

2024 BLUE CARD HAZARD-ZONE CONFERENCE SPEAKER PREVIEW



Forward-deployed tactical bosses improve safety by maintaining an effective span of control.

BY FIRE CHIEF DOUG WEHMEYER

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Fire agencies have had multiple chief officers responding to reported structure fires for decades, but to what end? We've often seen chiefs gathered on the Alpha Side of a structure, all staring at the fire—this doesn't extinguish it any faster. We've also seen chiefs emerging from burning buildings, helmets blackened and covered in debris. Were they supervising crews, or were they overriding the company officer's role, functioning as a firefighter by pulling ceilings? In both cases, we need to ask: What was their function at the incident, and how did they improve the fireground or enhance personnel safety? Like many of you, I have been guilty of both behaviors in the past. However, at some point in our careers, we must decide whether to fully embrace our role as chiefs or step back into positions where we can actively engage in tasks like advancing attack lines and pulling ceilings. There are benefits to having multiple chiefs respond to active incidents—if they are properly utilized.



Upon arrival, the first-arriving chief is tasked with quickly re-assessing the incident conditions to ensure all fire companies are operating in the correct strategy. When this chief assumes command from the first-arriving company officer (IC No. 1), they become the incident commander (IC No. 2), and they are responsible for the overall direction and safety of all personnel at the incident scene. They must build a command structure that addresses the incident's specific critical functions and the Eight Functions of Command necessary to eliminate the incident hazards.

A key objective of Command Function 1: Deployment is to provide and manage a continuous, adequate, and timely supply of the appropriate resources. In doing so, the IC can use additional responding chiefs to expand the incident's tactical level whenever three or more companies are assigned to any entry point. The necessary resources for a structure fire are typically pre-determined in our CAD systems before an incident occurs. Command officers should be no different, and an appropriate number should be included in the initial response for working fires. Many agencies say they lack enough on-duty chiefs to respond. However, when we require more engines, we routinely use mutual aid to fill these gaps; we should do the same for chief officers. This practice also supports Command Function 6: Organization, which emphasizes creating an effective incident structure using the Sector/Division/Group system to decentralize and delegate geographic and functional responsibilities.

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Deploying a tactical boss at the entry points of a fire, reinforced by an embedded safety officer, helps manage any resources assigned to that location. Managing these resources at the tactical level allows the IC to maintain an effective span of control, enhance accountability, manage work-rest cycles, and improve incident operations while reducing radio communications. Positioning tactically skilled chiefs in the incident's warm zone strengthens the incident command system by providing the IC with a forward-deployed set of eyes, ensuring that the incident action plan is followed and critical factors are addressed in their assigned division.

The tactical boss is responsible for risk management, ensuring that operating positions match conditions, achieving tactical priorities, and managing the IAP within their division. This role also involves coordinating with other divisions, evaluating critical functions within their division, and controlling the entry point. When an embedded safety officer or aide supports the tactical boss, the safety officer handles safety, accountability, air management, and work-rest cycles within the division. They also oversee on-deck and recycling companies, ensure personnel are properly turned out, and air supply. When there is not an embedded safety officer, the division boss must assume these responsibilities. When a chief officer is without an aide, the IC should assign another command or staff officer to this role. It's important to note that we must not take a company officer from their crew to fill this position. Each of these roles enhances incident operations and firefighter safety, but the most crucial responsibility of the division boss is to manage any mayday situations within their division. **BS**



Meet Doug Wehmeyer and learn how tactical bosses improve span of control at the 2024 Blue Card Hazard-Zone Conference Sept. 30–Oct. 4 in Cincinnati.

Doug Wehmeyer serves as the fire chief and village administrator in Lockland, Ohio. He is a Blue Card lead instructor, a Center for Public Safety Excellence accredited chief fire officer, and a graduate of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. Doug holds undergraduate degrees in fire science and fire service leadership and a master's degree in public administration. After serving six years as a company officer in the Woodlawn (Ohio) Fire Division and 22 years as a battalion chief and deputy fire chief in the Deerfield (Ohio) Township Fire Rescue Department, he returned to his hometown to take over as the fire chief for the fire department he grew up in. Doug is a second-generation firefighter, and his journey in firefighting began in 1989.

Tactical Boss Benefits

- ✓ Reduces the span of control and increases supervision of workers in critical positions.
- ✓ Positions a chief officer on the ground within the division.
- ✓ Manages division operations from within the warm zone, ensuring true entry-point control and reducing freelancing.
- ✓ Dedicates a set of eyes to evaluate conditions within the division.
- ✓ Enhances fireground accountability by transitioning from a first-due engine to an embedded safety officer within the division.
- ✓ Facilitates face-to-face communication within the division.
- ✓ Opens up radio traffic to ensure free airtime is available for priority communications, including mayday calls when necessary.
- ✓ Eliminates equipment issues with radio communication.
- ✓ Clarifies task-location-objective during the assignment of orders.
- ✓ Improves the accuracy of air management.
- ✓ Increases control over the work-rest cycle.

—D.W.