



Communication



Advancing Professional Rescue

Introduction >>>

This information provided in this module supports the foundation of incident command, and when applied contributes to a safe and effective casualty centred approach. The assumption is made that you are familiar with the six stages of an extrication, adopt a team approach, and are aware of the roles and responsibilities relating to extrication planning and managing safety. The focus of this unit is on communication during incidents, principally Road Traffic Collisions. However, the concepts covered can be applied to any incident.

Effective Communication >>>

Effective Communication is essential in all areas of life, but in operational incidents, it can be the difference between life and death. As it plays such an important role let's start by determining what constitutes good communication?

Put simply; it is when information has been exchanged and is understood in the way it was intended. On the incident ground, where communication can improve the quality, relevance and clarity of information transferred this exchange is essential. To assist in the process of exchanging information; there are some basic principles that when followed make up effective communication:

- Be clear. Avoid ambiguity by using commonly understood terms. This is especially important when working with other agencies. Remember, they might use different acronyms or phrases.
- Make it relevant and concise - Keeping communications short and to the point is essential during high-pressure situations. Too much information can overload the receiver, and the meaning can be lost. It is also important to only share information with the relevant individuals.
- Ensure it is timely - communications should be made at an appropriate point in time. To avoid distractions from critical tasks, consider how valuable the information is and the current demands being placed on the receiver.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions to provide clarity and never make assumptions - both the sender and receiver of information may have different interpretations of the message.
- Check that it is understood - This prevents misunderstanding and differences in shared situational awareness.
- Be assertive - There is a definite benefit to being firm to clarify meaning and test assumptions. Both confidence and status can affect the ability to be assertive under pressure.
- Listen – Active listening is essential, concentrate on content rather than delivery. Be mindful that pre-conceptions about the status of the person who is communicating may also affect listening.
- Match words and behaviours - People are always communicating, even when not using words. When verbal and non-verbal communications match, it helps people to make sense of the message.

Following these basic principles contributes to effective communication. Good communication assists in creating a safe environment, ensure actions are effective, support planning and ultimately save lives

Creating an environment for communication >>>

Supporting the basic principles of communication; there also needs to be an environment that facilitates a structure and flow to allow information to be exchanged. At an Incident, the environment is created by a practical arrangement such as:

- Gathering and sharing information
- Issuing instructions

- Receiving situation reports, and
- Engagement with other agencies.

At a Road Traffic Collision, the implementation of a command structure, the adoption of the team approach and application of the six stages of extrication provide the environment for these arrangements and facilitates the structure and flow. When established, these three elements provide the environment for a natural flow of communication between the Incident Commander, the crew, other emergency responders and the casualty. To further enhance communication standard arrangements are available such a briefing that allow a structured means of engaging with single individuals, fire service or multi-agency teams. The first briefing is often on-route to the incident, this process heightens during initial operations and continues throughout the incident and only concludes after a Post Event Review. The on-route, team briefing ensures there is an exchange of information about what is known from the available sources. This includes operational experience and training, messages from fire service control, site-specific risk information, standard operating procedures and local knowledge. Based on this information, some pre-determined assumptions can be made culminating in a range of initial actions. For example, the positions of cones and signs, setting up an equipment area, providing firefighting media, completing an outer survey and so on. When in attendance the Incident Commander ensures the scene is assessed as described in the 'initial scene assessment module'. Both during and on completion of this initial assessment the Incident Commander should communicate with both their crew and other emergency service responders that are in attendance.

It is a good practice where possible to gather the crew, and other appropriate responders to provide an update, exchange information and discuss planning options. By adopting this approach, Incident Commanders can ensure personnel know their tasks, the objectives and any critical safety information. These are examples, the nature and complexity of the incident determine the need, frequency and complexity of the debriefs. For instance, a single vehicle on its wheels is likely to mean that a pre-briefing may be straightforward. Whereas an incident involving several vehicles, by its nature incorporate higher risks and complexities, therefore call for a more comprehensive brief. It is also essential to debrief crews that have withdrawn from a working area during an incident. They are an excellent source of safety information, and this should not be overlooked.

These structured briefs increase safety and support operational activities. When appropriate, this information should be passed to fire service control. This ensures that an accurate picture of an incident is recorded. This organised approach of communicating allows crews and agencies to share information, discuss options and establish plans. It also provides an arena for receiving clear instructions. Without this structure, there is the potential for self-deployment of crews or for individuals to operate outside prescribed activities. Information, when transferred, should be constant and consistent. This safeguards that hazards are identified, the evidence is obtained and, it is shared and acknowledged. Therefore, it can be acted on at the appropriate time.

In a pressure situation, it is easy to misinterpret an instruction which could lead to misunderstandings. Although not often adopted in the fire and rescue service this can be overcome by using the process of repeating back any instructions or commands, followed by a confirmation. This technique is used extensively in the aviation industry and by surgeons during medical procedures to ensure that any information has been received correctly and there is no ambiguity. Although this may appear time-consuming, it can save time in the long run, by preventing unnecessary actions.

Summary >>>

- Effective Communication is essential at operational incidents.
- Good communication means that information has been understood in the way it was intended.
- Following basic principles helps ensure effective communication:
- Be clear - Make it relevant and concise - Ensure it is timely - Check that it is understood - Be assertive – Listen and Match words and behaviours. These principles need to be supported by an environment that provides a structure and allows communication to flow.
- At a Road Traffic Collision, the implementation of a command structure, the adoption of the team approach and application of the six stages of extrication provide the environment to communicate effectively.
- Briefing at critical points during the incident supports the communication structure allowing discussion, a transfer of information and planning. It also prevents self-deployment or individuals operating outside prescribed activities.
- Repeating back any instructions or commands prevents misunderstanding and confusion.