

INTENT

charles bailey for tinhelmet.com

14 August 2006

... before anything else, we must conceive our vision of how we intend to win...The first requirement is to establish our intent; what we want to accomplish and how. Without a clearly identified intent, the necessary unity of effort is inconceivable.

USMC Warfighting Manual

I have struggled with writing this missive. It has been written many times over, first in my head and then on paper. At least six times I have pushed control A and then delete. I think that the reason for my troubles was that I just wasn't sure of what I was trying to accomplish. So now with all that confusion wiped away and with the sun setting on a quiet day I offer this un-edited look at what has been bugging me for days.

Yesterday or the day before I found out that I had to go to a Level B and PAPR (powered air purifying respirator) class and fitting session. I wondered aloud why, since I was a hazmat tech already and spend a great deal of time on the hazmat unit. Why did I need to be trained all over again? My troops wanted to know if they were becoming hazmat techs, or if they would have to carry this stuff in their car, or if this meant there was some valid terror threat the organization was responding to. I did not have any of the answers. Therein lies the problem. I had no idea of what my commander's intent was. I was simply given orders and told to carry them out. I have no idea of why the order's were important or what exactly needed to be done, except to be at a certain place at a certain time.

If the fire department really expects to do well during the big one, this massive casualty event combined with building collapse and nerve agent release we have to make some fundamental changes. Everyone from the Chief to the newest recruit must understand what the mission is, each mission, and understand the strategic intent of their leaders. It is enough to simply give orders for day to day mission, but for the big one, there will be no real central leadership. It is a fallacy of thought to think that NIMS will be the answer to asserting control over large geographic areas or small areas with complex problems. NIMS cannot replace human initiative. However, human initiative cannot function effectively unless everyone is working towards common objectives.

I break this discussion of tasking into some broad categories, similar I think, to the NIMS/NFA approach. In the chart below I explain my thought process.

FIRE DEPARTMENT TASKING			
TASKING LEVEL	TYPICAL NON-EMERGENCY PROVIDER OF GUIDANCE	TYPICAL EMERGENCY PROVIDER OF GUIDANCE	TYPICAL STATEMENT/ACTION FOR HOUSE FIRE
OBJECTIVES	FIRE CHIEF AND DEPUTIES/ASSISTANTS	INCIDENT COMMANDER	PROVIDE FOR LIFE SAFETY/INCIDENT STABILIZATION AND PROPERTY CONSERVATION
STRATEGIES	SHIFT CHIEFS/BATTALION CHIEFS	IC/SECTOR LEADERSHIP	AGGRESSIVE INTERIOR ATTACK
TACTICS	UNIT OFFICERS	SECTOR LEADERSHIP/UNIT OFFICERS	STRETCH LINE THROUGH FRONT DOOR-PLACED TO PROTECT THE VICTIM AND SEARCH TEAM
TASK	FIRE FIGHTERS	UNIT OFFICERS/FIRE FIGHTERS	STRETCH LINE AND OPERATE NOZZLE

Intent.

It is the intent of the operations chief that a back-up line be stretched to primarily protect the egress of the primary attack line and secondarily to provide additional water flow should the initial line be overwhelmed. In order for the tactical and task level personnel, those people actually pulling the line, to put the back-up line in the right place, it is critical that they understand the intent of placing the back-up line. The knowledge of this intent drives the entire incident for that particular crew. Furthermore, each crew must be well indoctrinated in the objectives for the entire incident. For example, the intent of the back-up line is to primarily protect the egress of the primary line and the intent of the primary line is to protect the search. If the back-up line is aware of this they can position their line in a way that does not impede the overall mission, i.e., not stage the back-up line at the top of the steps obscuring the travel route of the search team.

We are not hiring stupid people. They are all passing a battery of tests and are of at least moderate intelligence. If firefighters understood the “why” then, perhaps, we would see a fewer mistakes. If people understood why it was important to take their assigned positions, and understood why the third engine checked the lowest level of the structure,

if they understood how many close calls were the result of unidentified basement fires, then perhaps they would be in the right place more often.

Many times mistakes on the fire ground can be traced simply to a lack of understanding of the objectives of the incident. Standard operating procedure is great and it is necessary but it is not enough. Things won't get better until Chiefs start communicating intent along with policy and until incident commanders stop micro-managing tasks and start communicating objectives and strategies.

If I knew why my troops were trying on level B suits and PAPRs it would be a lot easier to sell them on the mission and they would have a better idea of what information they should be paying attention to.

I apologize for the disjointed nature of this article. I suppose it could be many pages longer and cover many other topic areas, like why we issue two sets of gear and only one facepiece and regulator. Why some jurisdictions don't even allow for simple human error and have extra regulators and face pieces on apparatus in case someone forgot theirs at home. Yes, some of these things would be easier to swallow and easier to advocate for if I simply understood the intent of my leadership; if they did not treat me with a "do it because I said so attitude." That attitude works for the simple stuff. You can do a house fire with that attitude, you can even do a high rise fire with that attitude, but you cannot manage the aftermath of the "big one" with that attitude and you cannot manage complex operations with that attitude.

Sometimes I wonder if the lack of explanation of intent can be simply be attributed to a lack of clarity on that level. Maybe they don't tell me what their intent is because they don't know. If that is the case then more work than I ever imagined is left to be done. What I know for sure though is that things won't get any better until we as a department start doing a better job of communicating intent and allowing the end-user i.e., tactic and task level personnel to exercise creativity and initiative in meeting that intent.