



## Making Functional Sense of Incident Command:

### Chapter 1- Introduction and Fire Attack

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## Introduction

Over the past few years the fire department has been moving towards a more codified approach to incident command. Now with the Homeland Security Guys forcing us to use their system to get grant money it looks like we are stuck with the system. Don't get me wrong; I think that Incident Command is a good thing. I tend to lean towards the Phoenix approach though. I like the flexibility and the common sense of the Phoenix approach.

Incident command is cool and everything but it is awful hard for the officer of a three-person engine to command when there is a fire to be fought. It is also harder to be that engine officer because when the Chief gets there he assigns you to some kind of Division or Group.

The aim of this series of articles is to try and shed some light on how the division/group thing works, how to function in those roles, and how to know who answers to whom. After this introduction I will tackle each of the more common groups/divisions as a separate discussion.

I borrow heavily from the "Skip" Coleman text listed in the reference section at the end of this paper. Coleman identifies what he calls "The Big Four Sectors" attack, search, back up, and ventilation. We will explore the attack function here and the others at a latter date. Before we begin let's clarify some points.

- ❑ Groups are a subset of functional sectors. When a group is designated they are given a specific functional task. (page 115).
- ❑ Divisions are also a subset of functional sectors, however, when a division is established, “ the division supervisor is responsible to consider all problems and solutions for that geographical area.” (page 125).
- ❑ When a group is established they are responsible for accomplishing that task in the entire structure! (page 115).[emphasis added].
- ❑ Division officers do not answer to group officers, and group officers do not report to division officers. They both report to command.
- ❑ Command outlines the basic strategic and tactical objectives division and group leaders supervise obtainment of these objectives.

Pondering point:

Crews arrive on the scene of a three-story walk up residence with fire showing on two levels. If you assign engine 701 to fire attack engine 701 is responsible for attacking the fire on both levels. (hmmm)

*\*While Coleman lists back up as a separate entity I find that in the D.C. Metro area Chiefs tend to assign the back up line to the primary attack leader. It also seems to be the habit in this area to assign a fire attack group under the assumption that they will only operate on the primary fire floor. I advocate leaving the back up line under the control of the attack group leader (giving the attack group leader to position that back up line as needed) but also creating additional attack groups (on other levels or in other areas) as the situation dictates.*

*Finally the operations officer is not discussed here because it is not typically the domain of a unit officer and typically not needed on most residential fires (high rises excluded). It is these residential fires that represent the majority of our workload and are hence the focus of my attention.*

## Attack Group

**If command is supposed to focus on the entire incident the sector officer should tunnel in on their assigned tasks/area.**

I prefer to start every discussion by pointing out the incident priorities, namely; life safety, incident stabilization, and property conservation. As attack group leader you have three responsibilities according to Coleman.

- ❑ Safe guarding crew(s) [*to do this the leader must know who is assigned to the functional area*]
- ❑ Directing crew in attack and extinguishments in assigned area
- ❑ Keeping command informed.

The attack group leader should only be concerned with the placement of the primary attack line and the back up line. Command may ask that “attack go direct” with other groups/divisions to pass on or get vital information, but generally the other areas and functions are not the concern of “attack.”

“Attack” should be located at the front along with the operating crews directing them. “Attack” chooses the proper attack tactic. There are three accepted attack methods, direct, indirect, and fog\*. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. However, in the typical structure on the typical day the indirect attack provides for the quickest knockdown with the least disturbance of thermal layers, and uses the least amount of water, resulting in the least amount of damage.

The indirect attack is also crucial to use when search operations are under way or other crews are working in adjacent areas as you lessen the chance of steaming potential victims or other firefighters.

“Attack” like other group leaders, should be operating with a set of benchmarks. Using these benchmarks increases accountability and safety. As I have written elsewhere I do not advocate sending crews above a fire that is not under control. It is important then that “attack” advise command as soon as the fire is knocked.

This does two things: It allows command to juxtapose his/her visual against the report from the inside. In other words if “attack” claims to have a knock and the fire is still growing then there is a communication or perception disconnect that must be addressed. The second benefit of this announcement is that it cues the lines and crews assigned to work above the fire that their situation is safer now and they can begin to aggressively search for extension.

This discussion is not exhaustive. If you leave this wanting more {and you should} I refer you to the Coleman text listed in the reference section.

*\*To the doubters, yes even the fog attack has its place, especially on confined attic or cellar fires where actual entry by personnel is not possible or is too hazardous.*

## References

Coleman, J. (1997) Incident Management for the Street Smart Fire Officer.  
Saddle Brook, NJ. PennWell Publishing Company.