

# Maintaining Span of Control of Your Incident Command System (ICS) Incident Objectives

-The Three to Seven Fundamental Topics of ICS Incidents/Events Objectives-

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In ICS training courses, the National Incident Management System (NIMS) endorses the use of the S.M.A.R.T. mnemonic to summarize components of a well written incident objective. The mnemonic describes that objectives should be (S) Specific, (M) Measurable, (A) Action Oriented, (R) Realistic and (T) Time Sensitive.

Both ICS students and experienced emergency managers often struggle with the topic of establishing comprehensive incident objectives. Both often fall into the trap of crafting objectives that are actually more strategic or tactical in nature. While it is true that incident objectives need to be reviewed for each operational period and perhaps adjusted, there is no reason to discount the fact that carefully written objectives can be both “SMART” and encompass a wide range of strategic and tactical options. As such they may live for the entire duration of an incident.

Both students and experienced emergency managers often focus on “Operations” when they write objectives. When they do so, by deference, they ignore the other functions of ICS. While Operations is the focus of why we have responded to an incident, the objectives of the Incident Commander need to reflect a more comprehensive approach to the entire scope of what the IC and Incident Management Team (IMT) is managing.

Objectives should also adhere to ICS “span of control”; three to seven with five being the optimum. The following are recommended objectives topics that cover most of the common challenges to modern day emergency management.

In the Safety topic below examples of the parts of the SMART objectives mnemonic are spelled out. While not repeated in subsequent objectives topics, their use can be inferred from the ideas shown in the Safety objective.

This lends itself to these “Seven Fundamental Topics of Incident/Event Management”. You may not need all seven in your incident; maybe you do. If you have more than seven maybe you need to reevaluate what you have written and see if perhaps they are more strategic or tactical then encompassing multiple strategies and tactics. These seven topics include:

## **1-Safety**

*Ensure the safety of the public and incident personnel by:*

Specific-“following appropriate guidelines and standards”. For example if we direct our resources to continually follow proper agency guidelines and standards, we don’t need to direct them specifically in an objective to use proper personal protective equipment (PPE). Use of proper PPE, as directed typically by agency guidelines, is merely a ‘tactic’ of meeting an overall safety objective. If we specifically fail to use proper PPE we are violating both agency policy and the guidance of the objective. One good Safety objective can also address both responders and the public.

Measureable-“using a risk analysis process” is a good term

Action Oriented-“avoidance / evacuation / perimeter & access control” are all good terms regarding safety

Realistic-“direct or indirect actions” ... Can we go right after it with direct actions or at first need to fall back a bit in an indirect posture? This lends to creation of direct or indirect strategies under the umbrella of this objective.

Time Sensitive-“on an ongoing basis / through the duration of this incident / by date&time” are good terms

Example Safety objective:

“On an ongoing basis ensure the safety of incident personnel and the public by adhering to all appropriate (agency) safety guidelines and policies, by using the ICS risk analysis processes to select the safest appropriate actions prior to engagement, and by conducting and maintaining an orderly and controlled evacuation of the public that is coordinated with assisting agencies.”

## **2-Major Action**

Describe the major purpose of incident actions. This is the primary action oriented “why we are here” objective.

Example Major Action objective:

“Locate victims of the tornado, assess priorities for evacuation and rescue of victims and complete rescue of all high priority victims in a manner and timeframe that protects human life as the second priority beneath overall responder and public safety.”

## **3-Geographic Confines**

Describe the maximum area of management or engagement. Often this “geographic confines” objective can help define multiple major action strategies as well as defining the desired field of play of the incident. Using a “geographic confines” objective may preclude the need for multiple “major action” objectives:

Example Geographic Confine objective:

“Prevent the flood from moving west of the Murkey River into the town of Murkeyville and continue to provide community human need support and flood prevention mitigation actions in the eastern portions of Murkey County until public safety and infrastructure threats from flooding subside.”

#### **4-Information:**

In these days of instant media attention and social media it is prudent to establish a SMART incident objective that addresses the need to meet timely and comprehensive information goals.

Example Information objective:

“Continually provide accurate and current information regarding the Beta storm incident situation to evacuated residents, to the general public, and to interagency and non government stakeholders within Murkey County”

#### **5-Natural/Cultural Resource and/or Economic Impact Mitigations**

Almost all incidents seem to face special natural, cultural or economic resource issues. They may involve threatened, endangered or sensitive species, one-of-a-kind cultural resources, economic impacts to the affected community(s) or region(s), or merely just something special to an area such as “maintaining access to boat launches for local commercial rafting outfitters”. There may be more than one major issue in this area to address, and if so think about using a #7 Spare objective (below) to specifically address the second major issue of this topic.

Example Natural/Cultural/Economic objective:

“Prevent loss of historic town records and artifacts stored in Murkeyville town government buildings prior to them being damaged by flooding and take measures to protect these items until flood waters recede from levels that threaten damages”

#### **6-Cost Accountability/Containment**

In these modern times timely summaries of the overall costs of an incident response, the on-going need to document costs for future recovery (eg. FEMA), and the need for consideration of cost as part of incident planning (both in resource selection and continuance of operations) is something that needs to be addressed in objective guidance to all incident staff.

Example Cost objective:

“Activate existing cost sharing agreements previously established between the Murkey County interagency partners and maintain a system of cost documentation that enables reimbursement in accordance with these agreements at the conclusion of this incident.”

## **7-Spare**

This is the “catch all” spare of the “fundamental seven objectives topics”. This spare may be appropriate at any time during the incident. General topics for which this “spare” may be needed include the need to address:

- a second major mitigation action
- a special safety concern not covered in general safety objective
- an incident management phase objective such transfer of command / major demobilization / incident documentation / incident close out
- special stakeholder concern(s)

Example Spare objectives:

“Prepare for the upcoming transfer of command to the Type 3 IMT by safe demobilization of excess incident resources and by preparing the documentation package that will aid the transfer of command that will occur on March 31, 2011.”

“Minimize economic impacts to the region by re-opening major traffic corridors and enabling public re-entry into commercial zones no longer directly threatened by the flood when it is safe to do so.”

The Incident Commander is responsible for setting the incident objectives for each and every operational period. Ideally your Incident Objectives will number within the acceptable ICS span of control of three to seven. If you as an Incident Commander exceed seven objectives you may create as much impact to effective management of your incident as there would be if you permitted the Operations Section Chief to exceed their ICS limit of seven subordinates.

If you are tempted to exceed seven objectives, take a moment to review them and see if some of your existing objectives are truly strategic or tactical in nature. A well written objective can not only stand the test of time, often for the entire duration of an incident, and may embrace many strategic and tactical alternatives and actions.