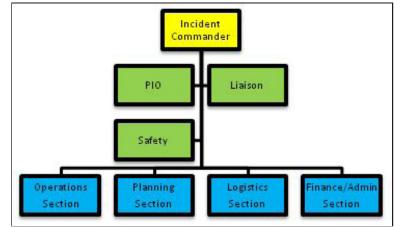### Introduction

We all use the Incident Command System (ICS), however, some departments use it better than others. Could it be used more efficiently and with more meaning and purpose? You bet it! Remember, the ICS is a tool in the toolbox that aids in controlling incident management, while improving the safety of the firefighters on scene.

Every incident will have an Incident Commander (IC). This person generally is going to fall into one of two categories, a company officer or a chief officer. In some departments, this individual might just happen to be the senior firefighter on scene. If this is the case in your organization, will this person be trained in ICS?

In order to manage fireground incidents, whoever the IC is needs to understand what command and control is and how to apply it to the incident at hand. In turn, as the incident escalates, additional resources will be brought in. This is when we really begin to see the ICS at work. The IC must have the knowledge to effectively manage the incident to maintain command and control.

First, let's look at the organizational structure. In general the organization is made up of two distinct sections: the Command Staff and the General Staff. Both sections work directly for and report to the IC. The Command Staff consist on a Safety Officer, Liaison Officer and the Public Information Officer. The General Staff is made up of Operation Section, Planning Section, Logistics Section and the Finance/Administration Section.

One small, but important, feature of ICS is "Unity of Command." Unity of Command basically means you report to only one boss and is yet another tool in maintaining the span of control of an incident. How it works is a company is given a specific operation at the incident or an assignment, along with an officer or another individual being placed in charge of supervising this task. Span of control refers to the specific number of individuals or rescores any one person can successfully manage; usually this number is three to seven, with five being the optimum number.

Command Staff in green-shaded boxes
General Staff in blue-shaded boxes

As all incidents go, someone will be responsible for assuming command and this is usually the first unit on scene. Depending on the nature of the incident, working with the ICS gives us the ability to increase or decrease our resources simply by adding or subtracting another modular. Should an incident escalate, there will be the possibility that command will have to change as well. If such a situation should occur, it would be known as a "Transfer of Command" and the outgoing IC would give a through briefing of the situation to the incoming IC.

Important information that needs to be covered in this transfer of command includes:

- What was occurring upon arrival
- What actions were taken
- What the current conditions are (along with the actions being taken and by what units)
- Strategic plans that have been developed
- An injury report/update (if any)
- Answer any questions the incoming IC may have

For this transfer to be most successful, a face-to-face meeting between the two commanders is recommended. Other methods for that transfer can be used, but are not as effective. They include radio or telephone transmissions.

–Prepared by Russell Merrick