

KEEP CALM & TAKE COMMAND

**Do the workers recoil in fear when you arrive on scene?
Master the art of control & they'll be glad to see you roll up.**

Plus: Learn how heart health makes you a more resilient leader.

BY STEVE LESTER

In Parts One and Two of this three-part series, we examined the definition of command presence, which represents an incident commander's ability to communicate with the on-scene resources to mitigate an incident with a sense of *competence, confidence, and control*. Remember, the IC sets the tone for the incident. This goes for not only the strategic IC but the mobile IC as well. This final installment will examine how *control* factors into maintaining a strong command presence on the incident scene.

Control is the power to *influence or direct people's behavior or the course of events*. Control as it relates to incident command manifests in two ways: self-control (or the control of one's self) and control of the situation (or the incident). Let's look at each of these in a little more detail.

Self-Control—Put Your Heart (and Lungs) into It

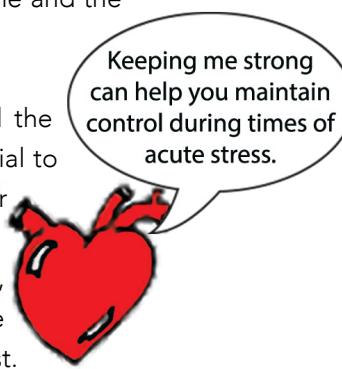
Self-control means being able to direct our behavior and manage the physical and mental effects of the central nervous system's sympathetic response (better known as fight or flight). The effects of a sympathetic response typically include:

- Increased heart rate (causing increased blood pressure).
- Increased respiratory rate.
- Dilated pupils.
- A slowed digestive tract.

If left uncontrolled, these reactions can compel the IC to shift their focus from the incident to their physical symptoms. We must be able to control the surge that comes when we arrive on the scene, assume command, and realize that we bear the responsibility for the incident's outcome and the safety of everyone on that scene (citizens and members).

Cardiovascular conditioning is one way to process or control the sympathetic response. As firefighters, physical fitness is essential to performing our jobs to the best of our ability. Cardiovascular conditioning allows us to put our bodies under stress, increasing both heart and breathing rates. When we do this regularly, our bodies become accustomed to this sort of stress, and we can endure and overcome similar stresses when it matters most.

I try to get at least 30 minutes of cardiovascular conditioning every



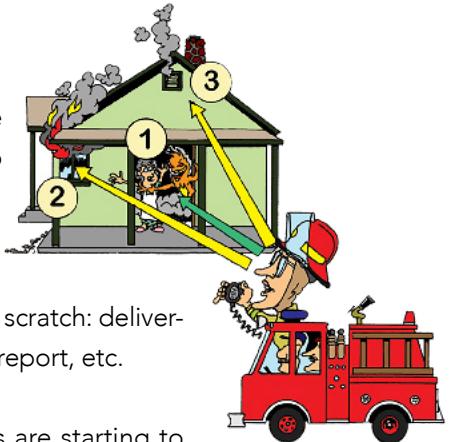
Keeping me strong can help you maintain control during times of acute stress.

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shift. I arrive at the firehouse early (mostly to miss Atlanta traffic) and get it in before shift change. This sets me up for success throughout the day and helps me feel prepared for whatever the shift might bring. Additionally, this practice allows me to be a good role model for those under my leadership. I want them to know I am in control of my body and mind and have my act together.

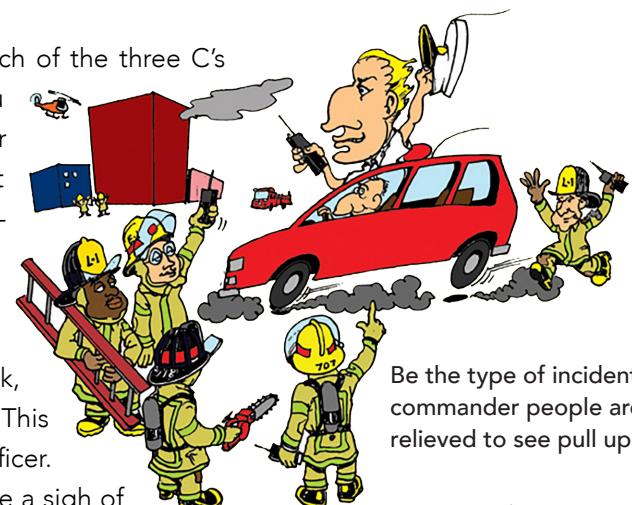
Situational Control—Where the 3 Cs Converge

The other way control relates to command presence is the control of situations. We must train and prepare ourselves to arrive on scene and gain control of circumstances that are inherently out of control. By developing the first two C's of command presence—competence and confidence—we can prepare ourselves to arrive at an incident and start from scratch: delivering an initial radio report, getting a 360, giving a follow-up report, etc.



As a strategic IC, we might arrive on scene just as things are starting to unravel, and we will need to make a strategic shift immediately. We must be prepared to do that. Firefighters instinctively do whatever it takes to get the job done, whether under appropriate command and supervision or by freelancing. Either way, they are going to do it. We must gain control of the incident to ensure firefighters operate within the safety and accountability of a well-run incident command system.

In Parts One and Two, I discussed how each of the three C's exists two-dimensionally. Not only do you need to feel competent and confident in your sense of control, but your members must see you as in control. This is where everything comes together. If your members are filled with dread or fear when you pull up on the scene, you have failed as their leader and IC. You want them to see you and think, "Chief is here and will sort everything out." This is the highest compliment for any chief officer. As an IC, I strive for my members to breathe a sigh of relief when I show up; that's how I know I am successful.



Be the type of incident commander people are relieved to see pull up.

Command presence doesn't come naturally for a lot of people. It's something most of us must work on and can take years to develop. By developing our competence, confidence and control, we can only improve how we respond to incidents and run our command. We can do this because we have prepared for it, believe we can do it, have done it before, and we can

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control ourselves and any situation. Most importantly, our members will have faith in us as their leaders. **BS**



Steve Lester is a battalion chief with Cobb County Fire and Emergency Services near Atlanta. He became a career firefighter in 1996 and worked his way through the ranks. Steve has degrees in fire management and nursing; he has served his department as a paramedic, special operations medic and Blue Card Instructor and works as a registered nurse. Steve assisted his department with developing recent editions of the "High-Rise Operations Manual" and the "Incident Management Manual." Steve has been a speaker at the Metro Atlanta Firefighters Conference and is a senior advisor for the 575 F.O.O.L.S.