
The principles clarify reporting relationships and eliminate the confusion caused by multiple, conflicting directives. Incident managers at all levels must be able to control the actions of all personnel under their supervision. These principles do not apply to the exchange of information. Although orders must flow through the chain of command, members of the organization may directly communicate with each other to ask for or share information.

The command function may be carried out in two ways:

- As a Single Command in which the Incident Commander will have complete responsibility for incident management. A Single Command may be simple, involving an Incident Commander and single resources, or it may be a complex organizational structure with an Incident Management Team.
- As a Unified Command in which responding agencies and/or jurisdictions with responsibility for the incident share incident management.

A Unified Command may be needed for incidents involving:

- Multiple jurisdictions
- A single jurisdiction with multiple agencies sharing responsibility
- Multiple jurisdictions with multi-agency involvement

During a large-scale crisis or disaster situation, a representative of the facility would likely be involved in a Unified Command structure.

The Chain of Command follows an established organizational structure that adds layers of command as needed. The basic outline of command layers follows:

- Command
- Sections
- Branches
- Divisions/Groups
- Units
- Resources

A role of responsibility can be transferred during an incident for several reasons: As the incident grows, a more qualified person is required to take over as Incident Commander to handle the ever-growing needs of the incident, or in reverse when an incident reduces in size, command can be passed down to a less qualified person (but still qualified to run the now-smaller incident) to free up highly qualified resources for other tasks or incidents. Other reasons to transfer command include jurisdictional change if the incident moves locations or area of responsibility, or normal turnover of personnel due to extended incidents. The transfer of command process always includes a transfer of command briefing, which may be oral, written, or a combination of both.

Flexibility: The ICS is an extremely flexible organizational system that ideally reflects only what is required to fill the planned incident objectives. The efficient use of all resources on an incident is a high priority, reducing incident clutter and costs. A single person may be in charge of more than one unit if the span of control for that single person has not yet been exceeded, but in all cases an element of the incident must have a person in charge of that element. Elements of the system that have been expanded but are no longer needed are contracted and the resources released from the incident.

ICS Key Management Concepts: Many agencies and organizations modify ICS to fit their needs, yet it is absolutely critical to realize that without the application of the ICS management concepts, ICS becomes ineffective. While the picture of the response organizational tree may look like the ICS, without applying the management concept and principles, the organizational charts and models will resemble the original ICS model in title alone. Furthermore, problems and conflicts experienced