

Use an organizational game plan to improve service

by Robert Laford

How well a fire department spells out its goals determines how well its members deliver the service to the community they protect. A department with no organizational game plan has no overall sense of direction and, therefore, is not likely to succeed in promoting needed programs and policies.

Incident command and emergency management

One such game plan is based on the incident command and emergency management principles the fire service has drilled into the heads of most firefighters to deal with a crisis: locate, surround, confine, and extinguish.

Incident command has taught firefighters that every scene requires a commander-in-chief to create and implement an action plan. Each member of the emergency response team then carries out the tasks necessary to support the commander's plan.

Ideally, incident command involves a series of steps that efficiently and effectively resolve a crisis. They are:

1. establishing incident priorities,
2. sizing up the situation,
3. developing a strategy,
4. executing tactical objectives, and
5. evaluating the operation.

Incident priorities

In emergency situations, the fire service's priority is always "life be-

fore property." In protecting life and property, some departments may limit their operations to fire suppression, while others also include prevention. The department's mission statement should spell out its commitment to the community and be available in writing. It should go beyond a description of the tactical and physical tasks performed by the department to include those policies that guide its actions.

Size-up

Sizing up an emergency situation involves getting answers to such questions as: What happened? What may happen? What resources do I need? The same step in the department's or-

ganizational command sequence asks similar questions: What have we provided the community in the past? Have we met the community's needs? What direction might the department take in the future? What resources (equipment, personnel, training) will we need in the future?

Today, the fire service meets consumer demands in the same way private industry does: by offering a wider range of services. One example is the delivery of emergency medical service (EMS) by fire departments, a service that a decade ago was the exception, not the rule.

Strategies

In an emergency, the incident commander takes into account many factors to make decisions in regard to emergency operations. In deciding how to use resources, he or she must consider such factors as building occupancy and construction, respond-

ing units, and weather conditions.

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Similarly, strategic planners must guide the department in choosing how best to use its resources to meet the needs of the community. Upper echelon administrators formulate the department's mission statement, and middle managers develop specific strategies for the department's divisions, districts, and battalions.

Tactical objectives

A fire department's foot soldiers, its company officers and members, implement the organization's goals. For example, middle management may decide to increase the presence of firefighters in the community's schools, but it is the company officer who must decide how to carry out the program.

Evaluation

Evaluation is a tool a fire department must use regularly to determine if it is meeting its goals. If the answer is yes, the department should continue its policies, programs, and actions. But if the answer is no, then it must make policy, program, and procedural changes. Each level of the department must participate in its evaluations.

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