

# Unified Command

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Employees at a chemical manufacturer were switching railcars when a pipe connecting the railcar to the facility separated releasing methyl mercaptan. The methyl mercaptan erupted in a fireball nearly 50 feet wide and 200 feet high, consuming the railcar, exposing an adjacent chlorine car, and producing a plume of toxic chemicals and smoke.

Three employees were killed in this incident and nine were injured, along with one police officer. Six fire departments worked more than eight hours to control the blaze that released 148,000 pounds of mercaptan and 26,000 pounds of chlorine. The release prompted an evacuation of more than 2,000 residents from a number of nearby communities.

This incident could easily have been caused by an environmental disaster or a terrorist attack instead of an accident. Regardless, the incident required a coordinated effort by six fire departments, dozens of local police departments and the State Police, public health officials, the state department of Environmental Quality, the US Environmental Protection Agency, the medical examiner's office, railroad representatives, plant representatives, the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross, and an environmental clean-up company.

Each organization brought their own area of expertise, responsibilities, and authority to the incident. To accommodate all the interested parties, a Unified Command was critical to an effective operation. In this module, you will learn how Unified Command can be used to direct the response effort.

## Objectives

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When completed, you will be better able to:

- Identify the purpose of using Unified Command
- Recognize when Unified Command should be used
- Identify who should participate in Unified Command
- Identify the elements of an effective Unified Command
- Implement Unified Command in a scenario

## Purpose of Unified Command

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Unified Command (UC) brings under one roof the responsible decision-making representatives from all organizations having a direct interest in the incident. Under the UC, the various agencies may blend together throughout the operation to create an integrated response team. The advantages of a Unified Command include:

- Use of common language and terminology
- Elimination of duplication
- Centralized communications through a single command post
- Collective goal and objectives setting
- Cooperative and coordinated response actions
- Development of an agreed upon Incident Action Plan (IAP)
- Sharing of resources

Ideally, the UC would function to determine the goal(s) of the incident and develop a common set of tactical objectives that will be implemented to achieve the goals. Goals might include stopping or confining the release of a hazardous material. Tactics might include neutralization or plugging and patching. The goals at any incident should be based on the incident priorities of (1) Life Safety; (2) Incident Stabilization; and (3) Property Conservation.

## When Unified Command should be used

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Generally, a Unified Command should be established anytime multiple jurisdictions are involved in an incident. Multiple jurisdictions may include:

### Geographic Boundaries

If an incident involves more than one jurisdiction, as in the evacuation of two neighboring communities, a Unified Command should be established to coordinate efforts and resources. This could include the involvement of two states or one state and Indian Tribal Land.

## Governmental Levels

A Unified Command should be established if an incident exceeds the resources of a local community and the assistance of the state agencies or the federal government is required. For example, a terrorist incident will involve the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as the local community impacted. Depending on the type of threat, a WMD incident may also require the assistance of state environmental, public health agencies, or law enforcement agencies, as well as the US Environmental Protection Agency.

## Functional Responsibilities

An emergency incident may result in the need for various agencies to be involved, depending on each agency's functional responsibility. For example, if a tornado has caused widespread damage, the agencies involved in the response may include those who have responsibilities for firefighting, building collapse rescue, emergency medical services, or public safety.

## Statutory Responsibilities

Local, state, and federal laws provide different agencies with certain statutory responsibilities and authority. For example, a case involving the intentional contamination of the food supply may require the participation of several organizations:

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Statutory Responsibility</b>
Local Health Department	Protect public health
State Department of Agriculture	Regulate the food industry
Local Law Enforcement	Apprehend and prosecute those who commit criminal acts under state or local jurisdiction
Federal Law Enforcement	Apprehend and prosecute those who commit acts of terrorism

**Note:** Any combination of the factors listed above (Geographic Boundaries, Governmental Levels, Functional Responsibilities, and Statutory Responsibilities) may result in the need for implementing a Unified Command.

## Who should participate in a Unified Command

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The actual make-up of a Unified Command will depend on a number of factors, including:

- Specifics of the incident
- Existing response plans
- Decisions made by initial meeting of the UC

Those participating in a Unified Command may change as the incident progresses, in order to account for different agencies that may become involved. The UC must be a team effort, but to be effective, the number of participating members should be kept as small as possible.

### Direct Involvement

To be considered for inclusion in a Unified Command for a specific incident, the agency in question must:

- Have jurisdictional authority or functional responsibility under a law or ordinance;
- Have an area of responsibility that is affected by the incident or response operations;
- Be specifically charged with commanding, coordinating or managing a major aspect of the response; and
- Have the resources required to participate in the response.

### Indirect Involvement

If an agency is not represented in a Unified Command, it can still ensure that its concerns are addressed by:

- Providing input to the Liaison Officer of the Unified Command;
- Providing input to an agency representative who has a direct link to the Liaison Officer
- Serving as a Technical Specialist in the appropriate section; and/or
- Providing input to a member of the UC

### Making decisions in a Unified Command

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Within a Unified Command, the main players are present to command the response to an incident. Each representative will bring different strengths and capabilities to the table, and the Unified Command must be able to tap into those assets in order to be effective. This means that each participant must make every effort to understand and appreciate the role of the other agencies. The person from the agency having primary jurisdiction should serve as the Incident Commander for Unified Command.

For the decision-making process to work effectively, the following suggestions will be helpful:

- Each member must strive to understand the underlying issues associated with any disagreements.
- The Incident Commander must be willing to keep an open mind and to make a conscious effort to ensure that the views of all agencies are carefully explained.
- If members cannot reach consensus, the Unified Command team should defer to the member whose agency has primary jurisdiction over the issue.
- Participants must understand that their agency may need to take a lead role during one phase of the response, while shifting to a support role depending on the changes that occur.
- The person who leads the Unified Command should function as the chair of the meeting, receiving input from all involved, rather than acting as a commanding general.

Example: During the initial phase of a bloodborne illness investigation, the public health department may have primary jurisdiction. However, once the facts of the case point to a criminal act, such as intentional contamination of the food supply, the local law enforcement agency may assume primary jurisdiction.

## **Activity: Assigning a Lead Agency**

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Purpose: To provide participants with an opportunity to determine which agency should be in charge of different incidents.

Directions: Your instructor will divide the class into small groups. Each group will be responsible for determining which agency would take the lead for the various concerns described below. Each group should assign someone to take notes and report back to the larger group. You will have 10 minutes to complete this activity.

Concern: Downed power lines  
Command Agency:

Concern: Building collapse of a private business  
Command Agency:

Concern: Broken gas main  
Command Agency:

Concern: Runoff of hazardous material to public water supply  
Command Agency:

Concern: Large number of injured citizens  
Command Agency:

Concern: Sheltering of those made homeless  
Command Agency:

Concern: Looting of damaged stores  
Command Agency:

Concern: Large number of house fires  
Command Agency:

Concern: Transportation of patients from local hospital that was damaged  
Command Agency:

### Elements of an effective Unified Command

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Unified Command is an essential component of an effective Incident Management System where a number of representatives from participating agencies gather to share information, concerns, and resources. To increase the effectiveness of a Unified Command, the participating agencies should consider the following elements:

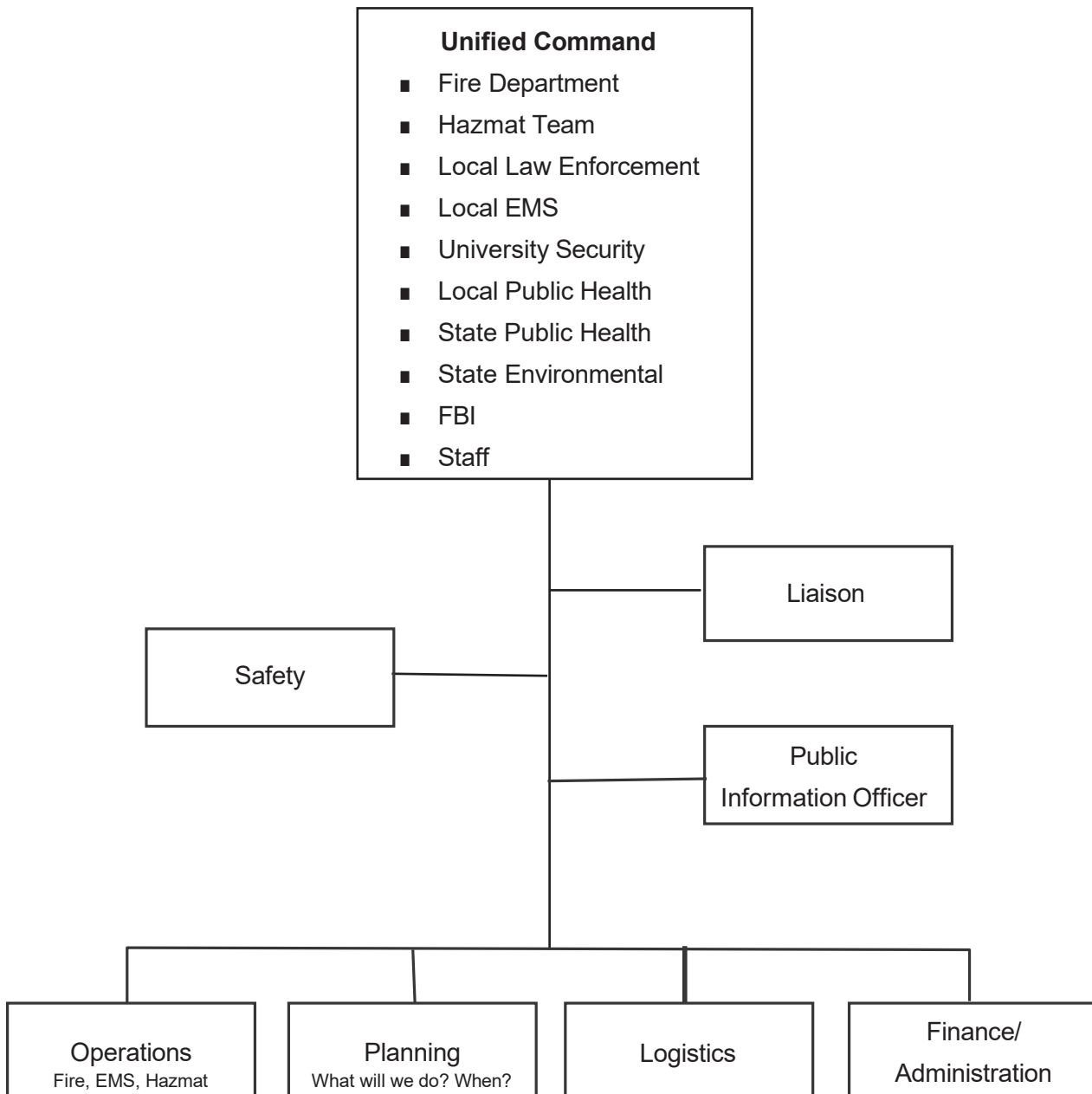
- The structure must be formalized and accepted by all parties concerned.
- Specific IMS functions and responsibilities must be well defined.
- The flow of information must be horizontal (across participating agencies) and vertical (within participating agencies).
- A reporting mechanism must be established to increase communications and information flow.
- All parties must agree on a method for developing an Incident Action Plan.
- All participating agencies must respond as a team, while using the Incident Management System.
- Members of the team should be familiar with local emergency response plans.
- Relationships and interactions with agencies outside the Incident Management System must be defined.
- The safety of response personnel must be at the top of the priority list for all participants.

By implementing a Unified Command with the elements described above, participating agencies ensure the best use of existing resources to tackle the problem at hand. Important duties include:

- Command staff—Keeps records and notes
- Liaison officer—The critical gatekeeper to the site
- Operations—Fire services, EMS, Hazmat
- Planning—Determines what will be done and when

Public information—May include a representative from each agency. A federal coordinator will be dispatched to the incident if The National Response Team is needed. Multi-agency practice drills, with critique and follow-up are essential to an effective response. Drills may be conducted annually.

## Unified Command Exercise – Participant Guide



Note: Each organization represented within the Unified Command should develop a similar working organizational structure. In addition, experience has shown that the lead representative of an organization within the UC must appoint an Operations Officer for any field activities. This will help to establish communications between the Unified Command Post and operations at the incident.



## Coordination of Effort

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### Physical Location and Facilities

Those involved in Unified Command must identify a location for carrying out command functions. This location is referred to as the Command Post. The Command Post should be in a relatively safe area that is accessible to other arriving agency representatives. It should also be able to accommodate the number of agencies that will be participating. The Command Post should be away from operational activities, yet close enough to provide a view of the incident, when possible. The physical location may vary, depending upon the incident. Wind direction, needs of participants (filtered air, bathrooms, food supply) must be considered. Also, for a food-borne event, there will be no “scene.”

Whether located in the street or in a building, the Unified Command group must have access to phones, radios and other means of communications. For long-term incidents that require a continuation of command activities, the Unified Command will need to provide for restrooms, as well as eating and sleeping facilities.

### Communications

The structure of the Incident Management System provides an organizational and communications flowchart. All communications involving decision-making that impacts the strategic goals must go through Unified Command. For instance, if Operations is in need of additional resources, this request must go through Unified Command. If such a request bypasses UC, the team will lose track of resources on the scene.

### Primary Jurisdiction

At a large or complex incident, various agencies will have responsibilities for different aspects of the incident. For example, in a response to a hazardous materials incident, the fire department or state environmental agency may have initial jurisdiction. If the incident also involves a crime, local, state, or federal law enforcement agencies may eventually assume a leadership role. Public health officials may have a significant role in providing medical monitoring and surveillance for site workers and the public, as was evident after the attack on the World Trade Center. If situations arise where members of the UC cannot reach consensus, the UC member from the agency with primary jurisdiction would normally have the authority to make the final decision.

### Parallel Operations

If a Unified Command structure is put in place, individual agencies will continue to have their specific responsibilities. Individuals involved in Unified Command have a responsibility to the UC, but also to their own agency or organization. UC members do not give up agency authority, responsibility, or accountability. The addition of a UC allows responders to carry out their own duties, while working cooperatively within one response management system. To be effective, UC members must be able to:

- Agree on an incident response organization
- Agree on appropriate Command and General Staff position assignments
- Commit to speak with one voice through the Public Information Officer
- Agree on methods for providing logistical support
- Agree on cost-sharing procedures

Although agencies may decide to implement a Unified Command to manage the entire operation, each participating organization would still be responsible for designating an Incident Commander for managing their own specific on-scene activities.

### Relationship with Emergency Operations Center

The county or state may establish an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to coordinate the emergency operations, especially if the needs of the incident exceed the resources of the site command.

The EOC goes into operation when the agencies involved determine that the situation is complex enough to require a coordinated and non-routine response, using higher levels of authority. Here are some important points about the activation of an EOC:

- The EOC does not become operational for all incidents
- The local emergency response plan should specify the conditions under which it does become operational and who is authorized to activate it
- Normally, the elected person responsible for the jurisdiction (mayor, county executive), or their designate, is in charge of the EOC

One of the first tasks of any emergency is to assess the situation quickly to determine if the size or severity warrants activating an EOC. Staffing the EOC may be as simple as asking people to leave their offices and walking down the hallway to the EOC. It may also require calling people in from various locations. Once an EOC is established, the on-scene Unified Command structure should coordinate all decision-making through the EOC. For example, the EOC should coordinate and approve any releases of information to the public.



3. For each agency listed, describe the agency's major goal for this incident.

**Fire Department**

**Major Goals:**

**Law Enforcement**

**Major Goals:**

**Hazmat Team**

**Major Goals:**

**Local EMS**

**Major Goals:**

**Public Works**

**Major Goals:**

**Water and Sewer**

**Major Goals:**

**State Environmental Agency**

**Major Goals:**

**US Coast Guard**

**Major Goals:**

4. If the explosion were caused by an act of terrorism, what additional agencies would be involved?

5. What potential areas of conflict can you identify that the Unified Command team should consider as part of preplanning in order to ensure an effective response for all agencies involved?

### Other factors to consider

- If there are substantial numbers of persons with injuries, local EMS may need the assistance of private ambulance services.
- Residents made homeless in an event will need shelter.
- Homeless persons in an urban area may not easily be alerted to dangers.
- Traffic control can become a major activity for law enforcement.
- Evidence must be preserved, within the constraints of protecting health.
- During various phases of the response or follow-up, the command may change. The essential information transferred from the commander going off duty to the one coming in.

### Summary

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By implementing a Unified Command, responding agencies can help to coordinate an effective response. In this module, you learned the purpose of using a Unified Command, and you discussed when a Unified Command should be used. During the activity for this module, you participated as a member of a Unified Command team. As part of the exercise, you made decisions and you identified elements that would help to ensure an effective response. Your ability to implement a Unified Command will assist your organization in creating an integrated response to any emergency that might occur.

### Closing

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Are you better able to:

- Identify the purpose of using Unified Command?
- Recognize when Unified Command should be used?
- Identify who should participate in Unified Command?
- Identify the elements of an effective Unified Command ?
- Implement Unified Command in a scenario?

Please ask any remaining questions.

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