



25 Best Practices for Improving First Responder Safety

Situational Awareness Matters

**Helping you see the bad things coming...
in time to prevent bad outcomes.**

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The content of this report is based on the author's 30 years of service as a first responder, his evaluation of more than 500 first responder fatality reports and his extensive research on factors contributing to first responder injuries and deaths.

There is a lot of talk in the emergency services about best practices. But where do they come from? There's no one place you can go for a comprehensive list of best practices. They are spread throughout books, articles and websites. And there is no shortage of advice for how to improve firefighter safety so long as you make the effort to be a student of best practices.

We would like to share with you this list of situational awareness best practices we have developed based on research we conducted on firefighter casualty incidents, coupled with extensive interviews with firefighters, company officers and emergency scene commanders. As you review the list, if you determine you do the best practice, celebrate your success! If you're not sure, ask questions. If you know you don't do them, create an action plan for improvement.



1

Ensure all incidents operate with one clearly defined commander at all times.

2

Ensure command is only passed when absolutely necessary and only after a briefing.

Where possible, the incoming commander and outgoing commander should remain physically together for a period of time to reduce confusion over information and details that were not shared during the briefing.

3

Ensure a 360-degree size up is completed at every working incident (with consideration for physical limitations). Gather the information that forms situational awareness – the foundation for good decision making.



4

Ensure the incident commander does not perform hands-on, street-level tactical duties.

The job of the commander is to watch out for personnel and the precursors for catastrophe. It is impossible to multitask the act of paying attention.

5

Ensure the incident commander maintains a physical distance from the incident sufficient to ensure the ability to see the big picture.

6

Ensure incident strategy and goals are developed and communicated to all personnel.



7

Ensure the commander gives assignments to personnel and coordinates incident activities – avoiding incidents running on “autopilot.”

8

Commanders should ensure accountability of personnel. This means knowing the crew’s location, crew size, actions and progress.

A periodic accountability report helps ensure situational awareness and facilitates a benchmark to incident goals.

9

All incident communications should be clear, concise and well understood. Using common terminology and a cadence can improve comprehension of radio traffic.



10

Develop a plan (in advance of the emergency) that ensures additional resources are called using a pre-established system of notification (e.g. a Mutual Aid Box Alarm System).

High stress, time compressed emergency scenes are not the place to be thinking about where the next engine or truck should come from.

11

Ensure the tactics are properly matched to the size and complexity of the incident, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to tactics.

12

Commanders and company officers should develop and maintain a broad perspective of the overall incident.

No team works in a vacuum at an incident. There are four situational awareness components to consider: Individual, team, equipment and incident-wide.



13

Ensure the radio traffic is disciplined and manageable. Train personnel how to talk on the radio and how NOT to talk on the radio.

Too much radio traffic can cause the brain to stop listening – and critical information may not be heard or understood.

14

Ensure someone is assigned to monitor every radio channel or talk group in use. Avoid using scanning radios. Avoid having a single person monitor multiple radio channels.

It is nearly impossible to listen to and comprehend multiple conversations simultaneously, especially under stress.

15

Take steps to ensure every radio transmission from personnel operating in high-risk environments are heard the first time transmitted.



16

Ensure the incident has adequate staffing and resources to carry out the strategy safely and effectively. If short staffed or under-resourced, adjust the strategy. Avoid overextending the capacity of personnel.

17

Ensure that as the incident conditions change, so does the strategy and tactics. Emergency scenes are dynamically changing. The strategy and tactics should adjust as incident conditions change.

18

Ensure progress reports are clear, concise, accurate, timely, informative, and understood.

19

Take steps to ensure conflicting orders or conflicting tactics do not hamper incident operations.



20

Build and maintain an organizational culture that is focused first, and foremost, on responder safety. The culture should be reflected in incident strategy, tactics, operations and priorities.

21

Ensure an incident safety officer is assigned where personnel operate in high-risk environments. The safety officer should be trained and certified to perform these duties.

22

Ensure the appropriate amount of equipment, apparatus and resources are at an incident scene to safely and effectively accomplish the mission.

23

Ensure personnel operating at high-risk incidents are adequately trained to perform their assignments.



24

Ensure the organization has standard operating procedures and/or standard operating guidelines established, and that they are properly implemented, communicated, and followed (especially for high-risk activities).

25

Ensure you are thinking ahead of the incident to effectively predict future events – seeing the bad things coming in time to avoid bad outcomes.



In the realm of all the situational awareness best practices emergency service organizations should adopt, this is a very small list. However, ensuring these items are done, consistently, will help improve first responder safety.



About the author

Situational Awareness Matters is a teaching and consulting organization based in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The company's founder and CEO, Dr. Richard B. Gasaway, is widely trusted as an authority on situational awareness and the human factors that complicate first responder decision making under stress.

The company's cadre of seven Master Instructors include subject matter experts trained to improve situational awareness for fire service, EMS, hazardous materials, law enforcement, private security, corrections, and information technology domains

Their website, Situational Awareness Matters (www.SAMatters.com) has welcomed more than 4 million visitors from 156 countries. The team has delivered situational awareness programs to more than 90,000 attendees on four continents. They can be reached at SAMatters.com or by calling 612-548-4424.



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