

# Development of Operational Command Skills

## Northern Ireland FRS: delivering innovative incident command training and assessment



The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, one of the largest in the UK, operates in one of the most challenging environments of any UK service. Since 2006 the service has developed and implemented an innovative incident command training, command competence assessment and individual personal development programme through which hundreds of its staff at all levels have raised their incident command skills (and promotional aspirations).

Northern Ireland is one of the biggest geographical areas for a UK fire service, and around 50 percent of its staff is retained. These two factors alone would present daunting training challenges for any fire service. In the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service these challenges have been met with an impressively positive response, resulting in a comprehensive training programme which has made tangible improvements in the service's operational effectiveness at all levels.

How has this been done? Innovative thinking about how best to build, assess and reinforce incident command competence is one explanation. A service-wide commitment to hard work, on the part of training centre personnel and full time and retained fire personnel, is another. The incorporation of large amounts of simulation-based training, using VectorCommand's Tactical Command Trainer - Fire system, is also recognised as being a key factor.

Noel Darley, a watch commander with NIFRS (with operational service since 1990), is the lead for

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command training and command competence assessment within the service. He has played a key role in developing the service's incident command training programme, along with command competence monitoring and a personal development programme.

'We wanted to validate the fact that the incident command training we delivered was appropriate, that people were understanding the training, and we wanted validation of the practical aspects of command competence. Are our people competent within command and control? We had previously used TDXs (tactical decision making exercises) and we had used tabletops.

'After being trained to use VectorCommand's Tactical Command Trainer - Fire system I embarked on a series of roadshows, where I took the system mobile to alleviate fears, because people had heard of this computer-generated assessment and were fearful of it. We took it out on the road, just to promote the thing, and it worked. Since then





we have had a massive impact and we work non-stop. We have put many hours in and have trained many, many people over the past three years. It works very well for us. We have a service of 2000 operational firefighters and officers. Around 50 per cent of these are whole time and 50 percent retained. We are quite a large retained fire service.

'We train most of our supervisory managers annually in command competence, and that's both formative and summative assessment. In the 2007 & 2008 training years we would have trained up to 500 firefighters and supervisory managers; that's at potential crew and substantive crew and watch commander level.

'We have now embarked on our middle management training phase, which is to train all of our station commanders and assistant group commanders (which is a unique role to NIFRS) in command competence, and that is both in acquisition and in maintenance of those skills. That will also be an annual training programme, again in formative and summative assessment.

This training year, which runs from April 1, we will probably train 250 to 300 people. Most of that will be done as peripatetic training, which is out-of-hours and weekends. Two years ago we trained middle managers as command assessors and instructors, so they would cascade down training to the people under their command at district level.

### Positive Feedback

'The feedback has been very positive. When you hear things from people who have attended our first courses and who come back a year later and say: "What I did in simulation is what I did in real life, it had an effect", that is very satisfying. In other words, before the simulation I may have tried something different, but I learnt in a very safe environment and I remembered. That's an important thing about the Tactical Command Trainer - Fire system, that it is not just a teaching tool. People remember what they visualised and what they did, and they remember the debrief at the very end of it.

'The debriefing tool is very good for analysis, for analysing command, and most of our time for a session will be the review and debrief, using that tool. People remember that, because they can actually visualise inside the building. We have also noticed an increase in people's knowledge, because it has promoted learning in incident command.

Far left: Initial training for new recruits;

Top: Steve Hind (left), Noel Darley, NIFRS incident command training team;

Right: Tactical Command Trainer - Fire command suite.

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'The Team Trainer module has also provided us with a greater knowledge base, because we can use Team Trainer and have people act first as a sector commander and then, when they have their next promotion, they come back on the other side of the table as the incident commander. Using sector commanders, as opposed to using the Artificial Intelligence within the system, they learn more about the practical aspects of sectorisation. It's a great learning curve for people.

'The most important thing this tool allows us to do is to teach the practical application of the decision making model within the Incident Command System.

### Performance Review of Command

NIFRS's use of the Performance Review of Command (PRC) process is another critical element in the service's success and drive for continuous operational improvement.

'PRC is an operational audit based on incident command procedures and best practice. People will be graded as to assurance, from full assurance to non-assurance. The document has seven key areas: Information Gathering; Operational Objectives; Tactical Planning; Communicating; Controlling; Evaluating; Incident Management.

'We PRC all large incidents. We have a designated officer each day at headquarters, the flexi-officer, who will be the PRC officer, Most of those guys are also involved as Tactical Command Trainer - Fire assessors, they've been trained. The feedback we have received is that they can see the difference.

'We also use the PRC form as our formative assessment tool. We use it in the real world, therefore we use it in the simulated world, because we don't define a difference between real and simulated.

'There are seven key areas that you need to prove competence in. On the back of it we have Corrective Action, so if any issue has been identified, we would endeavour to resolve it before an officer leaves the incident ground. That's at Level 1, where resolution will be on the fireground. Level 2 may be to attend training centre, Level 3 may be to attend Fire Service College.

'We still use operational exercises with other agencies for multi-agency work. The last one we did was run by the NIFRS, which was a major train disaster. We facilitated it, we ran it, with all of the other agencies involved, including the military, the police, the ambulance service, body recovery, the Department of Health. They all then assessed their own protocols within the one major exercise. We assessed our protocols using PRC at the Gold command level and each agency is then responsible for assessing its own performance.

'Our main concern at the moment, our main priority, is operational assurance for our people, from firefighter to strategic manager. That is our main objective. We gave ourselves a three-year plan around 2006, and we are well and truly into that. We are almost at the end of it, moving into the summative side where we will assess command competence.

'At the moment we use the assessment and the training combined as a training tool. We don't call it an assessment. We call it confirmation. We are confirming that our training is appropriate and pitched at the right level within the three levels of ICS, and we are confirming that the tools we have are right for the job. And we believe that they are at present.

'We give people the knowledge and skills, help them to acquire them, allow them to apply them in the command arena, and then we bring people back in and say 'Here's your gap'. That's what we are about, gap analysis, and addressing that gap within the command competence arena. We believe we have done that with the supervisory managers and we will now embark on that with our middle managers.

In Noel's view, the tangible benefits can be seen in the way people feel about themselves in their jobs: 'People feel more confident, in their ability to do what they have been previously asked to do, and with the idea of moving forward. We have had people who have said: "No, that's not for me." We have also had people who have said: "I now believe I can do that. I will become promoted." That's because of the different types of training that we do, the various levels of training, and the different training programmes that we offer.



### Risk Assessment

'We explain how we risk assess and why we risk assess, to demonstrate that we actually are assessing the risk before we ask you to do the dangerous stuff.

'Now people are seeing that they want to be commanders. Some people have also said: "I definitely do not want to do that, I want to be a firefighter." That then gives us the right people for the right jobs, and the safest people. It promotes creative output, most certainly, because it gives people an insight into what an OIC does.

'There are five different modules of incident command training alone that our newly promoted crew and watch commanders will receive in the first year of promotion, starting from day one when they take up the post.

'With the Activity Statement fire personnel put something on paper. We try to teach people to give the Situation, Task, Action and Result of an operational incident.

Commenting on the overall programme Noel is very clear about what makes it such a success: 'It's tough but it's safety-critical. We have spent the last 4 years developing this process. We have a development program for every individual role in the fire service. It's now all clicked. Our people have full operational assurance because we have given them the tools and the opportunity to develop command competence.

'We are very demanding on our retained service, in training, because we demand a lot of time from them. We require a minimum of 12 weekends a year, but a lot of them do two or three times that, plus one night a week. This is outside their commitment to operational incidents.'