Qualities of Effective Incident Commanders

BY DANIEL P. SHERIDAN

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THE FIRE DEPARTMENT OF NEW YORK (FDNY) HAS formed an Incident Management Team (IMT) to help with large catastrophic events in the wake of 9/11. I am fortunate to be involved with the team. As a part of our training, we sometimes shadow National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) in the wildland fire service. At one of these events, one of the operations section chiefs, George Custer, let me copy a handwritten piece of paper that listed 16 qualities of a good incident commander (IC). I put them in my wallet and carry them with me all the time. I would like to share them with you and put my spin on them with respect to how they apply to an IC at a structural fire. The principles apply not only to wildland and structural fires but also to every aspect of good management in the fire service in general.

1. SET PRIORITIES

An acronym we use to determine our strategy at every fire is known as LECE: Life, Exposures, Confinement, and Extinguishment. Our priorities are the same at every fire: life, then property. The first order of business at every fire is to get the first line stretched and into operation. Nothing happens at an incident until we can put water on the fire. Ladder companies rely on the engine companies to keep them safe while performing primary searches for victims. Many times when trying to get above the fire to do a search, I grabbed the first-due engine officer on the fire floor, looked him in the eye, and let him know that I was going above the fire to search.

At some recent fires, there have been some water problems. An IC’s first priority is to make sure that the first engine company has a positive water source and is stretching the first line toward the fire. Even though the IC delegates this job to the engine officer, it is still the IC’s responsibility (photo 1). You cannot look the other way and hope for the best. If there are water problems, the IC must step in and take measures to correct them, even if it means committing every engine on the assignment to do so. This will save more lives than any other action taken at any fire.

An exception to this is when there is only a single engine on the scene and the firefighters cannot both stretch a hoseline and effect a life-saving operation. When I was a probie, I recall riding the engine one night on a mutual exchange of tours. We received an emergency response system (ERS) box alarm, single-engine response. It was 2 a.m. We arrived on the scene and found a fire in the ground-floor fish market with three stories above. People were at the windows directly above the fire. We had to delay stretching the hoseline to deal with the immediate life hazard at hand. In that particular instance, our immediate priority was to save life.

Many firefighters think that the purpose of the first hoseline is to extinguish the fire. It usually does, but the intention of the first hoseline actually is to protect the means of egress for the occupants. That’s why we stretch the first hoseline through the main entrance or stairway occupants normally

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

On completion of this course, students will

1) Determine the qualities of an incident commander (IC) that apply every aspect of good management in the fire service

2) Utilize the L.E.C.E. acronym to determine strategies at every fire

3) Utilize the L.O.-D.A.N.C.E acronym to transmit critical information to the IC

4) Reduce significant fireground mistakes through the 16 qualities of an effective IC
use as a means of egress. It is by default that the first hoseline extinguishes the fire. Our second priority is to make sure that a backup hoseline is stretched as soon as the first hoseline is stretched and operating (water on the fire). This hoseline is for the protection of all the firefighters on the fireground. If using two hoselines, stretch a third hoseline as a backup.

With respect to the exposure problem, if you have a fire in an unoccupied store that is seriously exposing an occupied multiple dwelling, deploy your resources into the occupied multiple dwelling first. When no life is in danger, the priority shifts to protect the greatest amount of property.

The next part of your strategy is to employ tactics. We use the acronym LCE: Locate, Confine, and Extinguish. Before you can do anything, you must know the extent of the fire. At some incidents, the fire is visible, and you should deploy your ladder company to confine the fire. Usually, in an apartment building, it is as simple as closing the door to the fire room or the fire apartment. While doing this, firefighters will be searching for victims. All the engine companies should work together to get the first line in operation before any subsequent handlines are stretched to extinguish the fire.

2. GIVE DIRECTION

Like the director in a movie or the conductor of a symphony, you need to direct your resources to fulfill your vision, to see the incident go the way you want it to go, to be able to anticipate what is going to happen next, and to put the right people in the right places to make this all happen.

In a large department like FDNY, the companies are pre-staged at firehouses. In a sense, we are always just waiting for the next call. We have a standard operating procedure (SOP) every company follows at every fire. This may change for other types of emergencies that don’t fit into the paradigm, such as the following example.

A typical response will give the IC a three-engine and two-ladder response. If more information is received, the dispatcher will bump up the response to four engines and will also send a rescue and a squad. The first two engines will team up to stretch the first line; the first ladder will go to the fire floor, the second ladder will go to the floor above the fire, and the remainder of the assignment is up to the IC.

The IC needs to deploy the assets as he sees fit. I like to stretch a backup line to assist the first line, but you may feel that the line may be better suited in an exposure. If that is the case, you will need more resources to stretch a third line as a backup. Your companies cannot read your mind. You need to let them know what you need from them to fulfill your vision of what you want accomplished.

At a top-floor fire, it would be expected that you cut a ventilation hole over the fire, which will require more resources. That is why it is important that you are in front of the building so you can see the whole picture and not get bogged down with one aspect of the operation (photo 2). One decision that is the IC’s alone is whether to change to a defensive operation. It is imperative that the IC receives good, concise information, not just conjecture. The firefighters on the roof need to tell the IC exactly what they have or see. For example, “Roof to Command: We have heavy black smoke pushing from our vent hole.” You then need to have firefighters cut additional inspection holes away from the original hole to check on possible extension. If fire starts coming out of the original vent hole and subsequent inspection holes, you may have to pull your firefighters off the roof.

Firefighters inside the building always see things differently from their vantage point. They may think they are doing great, but you see the bigger picture and may need the firefighters inside to do additional tasks. At one fire where the engine company was reporting that the fire was “knocked down,” the IC in the front of the building saw fire continuing to show out of three windows; the IC had to deploy a second hoseline to deal with the additional fire. If the IC was up on the fire floor, he would not have been able to direct the units, and firefighters would have been burned or killed.

The same holds true at a high-rise fire. You will need to make the call about ventilation. The IC will be in the lobby and will disseminate all the information he is receiving from the resources inside. Based on all the information, the IC can decide how ventilation will affect the fire’s behavior. Sometimes you may have to hold off on venting. Studies were done recently about the effects of positive-pressure ventilation. That will be your call. Direct the firefighters to vent the way you think will provide the best chance for a positive outcome.

The officers and chiefs I worked with when I was a new firefighter had all been firefighters during the “war years” in the South Bronx. I never questioned any of their decisions. As a battalion chief now, I can be overwhelmed with the amount of knowledge that I am expected to have at my fingertips; it is very daunting. If I don’t have the answer, I never pretend to have it. I tell that officer or firefighter to hold on and I will either research it or confer with someone. This happens mostly with nonfireground issues like a building inspection or a hazmat call.
IC QUALITIES

3. DO NOT MICROMANAGE

Where is the line between being concerned and micromanaging? If you have confidence in your officers, you should not have to be on top of them. One of my former superiors was a total micromanager. He needed to be involved in every aspect of every operation. The other side of the coin is that you can be too much of a hands-off officer; that can hurt you as well. At an incident in an outer borough where I didn’t know the officers working, the call came in for a smoke condition in a strip mall. The first-in engine downgraded the call and recommended that we let all companies take up except one engine and one truck to mitigate this oil-burner emergency. I looked at the critical information dispatch system (CIDS) information on the building. It was a strip mall with lightweight construction. I thought to myself, “Newer types of buildings like this don’t have traditional oil burners.” I asked dispatch to hold all companies and advised that I was going to continue into the box.

On arrival at the box, I noticed a bunch of smoldering debris in the rear yard. We had a decent smoke condition in the other three stores. It turned out that when the owners of the store came in and turned on the heating system, a bunch of cardboard boxes had caught fire, along with the whole side wall. The fire never got out of that room, but it reinforced to me that the IC can’t rubber stamp everything. There has to be a balance.

It can be very easy to sometimes get caught up in micromanaging. It took me a while when I first became an officer to stop using my tool at fires and just use the flashlight. I was supposed to be supervising firefighters, not opening up walls. The same holds true for when I became a battalion chief: I didn’t have to do the officer’s job. I recently had to bite my tongue. I was watching a firefighter have trouble forcing a door; I wanted very much to show him where to place the halligan tool, but that is not my job. I said nothing and let him figure it out himself. I know that I really didn’t like it one time when I was a captain and the young battalion chief came into the fire room and started instructing me on where I should use my hose. That was my job, not his.

The function of the IC is to be in front of the building directing the officers, who in turn direct the firefighters. In some instances, a deputy chief may bypass the chain of command and get involved with every aspect of the fire. If a deputy chief needs information, he should contact that sector chief, who will get the information from that officer (Table 1). This type of behavior makes officers and firefighters very uncomfortable. It is important to let people function within their level of expertise.

4. SUPPORT RULES/ISSUES

I don’t agree that the saying “Rules are meant to be broken” applies in the fire service. In the fire service, rules, issues, policies, and SOPs are written in blood. Most of our SOPs are the result of someone’s having been killed or seriously injured as a result of some action or world tragedy. Often, it is the result of not following a rule or an SOP. Think of all the plane and train crashes where an SOP wasn’t followed. Recently, a plane crash in New York State involved the airline’s rules about pilots flying without adequate rest. Both pilots were fatigued, having been at the airport overnight before and all day prior to their departure. It also had an SOP about what would happen if there were a problem with ice on the wings. The flight crew failed to monitor air speed; they weren’t paying attention to controls. The Stick Shaker alerted, and the protocol to correct the problem was not adhered to. The point is that two very serious rules were violated—those pertaining to fatigue and to a response to a potential stall—and the plane crashed.

In the FDNY a number of years ago, we would respond to fires in high-rise fire resistive multiple dwellings. Companies would routinely add a 1½-inch length of hose to the standpipe outlet on the fire floor. This worked well many times. One night, however, firefighters were called to a relatively minor kitchen fire in a fire resistive multiple dwelling in a building located near the ocean. The firefighters did exactly what we did hundreds of times before, hooked a 1½-inch hose to the cabinet on the fire floor. The ladder company members entered the apartment where there was a small kitchen fire. A window failed in the kitchen. The door was open, and they now had a wind-driven fire. The ladder company firefighters were now scrambling to find the door and get out of the inferno. One firefighter lost his way and wound up in a dead-end hallway, where he ran out of air and tragically died (photo 3).

The FDNY now has a policy that 2½-inch hose must be used at all fires in a building that has a standpipe, and it

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<th>Table 1. FDNY Typical “All Hands” Assignment Communications</th>
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<td>4 Engine Companies</td>
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<td>1 Rescue</td>
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<td>2 Battalion Chiefs</td>
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Normally, the first chief assumes Incident Command until Division arrives. The companies are made up of the following:

- Ladders: 5 firefighters
- Engines: 4 firefighters
- Rescue and Squad: 5 firefighters

All companies have 1 officer.

- Firefighters report to Officer.
- Officer reports to Battalion Chief.
- Battalion Chief reports to Division Chief [incident commander (IC)], and vice versa.

IC—Front of Building
All Hands Battalion Operations Inside—Floor Above the Fire
First-Due Battalion Chief/Operations Chief—Fire Floor

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(3) At this incident, firefighters hooked their hoseline to the cabinet on the fire floor. The fire got out of the apartment and flashed, forcing the crew to abandon the hoseline. (Photo courtesy of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.)

must be connected to the outlet on the floor below the fire. When we all follow the rules or SOPs, it makes life much easier for the IC because it puts everyone on the same page. What makes the FDNY such a great department, I think, is that some of the firefighters before us took the time to write down all the issues we face at fires. The FDNY fought thousands of tenement fires. In the 1960s, someone had the great idea to write down the procedures that should be followed at tenement fires. From that, the bible of firefighting, “Ladders 3,” was created. Every young firefighter assigned to a ladder company is mandated to read “Ladders 3” when he arrives at the firehouse from the academy.

The fact that we all follow our SOPs makes everyone’s life easier. The IC knows that every fire company will be exactly where it is supposed to be. The firefighters know what the chief is going to expect. These rules are not meant to make the IC a traffic cop. They are there to create order out of chaos. Can you imagine what it would be like if the FDNY had no SOPs or rules? It would be total chaos. I have been to fires in Latin America where there are no rules or SOPs; the result is always utter chaos. I couldn’t imagine trying to manage four engine companies, three ladder companies, a rescue, and a squad without these SOPs in place.

The rules are also there for everyone’s safety. The FDNY has a self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) policy. Firefighters must wear and use an SCBA in any immediately dangerous to life and health environment. This is for the safety of the members. We all know now how toxic and dangerous smoke is. When I came into the FDNY, although we had an SCBA policy, it was very loose. Many of the old-timers did not like wearing an SCBA. They felt as if they were being restricted.

I used to think that if I ran out of air I could always find a window or breathe off the floor. I used to think that I could breathe in smoke but not water if I were a scuba diver. Well, all that has changed. I don’t believe that we can breathe smoke anymore, and this policy should be strictly enforced. It may seem as if you are okay breathing the smoke, but you have no idea of the damage you may be doing to your lungs. By enforcing this policy, you are doing what is best for your firefighters.

You gain more respect from the people you supervise and your superiors when you follow the rules. They may not be happy about it, but they will respect it. It shows character and in the long run builds trust.

5. DEVELOP A SENSE OF LEADERSHIP

How you portray yourself is how others will view you. If you are unsure about something, don’t show it; act as if you feel confident. You need to feel that you are the leader from the inside. No one wants to be behind a leader who is wishy-washy.

A primary factor in the ability to lead is to have strong technical knowledge. When I am in command at a fire, I feel that no one at that alarm has more knowledge than I. For 25 years, I have worked tours in the rescue, squad, hazmat, and even the Marine Division and in every type of unit as a firefighter and a lieutenant in Special Operations Command, which responded to every type of call imaginable. Although I am not an expert in all those fields, I gained enough knowledge to work in those units to build confidence in handling these emergencies. You need to exude confidence; your subordinates need to believe in you and your abilities.

6. BE A STRONG LEADER

This is one of the most important qualities of a good IC. It is the officer’s job to make decisions. Sometimes the decisions may not always be right, but at least you tried to do the right thing. You usually don’t have time to make a well-thought-out decision and must make a spur-of-the moment decision. Firefighters want to feel that they are being led by someone who isn’t afraid to take a stand.

Fire officers who fall short can be troublesome to the firefighters. One of the comforts I had when I was a young firefighter in the South Bronx was that my officers were strong leaders and competent fire officers. In the fire service, we lead from the front.

As an officer, I was often the first one on the fire floor and into the fire apartment. A few times when I was a firefighter, I stepped over an officer on the half-landing on the floor below. At one fire, we stepped over a captain on the half-landing; he was directing his firefighters from the landing while shining his light into the apartment. How pathetic! His firefighters had no respect at all for him. Another officer got the nickname “Floor Below Joe”; needless to say, his firefighters had no use for him.

Strong leaders exude confidence to subordinates. A strong leader does not ask for opinion. If that leader has a vision or a plan for an operation, it is the subordinates’ job to make that plan come to fruition. This is not to say that a subordinate cannot make a good suggestion. My captain in the squad company was a master at this. He would saddle up next to the chief and just make a casual observation. The next thing you know, the chief was asking us if we could check that out. The
Chief still made the decision, but he had a little help. Everyone wins.

Strong leadership really comes into play when there is a life-and-death situation. When I was a firefighter, we responded to a good fire in a three-story wood-frame building. We didn’t have many of these types of buildings left in our response district; many were burned out in the 1970s. This particular building was by itself in the middle of the block. Wood-frame buildings are usually built in rows and get support from each other. They are very dangerous when they stand alone, especially with heavy fire conditions. It was the last night for one of the senior members of the engine company. We all wanted Tom to have the nozzle and put out one last fire. The deputy chief arrived and pulled everyone out of the building. As usual, the plea bargaining started. The officer pleaded with the chief, telling him that they “almost have it” (this was a normal occurrence in FDNY at the time). The deputy took a firm stand and ordered everyone out of the building. After a lot of cursing and mumbling, we all left the building.

I was operating the tower ladder bucket; the deputy ordered us to set up for an outside operation. After a few minutes, I turned to my partner in the bucket and asked him why he moved the bucket. He replied that he didn’t move anything. It was then that it occurred to me that the building just fell over to the exposure 2 (B) side. For years afterward, the deputy always smiled at me when he saw me, kind of saying, “I told you so.”

At a recent fire in my response district, the chief ordered firefighters to evacuate the top floor. Some members felt that they knew better and decided to ignore the order. It turned out that one of the chiefs got hurt trying to personally evacuate the top floor. This should never happen; whether you agree or not, you need to follow the order. Even if the decision is wrong, it must be respected. A battalion chief in Brooklyn was killed when he went into a building after firefighters ignored his order to evacuate. The building collapsed, trapping and killing him.

I have been there myself. One night I was detailed to the rescue company. We had a good fire in a brownstone. We wound up taking over a hose line and needed to pull out only one more floor. The chief gave the order to pull out, and we left without a problem. I didn’t agree, but the chief is in the street, and he is seeing the bigger picture. You have to trust that he is making the right decision.

7. BE A GOOD COMMUNICATOR

The value of good communication can never be overstated. At a large-scale electrical emergency that involved numerous manholes and houses without power, the IC was an older chief with more than 30 years on the job and much experience and knowledge. There was one problem, however. He talked in a very low voice. His radio transmissions were barely audible. I spent the whole operation just responding “10-4,” when I really had no idea of what I was responding. Luckily, the situation was not life threatening; if this were a fire where urgent messages needed to be transmitted, it would have been a problem. The firefighters told me that they were used to this and lived with it.

Probably the greatest example of where communication was critical was at the World Trade Center on 9/11. Our radios at the time were not capable of reaching the members in the greatest peril. I responded to the tragedy immediately after the towers had fallen with a busload of firefighters from my battalion. I did not have a portable radio because there were none to be had. When we arrived, I spent most of the first few hours in the dark, oblivious to most of the rescues being attempted.

Communication is a two-way street: Not only does the IC need to give clear concise direction, but the IC also needs to receive good information from the firefighters or other personnel on scene. For an IC to be able to make good decisions, he needs to get good information. Like the acronym GIGO, Garbage In/Garbage Out, the IC is only as good as the information he receives. At a routine tenement fire in my department, it is expected that the firefighters on the outside positions, specifically the roof, would transmit to the IC the following:

- The configuration of the building—H types, for example.
- Whether fire was showing out the windows in shafts or at the rear or affecting any exposure.
- The color and volume of smoke coming from the windows.
- If any people may be trapped and their locations—especially shafts, when a life-saving rope rescue might be needed.
- If there is room for additional apparatus if the building fronts more than one street.
- If there is a height difference from street to street or from front to rear (buildings that have more stories in the rear than in front).
- If smoke, fire, or heat is in the cockloft. Don’t make assumptions. Transmit only what you see—i.e., “heavy black smoke and heat, no visible fire.” The IC will be making decisions, such as additional alarms or a switch to a defensive operation, based on the communication.
- If there is any other information that may be crucial. The first-arriving officer who reaches the fire floor must also transmit certain critical information to the IC. For this, we use the acronym LO DANCE:

  - L—Location of the fire apartment: What is the wing, floor, and apartment number?
  - O—Occupants: Have they been located and accounted for?
  - D—Delays or Difficulties: Have you experienced problems in getting access to the fire apartment or the first line in operation?
  - A—Access, the best way to get to the fire apartment: what type of stairs? Is there a well? Can you use a rope? Is there a standpipe?
  - N—Number of apartments: How many on the fire floor?
  - C—Conditions: Is fire out in the public hallway, or do you have control of the apartment door?
  - E—Extension: Is the fire extending to the floor above? Do
you need additional lines?
When the next higher level command arrives, the IC will turn over command and give the superior officer a CAN report, which should encompass everything stated above.

* C—Conditions: They include everything stated above.
* A—Actions: What was done so far at the operation?
* N—Needs: Based on all information, do you need more help, additional alarms?

FDNY uses CIDS to identify hazards on the response ticket. Up to 160 characters can be used to let the IC and firefighters know of any unusual conditions that may exist in the fire building. When an alarm comes in, the firefighter on the apparatus and do not have access to CIDS when the alarm comes in, the IC asks the dispatcher to read the CIDS information over the department radio. To work properly, CIDS must include the correct address of the structure.

A number of years ago, a very well-respected, experienced chief was in command of a fire in a five-story vacant building. At the time, companies normally employed an interior attack in these types of buildings. Companies usually marked on the outside of the building the level of hazard that could be expected in the structure. The IC asked his aide if there were any CIDS on the building. At least six companies were operating inside the structure, adding up to about 30 firefighters. Dispatch told the aide that, according to CIDS, no one should enter that building under any circumstances because it was extremely dangerous. Based on this, the IC immediately withdrew all firefighters from the building. A few minutes after the last firefighter was out of the building, the building experienced a total pancake collapse. The top floor collapsed right into the basement. These firefighters' lives were saved because of the excellent foresight of the IC and his communication of this critical information to the firefighters.

8. KNOW THE BIG PICTURE

How can we be successful if we don't know what is going on? At smaller operations, it is possible for an IC to personally oversee every part of the operation firsthand. For example, at a small house fire where we may have a bedroom burning, it is easy for the IC to be part of every aspect of the operation.

Usually, it is sufficient to stretch one hoseline and have two ladder companies performing truck duties such as search, ladder, forcible entry, and overhaul. The challenge is always at the larger operations. Once we pass a certain threshold, and it will vary from operation to operation, the IC needs to start to pull back and not be a part of every decision.

Seeing the big picture is where the IC needs to be. At fire operations, certain firefighters should actually have tunnel vision. First and foremost, the engine company pump operator should have only one function: to supply water to the first line. The nozzle firefighter should be concerned only with putting out the fire. In the truck company, the firefighter whose job it is to vent the roof should focus on that task only. Even if people are hanging out of the windows, his job, his mission, is to vent the roof. When you are a firefighter, you need to be concerned only with yourself and your task.

As you move up the command structure, you need to know a little more of the picture. Perhaps if you are an engine company officer, you are now responsible for getting that first line in operation. You are also responsible for the firefighters under your command. A truck company officer will also be in charge of his firefighters as well, but he also may be responsible for ventilating the fire floor. The first-due engine and truck officers, together, are responsible for what happens on the fire floor. Although their collective actions will affect what happens at the operation, they are not responsible for knowing what is happening in the exposures or even on the floor above. That is outside their purview.

For example, I was at a fire that involved three buildings. On arrival, the first-due units were confronted with a heavy condition in one building, with extension to exposures 2 and 4. The first-due engine company set up a large-caliber stream to protect the most serious exposure and stretched a hoseline to the front of the fire building. That was part of the picture (photo 4). When the IC arrived, he stepped back and saw that there was potential for extension to a few more buildings; that was the big picture. The IC transmitted a third alarm and ordered my engine company to stretch a hoseline to one of the exposures on the exposure 2 side. While this was happening, the IC set up a tower ladder in the rear. Tower ladders can move large amounts of water; when they are operating, members need to be warned if they are opposite of where the tower ladder is placing the stream. I entered the building and ordered my firefighters to wait at the front door while I went to see what was happening inside.

When I got to the top of the stairs on the second floor, there was a lot of fire outside the window. When I moved up to the third floor, there was a high heat condition. I crawled around and didn't see any visible fire yet. When I made my way down the stairs and got back to the second floor, I heard a loud bang, and visibility went to zero. There was some sort of backdraft or flashover. I dived down the stairs and managed to dodge the flames.

What had happened was that the tower ladder was operating and pushed all the heat and fire into the building where we were. It wasn't the fault of the firefighters in the tower ladder because they had no idea that we were in there. It wasn't our fault because I had no idea that the tower ladder was going to operate near us. What seemed to be lacking was someone who was looking at the big picture and was aware that we were operating in the building. If you are going to employ both offensive and defensive tactics at the same operation, someone has to see the big picture to make sure that firefighters are not in harm's way.

9. FOCUS ON THE TEAM

From management's point of view, the team, or its members, is the most important aspect of the job. Keeping our members safe at every fire is our highest mission. I hope I never have to attend another line-of-duty funeral again. In my department,
"the team" would constitute the companies in my battalion, normally three or four firehouses. An extension of the team would be the companies that respond on the alarm boxes in my battalion.

Training is an integral part of firefighting, now more than ever. We have so much more to deal with than our forefathers ever did. We need to know such a wide array of topics such as vehicle extrication, hazmat, terrorism, collapse, medical, and a host of other day-to-day emergencies. Years ago, it was acceptable that a fire company would stay in quarters and take an occasional cat out of a tree when not fighting fires. Today, the general public expects more from their fire departments.

When a leader, in this case the battalion chief, takes an active part in training, it sends a message to the troops that he cares about their welfare. A side benefit of proper training is that the firefighters will perform much more safely. There is an old Native American saying that goes as follows:

Tell me and I will forget.  
Show me and I will learn.  
Involve me and I will understand.

As chief, the IC involves his firefighters in good training, which sets the stage for success at any incident. Firefighters will believe that you always have their best interest at heart. The chief who rarely visits his firefighters on the tour except to give them grief sets up a barrier between him and the firefighters. His presence at the firehouse becomes a source of anxiety and sends a message that the chief does not really care about them (photo 5).

I try to learn all the firefighters’ first names. It is difficult because I don’t have a permanent assignment and cover a whole division. I visit one firehouse per shift, not because I want to check up on the members but so that I get to know the firefighters and let them get to know me. I normally talk about the different types of buildings they have and try to learn what they perceive as the major obstacles at these structures. Also, there is usually an important topic in the department or a big incident that had occurred recently that we talk about as well.

It is also very important to critique every operation. By doing this, you send a message that you value what the firefighters did. If things went well at a fire, acknowledge it in front of everyone. If things didn’t go so well, ask the firefighters if they think it went well; if they feel it didn’t, ask what they think they could have done better. Throughout my career, I have made hundreds of mistakes or did things that could have been done better. I always felt that if I made a mistake, I will never make that mistake again. It is much better to learn from other people’s mistakes. If you have a good relationship with your team, hopefully, they will feel comfortable enough to share some of those things with you without fear of retribution.

10. BE ACCESSIBLE

The fire service is unique in its method of leadership compared to other services, particularly the police department. We lead from the front; our frontline officers work side by side with the firefighters. It is really only in the battalion chief rank that you begin to see some sort of separation. Even so, it is comparatively slim than in other services. Battalion chiefs still live in the fire stations with the troops. Firefighters seem to have an innate sense of being able to separate the professional relationship on the fireground from the relationship back in the station.

I recently transferred back to the South Bronx, where I spent most of my career. I was back only one tour when I went to a fire in a multiple dwelling. I was commanding the top-floor and roof sectors. I knew most of the firefighters working, and it was nice to hear firefighters and officers calling me by my first name.

Given the nature and culture of the fire department, it is almost impossible to become “inaccessible,” although there are a few individuals who manage to do this. Some officers choose not to eat with the firefighters; although this is extremely rare, it does happen. Most of our bonding outside of the fire floor happens around the kitchen table. It is almost impossible to be a real “pain” to the people cooking and cleaning for you. Some may view as lunacy that supervisors commingle with subordinates,
but it has been that way in my department for many years, and it works very well. I was amazed when I came on the job that some of the older members would call the officers by their first names around the firehouse and in social situations, but when it came to a fire, everybody was either Lieutenant, Captain, or Chief. As a chief, I encourage this. I always want the firefighters to feel that we are accessible and not up in some ivory tower.

Recently, we had a major fire. It went to multiple alarms, there was one fatality, and the buildings were so badly damaged that they had to be taken down. I was talking with a lieutenant who was at the fire the following morning. We were critiquing the fire, and I asked him what they had done at the operation. They were assigned on the second alarm, which was given immediately.

As he described the operation, I started putting together some of the pieces of what had transpired. I started suspecting that the fire was in the basement. He told me that they had encountered very high heat and no visible fire. This is a classic sign that the fire is below you. From what I could gather, they had a very tough time finding the fire. There was heavy smoke in three buildings that were all attached. At one point, the lieutenant said something that kind of took me aback: “I knew the fire was in the basement, but I didn’t want to say anything to the chief because I am just a lieutenant, and those guys are all big chiefs.”

This statement shocked me. If anything, the reverse is true. Chiefs need information from the guys inside so we can make the right decisions. I remember one fire in a school when I was a captain. We had a very long stretch. After the fire, I noticed a door that would have made the stretch much easier and given us better access to the fire. I mentioned this to the members. The probie said to me, “I saw that door, but I didn’t want to say anything because I am just a probie and you are the captain.” I told him that anytime anyone sees anything that will make our job easier and safer, say something. The same firefighters and officers have no problem dishing it out in the kitchen; all of a sudden, they get stage fright when it comes to the fireground.

It is not so much a problem of the chiefs’ inaccessibility. It is more that the firefighters and officers are reluctant to be vocal about things they see. That is the same mindset firefighters have when it comes to calling a Mayday. Firefighters are afraid that the other firefighters will think less of them if they do call a Mayday. Commanders need to instill in the firefighters that it is okay to be vocal at fires when things are bad. I would like to see the members carry that “kitchen mentality” onto the fireground.

11. GIVE CLEAR DIRECTIONS
FDNY usually has very clear lines of direction on the fireground, probably because we preplan much of what we do. We have volumes of written procedures on how to handle almost every situation we may encounter. We have Ladder Company Operations, Engine Company Operations, High Rise, and a host of other bulletins that clearly define where firefighters are supposed to be at any given operation. It begins in the fire academy and then when you are on probation and continues on through your career. Chiefs expect their company officers to train their crews on the tactics we use at most of our operations.

For example, at any given fire, the chief in charge does not need to order the first-due engine company to secure a water source, stretch a hoseline, and protect the primary means of egress. The second engine company will automatically assist and be sure that it has a positive water source. The first-in ladder company will ladder, force entry, search for victims and fire, and effect ventilation horizontally and vertically. The second ladder company will do the exact same thing on the floor above the fire. The firefighters all know their respective positions. The roof firefighter is expected to be at the roof performing vertical ventilation; the outside vent firefighter should be opposite the fire performing vent-enter-search (VES). This is a great asset for a chief in the FDNY. If your department does not have such a system, you will have to give clear and precise directions to the officers and firefighters to see your vision fulfilled. To be able to give clear directions, you need to have a clear vision in your mind of what you foresee as your priorities.

If you give a company an order, say, for example, that you need a hoseline stretched to an exposure, and you realize that you also need another hoseline stretched to another location, let the company you gave the order to continue with your first request. Don’t change the order; get another company to do the other task. Changing orders on the fireground adds confusion. You also need to be specific in your directions. At one multiple alarm, the IC ordered that a hoseline be stretched to an exposure. The IC then ordered my company to assist in the stretch. We went to the right place because I was able to figure out what he meant; the other company never showed up. We wound up stretching a 2½-inch hoseline to the second floor of a multiple dwelling and having to force a door by ourselves.

12. ESTABLISH COMMAND PRESENCE
At every incident to which I respond, I position my battalion car as close to the front of the incident as possible without impeding the engine and ladder companies. In a perfect world, the first-in engine would be on a hydrant as close to the front

(6) Outside activities such as softball, road races, and hockey where firefighters play together are a great form of team building. In this photo, we had just participated in the FDNY’s annual “Ice” tournament. (We won two games that day!) (Photo by author.)
of the building as possible. This makes stretching the hose easier. In addition, the two ladder companies would cover the front of the building. The other apparatus do not need to be on the street near the fire building. Putting the battalion car near the front of the fire building or incident establishes a command presence.

The IC is the ultimate authority at the incident. We don’t rule by committee; it is not a democracy. An IC can solicit all sorts of information and ask for advice, but that should never be taken as a relinquishment of authority. If the IC sees a company or even a firefighter doing something that makes the IC uncomfortable, the IC must put a stop to it. This is one area in which I also need to improve. When working in a battalion to which I am not normally assigned and the companies are doing something with which I disagree, I go along with it because I don't want to make any waves.

At a fire in a battalion I was covering just for the day soon after I was promoted to battalion chief, the lieutenant working in the engine company was a friend of mine; we were firefighters together. We had a report of a fire in the basement of a private dwelling. Our SOP for a private dwelling fire requires that the first hoseline stretched should be brought to the top of the interior stairs to protect the occupants who may be escaping. He had his company stretch the hoseline to the side entrance because it was easier. (This company did the same thing at a fire 10 years earlier when I was a covering lieutenant; it pushed the fire right up the rest of the house.) I let it slide. I knew that the second engine was right behind them; I ordered it to stretch to the top of the stairs. When the deputy chief arrived, the first thing he asked me was, Why did the first engine stretch to the side? I was now put in a position to defend that engine, which I shouldn’t have had to do in the first place. That was a hard lesson learned.

Sometimes it can be much more serious. The chief needs to exude a real command presence. When I first came in the department, we were responding to a lot of fires in vacant buildings. Companies at that time in the South Bronx and Harlem were all “hard chargers.” Many times, the officers and firefighters in the engine companies would stretch into the building, regardless of how much fire was present. The chief would arrive, and it would be up to him to try and get them to come out. Many times when the chief would give the order to back out, the company officer would always start bargaining with him, “We got it, chief, two more rooms.” The chief, who was standing outside looking at three floors of fire, would have to again order the companies out. A few times the building collapsed shortly after withdrawing the units. It is a lesson I need to remember as well: A chief who doesn't assert himself may be doing more harm than good and may ultimately get firefighters killed.

13. DEVELOP TEAM-BUILDING ABILITY

The fire department has a one-year probation period. During this period, you are referred to as a “probie,” “Johnnie,” “Bop,” or numerous other nonflattering labels. It is a long-standing tradition that the probie is not considered part of the team. When I came on the job, even though I was off probation, I was still the Johnnie and would be for a long time. My captain told me, not so nicely, that I was the Bop until the next Bop came along, which was quite some time. This is the way it is: Firefighters do not embrace their new firefighters with open arms and roll out the welcome mat. You have to earn your way onto the team.

By the very nature of the job, firefighters form incredible bonds. The relationship that exists is something that is totally unique. Firefighters who work very closely with each other for long periods of time form different types of bonds. I can only guess, having not experienced it, that it is the same bond soldiers in combat form with each other (photo 6).

From a management perspective, this makes team building very easy. When firefighters share life-threatening experiences, it is natural for them to become a cohesive entity. It seems that the more dangerous the assignment or the busier the unit, the closer the firefighters are to each other. Chiefs know this, having come up through the ranks themselves. Chiefs were once firefighters, lieutenants, and captains and have been in everyone's shoes. They understand the dynamics of the team and use that knowledge to get the most out of every firefighter.

If you think about what actually occurs at a serious working fire, it seems unreal that one person could manage nine units comprised of 45 firefighters and nine officers. Consider also that you may have a serious fire in an occupied multiple dwelling that contains hundreds of people. The reason we are able to do it is because we are broken down into nine different units that form one team with one mission—to save life and put out the fire. Every firefighter knows what his role is. It's as if we are all parts of one body; every part has a different function to get the job done. Another reason this system works so well for an IC is that he has the ability to delegate. Delegating is another great way to build a team. Trusting someone to carry out an assignment builds self-esteem, which makes firefighters feel better about the job they are doing.

ICs at a serious fire need to delegate to function properly and handle the enormous amount of responsibility being thrown their way at one time. The assignment is usually given to a unit within that unit; an officer will delegate that to a firefighter. The IC has total confidence that his subordinates will perform the task because of the strong team building that occurs in the department.

Team building doesn't end with the conclusion of the operation. As the saying goes, “Praise in public; criticize in private.” Don't be stingy with the accolades. If one of the units does a job you feel is worthy of recognition, give it. In my department, if a company does a good job at a fire, we recommend them for a unit citation. Even if the job was good but not worthy of a unit citation, let the members know. Don't be afraid to give a well-deserved compliment.

When working in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, I developed a Water Resource Group. The city had no functioning hydrant system because of the flood. I was assigned to put together a group that would be able to supply water to every fire in the city. I wound up with 18 water tenders from the U.S. Forestry Service. Some of the firefighters knew each other from previous wildfires, but they basically were 18 different units, which were divided into three teams of six. Each team
was able to supply 20,000 gallons of water to an incident. The units were given official task force designations.

One day when making my rounds, I came across one of the teams and noticed that “Rain Dancers” was written on the side of the truck. I jokingly said to the task force leader that I was now going to refer to them as the “Rain Dancers.” When I visited the next team, I told them the story of the Rain Dancers and jokingly said they needed a nickname. The next day they informed me that they would call themselves the “Water Wizards.” The third team, not to be outdone by the other two teams, came up with the name “Water Dogs.”

What started out as a little joke now became a source of pride among them. It was a little friendly competition. Also, they were no longer Task Force 2 but had a more personal identity. They were starting to take pride in themselves and had become one team out of six separate units. The joke actually carried all the way to the highest command; they were now referred to by their nickname. The dispatchers were even calling them to fires by their nicknames. The teams each designed a company logo, which they displayed where they were stationed. Most, if not all, FDNY units have identifying logos and patches. When I was a firefighter in Ladder 17, we were known as the “Green Berets.” This sort of activity should be encouraged; it is a great morale booster and good for team building.

14. BE CALM

I can tell when a person is not comfortable in the role of IC. Sometimes it manifests itself in a way that is detrimental to the forces. We had a battalion chief in our district who used to scream at fires. At one fire, we had a room burning on the third floor of a multiple dwelling. It was a nice, easy fire; it had vented out the window; the door was closed, but it was a flimsy door, so the fire was starting to burn through the door. We had stretched the line to the apartment and had called for water. The nozzle firefighter was a brand new probie. The chief arrived and immediately started screaming about everything. He was yelling about fire in the cockloft, ladders being placed, and so on. The probie, next to me, was screaming about everything. He was yelling about fire in the cockloft, ladders being placed, and so on. The next, not to be outdone by the other two teams, came up with the name “Water Dogs.”

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15. SET OBJECTIVES

Usually, our objectives at fires are always the same: protect life and property and, more importantly, our own firefight-
I ordered; the fire was under control quickly; the rescue and squad were sent back. I didn’t waiver. I stuck to my guns. Sometimes, our decision may not be the best, but we must make them nonetheless.

There is no room for indecisiveness on the fireground. Sometimes, it is more difficult to make decisions at nonemergency incidents. For example, we respond to a Class 3 alarm (automatic valve) in a commercial building at 2 a.m., and the valve won’t reset. I call dispatch and ask, “Has the valve reset?” The dispatcher says, “Negative.” What do I do now? Do I force entry and cause major damage for a situation I am pretty sure is going to turn out to be nothing? I usually decide against doing the damage and hope for the best.

At one of the first commercial high-rise fires I commanded, I made a really bad decision. I didn’t know the experience level of the officer asking to do a certain task. I assumed because he had almost 30 years on the job that he knew what he was doing. That was a big mistake. The deputy chief came in and took over command, but he really didn’t, because he told me that it was my fire. “Act as if I’m not here,” he said. The officer asked me if they should use the hoseline to extinguish the rest of the fire in the electrical room. I assumed he knew what he was doing. The deputy chief spoke to me after the fire and wanted to know what I was thinking when I allowed him to do that job. He was right. I made many other good decisions at that fire. Luckily, no one was hurt. I filed the incident away as a learning curve. I will never make that mistake again.

Firefighting is an extremely difficult profession, but it is also very rewarding. One thing that always sticks in my mind is something I was told by a lieutenant when I was a brand new probie: “You are always learning on this job.” I couldn’t believe it at the time because he had 20 years, and I thought he knew everything. He went on to do almost 40 years and became one of the most respected chiefs I know. I probably will continue to be challenged at fires and make some mistakes. I hope that when I do, they will be minor. If I follow these guidelines, the chance of making significant mistakes will be less likely. Hopefully, they will do the same for you.

ENDNOTE

1. The Fire Department of New York has a new pilot program in which lightweight single-jacketed two-inch hose is used with almost the same flow as a 2½-inch hose.

DANIEL P. SHERIDAN is a 25-year veteran of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY), where he is a battalion chief. He is a National Instructor II and a member of the FDNY Incident Management Team. He founded Mutual Aid Americas, which works with fire departments in Latin America. Sheridan is a recipient of three Class B Medals and several Unit citations. He authored a chapter in Fire Engineering’s Handbook for Firefighter I and II, is a frequent contributor to Fire Engineering, and has a monthly column on fireengineering.com.
Qualities of Effective Incident Commanders

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COURSE EXAMINATION

1) What does the “L” refer to in the L.E.C.E. acronym for determining the strategy at a fire?
   a. Life
   b. Location
   c. Long Stretch
   d. Length

2) What is the purpose of the first hoseline?
   a. Extinguish the fire
   b. Protect the primary means of egress
   c. Protect exposures
   d. Protect the RIT team

3) Why is it important that the IC remains in front of the fire building?
   a. So operating companies can see the location of the IC
   b. This is where the command post must always be located
   c. So the IC does not get bogged down with one aspect of the operation
   d. Remaining in front of the fire building allows the IC to monitor exposures

4) Why is it important that SOPs, rules, issues, and policies are strictly followed?
   a. Most SOPs were developed as a result of someone having been killed or seriously injured
   b. Firefighters need to be certain who is in charge
   c. Companies need to be able to hold each other accountable if a procedure was not followed
   d. The IC will not have to make as many radio communications on the fireground

5) A primary factor in the ability to lead is to have strong:
   a. Knowledge of policies and procedures
   b. Officers who obey every order
   c. Time management skills
   d. Technical knowledge

6) Not only does the IC need to give clear, concise direction, but the IC also needs to receive:
   a. Good information from the firefighters or other personnel on scene
   b. Constructive criticism regarding his directions
   c. Direction from a higher-ranking chief officer
   d. Communication from each company that his directions were followed

7) Which of the following is not a component of the acronym: L.O.-D.A.N.C.E with regards to critical information that should be relayed from the fire floor?
   a. Occupants
   b. Actions
   c. Extension
   d. Exposures

8) What does the “N” refer to in the L.O.-D.A.N.C.E acronym?
   a. Number of floors
   b. Number of exposures
   c. Number of occupants
   d. Number of apartments

9) It is possible for the IC to personally oversee every part of the operation firsthand at smaller operations:
   a. True
   b. False

10) What becomes the problem when a chief rarely visits his firefighters on the tour except to give them grief?
    a. It sets up a barrier between him and firefighters
    b. The chief forgets his company officers’ names
    c. The companies perform poorly at fires
    d. Trust is lost between the chief and the firefighters

11) In what position in the firehouse do you begin to see separation between the firefighters and frontline officers?
    a. Lieutenant
    b. Captain
    c. Battalion Chief
    d. Staff Chief

12) Why do chief officers need information from firefighters and officers inside the fire building?
    a. So chief officers can make the right decisions
    b. To determine who has poor radio discipline
    c. Chiefs must remain outside, so they depend on interior size-up
    d. To allow the chief officers the ability to maximize their span of control

13) Firefighters are reluctant to be vocal about things they see.
    a. True
    b. False
### Qualities of Effective Incident Commanders

**14)** To be able to give clear directions  
- a. You need to have a clear vision in your mind of what you foresee as your priorities  
- b. You must have excellent radio etiquette  
- c. Talk clearly into the radio  
- d. Delegate directions with authority  

**15)** Why is positioning the battalion car near the fire building important?  
- a. Allows for quick access to equipment stored in battalion car  
- b. Allows for easy identification of command post location  
- c. Allows the chief officer to conduct a size-up faster  
- d. Establishes a command presence  

**16)** ICs at a serious fire must delegate to function properly and handle the enormous amount of responsibility being thrown their way at one time  
- a. True  
- b. False  

**17)** Team building ends with the conclusion of the operation  
- a. True  
- b. False  

**18)** When does the IC need to set objectives and prioritize them?  
- a. Early in the incident  
- b. Enroute to the incident  
- c. Immediately upon arrival at the incident  
- d. During pre-planning for every type of emergency  

**19)** There is no room for indecisiveness on the fireground  
- a. True  
- b. False  

**20)** On the fireground, snap-decisions often have to be made  
- a. True  
- b. False
Continuing Education

Qualities of Effective Incident Commanders

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1.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
2.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
3.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
4.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
5.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
6.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
7.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
8.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
9.  ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
10. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
11. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
12. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
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14. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
15. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
16. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
17. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
18. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
19. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D
20. ❑ A  ❑ B  ❑ C  ❑ D

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Please evaluate this course by responding to the following statements, using a scale of Excellent = 5 to Poor = 1.

1. To what extent were the course objectives accomplished overall?  5  4  3  2  1
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3. How would you rate the objectives and educational methods?  5  4  3  2  1
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6. Was the overall administration of the course effective?  5  4  3  2  1
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9. If any of the continuing education questions were unclear or ambiguous, please list them.

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