COMMAND FUNCTION #5 – COMMUNICATIONS

Effective:	November 6, 2026
Scheduled Review:	November 6, 2029
Approved:	Fire Chief Mike Kennedy

I. COMMAND FUNCTION #5 - COMMUNICATIONS

The primary goal is to use the communications system to identify and control the strategy and develop, share, and manage a single incident action plan (IAP).

Brunacini, Alan V., and Nick Brunacini. *Fire Command*. 3rd ed., Across the Street Productions, 2026 is the foundational resource document for this SOP.

II. FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

Face to face communication is the most effective form of communication. It should be the preferred form of communication on the task and tactical levels of the incident site. Face to face communications should be used whenever possible in the following circumstances:

- Company officers communicating with their crew members.
- Company officers communicating with other company officers in their work area.
- Tactical level bosses communicating with units assigned to their geographic location.

All members working on the fireground will avoid distracting the IC with face to face communications. Command must be the person to initiate this form of communication, and it should only be performed when the incident hazards have been controlled.

No good news reporting; eliminating good-news reporting reduces radio traffic significantly.

III. UPGRADE THE MOBILE IC COMMAND POSITION

Most of the time, the operation will start out with the first arriving company officer. Initial arriving, mobile IC (IC #1) have a narrow window of being able to produce clear and concise radio communications before putting themselves in the worst communications position possible, in full PPE operating in a hazard zone.

Therefore, it is very important to use the very begging of the event to transmit a complete Initial Radio Report (IRR) and Follow-Up Report before entering the hazard zone, when IC #1 is in their best communication position. These two reports tell other responding units exactly what's going on at the incident, what the first arriver is doing about it, and where they will be located on the incident site.

IV. LISTEN CRITICALLY

We put an IC in a strategic command post (outside the hazard zone, inside a vehicle designed to be a command post) so they have an ideal position to send and receive

information. Companies operating in the hazard zone are in the worst positions for effective communications.

Many hazard-zone distractions can cause communications problems. The IC needs to understand this when communicating with operating companies. Companies also must understand that their portable radios provide the only communications link to the outside world. The command system depends upon coherent communications between the IC and the operating units.

All hazard zone transmissions shall be carried out on one (1) tactical radio frequency.

Some incidents may require the use of multiple radio frequencies in order to support operations outside of the hazard zone, e.g., Level 1 & 2 staging.
Each additional channel activated for the incident must have a dedicated person assigned to manage that channel at all times. The IC must only be responsible for the operation of one (1) tactical radio frequency while an active hazard zone exists.

V. USE THE ORGANIZATION CHART AS A COMMUNICATIONS FLOW PLAN

Dividing the incident scene into S/Ds has a positive and profound effect on the communications process. When the IC assigns S/D officer responsibilities to the officers initially assigned to the different key tactical positions, it starts to manage their span of control and enhances the entire communications process.

In cases where the IC has not implemented/assigned S/D officers, they will have to communicate directly with each individual unit assigned to the incident scene.

S/D officers will communicate with their assigned companies over the radio or face-to-face depending on their proximity to one another. Preferably, face to face. The S/D officer will communicate with the IC over the tactical channel.

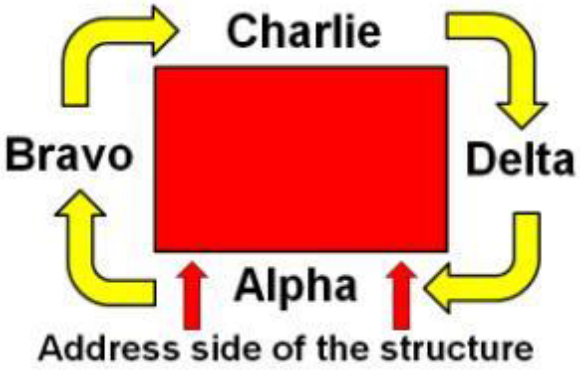
VI. UTILIZE THE STANDARD ORDER MODEL

The order model outlines the communications steps we follow to ensure messages are always received and understood despite the rushed, confusing and dangerous conditions we typically face during operations. The order model also standardizes how the incident's participants will exchange two-way radio communications. The order model's required steps are:

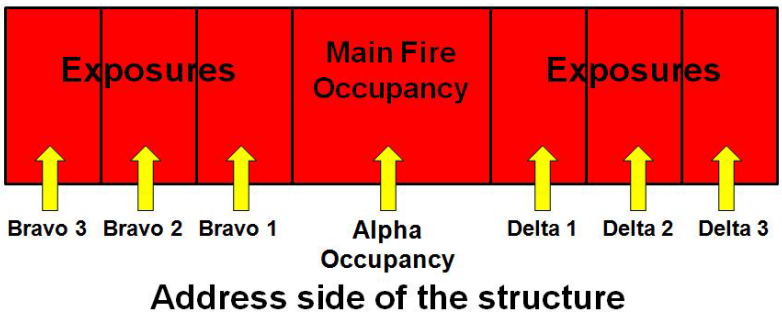
- When the sender is ready to transmit a message, they call the receiver to determine if they are ready to receive the message;
- The receiver then acknowledges the sender;
- When the sender receives the readiness reply, they can transmit the message;
- The receiver then gives a brief restatement of the message to acknowledge the receipt of the message; and
- The sender restates the message if misunderstood.

VII. GEOGRAPHIC LANDMARKS

Sides of a building will be described as:



The Alpha side of the structure is "usually" the address, street side. There will be many situations where it is not clear where the Alpha side is. In situations where there is any confusion on the incidents landmarks, initial arriving IC's must make it clear where the Alpha side is located.



Exposures: We identify exposed structures to the main fire occupancy by the side they are on starting with the closest, moving to the next exposure and so on. When the IC can give the exposure number and the occupancy type/apartment number it greatly enhances our directional sense of awareness.

Floors: Are identified by stories above and below ground level. Using divisions, the individual floor will take on the same floor number as the division (floor 2 becomes “Division 2”).

Floor 4 – Division 4
Floor 3 – Division 3
Floor 2 – Division 2
Floor 1 – Division 1
Sub-Floor 1 – Sub-Division 1
Sub-Floor 2 – Sub-Division 2

VIII. INITIAL RADIO REPORT

The initial IC begins the command, control and communication process with an IRR. This report provides dispatch, as well as everyone else responding to the scene, with a size-up of conditions seen from the initial command position. It also provides an initial situation status report to those listening in, such as non-responding companies, bosses still in quarters, and staff officers.

The IRR must include the following reporting elements:

1. Clearing the alarm and announcing your arrival on the scene
2. Description of building/area
3. Description of the problem
4. Action being taken: initial I.A.P.
5. Strategy
6. Resource Determination
7. Assuming and Naming of Command

IX. FOLLOW-UP REPORT

After the IC transmits the IRR, the IC completes the initial size-up by performing a 360. Once the 360 is complete, the IC must transit a follow-up report that:

1. Verifies the fire's size, location, and extent (if different from the IRR)
2. Verifies basement type (if present) and number of stories from the Charlie side
3. Confirms the initial strategy
4. Announces any changes to the initial IAP (if necessary)

Performing a 360 gives the initial IC a view of all sides of the fire to report on. Most of the time, the initial strategy stated on the IRR will not change. But there are times when the 360 size up will require a change in the initial strategy and/or the IAP stated on the IRR. These changes must be announced over the tactical channel in the Follow-Up report. If there no changes to the IAP stated on the IRR, the initial IC does not need state this on the initial follow-up report. The entire response team will assume the initial IAP has NOT changed from what was stated on the IRR.

Any immediate safety concerns: This includes:

- Potential collapse area
- Hazardous roof structure
- Power lines down or arching
- Gas meter/tank exposed to fire
- Swimming pools

X. ASSIGNING UNITS

Incident operations are conducted around the completion of the tactical priorities. Incident communications should mirror this simple concept. This will help keep communications short, to the point and effective. It also maximizes the available free airtime. The IC must structure unit assignments around:

- Addressing the incident's critical factors
- The completion of the tactical priorities
- Tactical reserve (on-deck)

When subsequent arriving units arrive to Level 1 staging locations, they will simply announce that they are Level 1 staged; "Engine 1-4, Level 1 staged." Command will then contact Level 1 staged units and assign them to the incident site based on their IAP.

Orders to Level 1 staged units should be structured in a TLO format:

- Tasks
- Location of the tasks
- Objectives of the tasks

Location of those tasks should include:

- What floor to operating on
- What occupancy/exposure to operate in
- What side to make entry on
- What side to operating on (defensive)

When assigning a unit to deploy a handline, the IC MUST designate the following:
What the company needs to do with their apparatus:

- Lay a supply line
- Pump a supply line
- Spot your apparatus out of the way (manpower only)

Where the company will get their handline from:

- Their own company
- Another forward pumper designated by the IC

XI. CAN REPORTING

CAN reporting gives firefighters a regular, consistent way to report back to the IC on their progress and needs. CAN reporting keeps things simple and it delivers the IC the information needed to keep the strategy and IAP current. The CAN acronym stands for:

- Conditions
- Actions
- Needs

All CAN reports should start with the tactical objectives that have been completed prior to giving the report. Here is a basic list of reporting items to choose from when providing a CAN report to command:

XII. STATUS CHANGES

A status change is defined as: moving from an assigned work location to a different geographic work location or exiting the structure to recycle or rehab.

Status changes should be given as soon as possible, but the sender must use the Order Model to structure the report. When clearing the IC with a status change, the sender should start the communication with a "status change," e.g., "Command from Ladder 1-5 with a status change."

If a unit has completed their entire work assignment, they should contact Command with a status change and request another assignment, e.g., "Command from Engine 1-4 with a status change," " Engine 1-4 has a primary all-clear, there is no fire extension to the second floor or the attic space, we are at 75% air, and our NEED is to be reassigned."

XIII. ROOF REPORTS

Ladder companies have the apparatus and equipment (ground ladders/power tools) to access and operate on the roofs of most mid-level structures. These units can provide very valuable tactical information to the IC and the rest of the troops about what is going on above interior operating units.

A company assigned to the roof will make the following assessment (size-up) of the roof:

- Type of roof if not easily identified from the ground, e.g., peaked, flat, bowstrung.
- Stability of the roof
- Fire or smoke conditions and their location on the roof
- Location of any firewalls
- Unusual heavy roof loads
- Attic conditions
- Basic blueprint of the building if unusual

XIV. PRIORITY TRAFFIC REPORTS

Once a unit is assigned into the hazard zone, they should maintain radio silence, and wait to be contacted by the IC. The following are examples of the ONLY instances where a unit can break radio silence. These transmissions should be structured as Priority Traffic reports, e.g., "Command from Delta – Priority Traffic." and they MUST be transmitted as soon as the information is obtained:

- Unable to complete a critical assigned task/tactical objective
- Urgent need to be reinforced/backed-up to complete an assigned task/tactical objective
- Victims encountered

- Working concealed space fires not easily controlled by the locating unit
- A roof report that includes: attic fire, unsafe roof structure, eminent collapse threat
- Sudden, significant incident events (flashover, back draft, collapse)

All Priority traffic reports are to be directed to and acknowledged by the IC. Having Central Fire Dispatch acknowledge priority traffic reports will greatly slow down the IC's ability to quickly readjust their IAP and/or Strategy based on these reports.

Unit/members with priority traffic are allowed to break into the order model of routine radio traffic to deliver their priority traffic report. Once the IC has acknowledged the priority traffic report, they should conclude their radio transmission with the unit whose traffic was broken into.

All communications that detail the routine work we perform in our assigned areas should be done face to face in the work area and must not be transmitted over the tactical channel. Wait for the IC to contact you if you do not have bad news (the above list).

XV. EMERGENCY TRAFFIC

The IC utilizes emergency traffic to make significant changes to the IAP such as:

- Switching strategies
- Declaring a fighter MAYDAY
- Alerting all incident responders to an unsafe condition (electrical lines down, imminent structural collapse, fire involving pressurized flammable gas).

Example

- IC, "Main St. Command to the dispatch, emergency traffic"
- Dispatch sounds the emergency traffic tones
- Dispatch, "Go ahead with your emergency traffic Command"
- IC, "Main St. Command to all units, we are going defensive on this structure. All units operating in the fire structure, exit the structure and report PAR's upon exiting."
- Dispatch sounds the emergency traffic tones
- Dispatch, "Dispatch to all units command is reporting this is a defensive fire on the main occupancy. All units operating exit the structure and report PAR's upon exiting."

Once the situation that caused the emergency traffic has been mitigated, e.g., PAR's obtained, power shut off, the IC should contact Central Fire Dispatch and clear the emergency traffic with a brief report stating why. Example; "Central Dispatch from Command", "Alarm go Command", "Command to all units 456 Main St. all units have exited the structure with PAR's. Command is clearing Emergency Traffic and will remain in the defensive strategy. All Units return to routine radio traffic".

XVI. OFFENSIVE TO DEFENSIVE STRATEGIC SHIFT

When the offensive strategy is chosen on our initial arrival, most of the time, a well-placed initial attack solves the incident's problem. But there are many times, that our initial, and sometimes re-enforced attack efforts, do not solve the incidents problems and conditions continue to deteriorate to the point where the critical factors indicate switching from an offensive to a defensive strategy.

IC's must be very pessimistic in these types of situations, especially if the structure has a primary "All Clear." Command must change strategies before the building is disassembling itself due to structural damage. When this happens, Command is very late in the strategy shift and on the receiving end of the building's decision governing the new strategy. The IC must be the single person to make the defensive decision, NOT the building coming apart.

"Exit the Structure" will be defined as: an orderly withdrawal where interior lines and equipment will be withdrawn and repositioned/shut down when changing to a defensive strategy.

"Abandoned the Structure" will be defined as: an emergency retreat where all hoselines and heavy equipment will be left in place and all members in the hazard zone will exit the structure as quickly and as safely as possible.

A PAR (Personnel Accountability Report) shall be obtained for all units exiting the hazard zone after any switch from an offensive to a defensive strategy. Command's greatest priority once a strategic shift has been initiated is the safe exit of all units located in the hazard zone. Level 1 Staged units and other units working outside the hazard zone shall maintain radio silence until all PAR's have been tallied (unless they have priority traffic).