

Fire Engineering®

Improving the Operational Planning Process

BY BILLY SCHMIDT

The fire service is entering an era of "do more with less." Even while many fire departments remain understaffed, they are still expected to be more efficient. The challenge for fire service organizations is to save time, focus on the real issues, and effectively communicate their vision to all members. It takes everyone in the organization to generate efficiency. Doing this means improving the operational planning process within the fire department. Below is a brief description of an approach in which fire department planners can narrow their scope on what's important and ensure the rapid flow of information and operational requirements to execute safely, effectively, and efficiently. The goal of this practice is to solicit cross-domain expertise to improve fire department operational planning.

TOP DOWN VS. BOTTOM UP

Every organization operates from two, often disconnected, strategies. The *directed strategy* comes from the "top" of the organization (i.e., the fire department administrators) and is directed down the chain of command. It is what they believe the organization should focus on. The *emergent strategy* attempts to rise up from the bottom, where the field personnel (e.g., firefighters, dispatchers, inspectors, investigators, educators, and so forth) operate at the point of delivery. This field group drives the actual decisions and behaviors of the organization.

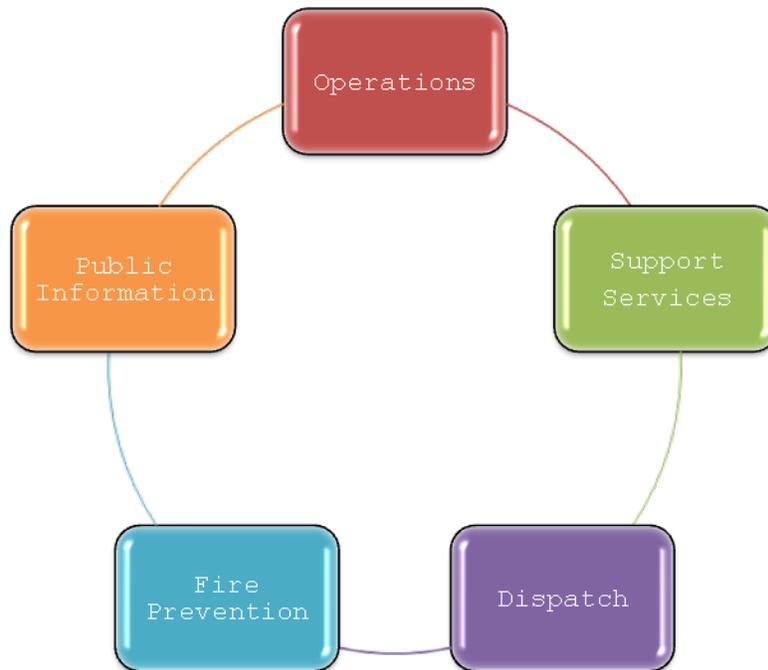


Figure 1. Operational Planning

Operational planning should involve all fire department systems for effectiveness.

Obviously, anything dropped downward from the top has gravity on its side, which creates a force that's difficult to contend with. Raising something up from the bottom is always harder, especially if no one is there to catch it. Hence, there needs to be *strategic integrity* in which the emergent and directed strategies become one and the same. To do that, the right people need to meet often enough to discuss the right issues and solutions.

PLANNERS

Fire department leaders need to see things through their members' eyes. Hence, the first step and the one in which countless fire departments fail is to identify the true operational planners. Many fire departments tend to complete their operational planning at the top, excluding the subject matter experts (SME) who are best positioned to present current organizational issues that can synchronize operational requirements to perform safely, effectively, and efficiently. Those SMEs are the field personnel operating every day on the front lines. Change, or implementing a plan, occurs at the level where the business of the business is actually performed (firefighting, emergency medical service, dispatching, inspections, investigations, and various support services), not at the top where the ideas begin. Successful execution of a plan requires buy-in from all members within the organization.

A fire department, like any organization, is made up of a variety of systems working together to produce a product or service. The planning should be a collaboration of these various systems that make up the fire department: the operations division, support services, dispatch, fire prevention and investigation, and public information and education. Understanding the primary focus of the various leadership roles within each of these systems is just as important.

Every system in a fire department includes three levels of leadership, and it takes all three levels, working in unison, to bring a plan to life. The administrative chiefs work at the *organizational level* primarily on creating the future; they are more supportive and less operational.

The operational chiefs, or shift commanders, operate at the *process level*, overseeing the daily operations of the system and communicating and monitoring change; they are supportive and operational.

Finally, the company officers, supervisors, firefighters, paramedics, and so forth, work at the *performance level*, where the operations on the street actually happen.

Creating the future and change may begin at the top, but real change occurs at the performance level, or the point of delivery, which is on the street. Therefore, input and participation from all members, especially those at the process and performance levels, is needed to execute the department's plans.

IMPACT ON OTHERS

Effective operational planning requires a holistic view of performance, one in which each group has an opportunity to address its specific concerns. For example, a fire department is purchasing and implementing an automated dispatch program that will immediately move units to empty zones for coverage. Implementing and operating this new program will impact the various groups within the fire department differently.

The operations division, including dispatch and field personnel, will confront new procedures that may place more apparatus on the road simultaneously, increasing radio traffic and interrupting daily objectives such as company inspections and training.

Support services, which maintains the apparatus, may have to adjust maintenance schedules and repairs to meet the resulting increase in mileage on apparatus.

Administration may have to modify operating budget requirements and contracts to cover an increase in fuel costs.

Because members from different parts of the organization often don't sufficiently understand the operational impact on other groups, it's important to maintain continuous dialogue and cross-domain input at all levels to enhance the development and improvement of the planning process.

FREQUENCY

How much do fire department leaders really know about the needs of their members and customers? How do they ask, and how often do they ask? How often should fire department leaders meet to discuss their plans? Well, it depends on what was learned and implemented from previous meetings and plans. It depends on what environmental forces are in play at the time such as budget cuts, political or legislative changes, or some kind of catastrophic event. It depends on how serious fire department leaders are about doing the right thing for the organization, the members, and the community.

Annual or biannual planning meetings are good but may not be enough. Many plans discussed at these meetings tend to get lost in the communication process when the participants return to their organizational areas. Because of the dynamic challenges fire departments face today, it is imperative to develop a continuous dialogue at all levels of the organization that allows for a free flow of information that focuses on operational plans and requirements, tactical subject matter expertise, and strategic oversight from the department's administration.

Bringing together fire department members, including staff and SMEs, to discuss current issues, to look at future issues, and to provide solutions is invaluable for developing a departmentwide understanding of operational requirements while providing visibility for emerging technology and tactics.

CONTINUOUS DIALOGUE

Continuous dialogue among all fire department levels (organizational, process, and performance) will enhance the development and improvement of the operational planning process. Meeting for no more than two hours every month, the representatives of the performance and process levels can present current operational issues that may require review and be of interest to the organizational level and can request subject matter expertise from SMEs representing every system in the organization. In addition, representatives from the organizational level can present current and future issues that are important for the administration of the fire department while providing support and oversight for all of the strategies. This continuous dialogue can synchronize the multitude of fire department issues with the operational planning requirements. Continuous and open meetings that include representatives from all organizational levels can dramatically improve planning capacity; increase information flow through all levels and systems; keep the SMEs apprised of current fire department requirements; and ensure up-to-date operations, support, and training.

In this day of "do more with less," how can fire departments ensure the rapid flow of information and operational requirements in their organization? Practicing continuous dialogue and cross-domain expertise will improve fire department operational planning. This method for planning will influence the operations and success at all three levels and within all systems in the organization. Synchronization and integration of collaboratively developed ideas in the organization will enable fire departments to be safer, more effective, and more efficient when providing service to the community.

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