

# ICS 300 – Lesson 4: Unified Command

## Lesson Overview

The **Unified Command** lesson will describe the purposes and advantages of multi-jurisdiction and/or multi-agency Unified Command, and how Unified Command can be applied to incident situations. It will describe the Unified Command organization, how Unified Command is established, and the roles of its major elements. This lesson will also discuss a number of factors to be considered when implementing Unified Command.

This lesson should take approximately **25 minutes** to complete. **Remember, you must complete the entire lesson to receive credit.**

## Lesson 4 Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Define the advantages of Unified Command.
- Define the kinds of situations that may call for a Unified Command organization.
- Identify the primary features of a Unified Command organization.

## Background on Unified Command

Early in the development of ICS, it was recognized that many incidents crossed jurisdictional boundaries or the limits of individual agency functional responsibility.

The standard ICS organizational framework with a single Incident Commander from one jurisdiction or agency did not lend itself to creating an effective organization for multi-jurisdictional incidents, or for incidents involving several agencies from the same political jurisdiction. In fact, the use of a single Incident Commander would, in some cases, not be legally possible or politically advisable.

On the other hand, it was also recognized that every incident must have one person with the responsibility and authority to direct tactical actions; otherwise, chaos would easily prevail on multi-jurisdictional or multi-agency incidents.

Two solutions were considered:

The first solution that was considered involved dividing the incident either geographically or functionally so that each jurisdiction or agency could establish its own ICS organization in a well-defined geographical or functional area of responsibility. This was the simplest political solution, but there were obvious cost and effectiveness reasons why this solution was unacceptable.

The second solution that was considered involved creating a single ICS incident structure with a built-in process for an effective and responsible multi-jurisdictional or multi-agency approach. This was the challenge to the early ICS designers, and the solution was an incident management process called Unified Command. Since its conception, Unified Command has been used many times, and has become a major feature of the Incident Command System.

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## Description of Unified Command

Unified Command is a team effort process, allowing all agencies with geographical or functional responsibility for an incident, to assign an Incident Commander to a Unified Command organization.



The Unified Command then establishes a common set of incident objectives and strategies that all can subscribe to. This is accomplished without losing or giving up agency authority, responsibility or accountability.

Unified Command represents an important element in increasing the effectiveness of multi-jurisdictional or multi-agency incidents. As incidents become more complex and involve more agencies, the need for Unified Command is increased.

## Elements to Consider in Applying Unified Command

There are four basic elements to consider in applying Unified Command in ICS:

1. **Policy, Objectives, and Strategy:** Jurisdictional and agency administrators set policy. The Unified Command sets objectives and strategy.
2. **Organization:** The Unified Command organization consists of the various jurisdictional or agency on-scene representatives (qualified agency Incident Commanders) operating within the Unified Command structure.
3. **Resources:** Resources, supplied by the jurisdictions and agencies that have functional or jurisdictional responsibility or with whom responsible agencies have agreements, stay under the administrative and policy control of their agencies. However, operationally they respond to mission assignments under the coordination and direction of the Operations Section Chief based on the requirements of the Incident Action Plan.
4. **Operations:** After the objectives, strategies, and interagency agreements are decided, the Operations Section Chief is designated to develop tactical action plans and to direct tactical operations.

## Advantages of Using Unified Command

Below are the principal advantages of using Unified Command:

- One set of objectives is developed for the entire incident.
- A collective approach is made to developing strategies to achieve incident objectives.
- Information flow and coordination is improved among all jurisdictions and agencies involved in the incident.
- All agencies with responsibility for the incident have an understanding of one another's priorities and restrictions.
- No agency's authority or legal requirements are compromised or neglected.
- Each agency is fully aware of the plans, actions, and constraints of all others on the incident.
- The combined efforts of all agencies are optimized as they perform their respective assignments under a single Incident Action Plan.
- Duplicative efforts are reduced or eliminated, thus reducing cost and chances for frustration and conflict.

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### **Unified Command Applications**

Unified Command is a practical and cost effective solution to multi-jurisdictional or multi-agency incidents. Let's look at some examples of how Unified Command might be applied to different kinds of incidents.

The first kind of application would involve an incident that impacted more than one jurisdiction. An example of this kind of incident would be an outbreak of livestock disease involving two or more jurisdictions, such as two counties.

The second kind of application would involve an incident that impacted multiple agencies, or departments, within the same jurisdiction. An example of this kind of incident would be a release of hazardous materials. The fire department has responsibility for fire control, containment of hazardous materials, and rescue; the police department has responsibility for evacuation and area security; and public works has the responsibility for site clean up.

The third kind of application would involve an incident that impacted several jurisdictions and functional agencies. An example of this kind of incident would be storms, earthquakes, and other major natural disasters. In these incidents, large numbers of local, State, and Federal agencies become immediately involved. These emergencies cross jurisdictional boundaries and involve multiple functional agencies. Roles, missions, and responsibilities are all intermixed.

Major commercial airplane crashes are another example of this kind of incident. Fire, law enforcement, emergency medical services, the coroner's office, the FAA, and others all have legal responsibility. All may be active at the same time and in the same place. It is the functional role and the legal obligation that brings about the multiple involvement.

The fourth kind of application would involve an incident that impacted different levels of government, for example local, State and Federal agricultural agencies. An example of this kind of incident would be a major pest infestation. In these incidents, local, State and Federal governments would work closely together to decide how to treat impacted areas. The impacted jurisdiction, the Governor, and the Secretary of Agriculture might declare a state of emergency and establish a Unified Command to manage the event.

By using Unified Command, participating jurisdictions and agencies can improve overall incident management and achieve goals in a timely and cost-effective manner.

### **Primary Features of a Unified Command Organization**

In ICS, organizations using Unified Command share key primary features. These include:

- A single, integrated incident organization.
- Collocated (shared) facilities.
- A single planning process and Incident Action Plan.
- Integrated staffing.
- A coordinated process for resource ordering.

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### Single Integrated Incident Organization

Under Unified Command, jurisdictions and/or agencies are blended together into an integrated, unified team. The resulting organization may be a mix of personnel from several jurisdictions or agencies, each performing functions as appropriate and working toward a common set of objectives.

The proper mix of participants in a Unified Command organization will depend upon the:

- **Location of the incident**, which often determines the jurisdictions that must be involved.
- **Kind of incident**, which dictates the functional agencies of the involved jurisdiction(s), as well as other agencies that may be involved.

In a multi-jurisdictional situation, a Unified Command structure could consist of one responsible official from each jurisdiction. In other cases, Unified Command may consist of several functional department managers or assigned representatives from within a single political jurisdiction. Because of common ICS organization and terminology, personnel from other jurisdictions or agencies can easily be integrated into a single organization.

### Collocated (Shared) Facilities

A single Command Post is essential to an effective Unified Command. Bringing the responsible Incident Commanders and Command and General Staff together in a single Incident Command Post can allow a coordinated effort for as long as the Unified Command structure is required.

One Base can serve the needs of multiple agencies. Similarly, resources from several agencies can be brought together in Staging Areas.

### Single Planning Process and Incident Action Plan

The planning process for Unified Command is similar to that used on a single jurisdiction or agency incident. One important distinction is the need for all assigned Incident Commanders to meet before the first Operational Period planning meeting in a command meeting. The command meeting provides the Incident Commanders with an opportunity to discuss and agree on important issues that will become the foundation of a single planning process.

The end result of the planning process will be an Incident Action Plan that addresses multi-jurisdiction or multi-agency priorities, and provides tactical operations and resource assignments for the unified effort.

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### Command Meeting Agenda

The agenda for the Command Meeting should include the following:

- State jurisdictional/agency priorities and objectives.
- Present jurisdictional limitations, concerns, and restrictions.
- Develop a collective set of incident objectives.
- Establish and agree on acceptable priorities.
- Adopt an overall strategy or strategies to accomplish objectives.
- Agree on the basic organizational structure.
- Designate the best-qualified and acceptable Operations Section Chief.
- Agree on General Staff personnel designations and planning, logistical and financial agreements and procedures.
- Agree on the resource ordering process to be followed.
- Agree on cost-sharing procedures.
- Agree on procedures for the release of information.
- Designate one agency official to act as the Unified Command spokesperson.

### Command Meeting Requirements

Command Meeting requirements include:

- Prior to the meeting, the Incident Commanders must have reviewed the purposes and agenda items, and are prepared to discuss them.
- The Command Meeting should include **only** agency Incident Commanders.

The meeting should be brief, and important decisions and agreements should be documented.

### Incident Action Planning Meetings

The results of the Command Meeting will be used in Incident Action Planning meetings to:

- Determine tactical operations for the next Operational Period.
- Establish resource requirements and determining resource availability and sources.
- Make resource assignments.
- Establish integrated Planning, Logistics, and Finance/Administration functions, as needed.

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### Integrated Staffing

The Unified Command incident organization can also benefit by integrating multi-jurisdictional and/or multi-agency personnel into various other functional areas.

- **Operations and Planning:** Deputy Section Chiefs can be designated from an adjacent jurisdiction or a functional agency, who may in future Operational Periods have primary responsibility for Operations and Planning functions.
- **Planning:** Placing other agencies' personnel in the Situation, Resources, and Demobilization Units can result in significant savings in personnel, and increased communication and information sharing.
- **Logistics:** A Deputy Section Chief from another agency or jurisdiction can help to coordinate incident support, as well as facilitate resource ordering activities. Placing other agencies' personnel into the Communications Unit helps in developing a single incident-wide Communications Plan.
- **Finance/Administration:** Although this Section often has detailed agency specific procedures to follow, cost savings may be realized through agreements on cost sharing for essential services. For example, one agency might provide food services, another fuel, another security, etc.
- **Command Staff:** An integrated Command Staff can result in more credible information dissemination, better interagency relations, and increased personnel safety.

### Coordinated Process for Resource Ordering

Decisions on incident resource ordering procedures are made during the Command Meeting, while the Planning Meeting determines resource requirements for all levels of the organization.

If the incident is operating under Unified Command, specific kinds and types of resources to be supplied by certain jurisdictions or agencies may be pre-designated as a part of the resource order. This will depend upon the prior commitments of the Incident Commanders in the Unified Command meeting. If this information is not known in advance, then it will be up to the individual agency ordering point receiving the resource order to fill the order based on closest available resources.

If clear resource ordering procedures are not established by the Unified Command, there is a very real possibility of lost or duplicated orders resulting in an ineffective logistical and financial organization. It is also critical that agreements relating to resources be clearly understood by off-incident agency representatives who will be filling the orders. These agreements may run counter to normal day-to-day resource management procedures, and failure to communicate incident-specific changes may result in delays in resource procurement and unnecessary costs.

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### **Guidelines for the Use of Unified Command**

There are six general guidelines for the use of Unified Command.

The first guideline is to Understand ICS Unified Command. It is essential to understand how ICS Unified Command functions. Knowledge of ICS principles and structure will enable managers to accept and easily adapt to a Unified Command mode of operation when it is required. Lack of knowledge about ICS can limit the willingness of some jurisdictions or agencies to participate in a Unified Command incident organization. It is impossible to implement Unified Command unless agencies have agreed to participate in the process.

The second guideline for the use of Unified Command is to collocate essential functions. Establishing a single Incident Command Post is essential to an effective Unified Command. Bringing the responsible officials, Command Staffs, and planning elements together in a single Incident Command Post can allow a coordinated effort for as long as the Unified Command structure is required. Establish other facilities, as needed, where all agencies can operate together. One Base can serve the needs of multiple agencies. Similarly, resources from several agencies can be brought together in Staging Areas.

The third guideline for the use of Unified Command is to implement Unified Command at an early stage of a multi-jurisdictional or multi-agency incident. It is essential to begin joint planning as early as possible. Unified Command should be initiated as soon as two or more agencies having jurisdictional or functional responsibilities come together on an incident. This is especially important on those incidents where the authority needed to successfully manage the incident is vested in separate agencies or jurisdictions.

The fourth guideline for the use of Unified Command is to concur on an Operations Section Chief and other Command and General Staff members. The Unified Command must agree on the Operations Section Chief, as he or she will have full authority to implement the Operations portion of the Incident Action Plan on behalf of all the agencies involved. The Operations Section Chief will normally be from the jurisdiction or agency that has the greatest involvement in the incident, although that is not essential. The Operations Section Chief should be fully qualified and be the most experienced person available

It is also necessary to agree on other Command and General Staff personnel who will be implementing their portions of the Incident Action Plan. In a Unified Command, it should be clear that the Public Information Officer speaks for all agencies involved in the incident, not just for the agency of which the Public Information Officer is an employee.

The fifth guideline is to designate one of the Incident Commanders to be a spokesperson. The Incident Commanders may see the need to identify one member to act as a spokesperson for the Unified Command. This designation can provide a channel of communications from the Command and General Staff members into the Unified Command. The spokesperson does not make Unified Command decisions, but does provide a single point of contact for the Command and General Staff during each operational period.

The sixth guideline is to train often as a team. It is important to conduct training exercises in the use of Unified Command with adjacent jurisdictions and functional agencies, whenever possible.

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### **Functioning in Unified Command**

Individually and collectively, the designated agency Incident Commanders functioning in a Unified Command have certain responsibilities at an incident. The members of the Unified Command:

- Must be clear on their jurisdictional or agency limitations and must know any legal, political, jurisdictional, or safety restrictions.
- Must be authorized to perform certain activities and actions on behalf of the jurisdiction or agency they represent.
- Have the responsibility to manage the incident.
- Must function together as a team and ensure that effective coordination takes place. In many ways, this is the most important function they perform in Unified Command.

### **Unified Command Member Responsibilities**

- Must be clear on their jurisdictional or agency limitations and must know any legal, political, jurisdictional, or safety restrictions.
- Must be authorized to perform certain activities and actions on behalf of the jurisdiction or agency they represent. These activities could include:
  - Ordering additional resources in support of the Incident Action Plan.
  - Loaning or sharing resources with other jurisdictions.
  - Agreeing to financial cost-sharing arrangements with participating agencies.
- Have the responsibility to manage the incident. This includes:
  - Working closely with the other Incident Commanders in the Unified Command.
  - Providing sufficient qualified staff and resources.
  - Anticipating and resolving problems.
  - Delegating authority as needed.
  - Monitoring and evaluating performance.
  - Communicating with their own agencies on agreements, priorities, plans, problems, and progress.
- Must function together as a team and ensure that effective coordination takes place. In many ways, this is the most important function they perform in Unified Command. There are two distinct levels of coordination:
  - Coordination with other members of the Unified Command Team. It is essential that all participants be kept mutually informed, involved, and consulted.
  - Coordination with higher authorities, agency administrators, etc. It is important to keep their respective authorities well informed and confident that the incident is being competently managed.



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### Lesson Summary

You have completed the **Unified Command** lesson. This lesson discussed the purposes and advantages of multi-jurisdiction and/or multi-agency Unified Command, and how Unified Command can be applied to incident situations. It described the Unified Command organization, how Unified Command is established, and the roles of its major elements. This lesson also discussed a number of factors to be considered when implementing Unified Command.

The next lesson will describe the differences and similarities in organizing and planning for incidents and planned events.