

Proposed Makeover of Coast Guard Incident Command System (ICS) Training

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ICS: Overview and History

The Incident Command System (ICS) is a standardized system for dealing with hazards and incidents involving multiple agencies. Originally developed in the 1970s to deal with massive firefighting efforts in California and later refined for emergency management agencies and eventually adapted by the federal government. ICS provides a common framework (organizational structure) so that different agencies can work together effectively during an incident.

ICS is an organizationally flexible management tool to address the following challenges:

- Meet the needs of incidents of any kind (expands or contracts)
- Allow personnel from any agency to meld rapidly into a common management structure with common terminology
- Provide logistical and administrative support to operational staff.
- Be cost effective by avoiding duplication of efforts.

Prior to the development of ICS, problems with incident management included:

- Lack of accountability, including unclear chains of command and supervision.
- Poor communication
- Lack of an orderly, systematic planning process.
- No predefined methods to integrate other agencies effectively.

ICS and the U.S. Coast Guard

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) was one of the first federal agencies to adopt this structure to effectively respond to emergency situations like mass rescue operations and oil spills. Since the federal adoption of ICS, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the lead agency for ICS training. Currently there are several modules ranging from ICS 100 thru ICS 800.

USCG current ICS training

Currently, USCG ICS training falls into two categories:

- Instructor led (usually “death by PowerPoint”)

- Online modules to be completed by the individual member (also “death by PowerPoint”)

Engagement issues with current ICS training within CG

- Instructor led sessions often are not very engaging (death by PowerPoint)
- Little if any group activities for lower level modules
- Online modules are very text heavy without interaction
- No relevance for members at operational units (operational units do not stand up a position in the ICS structure, they are assets used in response to an incident. Members at these units are mandated to attend trainings but do not see the relevance).
- Training is not active or thought provoking
- No follow-up once training is complete (check the box type training)

CG Organizational Barriers to Change

- Any training changes require high level “buy in”
- Many key stakeholders from different federal/state/local agencies
- CG does not use many of the currently available distance learning technologies (adobe connect, virtual classrooms, etc).
- CG does not have complete “ownership” of training (most online modules are from FEMA)
- Lower level (ICS 100) course taught almost exclusively on-line

Proposed Makeover for ICS

Use the anchored blend approach. More and more organizations are moving into using the blended learning approach to conduct the training within their organizations. Blended learning has been defined as using a combination of e-learning and other forms of training such as classroom (facilitator led) and on the job training (Mackay & Stockport, 2006). Blended learning was born out of the idea that the “experience gained from the first-generation of e-learning, often riddled with long sequences of ‘page turner’ content and point and click quizzes, is giving rise to the realization that a single mode of instructional delivery may not provide sufficient choices, engagement, social contact, relevance, and context needed to facilitate successful learning and performance” (Singh, 2003).

Ideally training could be kicked off with footage from Hurricane Katrina, showing ICS in action. Utilizing tools such as PowerPoint to “spice” up slides, allow for flexibility with delivery. This method can easily introduce facts and concepts within ICS structure. Although there is an increase for lower level ICS modules to be exclusively computer based, they could include many of the same interactions.

How will it work “inside”?

The initial start needs to grab the learner and make it WOW, by showing videos of CG in action during real incident responses. The overall course needs to be relevant and active.

Examples to make it relevant:

- Guest Speakers- CG members involved in Katrina operations (aviators, cuttermen, marine safety officers)
- Share ICS stories and experiences with audience to make them see how ICS structure is important in the performance of their duties.
- Invite participants to share their experiences, making more relevant and realistic to others.

Examples to make it active:

- In class scenarios
- Play games to test knowledge
- Give learners a chance to interact to display the knowledge that they’ve gained.
- Create intranet online social networking site to share ideas, experiences, and post questions for discussion
- Utilize fact based teaching techniques to ensure retention of material.
(www.totalrecalllearning.com)

How will it work “outside”?

- Create CG intranet database with ICS flowcharts, job aids, and other resources.
- Create listserv where questions can be posed to “experts” in the ICS field
- E-Coaching from mobile devices (blackberries, iphone, etc) during actual incident drills
- Create rewards/recognition system for members who perform well during ICS type drills/scenarios
- Customize drills around ICS competency gaps (break drills down to have mini drills for units showing issues, instead of conducting large drills all the time)

- Ensure organizational follow up after the drills are done (there's a debrief after drills, but then what?)
- Engage all stakeholders in drill planning meetings (value their input, address their concerns)
- Encourage the use of ICS in non-emergency situations to practice and sharpen skills. Events like annual holiday parties and CG day picnic. These are large events that ICS can easily apply.

Will it make a difference?

The primary goal of this makeover is to make the training more engaging and relevant. With the suggested makeover items implemented the following may also occur:

- Establish buy-in (learner sees applicability)
- Increase confidence of learners
- Provide substantial foundation for future learning and practical use of ICS

CG members want to do the best they can, but get discouraged when they do not see the relevance in a topic or when they are not constantly engaged. Implementing the appropriate methods when instructing ICS, CG members will understand the relevance to this important mandated training. In addition, by making the training more active, members will retain more of the information long after the "class" is over and be more confident in utilizing the tools it offers. Engagement is the key to ICS training success!

References:

Mackay, S. & Stockport, G. J. (2006). Blended learning, classroom and e-learning. *The Business Review*, (5)1, 82-88. Retrieved October 8, 2008, from ABI/INFORM Global database.

Singh, H. (2003). Building effective blended learning programs. *Educational Technology*, 43(6), 51-56. Retrieved, October 7, 2008 from ABI/INFORM Global database.