



# COMMAND RELATIONSHIPS

*By Sid Heal*

Every tactical operation is overseen by an organization specifically designed to assign and direct critical personnel and equipment to resolve an unfolding crisis. Sociologists refer to these organizations as emerging multi-organizational networks (EMONs).<sup>1</sup> One of the most critical functions of an EMON is identifying who is responsible for whom and what. This function is most commonly referred to as a “command relationship.”

A *command relationship* may be defined as any formal association between two or more people which establishes a connection through which command is exercised. Of necessity, both superior and subordinate roles will be designated. These command relationships form a “chain of command.” In the simplest terms, a *chain of command* (sometimes referred to as a *command channel*) is the line of authority along which information and instructions are passed

between superiors and subordinates. It is important to note that this channel is bidirectional in that instructions are commonly passed from superior to subordinate while information is frequently passed from subordinate to superior. Moreover, higher rank does not entitle a superior with the authority to compel actions if they are “outside” the chain of command.

Command relationships are how an organization affixes responsibility,

resolves conflicts and focuses efforts. When disagreements arise between individuals or components within an organization they are resolved using the “first common senior rule.” Simply put, the *first common senior rule* establishes the authority to decide with the first superior in charge of all disputants. This ensures that the concept of “unity of command” is firmly supported.<sup>2</sup>

As tactical organizations increase in size and complexity a point will eventually be reached where it is humanly impossible for a single person to exercise the essential command functions. How many subordinates should be under the direct supervision of a single superior is called the “span of control.” In disaster management and tactical operations a commander can normally supervise about five subordinates. If subordinates are working on extremely complex assignments or are geographically separated, the span of control should be reduced. Conversely, if they are working together and performing similar tasks the span of control can be increased.<sup>3</sup>

When tactical organizations require reinforcements, command relationships become especially critical. Generally, the supporting (reinforcing) unit or agency reports to the incident commander of the supported (reinforced) unit and is attached to the existing tactical organization as a separate component. All internal command channels remain the same with the senior commander of the supporting unit subordinate to the original incident commander. Missions and orders are given to the senior commander of the supporting unit and follow the existing chains of command within the attached unit.<sup>4</sup> This command relationship is called “joint command.”

Joint command is the “default mode” for quickly incorporating reinforcements and mutual aid. Joint command works just fine in most instances but falls short when the supporting unit is larger than the one supported or when the supporting unit is



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of another discipline. When either of these conditions exists, a “unified command” relationship is most often employed. Unlike a joint command, a unified command incorporates the senior commanders from supporting units into a single command module where command is shared and collaboration allows agencies to work effectively together without affecting the authority, accountability or responsibilities of the individual agencies.

How a unit is assigned to support also affects command relationships. For example, an agency of another discipline, such as fire services or water and power, are usually in “general support.” General support describes the command relationship for a unit whose actions support the organization as a whole rather than any particular component. Units and agencies in general support are responsible for all their own logistics, administrative and operational needs. In comparison, units and agencies whose actions support a specific component of the overall operation are in “direct support.” Units and agencies in direct support are under the command of the supported unit commander rather than the incident commander. Moreover, the supported unit commander assumes responsibility for the logistics, administrative and operational needs of the unit or agency in direct support.

Although more common in military than law enforcement operations, command

relationships can be further adapted to circumstances by specifying whether a unit is under operational control, tactical control or administrative control. Operational control, sometimes referred to as “OPCON,” gives a commander authority to assign tasks, organize and employ the supporting unit’s assets and give direction throughout the accomplishment of the mission. Tactical control, sometimes called “TACON,” gives a commander authority for assignments limited to objectives necessary to accomplish specific missions. Administrative control, sometimes referred to as “ADCON,” gives authority to a commander for controlling all things administrative. ADCON is not as uncommon as the others in law enforcement operations when they are exceptionally large or complex, and occurs when a supported unit assists reinforcements by accepting responsibility for prisoners, tracking overtime, feeding and sheltering reinforcements, ordering supplies and so forth.

Command relationships are one of the most common points of friction in any organization, but because of the tensions and emotions inherent in crises they are particularly troublesome during tactical operations and emergency responses. One of the most common occurrences is when a change of command becomes necessary. With extraordinarily few exceptions, the first person on a scene is in command until properly relieved. A change of command is never assumed but must





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be explicitly delegated and promulgated to ensure everyone involved is aware of who is in charge. While this might seem somewhat rigid and formal, it ensures that there is never doubt at any time of who is in charge.<sup>5</sup>

Another occasion is when a commander fails to delegate and assumes more duties than can be easily handled. This condition highlights the importance of another concept which states that decisions should be pushed to the lowest possible level. To put it another way, it means that the first person with the requisite authority to make any decision should do so. While higher headquarters may be advised, decisions should not routinely be passed up the chain of command.

So important are command relationships to the success of an operation that they are often used as a measure of excellence of the organization itself. An organization with solid and reliable command relationships is quick to react to changing conditions, withstand setbacks and suffer less friction. Accordingly, it is well worth the effort to fully understand their critical importance and refine them before they are strained and tested during times of adversity. ◀

## Endnotes

1. For more information see "Emerging Multi-Organizational Networks, (EMONS)" *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1999, p. 62.

2. Unity of command is a concept which ensures that every individual participating in an operation reports to one, and only one, supervisor. It is one of the nine principles of war and is essential to avoid confusion with conflicting or competing instructions or priorities. For more information see "Nine Principles of War," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2001, pp. 49-50.

3. Generally, the ratio should not be less than 1:3 or more than 1:7 but when organized into platoons and squads, especially during crowd control situations, law enforcement agencies typically deploy with a span of control of 1:10 or 1:11.

4. For more information on how missions are assigned see "Mission Tasking," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1999, pp. 93-94.

5. This concept is so critical that it is frequently formalized in written policy. This also helps to remove much of the friction since assumption of command is a matter of policy, not personality.



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