

FIREHOUSE®

Weekly Drill

DRILL #150: INCIDENT SAFETY OFFICER

Introduction

One of the most important positions within the Command Staff is that of the Safety Officer. Back in the day, incidents were run without thinking of staffing an Incident Safety Officer (ISO), but times have changed. Most fire departments today are assigning an ISO to every working fire.

How do fire departments make the determination as to who will fulfill the position of Incident Safety Officer? In some departments, the ISO is a staff officer working, generally, in the training division, who will either monitor incidents over the radio or self dispatch if necessary. While this might sound like a good choice, what happens at night and on the weekends, when this individual is off duty? Does the department expect the ISO to respond during his off time?

Another question that is raised quite frequently is the rank that the ISO should hold; is a firefighter capable of performing in this role or should it be a lieutenant, captain or a battalion chief? These all need consideration. The bottom line, however, is the person who is going to fill the role of the Incident Safety Officer must be trained!

As is the case with any position in the fire service, proper training – initial and ongoing – in service training is a must. Don't assume that any officer should have the skills, ability, and knowledge to perform the ISO tasks. Need I remind you what happens when one assumes.

In many jurisdictions, the fire services have determined that the individual filling the ISO position should have a minimum of Fire Officer I professional qualifications. In addition, the ISO has to have a solid understanding of all different types of emergency situations: fire behavior; hazardous materials; building construction and collapse; water/ice rescue; confined space and trench rescue; as well understanding the incident management system.

However, on the fireground the ISO will play a vital role in risk vs. benefit. They should be constantly observing tasks being conducted by the firefighters, and make a decision as to whether the action being performed are safe or not. If the operations are not being



performed safely, the ISO needs to address this immediately. If the ISO is performing his job appropriately, he might prevent an injury.

If you work around firefighters long enough, you can pick up on some of their “bad habits” often called shortcuts. These bad habits generally can account for the firefighter injury. Keeping an open mind and a sharp eye out for them is going to work to the advantage of the ISO.

How does the ISO go about enforcement of safety violations? This is where the ISO needs to have the respect of the firefighters and this respect has to be earned. If you are not serious about safety, do not expect the membership to be. However, lead by example. If the firefighters see the ISO taking the lead and understand that it is not just a show, but the real deal, they will soon join in. Attitudes will come into play, as they often do. By having the right attitude, the ISO's job can be both satisfying and rewarding.

–Prepared by Russell Merrick