

# Fire Department Strategic Planning 101

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This post is intended to explain the basics of fire department strategic planning for those new to the concept. As a member of the fire service and believing that you have had a reasonable amount of training, you already make strategic plans and are probably effective at it, at least when it involves emergency operations. This posting is not intended to be one about emergency operations and is intended to be more about organizational development. But strategies for emergency operations are a good place to start the discussion because it is such familiar ground to everyone in the fire service today.

For nearly every type of emergency/incident response, our basic strategic plan has been listed as three strategic goals:

- Life Safety
- Incident Stabilization, and
- Property Conservation

This is as simple as it gets for most strategic plans for emergency incident response. It's the Tactical or Operational Plans with all of the details concerning what we must do to achieve the strategic goals that are the usual focus of most articles that mention strategies. I am going to get to the management side of strategic planning shortly but first want to expand the usual strategic plan with a few more essential strategies that are often taken for granted. That, however, creates some of the big picture strategies issues we face in today's fire service.

There are a couple more strategic issues that should not be forgotten (but are often taken for granted in some departments). The first additional strategic issue we face in an emergency incident is finding out that there is actually an emergency going on at the time and just exactly where the incident is occurring. Secondly, we have to get the right apparatus and personnel to the incident scene in time to make a difference in the outcome of the emergency incident. With these two strategic issues addressed, we can then start on the big three Incident Strategies: i.e. Life Safety, Incident Stabilization and Property Conservation. But these two issues really extend beyond an individual emergency incident and get to the heart of community-wide strategic issues.

These two issues are really about community needs and expectations as well as the acceptable level of risk the community is willing to accept. It gets into adoption of fire codes and how the community wants to develop over time. It involves basic community decision about the type of fire department the community wants, the number of fire stations it needs, and how the fire department will be staffed and equipped.

The question over the last few years in the fire service has been – “What about NIMS?” Are our planning efforts compliant with the requirements of the National Incident Management System

(NIMS)? In NIMS terminology, Incident Action Plans are really the department's plan for the next operational period of an on-going incident. An effective Incident Action Plan involves both a strategic components as well as a tactical component for the incident during the next defined time period of the incident, called an operational period. The overall incident objectives form (ICS form 202) describes the strategic plan for the incident and provides the guidance and direction for the overall incident. The "202" doesn't change much even if the incident lasts for days or weeks. The rest of the Incident Action Plan for each operational period is really the tactical plan for the next operational period. The ICS course, G-300 - Intermediate Incident Command for Expanding Incidents, is a course that is intended to instruct people in the process of creating a written Incident Action Plan. So, yes, strategic planning and operational planning are both NIMS compliant if completed effectively. Keeping NIMS compliant is an on-going process so if your department needs assistance in this area, contact me. I'll either help directly or provide you with my recommendations.

We need to build on our experiences involving emergency operations for the non-emergency components of our fire departments and apply the organized common sense throughout the organization. The question is – where should a strategic planning effort start?

Strategic plans simply address the issues or problems we face in our fire department today and in the foreseeable future. If we can identify the strategic issues we face, the strategies follow easily. Therefore, strategic planning is can be thought of as a process designed to identify those big picture issues we are facing now and in an undefined future. Dr. John Bryson, author of *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, describes strategic planning as "organized common sense". Strategic plans provide guidance and direction. Specific plans explaining how to solve a problem or what to do about a particular situation involves creating tactical plans or Incident Action Plans. These plans should be SMART. SMART is an acronym designed to suggest that operational plans are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-oriented and Time-limited. Over time, different sources are starting to "alter" the acronym to put their own "twist" on the concept so don't worry if you see this explained differently in the future. For emergency incidents, we usually call them tactical plans or incident action plans. For management or non-emergency purposes, we refer to them as operational plans.

Leaving emergency operations behind, the fire service, as a whole, is pretty good at operational planning. The traditional long-range plans, medium-range plans, short-range plans, and action plans are the normal menu of an organization's fire planning efforts even though many departments use the for-profit explanations for these different planning time horizons. I advocate using different definitions and justifications in public safety agencies, including fire departments.

Today, real strategic planning efforts have spread through many fire departments. An effective strategic plan or a master plan is required before the Commission on Fire Service Accreditation can accredit a fire department. That is just one of many requirements for accreditation but it is a key to a successful future. This requirement has resulted in many more fire departments spending the time to develop effective and well-designed strategic plans and master plans. I view a master plan as a combination of the department's strategic plan and operational plans. So, a strategic plan is really one component of a master plan.

Many “strategic plans” that I reviewed in years past were really operational plans and just called a strategic plan. If your organization has not started planning strategically, you can expect it in your not-to-distant future. If you don’t know how to proceed, I can help facilitate your planning process and/or train your planning team as they work through the processes.

In my book, *Fire Department Strategic Planning: Creating Future Excellence*, I explain a suggested strategic planning process as well as provide a details process how to conduct a strategic planning process using the Fire Department Strategic Planning Model.

Fire fighters, like any group of people, have a set of operating principles that are called values or principles. These are standards of behavior that every person adheres to because it’s how they were brought up and it’s how they have decided to live their lives individually. No matter what, a person will stick to their value system throughout their life whether or not they recognize that this is what they are doing at the time behavioral choices are made.

Collectively, the people of an organization share certain core values, like honesty and integrity. The first step in understanding any organization and the strategic issues it faces is to have a good understanding of the values those in the organization share and will live by at all times. Understanding the common shared values of the members of a fire department will shape the organization as it faces and operates in the future.

Fire Departments don’t exist in order to give a bunch of nice people someplace to go and interact with other people or have a good job for life. Fire departments exist because our communities have decided (and learned from bad experiences) that an organization must exist to deal with the fires, floods, tornados, tropical storms, winter storms and other tragedies or emergencies of life. The fire service’s “menu” of services has changed over time because the community has identified changing needs and it was decided that their fire department could and should provide services to meet those needs. These services were developed and later enacted as laws, statutes, ordinances, city charters, regulations and other forms of mandates that codify the role of the fire department in a community. An important part of our job is to understand what we are mandated to do and what needs our community has that we can fill. Then what do we have to do to effectively deliver those services within the community.

Today, fire departments are expected to many things in a “business-like” manner but we must remember that there are many differences between the approach of a “for-profit” business and the approaches required to successfully achieve our goals as a fire department. Using strategic planning process designed for “for-profit” business has many shortcomings when you try to force them into the fire service. So planning processes developed by firefighters for use by the fire service will have more effective results. This is why I developed the Fire Department Strategic Planning Model over 20 years ago. I continue my work to improve my processes with the goal of assisting fire departments as they create excellence.

Many fire departments turn to an independent facilitator to help drive their process so that the champions and planning team members from within the department can fully participate in the planning process. This is at the foundation of my consulting efforts in this area. Although hiring an outside consultant to assist with your strategic plan processes comes at a cost, the return on

your investment will likely prove that the benefits far outweigh those costs. There is also a range of options available since every fire department today has significant budgetary constraints and assistance levels must be balanced with available funding.

Finally, the strategic planning process is just entertainment unless it results in action and creates organizational change. Actions result from effective Operational Planning and the best Operational Plans are developed using the guidance provided in the Strategic Plan. There is a planning continuum that must exist with the action plans on one end and the strategic plan at the other end. What the organization is doing today will impact the direction of the department in the future and should be detailed in your Master Plan.

This Master Plan can be thought of as the “Incident Action Plan” for the overall fire department with a time horizon reaching from today for the action plan to the indefinite future of the strategic plan. Developing an effective strategic planning process within your fire department is an important part of creating future excellence within your department. It will provide the guidance and direction needed to create future excellence rather than responding to changes after it has occurred. It will help your department pick the best path for the future.

This posting just scratches the surface and was intended to get you thinking strategically as well as providing a starting point/refreshers as you continue to work strategically toward creating excellence within your department. For more information, see [www.fireeagleconsulting.com](http://www.fireeagleconsulting.com) or contact me at [mark@fireeagleconsulting.com](mailto:mark@fireeagleconsulting.com).