

How to be an effective incident commander



The role of incident command has changed dramatically over the last few years and, as part of new UK incident command guidance, incident commanders are expected to demonstrate a new array of behavioural and subjective competences, writes Katherine Lamb, of K Lamb Associates.

Is it easy to be an Incident Commander?

Is it straightforward? Can anybody do it? I think the answer to that is 'No'. What kind of qualities might we be looking for?

Operational discretion. Exactly what operational discretion depends on who you ask. Everyone has a slightly different

explanation or interpretation of what it means.

I believe it's a state of professionalism in which individuals are able to make a decision which is outside of procedure, a decision which they know may also be outside the organisational risk philosophy.

Operational accountability. All fire services are accountable for the actions of their personnel. In an era of litigation, they need to be comfortable with the ability of their personnel and assured that they are qualified and confident in making decisions. But how do we train people to attain this confidence?

Professional judgement. Incident commanders are expected to apply professional judgement. Traditionally, professional judgement was directly aligned to experience, but how do you gain this experience at a time when incident numbers have fallen by 40% in the last ten years?

Assertive, effective and safe. This is the utopian goal. A description of an effective commander would include all these fabulous qualities alongside 'dynamic', 'reactive' and 'balanced'. In a nutshell, commanders who are happy to make decisions and lead the incident.

But what makes somebody an effective commander? How should you develop and nurture those skills? When should

Virtual reality training plays an essential and cost-effective role in the Effective Command methodology.



HOW VIRTUAL REALITY TRAINING HELPED A MIDDLE EAST AIRPORT BECOME SAFER



How does a major international airport train its emergency personnel in the key aspects of a new concourse building without affecting its day-to-day operations and revenue? By using high quality simulation and accredited training methodologies, of course.

All airports are required by the Airports Licensing Authority to run realistic training exercises to test their emergency plans to ensure all personnel are competent in their response. With most people involved in such exercises having very limited exposure to real life incidents, simulation-based training is often the most cost-effective option.

In Summer 2015 a consortium made up of simulation software provider XVR Simulation, command decision-making training expert Katherine Lamb from Effective Command and aviation training specialist Barry Alderslade from Rescue Fire Fighting Services were tasked with delivering a training exercise for a major Middle Eastern airport which wishes to remain anonymous.

The multi-agency exercise was designed to test the functionality of a new concourse building and its emergency plans and protocols as well as provide a training opportunity for emergency response personnel and associates.

A 3D virtual-reality model of the concourse building including airside apron, access roads and taxi-ways was created. The detailed model included the doors, stairways, escalators and CCTV cameras relevant to evacuation and smoke egress.

The exercise began with a 777 making a heavy landing in fog. The plane taxied to its stand, where the over-heated brakes caught fire, leading to a full evacuation of the aircraft and an airside emergency response. The scenario was run using XVR simulation software on three parallel screens – one for the airport fire service, one for the medical responders and one for the law enforcement officers.

The airport fire service responded first and were soon supported by the local authority fire service. The arrival of the medical support and police then followed, focussing on triage and security respectively.

The exercise was designed to test the emergency plans and to give commanders the opportunity to use particular incident protocols; explore their decision-making skills; and consider solutions not necessarily detailed in standard operating protocols.

The scenario then explored the tactical decision-making, with significant consideration given to the ensuing investigation; the management of the media; the continual functioning of the airport; and the implementation of emergency plans. The Effective Command methodology explored the decision-making strategies, highlighting the working-out of decisions rather than just the application of procedure. This aims to develop command skills and competent incident commanders.

The exercise also enabled the memoranda of understanding between the services to be applied, tested and practiced.

The virtual reality model that was used could be useful in a number of additional ways. As well as training fire marshalls and other personnel in evacuation procedures, different evacuation strategies could be practised. In addition, the efficiency of rendezvous points, location of cordons and management of the press could be tested on a variety of scenarios.

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The Effective Command methodology was used during a recent multi-agency, virtual-reality training exercise at a major Middle East airport.



you start that development process? How should you measure this competence? Every fire service has a different answer to these questions, yet they are all working to exactly the same role map and providing almost identical services.

An effective commander is someone who has ultimately been selected through selection tests that focus on managerial qualities, experience and aptitude, not just seniority. They also need to have the right technical knowledge and proficiencies. They need to know the organisational rule book, policies and procedures and how to apply them.

But at an incident they not only need to know which policies or procedures are applicable but also need to be able to use professional judgement and be comfortable with the level of operational discretion they feel the need to take.

The Effective Command training and assessment methodology launched in 2015 and developed by myself (former member of Oxfordshire FRS) and Dr David Launder (South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service) focuses on developing 'thinking' commanders. This training has been integrated with many international projects and implemented by fire services as best practice.

It focuses on developing decision-making behaviours by using dilemma-based training scenarios including simulation, real fire ground training and monitoring the performance of a commander at an incident. It is supported by a series of web-based assessment tools and apps and the methodology has been pre-accredited by Skills for Fire Service Awards for their incident command qualifications at all command levels.

We believe that thinking commanders come from thinking firefighters. For example, if you train firefighters to think in a fire behaviour training manner, they will be able to read the fire. They will understand what they're looking at and they'll make decisions about what firefighting tactics to apply. They won't just open the door and deal with the fire from a fixed procedural perspective.

Thinking firefighters make thinking commanders. Focus on decision-making behaviours rather than specific procedural or role-based competencies. And if you apply that philosophy through the whole of the service, from the operational level right through the strategic management, you'll end up with a cohesive, dynamic and thinking service.

Individuals need to be given the opportunity to change the specific competences of knowledge, experience and skill acquired from training or operational exposure, into command competence. Let them take that two-dimensional information they've learnt and transpose it into a 3D model in their heads. Let them take that knowledge, experience and skill and landmark it in such a way that they remember how it all fits together. That is an effective training methodology.

A cost-effective way of delivering this kind of learning experience is through the use of simulation. Simulation gives incident command trainers the opportunity to create a whole array of scenarios and allows people to make mistakes. We learn best by making mistakes and figuring out what we should do differently next time.

I always emphasise that the incident must be complex. Give somebody a dilemma. Give them a real problem to solve. Do not test the ability of an individual to resolve an incident by turning to the right page in the procedure manual and apply an organisational procedure. Anybody can do that. Give them a scenario that requires them to make time-critical decisions. A scenario that allows the assessor or training officer to explore the decision-making rationale of the individual.

A reactive training environment helps them cement their learning. If they make appropriate decisions, there must be appropriate outcomes at the end. If a BA crew is given a good quality brief and they are appropriately equipped with hose and sufficient water, then the fire should go out. Conversely, if a poor brief is given and the fire continues to develop then the commander needs to be given the opportunity to review their decisions and make tactical changes to the plan that are based on the changing visual cues.

The Effective Command competence assessment always occurs in a structural debrief after a scenario. The commanders are asked to explain what they were doing, why, and what they were thinking. You cannot assess somebody's competence at making a decision by standing at the back of the room with a clipboard. It doesn't work. You need to get inside their head. It's really important to understand the rationale behind their decisions and the actions they have chosen to take or avoid.

By training people in this way you end up with assertive, effective and safe commanders. Individuals who are confident and self aware, who are well trained and competent. They have good situational awareness and are able to lead their teams in a clear, cohesive way. You can trust them – and incident command decision-making revolves around trust. By developing decision making skills in your commanders you are equipping them to progress to the status of an 'all hazards commander' – one who has the confidence and competence to deal with the unexpected.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Katherine Lamb MIFireE, MSc (Oxon), BSc (hons) is a respected authority on incident command training and assessment. She worked as a research scientist before joining the fire service in 2004 and for the last six years Dr Lamb has specialised in incident command and crisis decision-making. Effective Command is a charitable organisation which develops the concept of the thinking commander. To find out more about Effective Command methodology visit www.effectivecommand.org or email katherine@effectivecommand.org.

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