Standardizing the Incident Command System for Businesses

by Judy Bell, CEM

From Jerry Molten's perspective, the fire at Acme Manufacturing was fairly routine. The first alarm had come in just after 7 a.m. on a Friday morning. Jerry commanded the first team of fire fighters that responded and as such, he became the Incident Commander. On arrival, he immediately requested additional equipment and fire fighters, also three EMS crews for several victims of the smoke and for two employees who had tried to rescue some of Acme's vital records. Jerry also called for police to manage traffic in the area and a crew from the utility department to deal with a downed power line.

After the blaze was extinguished, Jerry called for a team of investigators who determined that the cause of the fire had been a hot plate in one of the employee break areas. Later that day, traffic flow around Acme Manufacturing resumed, members of Jerry's team swept the parking lot and placed yellow tape across all of the entrances of the darkened building. Then they returned to the firehouse where they cleaned and stored all of their equipment while Jerry had advised his superiors that the recovery phase was complete.

At that same time, Acme Manufacturing's COO, Jim Green, sat in his office about two miles from the damaged building and the phone was ringing. He was taking calls from family members of the injured, wanting to know where their loved ones had been taken, calls from employees wanting to know if the payroll would be processed on schedule, calls from department heads, who needed funds to make emergency purchases, and calls from a local television station wanting Jim to comment on the rumor that the fire had been set by a disgruntled employee. While the fire fighters had had a routine day and had declared their recovery phase complete, Jim's day had been a nightmare so far, and his business recovery tasks had just begun.

This account though fictionalized is common in the U.S. today, and it illustrates important differences in the readiness capabilities of first responders compared to private businesses. Jerry's response conforms to a national standard established by Presidential directive in 2003. That standard is the National Incident Management System (NIMS), a consistent, nationwide core set of doctrine, concepts, principles, terminology, and organizational processes to enable effective, efficient, and collaborative incident management at all levels of the public sector. It provides a set of standardized organizational structures including the Incident Command System (ICS) which provides framework for preparing for, preventing, responding to, and recovering from domestic incidents regardless of cause, size, or complexity. ICS defines the operating characteristics, interactive management components, and structure of incident management and emergency response organizations engaged throughout the life cycle of an actual incident during response. As illustrated in the case of Jim Green, NIMS assumes the responding agencies are not also victims of an event. Consequently, the recovery components of the ICS standard stop at the point when public agencies complete their investigation, clean-up the area, and turn over the damaged assets back to the property owner. For the affected business or agency, this is the point where true business recovery begins.

Businesses and non-response agencies need an expanded ICS structure to accommodate the business recovery phase. This structure should embrace the "unified command" concept that has been proven by first responders in the public sector. But this new standard must extend beyond the emergency response phase to sustain the critical functions of the effected organization while it rebuilds its damaged infrastructure (buildings, systems, and telecommunications) and prepares to "return to normal".

History of ICS in the Private Sector

Although ICS in the public sector has evolved for decades, few private sector organizations used its principles until the 1990's. Notable exceptions were utilities such as the Bell System, who adapted ICS with the inception of the Cold War in the 1950's. The threat at that time was potential nuclear attack. Under the direction of the National

Emergency Preparedness System, the Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) of the Bell System were tested annually to ensure the preservation of the public telephone infrastructure.

Later, ICS principles were applied to the oil industry and to businesses that regularly stockpiled and handled dangerous chemical substances. By the early 1990's, the advantages of a uniform incident response structure for both public and private sectors began to be evident. Major events like the Loma Prieta earthquake, Hurricane Andrew, and the Northridge earthquake illustrated the extent of cooperation needed to reduce the human and financial impacts on communities hit by major disasters. During this period, "public-private partnerships" became a buzzword within the industry, as we matured our focus from disaster recovery to business continuity. One of the milestones in defining this new partnership was the National Democratic Convention of 2000 in Los Angeles, which provided an opportunity for local public agencies to share potential incident information with private businesses in the surrounding area.

Influenced by these events, many businesses that have recently established business continuity programs have begun using the fundamental components of ICS to form emergency response teams. The popularity of the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) concept has also promoted the use of the ICS in the private sector. However, until now, no model has been standardized that can be applied to both emergency response and business recovery, within both the public and private sectors, using ICS as the foundation. This paper describes such a model which is adaptable to any business, school, or non-response public agency.

Incident Command System Basic Components

ICS establishes five general areas of responsibility:

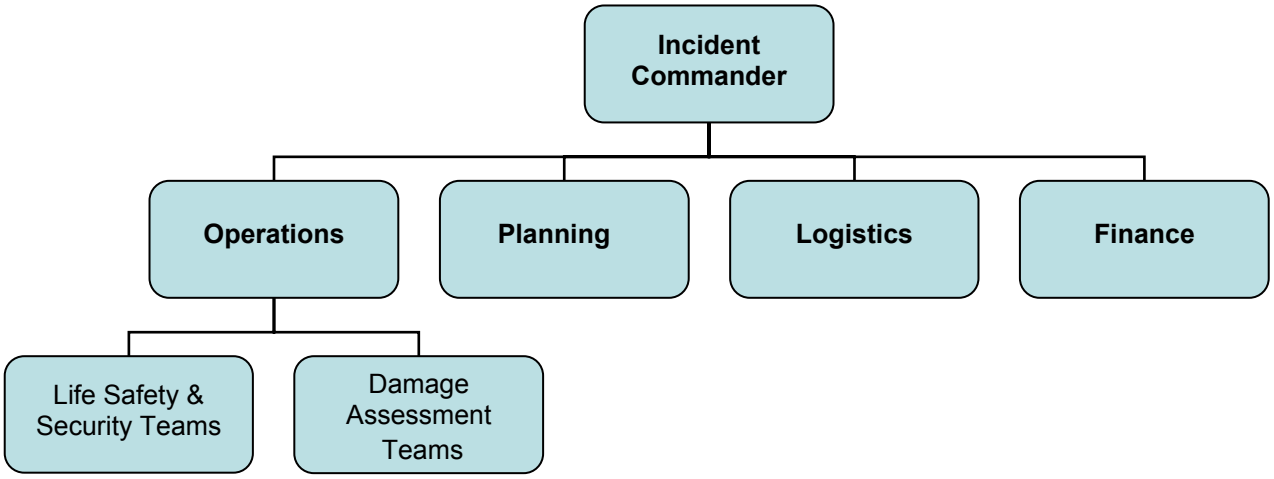
- Command - manage the overall response to the disaster.
- Operations - reduce the immediate hazard, establish situation control, and restore everything to normal operations.
- Planning - collect, evaluate, and disseminate information about the event.
- Logistics - provide all support needs to the event.
- Finance/Administration - track all expenses and provide funds where needed.

For purposes of this discussion, the reader should be familiar with the ICS model for the public sector. Additional information about it is contained in the National Incident Management System document dated March 1, 2004. A copy of the document can be downloaded at http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/display?theme=51&content=3423. This paper will focus on how these generalized roles can be applied to business recovery as well as emergency response in the private sector or in non-response public agencies.

Emergency Response Model

Regional events such as earthquakes and hurricanes have often taught us that first responders in the public sector may not always be immediately available. In regions prone to such events, local responders have prepared their citizens for years by stressing that everyone must be equipped to survive the first 72 hours on their own. Over time, this has become a requirement regardless of geography. Citizens must be prepared at home, and businesses and schools must be prepared to respond independently as well. When disaster strikes a business, evacuation may be necessary, and if public responders are not available, management needs to be prepared to activate their own response teams to perform life-safety and damage assessment functions. Below is a basic diagram illustrating how roles and responsibilities should be organized for a business during the emergency response phase. The Site Incident Commander drives the response effort with the support of others who may be located elsewhere. This enables the Site Incident Commander is to be the point of contact for the public sector's Incident Commander, if the public sector is able to respond when needed.

Emergency Response ICS Structure at Affected Site:



This diagram can be expanded or reduced, depending on the complexity of the response need. For example, some organizations may find it necessary to separate the Life Safety and Damage Assessment stages, with appropriate personnel identified for each component during each stage. Smaller locations may only need the Incident Commander and Operations components. As the public sector has proven, having the flexibility to expand the ICS components based on the actual event allows Incident Commanders to have available the resources they need to address the situation appropriately. Here is a list of the typical functions each component performs.

Incident Commander:

- Coordinates all emergency response elements at the site.
- Designated interface to local authorities.

Operations Leader:

- Coordinates activity of all operations team personnel.
- Provides information regarding progress of life-safety and damage assessment response to the Incident Commander.
- Coordinates damage assessment.
- Coordinates facility clean-up and repairs.
- Provides liaison with public inspectors.

Reporting to the Operations Leader are:

Life-Safety Team:

- Direct building evacuation.
- Account for all missing.
- Perform search and rescue.
- Administer first aid.
- Security Team:
- Secure building.
- Escort personnel to evacuation area
- Direct traffic.

Damage Assessment Team:

- Assess non-structural building damage.
- Assess telecommunications & systems damage.

Planning Team:

- Track disposition of injured.
- Notify families of injured if local authorities cannot respond.
- Maintain situation status.
- Perform advance planning for large-scale events, scheduling relief personnel.
- Arrange for critical incident stress management.

Logistics Team:

- Set up command post.
- Set up first aid station.
- Provide emergency supplies.
- Coordinate transportation needs.
- Provide emergency communications.

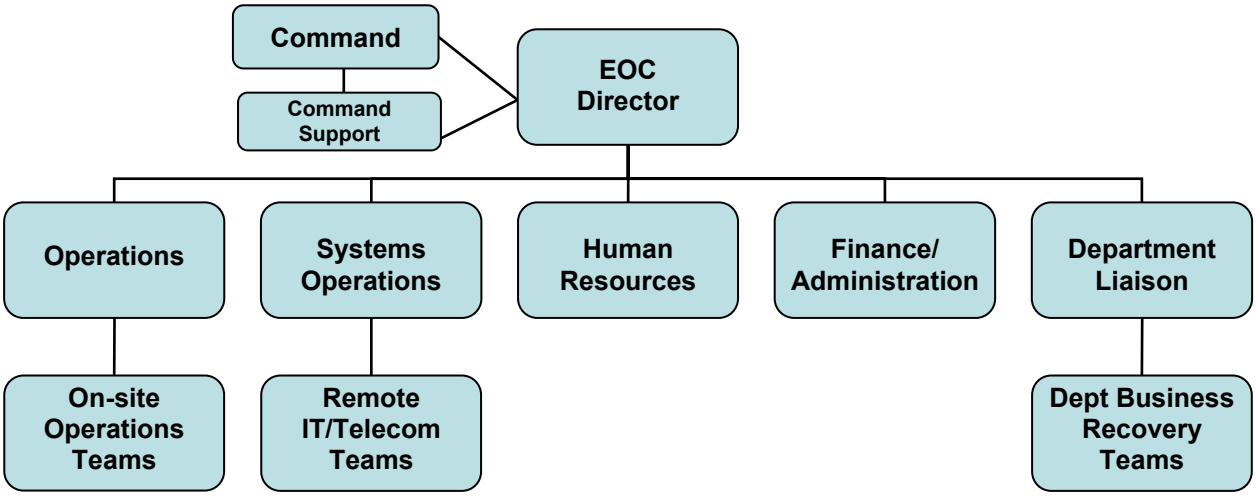
Finance Team:

- Provide emergency cash & funds for immediate purchases.
- Document emergency expenditures.

The teams continue to respond at the affected location until their responsibilities are completed. Team members for each position should be designated in advance, as well as appropriate alternatives. A key person must not be assigned to more than one position because each position has a distinct responsibility that may need to be performed for an extended period of time. Therefore members of the Life Safety Team, for example, should not be assigned to the Damage Assessment Team because both teams may need to function concurrently.

Activating an Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

In the face of a catastrophic event, most organizations cannot function efficiently using their normal business structure. If the incident is large enough to disrupt normal business routines for a large portion of the organization over an extended period of time, executive management must be ready to activate an EOC structure to provide conditions that allow strategic decisions to be made quickly, and to provide coordination and control of the recovery phase. It is time to consider activating the EOC as soon as the Incident Commander at the affected site knows the extent of injuries and damage to the building. If the initial damage assessment indicates severe damage, the EOC will be needed to coordinate teams to rebuild damaged buildings, systems, and telecommunications equipment. At the same time the EOC must coordinate business recovery teams from key business units who will be dispatched to a pre-arranged alternate location to continue critical business processes. This is where the ICS model becomes critical for business survival. Here is the basic business recovery model for the EOC:



During business recovery, ICS roles converge to manage three areas of expected priority—handling personnel issues, repairing the damaged infrastructure, and sustaining critical business functions. Below is a high-level description of the roles represented in the above diagram.

Command – responsible for the overall management of the response and recovery of the business. The focus of command is on strategic decisions that must be made to minimize the impact on the organization. The CEO typically fills this position.

Command Support – composed of the executive management team that provides advice and counsel to Command and the EOC Director throughout the response and recovery phases. These positions are typically the top management executives. An important addition to this team is the media relations designee, who responds to all external requests for information.

EOC Director – represents Command at the EOC, managing the operational elements of recovery. This position is typically filled by a member of the Command Support team, or a mid-level manager who has been delegated the authority to make operational decisions for the recovery of the business.

Operations – remotely supports the clean-up and recovery of the affected sites, interfacing with the site Incident Commander to provide additional resources as needed. Units within the operations team assume support to the logistics and planning/intelligence roles that were separate during the initial emergency response. These representatives at the EOC provide assistance to the site personnel by contacting contractors, vendors, and other additional resources as restoration of the damaged locations progresses.

Systems Operations – coordinates information about the progress of systems and telecommunications recovery activities. The EOC representative becomes the central repository of updated information about which components are functioning, providing time estimates for restoration of critical systems and communications. This position is also a vital link to the affected business units, coordinating the dispatch of additional personnel to those business teams that require immediate attention to continue the performance of critical business functions.

Human Resources – supports the Life-Safety teams at the affected site, performing additional contact functions to link injured employees with their families, as well as providing updated information to employees and their families. They keep the unions informed of the situation, and work closely with the media relations designee to ensure that consistent information is distributed both internally and externally. This team handles all personnel issues that arise, establishing emergency personnel policies where needed, if they have not been pre-determined. They are also responsible for managing requests for additional staff assistance, and redeploying available personnel from departments that are able to suspend their normal functions.

Finance/Administration – tracks all expenses related to the event, establishing appropriate tracking codes, manual forms, or other necessary documentation to ensure all expenses are captured. They work with the insurance representative and Operations team to document the damages and fill in the appropriate information for insurance reimbursement. Finance also typically arranges for emergency vendor and supplier contracts, if needed, and provides the various response teams with the ability to make immediate purchases. They provide the Command team with damage estimates and any other financial information needed by the executive team to assist their decision-making process in evaluating alternative long-term recovery options.

Department Liaison – If the business is large enough, it may be necessary to establish an EOC position that becomes the point of contact for all other business units. The Liaison is responsible for receiving requests from the departments that need additional assistance, and coordinating their priority, based on the overall company situation. The liaison then works with the other EOC members to ensure that those departments performing critical business recovery functions have the support they need to perform those functions in a timely manner.

Recovery Stages

The objective of activating a temporary EOC structure during response and recovery is to suspend the normal business and decision-making processes to focus the organization on continuing only the vital functions needed for business survival. Depending on the extent of damage, businesses may be operating in a recovery mode for months

or even a year or more. For planning purposes, business continuity plans should be created to protect critical functions for 21 days. This provides each business unit with a focus, eliminating the "normal" functions that can be suspended temporarily with minimal financial harm, and emphasizing the functions that must continue to protect bottom-line revenue, or the other core risk elements.

The EOC team will be responsible for handling the various transition stages as damaged buildings are repaired. Preparing employees to report back to the affected locations entails the need for close coordination between all EOC teams. Consequently, the EOC may remain active throughout the entire 21-day period or longer, depending on the actual event. If the extent of damages is greater than what can be repaired in that interval, a long-term recovery team will need to be appointed to handle all of the logistics. This frees up EOC members to resume their normal functions once all employees are returned to work, even if they are located in temporary housing for an extended period of time.

Summary:

When disaster strikes, three factors determine survivability:

1. The extent of planning that is in place, tested, and ready to go.
2. The ability of the organization to make timely informed strategic decisions.
3. The level of knowledge that all employees have about what the plans are.

These factors must combine to respond to the needs of employees and protect the critical functions of the business while accelerating repair of the infrastructure. By adapting the ICS model to manage all phases of the effort, businesses and non-response public agencies can substantially improve their readiness to withstand a major event. In the process, they can more effectively coordinate their efforts with first responders in the public sector.

About the author:

Judy Bell is the co-founder and CEO of Disaster Survival Planning Network (DSPN). She is a Certified Emergency Manager (CEM) through the International Association of Emergency Managers, and a member of the American Society of Professional Emergency Planners (ASPEP). As a Division Manager for Pacific Bell, Ms. Bell directed the activities of some 2400 employees and was responsible for all central offices and data services within area codes 213 and 310 (Los Angeles), as well as all long distance services within Southern California. During the Whittier Earthquake of 1987, Ms. Bell, as EOC Chair, coordinated the overall restoration of the Pacific Bell public telephone network. She has participated with industry associations at national and international levels, and, in 1991, authored the first book on business continuity for the private sector, Disaster Survival Planning: A Practical Guide for Businesses.