

FIREHOUSE®

Weekly Drill

DRILL #87: INCIDENT SAFETY OFFICER

Introduction

Over the years, there have been many improvements made to the fire service. One of the most significant improvements was the implementation of the Incident Safety Officer (ISO). The ISO holds one of the command staff positions within the Incident Command System and, as such, the ISO reports directly to the Incident Commander (IC). Keep in mind that the IC has overall responsibility for the safety of all responders. This means the ISO can focus directly on the safety aspects of the incident more effectively.

The primary function of the ISO is to monitor and assess safety hazards or unsafe acts or situations and develop measures for ensuring the personal safety of all those involved. To help them perform these duties, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) has developed a consensus standard (NFPA 1521 Standard for Fire Department Safety Officer) that covers health, safety and wellness programs, along with the responsibilities of the ISO during emergency incidents.

In addition to the NFPA, the National Fire Academy (NFA) has put together a course specifically designed for an ISO. One of the more controversial aspects, which both the NFPA and the NFA describe, is the authority the ISO has to alter, suspend, or terminate unsafe acts or hazardous activities. The key word in this sentence is *unsafe*. Having been assigned as an ISO in my department, I often was prodded by some firefighters and officers to take over the entire incident once they saw an unsafe act taking place. Obviously, they are misinterpreting the meaning, but don't shoot the messenger yet, let me explain.

Yes, the ISO is given a lot of responsibility and authority on the incident scene. However, nowhere does it state that the ISO has the power or authority to take over command operations. The ISO can alter a task. Should the ISO observe a task being performed in an unsafe manner, he can intervene and advise the firefighter on how to perform the task in a safer fashion. An example might be the ISO observing a firefighter trying to put up a ground ladder at an improper angle. The ISO can inform the firefighter on the proper angle and, once corrected, the ISO should inform the IC of his actions.

The next description states that the ISO can suspend an



operation. Once again, the ISO can stop a firefighter from performing an unsafe act until the safety issue or issues have been addressed and the operational task can be resumed safely. An example of this type of act might be if the ISO observes a firefighter operating on the fireground without having on a pair of gloves. Here, the ISO would suspend the task being performed until the firefighter has put on a pair of gloves. Once again the ISO should report these actions to the IC.

The last description is that of terminating an operation. In this case, the ISO will stop the firefighter or firefighters from performing a task that is unsafe and has no alternatives to render the operations safe. An example might be firefighters assigned to an exposure line placing them in a collapse area. The ISO should terminate this task and immediately advise the IC, as this will affect his incident action plan.

As you can see, in not one of these scenarios does the ISO take over command of the operations!

—Prepared by Russell Merrick