Incident Command System
Position Title Review

Introduction

Upon its inception, the Incident Command System (ICS) was designed as a system that provided a simple, understandable, and flexible organization that could be employed on emergent incidents that required multiple agencies/disciplines to come together quickly and operate in a very effective manner. Basic training on ICS framework and regular practice using ICS would allow rapid assimilation of responders from various and widespread agencies and disciplines into a standard organization used during times of great need. It included, as a vital element, a series of terms called "position titles" that were not agency or discipline specific, but rather were "clear text" in a sense. These simple titles would immediately provide to all responders a clear understanding of levels of organizational hierarchy, supervisory responsibility, and acknowledged capability without knowing the agency from which the individual came, or the specific term used for the rank that person held within that agency.

The benefits of this approach are undeniable. If we tried to rapidly coalesce multiple agencies while holding on to agency specific titles (captain, lieutenant, officer, senior deputy, battalion chief, technician, etc.), the clarity of chain-of-command would take far too long to develop and be understood. This clarity of command might very well change minute-to-minute as we installed new individuals into the incident organization to manage and supervise the multitude of activities.

It is also a benefit that these titles are NOT pinned to agency rank, but to a level of qualification or competency related to the ICS element that the individual is responsible for leading. While it is often true that the home agency rank does align with incident qualification, in a multiple-agency response, this relationship is obscure to those unfamiliar with the individuals' home agency rank structure.

Therefore, upon arrival and incorporation into an incident organization, a person can assume the ICS title that quickly defines an assumed level of competency and certainly a level of organizational responsibility. Subordinates can relate to that level of responsibility without looking at collar brass or business cards.

As an ever increasing number of responders are added to the incident, these responders can quickly identify the organizational chain-of-command. This also supports the basic ICS tenants of "unity of command" and "span-of-control" as these titles support each other in an identified manner.

It must be recognized that over time, the original list of titles has changed. Primarily, these changes are due to two things.

First, there was an early recognition that this system must be discipline neutral. As developed by FIRESCOPE, the original nomenclature for the person responsible for the

operational activities of the incident was originally called the "Suppression and Rescue Section (S & R) Chief". This worked well for the fire discipline, but that same group soon saw the benefit of the system in a broader application (all-hazards). Therefore, the title "S & R" was changed in the early 1980's to the more "all-hazards" appropriate title of "Operations Section Chief". There have been other changes to continue to support the all-hazards response applicability of the system.

The second cause for modifications to organizational titles was simply in response to user experience. Form needs to follow function. The expansion of "Assistants" within the organization and the addition of the term Administration to the Finance Section (hence Finance/Administration) are examples of these changes. But it must be acknowledged that frequent changes, or discipline/agency specific changes, will have very serious and negative impacts on the "standard" language concept and the benefits it provides. The temptation to adapt the system to a specific agency or discipline, in an effort to make it more tolerable and adoptable, is risky. Care must be exercised in the consideration of changes to the basic structure and related terminology.

The final challenge of the establishment of "standard" position titles is the need to balance this against the need for "clear-text" communications. Development of titles that were too ICS dependant, and therefore ICS specific, would fly in the face of the desire to move away from agency-specific titles. This situation would negate any success in making a simple organization that is devoid of any obscure definition. Not an easy task as the ICS moves out to a whole new level of use.

Position Title Review

The success of the ICS is its simplicity. This simplicity is very evident in the concept that there are very few position titles. But each is effective in establishing the level of authority. The simple title "Officer", successfully defines a level of responsibility within the organization. Adding a functional descriptor to the term, such as "Public Information Officer", now defines the area of responsibility and authority.

This review of the titles used in ICS will start with the basic terms used to define level within the ICS organization.

Commander Position

The term **"Commander"** is reserved for those who occupy the highest level of incident responsibility. The Incident Commander (IC) is understood to be the highest level of organizational management. Nothing changes if the title is used in a "Unified Command" environment. Additionally, the specific term "Deputy" is often associated with the IC position. More on the "Deputy" position later.

Command Staff

Collectively, the three **Officers**, Safety, Liaison and Public Information, are referred to as the **Command Staff**.

Officer Positions

"Officer" is a specific term for those who are directly delegated areas of responsibility that specifically reside with the Incident Commander. The safety of responders, the relations with assisting and cooperating agencies, and keeping the public informed, are things specifically vested with the IC. The IC delegates the accomplishment of these tasks, once clear direction is provided, to the Officer level. Officers (Safety, Liaison, and Public Information) have no direct supervision on lower levels of incident organization unless these Officers have "assistants" assigned to them and whom they supervise. More on the title of "Assistant" will be discussed later.

General Staff

The remaining four positions that report directly to the IC are collectively called the **General Staff**. These individuals are responsible for management of very large organizational elements and carry out IC developed policies, priorities and objectives.

Chief Positions

The General Staff positions all carry the term **"Chief"**. These personnel are equivalent in level of responsibility. Adding the specific element of responsibility completes the definition of the individual's focus and scope. The Operations Section Chief, the Planning Section Chief, the Logistics Section Chief and the Finance/Administrative Section Chief are organizational peers.

Director Positions

The next level of organizational hierarchy is the **"Director"** level. This term is associated with the management of **Branches**. The Branch level can be activated to ensure that span-of-control is maintained or to address "functional" complexity on certain types of incidents. By convention, the use of Branches is confined to two sections, Operations and Logistics.

In the Operations Section, Branches can be developed in two ways. For example, a Branch can be functional such as the Law Enforcement Branch or Medical Services Branch. This is often done on functionally complex incidents. In cases where incident complexity is a result of geographic scale, geographically-based branches (Branch I, II, III…) should be used to allow for the physical scale of the incident to be accommodated. The use of functional Branches is typically based on the number of functional "groups" operating due to incident complexity. The geographical use of Branches is typically based on the number of Divisions that are being used to manage the incident. While both

applications can exist on an incident, this must be done carefully so as not to confuse responders as to who is responsible for the same area of an incident.

The Logistics Section has two "functional" Branches available to employ if the complexity of the logistical activities demands. The use of these Branches is optional. The activation of the Branches is based on span-of-control issues and/or the diversity of tasks that may create the complexity and the potential need for these Branches. The branches in the Logistics Section are the Service Branch and the Support Branch with multiple "Units" within each.

Supervisor Position

The next level of supervision is the **"Supervisor"** level. Those with a geographically defined area of responsibility for all operational incident activities within that area are **"Division Supervisors"**. In comparison, the supervisor of a specific incident function, without geographical limit, is called a **"Group Supervisor"**. The need for specific functional "Groups" demands the inclusion of the functional area of responsibility when naming the group. Examples of these terms may be the "Medical Group Supervisor" or the "Debris Removal Group Supervisor". These two elements, Divisions and Groups, are confined to the Operations Section organization. Division and Group **Supervisors** are organizational peers.

Leader Position

The next level of organizational responsibility is identified as the **"Leader"** position. This term applies to the supervision of Teams, Task Forces or Units. Strike Team Leaders, Task Force Leaders and Unit Leaders are organizational peers. Unit Leaders can be found in all of the General Staff organizational elements. In the Operations Section, they are often used, for example, as the Decontamination Unit Leader when dealing with entries into areas having the risk of contamination by hazardous materials, or the Treatment Unit Leader during Multi Casualty Incident (MCI) events. In addition, "Unit Leaders" are also found in the Logistics Section such as the Communications Unit Leader. They exist in the Planning Section as indicated by the "Situation Unit Leader" position. The Compensation and Claims Unit exists in the Finance/Administrative Section and is supervised by a "Leader".

Manager Position

The next level of responsibility is the **"Manager"** position. These personnel are typically responsible for a specific physical area of the incident. These areas may include the Incident Base (Base) Manager or Receiving/Distribution Manager within the Logistics Section. Within the Operations Section, Managers would be assigned to one of the treatment areas within the MCI organization (Immediate Treatment Area Manager, Delayed Treatment Area Manager and the Minor Treatment Area Manager), or possibly a Safe Refuge Area Manager during an incident involving Hazardous Materials.

Additional Position Titles

There are two position titles that are used in ICS that define a level of support for various levels of the organization. These positions are found throughout the organization but have VERY specific limitations.

Deputies

The **"Deputy"** position is a support position for the following organizational elements:

- Incident Commander
- Section Chief
- Branch Director

A Deputy is specifically defined as a person who is qualified to the same level as the person they support but remain subordinate to that person. For example, a Deputy Operations Section Chief is a qualified Operations Section Chief (OSC), can fill-in for the Operations Section Chief as delegated by the OSC or can oversee specific functions within the Operation Section.

Assistants

The next support position is the **"Assistant"** position. The use of Assistants has grown over the years. They are primarily found supporting the **"Officer"** positions. The difference between a Deputy and Assistant is that an Assistant need not be fully qualified for the Officer position they are supporting. Instead, the Assistant needs to be capable of completing the tasks assigned to them within the Command Staff function. For example, an "Assistant Safety Officer – Hazardous Materials" is typical in a Hazardous Materials response organization. This individual may not be fully qualified to be an incident Safety Officer, but has expertise to evaluate the safe conduct of Hazardous Materials entry operations. Assistants are commonly found supporting the following positions:

- Safety Officer
- Liaison Officer
- Public Information Officer
- Certain Unit Leader positions in the Logistics Section

In addition to the above description, Assistants allow for an expansion of a particular Command Staff "organization". Using span-of-control guidance, that being one supervisor may supervise up to seven individuals, we can see for example, a Public Information organization can grow to over 50 individuals and still be successfully managed within ICS doctrine. For example, Assistant Public Information Officers may be used on very high profile incidents and identified as to any area of focus. For example, an "Assistant Public Information Officer (PIO) for Media Relations" can work

directly with media, while another Assistant PIO may supervise the operation of a phone bank.

Technical Specialist

Technical Specialist is an organizational term tied to someone who has a high level of technical expertise in an area and can provide that expertise to the incident. Technical Specialists do not typically have a managerial role in an incident. They are strategically assigned throughout the incident to achieve specific benefit. Examples of Technical Specialists would be:

- Technical Reference Specialists on Hazardous Materials incidents
- Weather Specialists
- Cultural Resource Specialists
- Heavy Equipment and Rigging Specialist
- Marine Biology Specialist

These are very much defined by the conditions found at the incident and the particular needs of the incident.

Agency Representative

Finally, an **Agency Representative** is a specific ICS Position identifier. This position is defined as an individual assigned to an incident from an assisting or cooperating agency that has been delegated authority to make decisions on matters affecting that agency's participation at the incident. Agency Representatives coordinate with the Incident's Liaison Officer.

Subordinate/Support Positions

The table below attempts to show primary ICS position titles and the titles of those individuals who support those incident supervisors.

Table 1. ICS Position Titles and Support Positions

ICS Position Titles		
Title	**Applicable ICS Position**	**Supporting Position**
Commander	Incident Commander	Deputy
Officer	Command Staff	Assistant
Chief	General Staff	Deputy
Director	Branch	Deputy
Supervisor	Division or Group	None*
Leader	Strike Teams Task Forces Units	Assistant**
Manager	Areas or facilities	None

*   Division and Group Supervisor positions are not provided an Assistant or Deputy. Increased workload or span-of-control issues are addressed through expansion of the Operations organization to activate additional Supervisor positions as appropriate.

**   Assistants may be used to supervise unit activities at Camps.