if we are not successful, we will then want to hold it to the room, floor, structure, or in some rare incidents, we may find ourselves looking at keeping it confined to the block of origin.



In conjunction with confinement we may find that some incidents require us to stabilize patients. Depending on the size and nature of these incidents, a Mass Casualty Incident (MCI) may have to be implemented.

Another problem that can confront us is dealing with a hazardous material incident. In this case, aside from life-safety and stabilization issues, we are going to have to focus on containing the spill and stopping the leak.

Our last decision making step is that of property conservation. This process should, in all likelihood, start as soon as possible. In a department with sufficient staffing, this process will start at the same time as the initial attack on the fire. Property conservation means we should make every effort to minimize property damage. Damage does not necessarily mean just the damage caused by the incident itself. It's a known fact that firefighters, during the performance of their tasks on the fireground, may inflict additional damage. This additional damage, however, needs to be held to a minimum. I have seen some pretty aggressive firefighters on the incident scene whose actions require close supervision to prevent further damage.

Fireground decision making is the key to a successful outcome. When performed in the proper sequence (life safety, incident stabilization, hazmat if necessary, and property conservation), everyone will be on the winning team.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick