

LCES FOR INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS

By Steve Gage

In an article titled “LCES - A Key to Safety in the Wildland Fire Environment” (Fire Management Notes, U.S. Forest Service, Volume 42, Number 4, 1991), Paul Gleason explained his systems approach to fire line safety, by using LCES. LCES stands for “Lookouts,” “Communications,” “Escape Routes,” and “Safety Zones.” This systems approach can also be applied to an incident management organization. The question should arise ‘what does fire line safety have to do with an incident management organization?’ If the management organization or team does not recognize that things are not going well on their incident, then those that stand the most to lose are the firefighters assigned to the incident.

Incident management teams could be viewed as hired professional consultants brought in to abate the nuisance, to restore order, and to bring about a cessation of the emergency conditions. Some teams come to an incident as an organized group such as a Type 1 or a Type 2 team. Others may have formed at the incident from those assigned that meet the qualifications. However the management team is formed it must recruit from the human race. Because of this factor the team will have all the human factors to deal with. Some of these factors include stress, fears, emotions, prejudices, weaknesses in training and/or experience. The list could go on and on. These teams may or may not have worked together before. If they worked together before by theory they should be more proficient. However if they were not put under a strain then all of their factors may not have surfaced. Incident management can be very stressful. Many lives and large amounts of tax dollars are at risk if an incident management team does not provide for LCES.

Lookouts

Incident management teams should always ask for or assign “Lookouts.” These lookouts are not unlike the lookouts used on the fire line. It’s someone assigned to watch what is going on and signal when they perceive something is about to go wrong. This would be a person or persons who could move from functional area to functional area looking for the situations that shout watch out. The folks doing this should be knowledgeable of team interactions and have functional background at the level of the team they are observing. Each team member has a share of the lookout responsibilities and should speak up if they see a situation that shouts watch out. The Incident Commander can ask that someone that is not involved with this incident that has knowledge of incident management review how the team is doing. This person(s) could be called a risk manager or a friend if they could head off any of the watch outs. The outside ‘Lookouts’ could come into the incident command post and observe for an operational period or two and give the team some positive feedback.

The list of 18 watch out situations are studied and reviewed by all firefighters. The following is a particle list of watch out situations for incident management teams;

- The number of reportable accidents is going up daily
- The Incident Commander is spending more time with the Human Resource Specialist and Union Rep than his/her command and general staff
- Hand crews not eating the food from the kitchen and requesting MREs
- Daily revisions of the Wildfire Situation Analysis

- Planning meetings and briefings are late or too long due to lack of preparation
- Operations has more aircraft than safe airspace
- Incident action plans do not match the incident
- Non working communication plan
- Only being able to account for 37 of the 101 pieces of contract equipment assigned to the incident
- Agency representatives want to take their resources and go home before incident is controlled
- The local media, 'Film at 11', is asking the Information Officer questions like, "Is it true that ..." or "How do you explain the actions of ..."
- The supply orders are more than three to five days behind
- The shower line is moving slower than the supply orders
- Local government officials are calling special meetings to discuss the team's actions or non-actions.
- The Planning Section Chief will not talk to the Logistics Section Chief due to "inter-personal conflicts"

Communications

Communications is always a big issue on any assignment. Communications for incident management teams will be in many forms. They could be verbal, written, non-verbal and sometimes telepathic. Team members must always strive to be as communicative as possible. There are so many activities going on at any one time that affect more than one functional area that without good communications between team members the effectiveness of the team will begin to diminish.

One key component of good inter-team communications is making sure that all of the team members are speaking the same language. The language of the team should be one where each member can understand what information is being passed along. The Operations people need to communicate in a language that the Finance people can understand. Do not try to use lingo that only one or two groups will understand as this will drive a wedge between the groups and be another blockade to effective communications. Team members must make an effort to be good listeners as well as good talkers. Many time team members are so wrapped up in the issues they may be dealing with that they fail to hear a piece of information that could possibly cause great damage.

Non-verbal communications sometimes can communicate a more powerful message than the spoken word. Remember back to your childhood days when a person who influenced how you behaved gave you the 'look'. The 'look' could stop you mid-step, mid-sentence or melt your feet to the floor. There are many of opportunities for non-verbal communications that must be recognized so that it can be dealt with before it becomes a major problem. Is the message that one person does not like the other person or the message. This is another chance for team managers to step up and head off future problems.

Written communications is very important to effective team functions. Team members must be sure that the written information gets to all the folks that need the information. Ensure that team

members document all events or conversations that may have an impact on the incident. If there is chance that some information may have a negative or positive effect on the incident it should be properly documented. Yes, it takes time to write down all the needed information. However, if the information ends up in a tort claim it could take several months or years to come to the fore front. Most people can not remember a conversation that had two days ago let alone two years ago. If the other party has written documentation and an IMT member has a vague recollection of speaking to someone about the issue, but can't remember if it was this incident or the one before, who will the judge believe?

Team members must also provide written communications outside the team. Many written messages must be sent to the home office, a regional office, a state office or a national office. Is the document written in a manner that it conveys the information needed and reflects well on the incident management team?

Escape Routes

Escape routes for an incident management team does not mean fold up the tents and slip away in the dead of the night. The escape routes for incident management team's deals with having an alternate plan if things are not going as planned. Does the team have a plan B if the inter personal dynamics of the team start to break down? Is there means for a functional area to go and regroup to get back on track if needed? Is there a place for the command and general staff to go and clear the 'air' if needed? Firefighters and others can pick up on the fact that an incident is being managed by a group of people that are not working together as a team.

Another type of an escape route maybe a contact person or persons that can be called to answer a question or give advice. Team members are not expected to know everything or have all the answers. Some people may feel that they can not ask questions of people outside the incident and this could lead to an opportunity for failure.

Safety Zones

Safety Zones are defined as an area where people can go to get out of harms way without having to use a shelter. For an incident management team a safety zone is a must. They need a place to go and feel safe to discuss issues. This area has to be away from the rest of the people assigned to the incident. It could be as simple as a tent or an office where the team members, as needed, can go and support each other or resolve a conflict. Team members must be able to recognize when they or their fellow team member is at systems overload. The signs could be masked or as easy to pick out as the "thousand yard stare". Incident Commanders must try to prevent the damages of those that will try to 'Monday morning quarterback' the team. There maybe a time when critical incident stress debriefings (CISD) will be appropriate for team members. CISD for team members was offered and well received at the South Canyon incident.

In a Tri-Data study, done for the Federal Wildland Fire Agencies, a firefighter was quoted "We understand the science of fighting wildland fires; we don't understand the science of people fighting fires." Incident management teams must recruit from the same human race that all incident personnel must be recruited from. This means they all come with flaws that can not be fixed at the factory. Human factors will play a huge role in how a team acts and reacts to an

incident. There are many opportunities for incident management teams to fail to provide the leadership needed to guide a number of people toward a common goal. Being proactive and using a systems approach to team interactions can provide all those assigned to an incident managed by an incident management team a safer experience. LCES provides such a systems approach.