ICS TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

PART 1 – INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING ICS
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Cover picture – Deputy Chief Ken Hubbard of the Airdrie Fire Department, one of the Incident Commanders for the 2010 Airdrie Train derailment, teaches ICS 200 in 2013 (Tox)
INTRODUCTION

IF THERE IS ONE THING IN LIFE TO GET GOOD AT AS AN EMERGENCY RESPONDER OR SUPPORT TO RESPONDERS, IT IS ICS.  ONCE YOU ARE GOOD AT INCIDENT COMMAND, TEACH SOMEONE.

These materials were designed for the ICS Canada I-200 course which is a classroom-based version. It is hoped that the materials may also help any ICS instructor better understand the Incident Command System and give some quick points to assist with ICS 300, 400, any Train the Trainer courses or to offer a couple of more tools in the toolbox when running an exercise or trying to explain ICS to someone having trouble understanding one of the concepts.

One of the first ICS courses I ever took was with Don Jolley, now Fire Chief for the Pitt Meadows Fire Department in British Columbia. He was knowledgeable, had experience, and brought both the knowledge and the experience to the course. But on top of that, he made it memorable. He gave examples that I still remember to this day.

It’s easy to make mistakes when you are just starting out teaching Incident Command. It seems pretty easy and straightforward until you start to apply it to real life. Real life sometimes gets a little messy. Like baseball and poker, there are subtleties to ICS that you don’t realize until you have played with it for a while. Then suddenly it all begins to make sense and you instantly recognize the mistakes, the misconceptions, the misapplication and the misunderstandings people have with the system.

Any ICS 400 instructor will tell you; the mistakes made in ICS 200 will haunt the ICS 300 and 400 instructors and the students for years. ICS 200 is where you make people understand the principles, the system, the history and the objectives. Get it wrong and everyone suffers.
Every class I teach, I try something different. If you don’t try something new, how can you improve? I pick the item/topic/principle I am weakest in and try a new approach. If it doesn’t work, well, little is lost. If it does work, the students gain a better understanding.

You want to teach ICS? Some of the people in your course will, not may but will, end up in key positions on big incidents. You are the only one who can prepare them properly. You are the one who doesn’t just know ICS, but knows it well enough to get it through to a variety of people; from municipal staff, to emergency responders, to volunteers, to the Incident Commander. You have to do this right.

Don’t expect to fit everything in. In a two day course, there is not enough time to do everything you would like. The group work is critical, there’s a lot of material, discussion is important to clarify concepts, add some anecdotes to illustrate points, and you don’t have a lot of time for adding everything you would like to. You need to watch your time, even if it means cutting short some activities or discussions.

I still struggle with trying to get it perfect. There are a couple of things I see the students don’t get as well as I would like. But in this paper, you will find the absolute best of what I give in my ICS courses. Use it as you like.
KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING ICS

If you think you know ICS, you are likely in for a surprise. The most important principles of ICS are not what you think or what most people talk about. As a matter of fact, the first two things that students and organizations grasp, the Incident Commanders’ vest and the organization chart, are usually wrong and not good ICS!

If I were to list 17 things that instructors and students usually get wrong, it would be the following:

1. “If you are not using all 14 principles, you are not using ICS”

   This is where most organizations fail at ICS. ICS is not the organization chart.

I make students write this on the front cover of their student handbook. Then I make them sign it.

ICS is not a “pick and choose” list of things you like. Either you do all 14 principles or you are not doing ICS. Most organizations and senior officials do not understand this.

I make students sign it because I have taught too many classes where students later have not used all 14 principles and wonder why things went wrong in the response. I have them sign it because I have had Incident Commanders say “we don’t need Objectives...”. I make students sign it because most organizations will try to pick and choose the principles they like. ICS was not set up as a drop-down box to select the ones you like.
Incident Command was developed as an integrated system to deal with emergencies and disasters. Either you take all of it or none of it. ICS was never developed to only take parts of it – it is all or nothing.

ICS is not a vest. Putting on a vest that says “Incident Commander” doesn’t mean you are doing ICS. The 14 principles are what indicates you are doing ICS.

ICS is not an organization chart. There is a comfort level of having an organization chart. Quite frankly, the organization chart naturally falls out of the application of the 14 principles. When you understand that the organization chart is done AFTER you determine the objectives and the resources required to achieve those objectives, THEN you will understand how ICS works.

Some instructors like to put up a large organization chart to help the students see who does what. I personally would not do that – it leads students to believe that the ICS chart is one of the 14 principles or the desired result of doing ICS. Students inherently fill in boxes on the organization chart whether or not the positions are needed.

You will often find organizations that say they are doing ICS, the person in charge is called the Incident Commander or they have an organization chart that mirrors the ICS chart. This is one of the biggest problems in ICS; organizations that SAY they are doing ICS, but aren’t using the 14 principles.

Focus on the 14 principles during the course.
2. “You are going to be a Leader”

State this at the beginning of ICS 200, remind them through the course, and use it to wrap up ICS 200 at the end.

Lauren Harris (right) takes her first shift as Operations Chief for the Alberta Emergency Management Agency supporting the response to the Slave Lake disaster. “I don’t know if I can do this” becomes “I did the best I could”. With disaster, you suddenly are confronted with the need for good leaders, even if they have limited training or experience. You WILL become a leader. Lauren became EOC Manager in Calgary in 2014. (Tox)

“If you come across an accident on the highway and there is no emergency response, do you have to do anything?” When they answer “Yes”, then tell them “You have become the Incident Commander.”

Studies have shown that most people are reluctant to do something in disasters, until SOMEONE takes charge. In large disasters, you will hear of individuals spontaneously starting to search, treat
the injured, and try to organize the community in the absence of authority. People are looking for leadership.

Incident command allows everyone in the class to exhibit leadership, whether they are the first person on the scene, the first to organize a response, helping the authorities upon arrival or playing a small role in a huge response like the Ice Storm, Slave Lake, Kelowna 2003, Mississauga or Swiss Air.

ICS 200 is designed for management of single resources. Get the students away from thinking “This is another ICS 100 theory course, just more of it” to “I am going to be in charge of three to seven people, no matter how big or small the incident”.

Use your examples, questions, and exercises to reinforce “If I am in charge of single resources, what do I need to know and how will I do this?”

Use the information each student presents during the introduction to tailor the importance of leadership. Public works: “How many police/fire/EMS know how to clear roads in a snowstorm? You will be in charge!” Electrical Utility: “Crews are arriving from all over the country to help with the power outages. You have been put in charge of them....” Non-emergency personnel: “A neighbor’s kid has gone missing and they don’t know where to start” or “You are first on scene at an accident...”. Give the room something they can relate to, where leadership would be required.

I present the leadership aspect as a certainty; you WILL be in charge.

3. ICS deals with PROBLEMS.

If there are no problems, then you don’t need ICS. Many classes, exercises, and responses are disorganized and inefficient because those in charge don’t understand the problems. ICS deals with two types of problems; problems of the incident and problems of the response.

If you can’t articulate the problem, you can’t direct the response to deal with the problems.

The problems created by the incident are easily identified by asking “Is this a threat to one of the ICS priorities?” If there is an uncontrolled fire threatening people and/or houses, it is a threat to life, it is a threat because it is uncontrolled and it is a threat to property; it threatens one or more of the priorities. With ICS, it is dealt with by creating a SMART Objective.

If it is a problem, but not a threat to one of the priorities, then it is a problem of the response. These are problems of “how are we responding” to this threat. For example, “We don’t have a map of the evacuation area” doesn’t kill people. It is the fire that is the threat. The lack of
accurate mapping is a problem with how or how well we are responding. These are dealt with by an position in the Incident Command chart. Every position on the chart has an implied Objective.

Problems created by the Incident are dealt with by SMART Objectives. Problems of the response are dealt with by giving it to the person responsible for that box on the organization chart.

4. The Objectives ARE ICS. Understand objectives better than your students.

If the students don’t understand objectives, they don’t understand ICS. Your ability to instruct ICS and have students understand the system will be your success in teaching Objectives.

Failure to successfully teach “Management by Objectives” results in poor exercises, re-teaching Objectives in the ICS 300 and 400 courses and a complete misunderstanding of ICS during actual incidents. If you don’t understand Management by Objectives, then you need to spend some time doing more exercises, research and participating in actual incidents.

If there is any one “first among equals” when it comes to the 14 principles, it would be Management by Objectives. Your job, should you decide to accept it, is to help the students understand that the Objectives are what drives the Incident Command Response – they are more important than the organization chart.

Doing ICS 200 as a two day course rather than a one day course leaves more time for questions and a better understanding), but more importantly, a two day course allows you to take all the time required to teach Management by Objectives.

Students who get a bit of wrong information from a new instructor or misunderstand an example will eventually be corrected in the field or in a subsequent course. But failure to understand Management by Objectives results in serious issues with higher level courses and actual responses.

I have literally had Incident Commanders state “We don’t need objectives” during a response and have watched ICS 400 courses struggle because the participants didn’t understand objectives. This is the chapter you have to know cold. This is the chapter you have to instantly recognized the difference between an objective and a strategy, a strategy and a tactic, and a tactic and a priority.

Management by Objectives is the module you have to get right. There is nothing more important in Incident Command 200 than the Objectives.
5. Observations on PPOST

PPOST and SMART Objectives are covered more completely in Part 2, but that is another 26 pages of materials to read. Start with this for now.

Problems and Priorities are two sides of the same coin.

If you give me the priorities, I can create the list of problems to be solved. If you give me the problems, I will use the priorities to determine which one comes first. You can start with a list of problems and put them in order of priority, or you can start with the priorities and use them to create a list of problems. As an instructor, you should be able to work from priorities to problems and the next time from problems to priorities.

For an Incident Commander or Planning Chief, you should be able to do either method. The advantage is your ability to put the problems immediately into order of priority or using the priorities to identify problems you might have overlooked.

Make sure YOU know the difference between an objective / strategy /tactic.

“Pump out the reservoir to 8 feet by 16:00.”

If you don’t recognize the problem with that objective, then you need to spend a little more time recognizing the difference between objectives and strategies. Pumping is a strategy, not the objective. The objective would be to reduce the reservoir level to 8 feet.

Now, if you are having problems with identifying the difference between a strategy and an objective, you aren’t the only one. As an instructor, however, you need to get the students to see the difference. How can you teach others without getting them confused?

Objectives are “WHAT do we want to do?”

Strategies are “HOW are we going to do it?”

Tactics are “What resources (personnel and major equipment) and the bits and pieces (tools, procedures, miscellaneous equipment) do we need?”
“There’s more than one way to skin a cat...”

In disasters, things go wrong. If Plan A doesn’t work, then you use Plan B.

In Slave Lake, the water pressure died. The phones got overloaded. The Emergency Operations Centre caught fire and the radio station went off the air. Did they stop fighting the fire, stop communicating, stop managing the incident and stop trying to warn the public? The difference between reacting and managing is how much time you spend on alternate strategies. If you have thought of three or four strategies and picked the easiest/best one, you always have alternates in case things go wrong.

Most students are familiar with the phrase “Plan A and Plan B”. You need to get them to think of Plan C, D and E as well.

6. Further notes on SMART Objectives

**Student will struggle with making the objectives SMART.** They will need a ton of help, cajoling and hints to get the hang of it.

Students will invariably be unfamiliar with stating the objectives correctly and will revert back to their day-to-day descriptions of general intent and/or specific strategies. This will be a struggle through all of the discussions and exercises.

SMART is a great acronym for the key requirements of Objectives. “A” has had a couple of meanings; “achievable” or “action-oriented”. There is merit to both, but “achievable” and “realistic” might be considered to be duplicates, so I tend to rely a little more on “action-oriented”.

**An objective must have resources to ensure it will be accomplished.**

What do you call an objective without resources?

A “wish! “I wish we could (save lives/stabilize the incident/protect property and environment...)” For every objective the Incident Commander states, they must have adequate resources to accomplish that objective. That is not to say that the incident commander will always have adequate resources on scene or they can guarantee that the objective will be completed within the stated time.

But, an Incident Commander, when they have an objective, must give it adequate time and resources to accomplish it or it is simply a wish. If you don’t have sufficient resources, you had better change the objective. If you have no resources, you cannot have it as an objective at all.
This is not to say that the Incident Commander doesn’t have some wishes/objectives in their back pocket ready to go. For example, the arrival of additional resources, the completion of another objective, or the unexpected progress of another objective might free up some additional resources that would be idle and bored.

7. Time for Objectives and Time for Operational Period

The “T” in SMART and the Operational Period do NOT have to be the same. They are two different time periods that may be of the same length.

The confusion often lies with the fact they are linked.

Most students will have problems with the difference between the Time-Sensitive aspect of an Objective and the time specified for the Operational Period. Every objective must have a time limit. All objectives must be met within the Operational Period OR the Objective must be broken up into bite-size chunks that can be achieved in each Operational Period.

For example, at a traffic accident on the highway with no emergency responders yet on scene, the Incident Commander may identify the following objectives:

- Stop all traffic in both directions in the next five minutes
- Call 911 and obtain emergency response in the next ten minutes.
- Identify the number of casualties and provide basic first aid in the next thirty minutes.

The Operational Period would be thirty minutes, which would allow all three objectives to be completed. As an instructor, you need to distinguish between the time allocated for an individual objective, and the total Operational Period to achieve ALL objectives.

If an Objective will require two days to complete, you will need to demonstrate to the students that the objective will be split in two, with two operational periods.

“Create a fire break 20 feet wide and 10 miles long in two days” might become “Create a fire break 10 feet wide and 10 miles long today and double it to 20 feet wide on day two” or “Create a fire break 20 feet wide and five miles long today and then do another one 20 feet wide and five miles long tomorrow.”
8. Do they understand
Objectives/Strategies/Resources/Organization?  Do You?

This slide is one of the most important in understanding ICS. Simple, but deceiving, because it is simple.

To me, this slide is the key to understanding ICS. Like ICS, its’ simplicity fools people into thinking there is little too it. Many instructors gloss over it. I spend a bit more time on this slide and (when I remember) get students to put a star on this page.

First, there is no organization chart. The ICS structure is not determined until you figure out what needs to be done by setting the Objectives through the PPOST / SMART process.

By the use of the plural, the slide hints at needing more than one strategy to achieve the objectives.

It hints at one of the toughest problems for disaster response; too few resources or the massive convergence of too many resources. Hundreds of after-action reports will state “We had too few people / didn’t have the equipment we needed” and hundreds will report “We had too many responders, too many people standing around and too many vehicles blocking the road...”  How do you know if you have too many or too few responders? By clearly stating the objectives! If you need 15 officers to establish an inner and an outer perimeter, then it becomes immediately obvious that 3 are too few and you need to order more and 34 are too many and people are going to be standing around bored and vehicles will be parked in the way.

The incident and the objectives determine the resources needed, not the organization chart. So where does the organization chart come into play? AFTER the objectives have been stated and the resources are ordered!
The size of the organization chart depends on the objectives and the resources available. It is the END POINT of the incident process, not the starting point.

For the Incident Commander, this slide simplifies their job and provides clarity to the direction of the response. How do you know if the strategy is working? Look at the objective and, because it is measurable, check your progress. How do you get number of resources right for the incident? Look at each objective and ask “Exactly what kind of resources, what size of resources, and what number of resources will get this objective done?” The objective will determine whether you need sandbags, police officers or ham radio operators.

Play with this slide. Come up with quick examples of simple and complex objectives (ie. a child’s birthday party and a 10,000 square kilometer search) to show how the objective will indicate the most suitable strategies, which in turn will determine the exact resources needed and the organizational structure. Only then do you need the organization chart!
9. Incident Complexity

A single look at the incident should give you a best guess on size, time, resources need and management for the incident. This will be a guess - ICS will correct it until it becomes right.

“I watched a city grow up around me” Ken Hubbard, Incident Commander for the Airdrie Train Derailment in 2010. With the potential evacuation of 47,000 people, Ken found himself in charge of a major 5 day response involving hundreds of people. (Tox)

Organizational Complexity recognizes that you will never get the exact resources for the objectives at the start of the incident, you won’t know how long it is going to last, and you don’t have time to figure out how much management is going to be needed. Unless you have experience!

A study of incident commanders found that incident commanders look at an incident and mentally compare this with what they have responded to before. In an instant, they determine “Have a seen this before? Then I need to do this...” or “I haven’t seen this before. What is different? What do I need to do about it?”

Incident Complexity helps an incident commander determine:

- Is this a usual incident or is it something we haven’t seen before?
- How many resources do I need?
- How long is this going to last? If it lasts more than 12 or so hours, I will likely need to double up for every person on scene. How long will it take to bring in relief for everyone?
- Given the resources, how much “management” and support will the resources need?

“Go big fast!” “We don’t have enough people to fill all the boxes...” “I watched a city grow up around me and I thought ‘Who’s doing all this?’ and I realized it’s me – I’m the Incident Commander.” “We left it until too late” “We had people standing around....”
There will always be a struggle between having too many people and too few people at a scene. You will never get it right.

**Typing the Incident will provide an estimate on the size of the response management needed.**

The tendency is for any organization to look at the response to the incident. Almost invariably, looking only at the objectives results in a lack of management and support required for the response. Typing Incidents says “The bigger the incident, the more management you will need or the more problems you are guaranteed to have.” The key dividing point for me is a Type 3 Incident. I have never seen a Type 3 Incident without significant planning, logistical, financial, safety, information, or liaison problems. Not one.

A Type 3 Incident is the dividing line; a Type 4 incident can get by with some Command and General Staff positions unfilled, but to me Type 3 Incident should have all positions staffed. Having positions unfilled in a Type 3 Incident says you have no anticipation of problems certain to bite you and you have no intention of ever training staff to handle big incidents. Type 3 Incidents are perfect for putting people into unfamiliar positions and challenging them to “learn it now, while it is quiet, or try learn it for real when people are dying...”. After action reviews for Type 3 Incidents always say “we didn’t have enough management. That’s what Typing Incidents does – put’s an adequate amount of management to support the Operations on that type of Incident.

**An Incident Commander should be putting 1/8 attention to the Objectives and 7/8 attention to the management of the Incident – on ANY incident.**

For any Type of Incident, the IC should be putting as much attention into the management of the Incident as the attention they give to the response to the incident. The original problems identified in 1970 were 7/8 support to operations and 1/8 operations.

At the time of writing this, I received an email from an ICS instructor at a Type 2 Incident to say “We know Ops, we’re good at Ops, but in emergencies we tend to neglect Planning, Logistics and Finance in an effort to ‘just get it done’. Our organization ignores these things and it hampers us in the end – all the response knowledge and capability in the world doesn’t mean much if people don’t have the right information, equipment, facilities or vehicles to do the jobs they’ve been trained to do.”

While 7/8 of the time may seem excessive as compared to operations, I would break it down this way: You figure saving time on safety of the public/victims responders is less important than responding? You think that giving nobody information will make a better response? You think

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11 Thanks Mike, for passing this observation on during the incident. I have left the name of the individual and the organization off as they are at least using relatively good ICS and it is an on-going incident.
that “winging it” will be a better response than Planning? You think that you ignoring all other agencies and organizations is better than having no Liaison? Run into a burning building by yourself if you think that an incident commander should be doing, rather than managing.²

10. Do not allow “flexibility” in your training.

Flexibility ONLY refers to the needs of the Incident. People will interpret it to mean they can adapt ICS so it matches what their organization normally looks like. Show me an organization that uses “modified” ICS and I’ll show you an organization that doesn’t understand ICS. Almost all modifications are unnecessary. It took me years to realize this.

Almost every instructor will recognize this, once you teach more than one course. Yes, ICS is flexible. It is flexible to meet the needs of the INCIDENT, not the organization.

There is a huge desire for students to morph ICS to the organization and way of doing things they are most familiar with. Rather than learn something new, students (and more often, agency executive) want to make ICS look like their organizations’ usual way of doing things.

Because people don’t understand ICS, they will try to move ICS towards what they do in their day-to-day jobs; titles, organization, descriptions, ...everything. I have seen organizations have the Finance Chief ordering food and the Logistics Chief doing procurement. Rather than switch titles and make it classic ICS, they say “ICS is flexible....”. When an organization says “We don’t need objectives”, they use the excuse “ICS is flexible”. When they have one person reporting to two different people, they say “ICS is flexible”.

There are three key ways to prevent this from happening: Emphasize it is “Flexible ONLY to the needs of the incident, have more than one organization in the class and don’t allow ANY flexibility in ICS 200 discussions. As an instructor, learn to recognize when people try to break one of the 14 principles to revert back to what they normally do. When I hear “We have 7 incident commanders”, “Head office (800 kilometers away) is the Incident Command Post”, “We us 10 codes”, you should recognize they are trying to revert back to what they know/normally do.

The flexibility of ICS is ONLY to the needs of the incident and it doesn’t say “throw out the principle because you don’t understand it” but “adapt one principle for the needs of this one incident and leave the other 13 principles intact.”

In class, I use the term “Adjustable”. This better suggests to the students that you start with the 14 principles and, like a crescent wrench, you adjust the tool to the size/needs of the problem.

To understand where and how ICS is adjustable, you have to clearly and completely understand why the 14 principles are ALWAYS the starting point, not something you finally arrive at when all your adaptations have failed. It is only when you get to an ICS 400 level incident or training that you should emphasize the flexibility. For the ICS at the 200 and 300 levels, I emphasize “stick with the 14 principles of ICS”.

11. Incident Command is self-correcting

You will never get the response perfect on the first try. Make your best guess, throw some spaghetti at the wall to see what sticks, and do what you think is right. ICS is wonderful because there are 14 mechanisms to correct errors and make things work.

ICS says “Make your best guess at making things right. The entire system and organization will help you get it right.

Not sure of the right resources? Throw some resources at it and let them tell you if it is meeting the objective or not. If not, their experience, the stated and measurable resources, the available alternate strategies, the ability to organize strike teams/task forces/divisions/groups/branches will help you adjust to get it right.

Not enough time? The priorities, the operational period, the availability of resources will help you adjust to get it right.

Not sure if the organization is correct? The span of control, briefings, transfer of command, priorities, informal and formal information will help to get it right.

Made a mistake on span of control or the organization chart? The people responding, the Leaders, Supervisors, Directors, Chiefs, and Officers will all help you correct it. Wrong use of terminology? A gentle reminder or someone using a subtle affirmative using the right terminology or everyone knowing “you meant...” will fix the mistake.

The 14 principles of ICS represent best practices, best management, best priorities, best chance of making an incident better. If you follow all 14 principles of ICS, you will not have a chance of making things better. Will it save every life, stop every incident immediately, correct human errors? No. But no other system in the world has a better method of dealing with emergencies and disasters. None.

The use of Objectives and Priorities tells you what to do, which comes first, why to do it, and suggests multiple ways of how to do it, so if one way doesn’t work, you always have another.
12. There are no fire/police/EMS in ICS

Send in the high school football team!

When students put “police”, “fire”, “EMS” on the organization chart under operations, they are demonstrating they haven’t understood the principles. There are no “police” in ICS. Not a single mention in any of the principles. Nor fire fighters or paramedics. Those are your normal organizations used in normal emergencies for normal day-to-day incidents.

I loved the comment made by one instructor “Putting police, fire and EMS on the organization chart is going back to our silos of excellence.

One of the most common exclamations in disasters by the first emergency responder on scene is “Send me EVERYTHING you’ve got!” I’ve heard this for the Edmonton Tornado of 1987 (two different locations), the Slave Lake wildfire, the Minnesota bridge collapse and multiple other large and small events.

As an instructor, you need to recognize when people are either throwing in everything but the kitchen sink at a problem or trying to revert back to what the organization would do before a disaster.

For example, if someone says “Send me everything you’ve got” to deal with an objective, I would tell them “I have 20 boys scouts on tricycles. You asked for it and now you have it. Was that what you REALLY wanted?”

This often shows up on the organization chart. If you, the instructor, see “police”, “fire” or “ambulance” on the organization chart, they don’t understand strategies and resources. “Police” are a resource. If the police aren’t available, do you stop the evacuation? If there are no EMTs and ambulances, do you leave the people to bleed to death? If there are no fire fighters, do you ignore the rescue? Of course not.

In the VIA rail exercise, a perimeter may be required to ensure the quarantine. If students put down on the organization chart “Police”, then I say “There are two officer in Foleyyet and they are out dealing with a traffic accident. Who else would you use?”

If I am using the example of injuries and the only ambulance is out on a call, I will ask the students “Who else could provide basic medical response?” They will come up with lifeguards, fire fighters, police officers, group home staff, industrial first aid attendants, Search and Rescue volunteers, sports team coaches, St. John Ambulance, or in extreme cases, neighbors with a first aid kit. In disasters, Plan A may not be available. In ICS, it is not “who normally does this” but “Who is available right now?”. Suddenly, when there are no fire, police, or EMTs available, the use of the high school football team with a “can do safely” attitude to save lives, stabilize the incident and protect property/environment makes sense.
13. **Common Terminology is not common usage**

Many people mistake the concept of “Common Terminology” to refer to common usage or day-to-day language; Common Terminology actually refers to all organizations using the same meaning for the term. This is different than using “clear language” over the radios where common usage and day-to-day terminology is required.

For example, in ICS “Kind and Type” are extremely specific terms. Kind is “What does it do?” and Type is “How big is it and what staff/crew does it need?” The public would never know that “Type” has that specific meaning in the ICS world.

When you look at it, most of the ICS words have extremely specific implied meanings. An Incident Command must have an Incident Command Post. A staging area must have a staging area manager and resources within the staging area must be available on three minutes’ notice. A deputy must have the same ability and authority as the primary position.

You see the confusion between the ICS language and common usage all the time with Communications Unit and Information Officer. Non-ICS people use the terms interchangeably or simply replace Information Officer with Communications Officer because their organization normally uses corporate communications staff for dealing with the public. If we needed a Media Officer, ICS would have created a Media Officer; ICS needed an Information Officer to get information to all responders, then the public, and then the media as a way of reaching the public. I don’t know how many incidents I have been to where the responders have no idea what is going on because the Information Officer is focusing solely on corporate spin and media relations rather than providing information to the response and the affected public. An Information Officer provides incident information and the Communications Unit does the hardware (radios, phones, and internet). Those are very specific terms.

The result is virtually every ICS word has a specific role, meaning, requirement, implications and use. When we say “Common Terminology” it means that instead of everyone using Latin, we have agreed to use ICS.
14. The use of vests

The use of vests is not one of the principles of ICS, but I recommend it. Having seen the effectiveness of the vests in two Type 1 Incidents, I cannot recommend them highly enough.

Four Section Chiefs from the Provincial support to the Slave Lake wildfire. Orange for Operations, Yellow for Logistics, Blue for Planning and Grey for Finance. (Tox)

Dean Monterey (an ICS guru if there ever was one) says that the vest colours were decided in a bar in B.C. after an incident. Ontario has picked its own colours, but western Canada has gone with these:

- Incident Command: Green
- Officers: Red
- Operations: Orange
- Logistics: Yellow
- Planning: Blue
- Finance/Administration: Grey
- Agency Representative: Black
- Scribe / Observer: Black

In multi-organizational, multi-operational period, multi-jurisdictional responses, the use of the vests can greatly improve the response. You learn to recognize whoever is wearing the vest is the person to talk to. At shift changes, the transfer of the vest indicates the transfer of responsibility. If you don’t know who is the Logistics Chief is, ask ANYONE, in a yellow vest and they can tell you who they are and where they are. Black indicates the person has the right to be inside the ICP/ECC (scribe, visitor, elected official) but is not in a position to provide advice or answer specific questions.
I personally favour the vests. When you don’t know all the players (Slave Lake) or there is a shift change, the vest is the easiest way to pick out the key players.

Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development usually use name badges to indicate the person and their ICS position, but found the vests to be extremely helpful in High River with the large number of organizations on scene.

Karen Sanderson, Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development as Deputy Operations Chief, meets with Lethbridge Fire Chief Brian Cornforth, Operations Section Chief, 2013 High River floods. (Tox)

This is not to say that they are always a good idea. One interesting comment from the police:

“We don’t need vests because in some incidents, the Incident Commander vest becomes a target. Undercover officers don’t like to be identified. We learn to identify the Incident Commander verbally and don’t rely on insignia, rank markings, vests or other indicators.”

As well, in the Kelowna reception centre in the 2003 wildfire evacuations, key reception centre staff took off the vests because the public focused on anyone with a vest with their complaints, questions, concerns and feelings. Having a vest on meant you couldn’t do your job. Only front-line supervisors had vests, the reception centre management team kept the vests off.

Vests in use in the Medicine Hat EOC, June 2014

Vests in use in the Lethbridge EOC, June 2014 (Tox)
15. “It doesn’t work” is not a valid critique of ICS

ICS works better than any other emergency management system ever invented. It is not perfect, but it is more effective than any other system.

For 40 years, people have said “ICS doesn’t work.” I hear it in almost every class “Well, that wouldn’t work for OUR organization…”

ICS is not perfect. But it is the most effective disaster management system we have.

Why do people think ICS doesn’t work?

- They don’t understand the 14 principles.
- They haven’t used it for real to see how effective it actually is.
- They didn’t apply it correctly and instead of blaming their failure to use one or more of the principles, they blame it as a failure of ICS.
- They don’t understand the disaster characteristics that ICS is solving. (See the chapter on Disaster Characteristics and ICS).
- They don’t understand the process of how ICS was created and why it is used as a SYSTEM rather than a set of Lessons Learned (See the chapter on ICS History).
- They are more comfortable with what they do now and are trying to move ICS to reflect their current organization structure and processes.
- They have tried to apply the best practices for a one-time site response to the normal day-to-day running of their organization.

In incident after incident, report after report, inquiry after inquiry and “lessons learned” after “lessons learned”, you will hear the same thing. ICS works.

So why do people say it doesn’t work?

If you don’t understand the principles, it is hard to make it work correctly. When I hear someone say “We don’t need objectives”, I can immediately tell they don’t know the 14 principles.

If you haven’t used it for real, it is hard to understand how effective it is. Yet, after Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 and the BP Oil Spill, the reports all indicated ICS worked. Problems of the response were generally not understanding the principles or not applying the principles. Why is it that after these major incidents, there was not one criticism of the Incident Command as a system? Why is it that after hundreds of incidents, ICS is the only management system being recommended? Why is it that ICS is becoming the Global incident management system, with over 30 countries already switched or switching to it? It’s not because it doesn’t work! ICS works, it’s the people using it that need to improve!
When you have the general public, without any training, assisting in a response and they have a chance to compare an ICS structure and a non-ICS structure, they can tell the difference. “I don’t know what you guys were doing, but it was working....” “I don’t know what ICS means, but this reception centre was running better than the other one.” “You guys know what you are doing, don’t you.”

I am all in favour of finding another emergency management system that works better than ICS. But with all the best brains and most experienced responders in the world looking at the issue, there is not one system that is seriously challenging ICS.

Yes, sometimes ICS doesn’t work. But if that is because of not understanding the principles, not applying it as taught, not being familiar with it or not wanting to use it, that is not the fault of ICS.

ICS 200 is not the arena for getting into debates on whether ICS works or not. If you have been told to teach and they have been told to attend, don’t hold up the entire class for debate over the merits of ICS. I acknowledge the concern and then offer to discuss it during a break, over lunch or after the class. Generally what you will find is the person is struggling how to reconcile what they normally do with the application of the 14 principles in a disaster or emergency situation.

16. Mixed groups and mixed instructors learn best

ICS 200 (or 300 and 400) courses work best when you have a variety of organizations and disciplines together. There are two reasons for this: it illustrates the multi-organizational nature of disasters and it prevents students from reverting back to what their organization normally does.

Incident Command was designed for multi-organizational and/or multi-jurisdictional response. Having multiple organizations in a class will demonstrate the effectiveness of ICS as students see how the common terminology, common structure, common objectives and establishment of command/unified command brings everyone together. As well, examples and anecdotes from the various students reinforces how ICS would solve or alleviate many of the problems encountered by all organizations in a response.

When only one organization is present in the course, there is a huge tendency to revert back to what they normally do and what they are familiar with, rather than making the leap to a new way of thinking. Occasionally, disparaging comments about other organizations reinforces “we can’t work with them” mentality. Just as a mix of students makes the learning more effective, a mix of instructors will reflect that all organizations are using the exact same 14 principles. What is being shown to them is the exact same material given to any other organization.

Senior representatives also see the advantage; if a peace officer misses the course, send them to the fire department training – it is exactly the same. As one small town fire chief exclaimed “I LOVE ICS! When I call the larger communities for mutual aid, everyone they send is trained. I don’t have to do any of the training!
CLASSROOM TIPS

Mix the groups – having only one organization in a group reduces the chance of the group becoming self-correcting. They tend to revert back to what they do in their organization.

Monitor the groups. Let them get off track a touch – the discussion is good for understanding. You will need to hover by each of the groups for a minute or two to ensure they get back on track, but let them try to work it out first.

Encourage people to write in their student manuals. I start the class by having them write on their cover page “If you aren’t using ALL 14 principles, you are not doing ICS” and have them sign it. This allows me to emphasize that ICS is not the organization chart or the vest, ensures that the students get the message, and starts them writing their own notes. This will also help on the exam.

Bring a camera. You may not have a chance to write down all the good ideas the students have. Few lists of qualities of a good Incident Commander include “coping” or the ability to cope with the demands of the job.
Bring a smile.

Teaching ICS is serious and demanding. Many of the participants will be senior in their organizations and not tolerant of unprepared or unknowledgeable instructors.

At the same time, a bit of banter, a smile, a humorous story of an ICS mistake you made, and a touch of laughter in the room will make learning easier.

“\textquote“I am the Loonie!” and “Two kids are giggling as they fill up the bathtub…” are examples of sneaking a bit of humour in to break up the seriousness and make the instructional point."

Mark Murphy teaching ICS in Lethbridge. (Tox)

Try something new in every course. You are required to cover the ICS Canada materials in whole, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t room to add a bit or to change an example. Look at how the class responds to an example. If there is still signs of confusion, try another approach. Have a couple of examples from other services; too many fire stories doesn’t help the group to understand ICS applies to all organizations. If you have good examples and stories and are comfortable with the material, a little experimentation to improve your ability won’t hurt the students and may help for all future courses.

\textquote“I am the Loonie!” Using coins to teach ICS concepts (Tox)
UNDERSTANDING ICS – WHY DOES IT WORK?

“I’m gonna build you the best goddamn system you ever saw, and if you are too dumb to use it, that’s your problem, not mine.”

The creation of ICS from the original FIRESCOPE Working Group is a fascinating, and mostly lost, story. But the fact that ICS is going world-wide now is an indication of how well they did their job. The fact that police, fire, EMS, different levels of governments, industry, non-governmental organizations, utility companies and even small events and individuals are efficiently using ICS to deal with one time situations is a testament to the job done back in 1971 – 1973. With over 40 countries now using ICS, it is truly becoming the world-wide standard.

With all the different thoughts and response systems and competing emergency management systems, how did ICS come out on top?

At least five key factors are crucial:

1. The design team was multi-organizational, bringing in good suggestions and reality from a number of different perspectives.
2. The genesis event was a disaster, not an emergency.
3. After the “lessons learned” were listed, the group was told back to do it again, better.
4. A systems approach made it a “quantum jump” and an “order of magnitude” better.
5. There is little or no cost to the system.

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The 1970s wildfires

The fires were a disaster, not just another fire.

The 1970 wildfires in California were the genesis of Incident Command. Although fire departments had dealt with large wildfires for years and decades, there was something different about this one. What was different?

- The number of responding fire departments: over 30 different fire departments responded. In addition, there were state, federal and local agencies participating or supporting the suppression efforts; over 100 organizations needed to be integrated.
- The area impacted – the incident was multi-jurisdictional and multi-organizational.
- The lack of interagency coordination – knowing your own job but not knowing how to work with your partners created "silos of excellence".
- The problems of communications – modes, information, plans, and human failures all contributed to severe and dangerous communications failures.
- The situation constantly changing – the arrival of the emergency response did not make it better.
- Impact on Emergency Services – roads blocked, flat tires, hurt responders
- The length of time - the event went on for days, and for some departments, weeks. The fires went on for a period of 13 days.
- The number of homes and lives lost – the significant loss of life and damage to property. Over 600,000 acres burned, 772 structures burned, and a number of lives were lost.

In my original versions of this paper, I stated that ICS/FIRESCOPE wasn’t intended for disasters. When I came across an interview with Robert L. “Bob” Irwin who was leader on the Inter-Agency Task Force creating ICS/FIRESCOPE, there was an interesting quote that shows that right from the very start, ICS was meant as an all-hazards system:

“’Why the hell did you guys work on terminology when there was all this other stuff to do?’ And Terry said, ‘That’s the only thing we could agree on.’ And they could agree, because they’d all had problems, see? The guy wasn’t the fire boss. Even in those days, he’d go off on medical aid, rescues, stuff like that. It was an incident that this guy was dealing with. Bingo: incident commander. Everybody bought into that. Early on—the very first organization chart did have a fire and rescue operations chief. They said, ‘Forget fire and rescue, because there’s all kinds of other stuff: earthquakes, hazmat, this and that and the other thing.’ So it changed to operations chief, which it is today.”

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Lessons Listed

“Things went wrong or we could have done better. Improve next time.”

I call lessons learned “lessons listed”. When you see the same “lessons learned” in 15 or 40 after-action reports, you realize that the lessons aren’t being learned, they are simply put down on paper again and again and again.

There are a number of reasons for this. One of the key reasons is people have to see it for themselves before they will believe it. I call this the “smell of the smoke”. I couldn’t understand why all the responders were saying “bring eye drops” until I got up to Kelowna in 2003 and had the sting of the smoke in my eyes for days. Suddenly, I understood why Vizene was more important than most of my gear. You have to see it for yourself.

Secondly, lessons listed can say anything, with no basis in reality or suggestions for improvement. “Do better!”, “Improve communications!”, “Be more aware of the situation.” are all great suggestions, but impossible to achieve.

Lessons listed are done without reference to cost, resources, time, political will, or reality. I use the suggestion of “Put a fire truck on every street corner.” to prevent another fire. Great suggestion, but completely unrealistic as it is not affordable, we don’t have the trucks, it may take too much time to get all the trucks, politics may say it doesn’t look good to have the neighbors’ trucks on our streets because it makes us look bad and it will never happen.

William Lokey, who eventually became the point man for FEMA during Hurricane Katrina, said “There is a depressing similarity in reading the same lessons learned time after time after time.” We don’t learn the lessons.

The lessons learned from the 1970s wildfires came depressingly close to being another bunch of lessons listed. What happened to change that?

First, they gathered the “Lessons Listed” and grouped them. Most of the problems centered on the massive convergence and the incompatibility of organizations:

- Lack of a common organization
- Poor on-scene and inter-agency communication
- Inadequate joint planning
- Inadequate timely intelligence
- Inadequate resource management
- Limited prediction capability
“AN ORDER OF MAGNITUDE BETTER”

Every single recommendation is realistic, cost effective, simple, and achievable.

There are two quotes about the direction given to the design team. With over three years to design the system, the two quotes may have been the same direction given two different times or two directions given to the team. The statements were:

“Make it an order of magnitude better”

“Make a quantum jump”

Improving the Lessons Listed

Starting with the problems of the 1970s wildfires (which were the characteristics of all disasters), they came up with the lessons listed solutions. These look good on paper and make everyone feel productive, but don’t truly solve the problem.

Each lesson learned had to have a solution which would actually fix the problem. Any discipline or suggestion would be explored. Many of the best suggestions came from military experience, such as World War II, Korea and Vietnam. But some of the solutions, such as span of control, go back to the Napoleonic wars.

The lessons learned had to be realistic. No garbage. If you look at ICS, there is no fluff. No “Spend $1 trillion dollars to obtain the right equipment” or “practice 23 hours a day” type recommendations. Putting a fire truck on every corner or a recommendation with no resources wasn’t in the report. Every single recommendation is realistic, cost effective, simple, and achievable.

The recommendations were specific. Each addressed a disaster characteristic or response characteristic, each made the situation better, none of them cost much (if any) money and all of them could be achieved.
A Systems Approach

The systems approach takes a look at how everything interacts. If a solution to one problem creates a problem elsewhere in the system, then you are no further ahead. Every solution to a problem must not interfere with any other solutions. For example, saying “We need more people” for one problem and “We need fewer people” for another, leaves you no further ahead.

If you look at the 14 principles of ICS, you will see they either work beside each other principle, or (even better) they actively support the other principles. As a result, ICS works best as a system and when all 14 principles are being applied, the system works the best.

This fundamental understanding of ICS leads to another conclusion: Suggested improvements on one principle actually cause more problems than they solve! Anyone who says “Well, that principle didn’t work in this one incident – let’s change it…” doesn’t understand that improvements to ICS need to go through the same systems approach to ensure that it actually is an improvement and doesn’t interfere with another principle or actually cause the whole system to collapse.

That is the magic to ICS; a total system, each principle supporting the others, with no fluff or costly recommendations, specifically designed to deal with the characteristics of a disaster.

That is why, in over 40 years, there have been no substantive changes to the Incident Command System. You might argue that there were only 12 principles to start, but I would argue that the idea of “Don’t self-dispatch” and the addition of “Intelligence and Information” were accounted for and implied in ICS by the “Accountability” and “Flexible Organization” of ICS. We can argue that until the sun goes down, but the fact remains that for 40 years, ICS has been the Gold Standard for emergency management systems. How many other things in your life have lasted for over 40 years with little or no change? Think about that the next time someone says “ICS doesn’t work!”

In 40 years, nobody has come up with a better system than ICS. If it is the best available system, why don’t we use it?
UNDERSTANDING ICS - DISASTER CHARACTERISTICS

In dealing with many large emergencies and one of Canada’s largest disasters, one of the lessons of emergency management becomes abundantly clear: disasters are not simply large-scale emergencies.

Understanding the success of ICS needs an understanding of what the characteristics of a disaster are. ICS was designed to deal with disasters.

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of characteristics that are unique to disasters and not to emergencies. Let’s put the two in context, first, and then look at the characteristics of a disaster.

An emergency, like a house fire, car accident, or medical collapse on a store are the same. Life/safety is the priority. You can see it, you’ve seen it before, the emergency services are designed, positioned and staffed to handle it efficiently, and you go home at the end of the shift.

Disasters are not simply big emergencies, more widespread or more casualties. The following characteristics are also seen:

1. **The Scope is not known.** One person cannot see or comprehend the size of the event. You can spend your whole life talking to responders and the public and never know the worst hit areas or the whole story. Quite often, this comes out as “The worst hit area was the last to be responded to”. The worst hit areas may not get response for hours (Edmonton Tornado in 1987), days (Hurricane Katrina outside of New Orleans), or weeks (earthquake in Iran). This may be partially because many disasters are widespread, but it is also because of the difference between emergencies and disasters; you can look at a car accident and get a good idea of how bad it is. When it goes beyond what you can see, you don’t have the full scope. For example, the damage area for Hurricane Katrina was the size of Great Britain. If you are standing in the middle of that area, could you ever tell where the worst hit locations are?

2. **Communications Fail.** Not only a disaster characteristic, but an indicator that your emergency is becoming a disaster. While Communications fail is one of the most common disaster characteristics, the statement fails to specify WHAT went wrong with communications, which is like saying “things went wrong….”. There are over 40 distinct and separate communications failures in disasters.

3. **Situation Changing.** The arrival of the emergency services at an emergency scene will invariably make the situation better. The arrival of emergency services at a disaster scene may have little or no effect or may make the situation worse. The problem with a changing situation is the normal response you were doing suddenly becomes inappropriate. For example, every time a plane hit a building, a tower came down, a rumour got started or five minutes went by, the response to the World Trade Centre had to change. What you were doing correctly 1 second ago was now wrong.
4. **Emergency Services Affected.** In an emergency, the fire hall is intact, the roads are passable, the families of responders are safe and the response is by routine procedure. In a whiteout snowstorm, why do you expect the emergency services to respond as normal? With the collapse of the World Trade Centre, the Incident Command teams were killed or rendered incapable of directing the response. If a tornado takes out the fire hall, or the Slave Lake wildfire takes out the Emergency Operations Centre, why would we expect the response to continue unchanged?

5. **Unusual response** – Fire fighters rescuing people with front-end loaders, police doing search and rescue, beer companies supplying water for hundreds of thousands of people, elephants clearing the roads. One of the most interesting aspects of disaster response is the use of what you have at hand to get the job done. This is where you begin to say “You don’t see THAT every day.”

6. **Use of Volunteers** – disasters cannot be responded to solely by trained first responders. If it weren’t for the volunteers, the job wouldn’t get done or it would take too long. The problem is that disaster create a risk to lives, especially in the response. Many responses have been seriously impeded by the sheer number of volunteers as well. You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them!

7. **Massive Convergence** – Convergence will overwhelm the Incident Management Team. Not just a little – there will be a lot. It may be self-inflicted (“Send me everything you’ve got” for the Edmonton Tornado and Minnesota bridge collapse) or completely unexpected (Chicago aerial ladder self-dispatching to the World Trade Centre in New York). From ambulances blocking roads to volunteers overwhelming the scene, you are not ready for the dozens to hundreds of organizations that arrive. Research has shown some incidents will have in the order of 300 – 400 organizations arriving on scene.

8. **Things go wrong** – In the 2005 London Bombings, they couldn’t find the keys for the cupboard for the stockpile of radios for the responders. When they found the keys, the cupboards were empty; the radios had been taken out to charge so they would be ready to go for any emergency. In Slave Lake in 2011, the wind picked up. The fire took out the power to the town. The backup generator failed. The water pressure dropped. The EOC caught fire. Things go wrong.

9. **Much longer than expected** – In emergencies (Type 4 and 5 Incidents), you will be home in your bed tonight. Perhaps you are required to put in a bit of overtime, but the incident is usually resolved in one operational period. Type 3, 2, and 1 Incidents are substantially different because they last for days or even weeks. Failure to recognize this results in failure to bring in the next shift, poor Incident planning, poor briefings/handovers, and staff fatigue, burnout, and inefficiency. The planning “P” recognizes the importance of proper planning for the next Operational Period and is structured to get the response on track and prepared for when the next Operational Period begins.
Examples of unusual resources or strategies in disasters:


Locomotive moved down a street (no rails) to be used as a generator for a reception centre, 1998 Ice Storm (Unknown)
ICS RESPONSE TO DISASTER CHARACTERISTICS

Every typical disaster characteristic was listed in the 1970s wildfires. What was interesting is they didn’t realize they were dealing with disaster characteristics. They thought they were dealing with the lessons learned from one big fire. Yet, if you look at the disaster characteristics and then the incident command system, you will find that EVERY disaster characteristic has a method or principle for overcoming the problem. In some cases, the disaster characteristics is assigned a specific unit whose sole function is to overcome that specific disaster problem. In other cases, multiple aspects and principles of ICS are used to minimize or eliminate the problem. Whether one solution or many, the disaster problems are ALL specifically addressed:

Scope not known / Situation Changing – Dedicated Situation Unit in Planning or use of Planning Chief.

Communications Fail – To handle mode failures, the use of a Communications Unit within Logistics. To handle information failures, an Information Officer and allowing Informal Communications to go anywhere it is required. To handle human information failures, the use of the written Incident Action Plan, the use of briefings, the use of clear English and common terminology.

Unusual Response – The use of Objectives and Strategies. If Plan A doesn’t work, then Plan B or Plan C (Strategies). As long as the Objective is clear, you may use multiple methods to get the job done. If the Objective cannot be met, change the objective and/or the time limit and/or the strategy and/or the resources.

Massive Convergence – Establishment and Transfer of Command, Unified Command, Common Terminology, everyone using the same 14 principles, staging area to prevent self-deployment, mandatory sign-in, unity and chain of command.

Things Go Wrong – Safety Officer, “everyone acts like a safety officer”, Safety message on the IAP, briefings, Priorities to focus on what has to go right, multiple strategies to overcome things going wrong.

Longer Than Expected – The Planning “P”, Planning Chief, Operational Periods, Transfer of Command Briefing,
TOX’S FAVOURITE PHRASES

When teaching ICS, you need to add emphasis to the important points. You can’t let everything blur together or drone on in the classroom. Two of the most effective techniques are to use a memorable turn of phrase and then have the students write it down. How effective? I’ve had students repeat a phrase word-for-word five years after they took my class. Five years.

Making them write it down is one of the big differences between in-class learning and on-line learning; they have to think about what you said and determine if it actually is worth writing down, they have to understand it to determine where would be an appropriate place to write it, and they have to remember it to write it down properly. Underlining is where I place the emphasis.

If I am teaching a course, here are the most important phrases:

1. You are going to be a leader.
2. An objective without resources is called “a wish”.
3. Write down “If you aren’t doing all 14 Principles, you aren’t doing ICS.” Now sign it.
4. There is no “modified version” of ICS.
5. Span of control was never intended for a sunny day...
6. Every box on the org chart has an implied SMART Objective. (Don’t mistake jobs for Objectives)
7. A problem is a threat to a Priority. (PPOST)
8. Every Objective should become a box under Operations (unless you are in a wildfire).
9. Type 1 is the big one.
10. Kind is “What does it do?” and Type is “How big is it and crew?”.

These I work in if I have time:

1. Common Terminology is not Plain English
2. The org chart is not ICS; show me your Objectives.
3. Strike is Like (all alike)
4. Saying “ICS doesn’t work” is an opinion, not a researched analysis.”
5. The Incident Commander is the driver, Management by Objectives is the engine (car analogy).
6. If you don’t know who is in charge, then it doesn’t matter how good your ICS is because it will still be a mess.

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5 I never call myself Tox, but sign everything “Tox” because Tom Cox is waaay too many letters to write. Over a decade, more and more people refer to me as “Tox” because they think that’s what I call myself by my signature and because we have more than one “Tom” in our training unit now.
WOW! YOU THOUGHT TEACHING ICS WOULD BE SIMPLE!

The more you teach, the easier it becomes.

Co-teach with another organization. You will learn their best stories and examples and become a better instructor. They will see that the ICS principles are being used by all organizations, not just them. It will also prevent them from trying to take shortcuts and adapt ICS to look like their day-to-day organization.

Listen to the students. When you ask them “What experience have you had with emergencies or disasters?” you will either get another great example or a challenge to your knowledge that will make you a better instructor. From the student who saw her son injured to the student who was at the Pentagon on 9/11, you will understand ICS better.

Know your stuff. ICS requires knowledge of the ICS history, why it works, disaster characteristics, communications failures, the difference between events and incidents, human tendencies, emergency legislation, why things go wrong, and advanced teaching skills.

Your ability as an ICS instructor requires you to have both the civilian/public and the fire chief/mayor/detachment commander go “Oh! NOW I get it.”

Get knowledgeable enough to welcome challenges and criticism. Anyone can teach ICS. You have to be great at it to be a good instructor. The information takes some digging, but it is there. The Coast Guard report on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Thad Allen, the National Incident Commander makes fascinating reading and demonstrates to the students a depth of knowledge and love of ICS.

Once you are an expert, become an expert teacher. It is not enough to simply instruct it. You must teach it and teach it well. What is the best way I can present this so the students will never, ever forget it? Or, at least, in the middle of the disaster, they will remember the ICS principle enough to use it?

Be passionate. Knowledge is boring. Passion puts the emphasis on the key points. Let your passion show. Let the class know “THIS IS IMPORTANT”.

Thanks to Dean Monterey, Don Jolley, Dave Bokavay and Mark Eckley, Tom Sampson, and Ron Robinson for sharing me their knowledge and passion. The passion was in the caring, not in the interaction.

IF THERE IS ONE THING IN LIFE TO GET GOOD AT AS AN EMERGENCY RESPONDER OR SUPPORT TO RESPONDERS, IT IS ICS. ONCE YOU ARE GOOD AT INCIDENT COMMAND, TEACH SOMEONE.
TIPS AND TECHNIQUES SERIES

There are currently five papers available in the Tips and Techniques series. These papers are personal observations and suggestions and do not reflect any organization or agency. They were written for the Alberta instructors using ICS Canada materials; they reflect Alberta legislation, organizations and experiences and were not expected, when written, to be used outside of that jurisdiction. They are for information only and may not apply or may not apply well, in any other jurisdiction. They are available for download through www.icscanada under the instructors’ tab, or can be downloaded from www.icstraining.ca.

Part 1 INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING ICS

This provides some general observations for new instructors about the history of ICS, 16 observations about understanding and teaching ICS, a little bit on classroom techniques and thoughts on disaster characteristics. An introduction to give you a little more when going into the classroom.

Part 2 PPOST SMART

I believe this to be one of the most important discussion pieces. I don’t expect you to agree with everything I say, but this explores PPOST and SMART and delves into the details of both. If the principles of ICS make up the vehicle for successfully dealing with disasters and emergencies, then Objectives are the engine to get the vehicle going. If you want to teach ICS, you need to understand Objectives and how to write them.

Part 3 ICS 200 EXERCISES

The concept, details, and background to the bathtub, the pennies, the Form 200 are all provided here. This allows you to be “one step ahead of the students” if you use any of the examples. This will be less useful in the U.S. classrooms because it covers the exercises in the ICS Canada 200 course, which are different from the exercises used in the United States and most online courses. It is worth taking a gander through, however. As an instructor, working through and understanding the Canadian exercises is good practice and may give additional insight as to how the system might apply.
Part 4 ADULT EDUCATION

Al Fraser, Emergency Manager with the City of Edmonton, provides information on Adult Education and Tom Cox talks about some of the classroom management skills and instructor best practices. For those without a lot of experience in the classroom, this will give some basic tips to help you get your feet on the ground and your head focused on the classroom and the needs of the students. This is not a be-all, end-all for ICS instruction, but it will provide a bit more perspective from someone who has watched hundreds of instructors take their first steps.

Part 5 BEST RESEARCH AND READING

Teaching Incident Command is such a specific and almost obscure discipline that it is hard to find some of the good research to further understand the topic or provide examples to your students. I have compiled a list of some of the best information I have found on the internet, along with the links, to help instructors delve deeper into the system, to get a sense of its origins, and to better understand its strengths and weaknesses. It too, me thousands of hours to find these – I hope you can use the time to read and digest the articles rather than waste time looking through the web for this.

Part 6 ADVANCED ICS INSTRUCTION (300 AND 400)

RESTRICTED This is the handout for the two day “Advanced ICS Instructors Workshop”. Information is provided to instructors a better understanding of teaching the ICS 300 and 400 courses, covers Unified Command in more depth, simplifies Divisions/Groups for students, illustrates the teaching of every ICS form, provides the framework for understanding and teaching Complex Incidents, Incident Complexes, Two Section Responses, Advance and Recovery planning, Area Command, Multi-Agency Coordination, Emergency Operations Centres, and Type 0 Incidents. Not available for distribution.
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The information on the BP Oil Spill is downloaded from the internet and, as such, is available to anyone. It is intended to be used to illustrate the key points of priorities/objectives/strategies/tactics. However, if it is to be used in a “for profit” course, permission should be obtained from the copyright holder.

Lorri Laface teaching ICS in Airdrie, Alberta (Tox)
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- Ron Robinson – demonstrating how “pure” ICS can be applied in an Emergency Operations Centre (even the ICS forms) and have things work for a potential Type 1 incident.
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Tom Cox (left) as Operations Section Chief at the Provincial Operations Centre during the 2011 Slave Lake fire, with Pat Henneberry, Provincial Director. Slave Lake was the largest wildfire disaster in Alberta until the 2016 Fort McMurray fire. Tom was Operations Section Chief in the Provincial Operations Centre for over two weeks. Tom is an ICS Canada instructor trainer with experience in seven Type 1 or potential Type 1 incidents. He has taught over 250 Instructors in Canada.