

What Is Unified Command?

When a response involves a multi-agency or multi-jurisdictional approach, the Incident Command leadership of the response effort expands into a Unified Command. The Unified Command is a structure that brings together the Incident Commanders of the major organizations involved in the incident in order to coordinate an effective response, while at the same time allowing each to carry out their own jurisdictional, legal, and functional responsibilities.

The Unified Command links the organizations responding to the incident and provides a forum for these entities to make consensual decisions. Under the Unified Command, the various jurisdictions and/or agencies and non-government responders should blend together throughout the Incident Command System to create an integrated response team.

The Unified Command is responsible for overall management of the incident. Members of the Unified Command work together to develop a common set of incident objectives and strategies, share information, maximize the use of available resources, and enhance the efficiency of the individual response organizations.

When should a Unified Command be used?

Unified Command may be used whenever multiple jurisdictions are involved in a response effort. These jurisdictions could be represented by:

- Geographic boundaries (e.g., two states, or Federally recognized Indian tribe land); Governmental levels (e.g., local, state, or Federal);
- Functional responsibilities (e.g., fire fighting, oil spill response, or Emergency Medical Services); or
- Statutory responsibilities (e.g., Federal land or resource managers, potentially responsible party [PRP] under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act or Oil Pollution Act of 1990, and California's Office of Spill Prevention and Response legislation).

Members of the Unified Command have decision-making authority for the response. To be considered for inclusion in the Unified Command, the representative's organization should:

- Have jurisdictional authority or functional responsibility under a law or ordinance for the incident;
- Have an area of responsibility that is affected by the incident or response operations;
- Have the regulatory authority for commanding, coordinating, or managing a major aspect of the response; and
- Have the resources, including funds, to support participation in the response organization.

The makeup of the Unified Command may change as an incident progresses to account for changes as the response transitions out of the emergency phase and into long-term cleanup, and resulting changes in jurisdictional responsibilities.

How is Unified Command formed?

Frequently, the first responders to arrive at the scene of an incident are emergency response personnel from local fire and police departments. The majority of local responders are familiar with ICS and are likely to establish one immediately. As local, state, Federal, and private party responders arrive on-scene for multi-jurisdictional incidents, responders would integrate into the response organization and establish a Unified Command to direct the expanded organization. Although the role of local and state responders can vary depending on state laws and practices, local responders will usually be part of the Unified Command.

Unified Command members bring their authorities to the Unified Command, as well as the resources to carry out their responsibilities. Members in a Unified Command have a responsibility to the Unified Command, and also to their respective agency or organization. These individuals do not relinquish agency authority, responsibility, or accountability. Instead, the addition of a Unified Command to the ICS enables responders to carry out their own responsibilities while working cooperatively within one response management system. For an oil or hazardous materials (hazmat) incident, the Unified Command generally consists of a pre-designated Federal On-Scene Coordinator (FOSC), the state On-Scene Coordinator (SOSC), the Incident Commander for the PRP, and the Local On-Scene Coordinator (LOSC).

Generally, for spills on Federal lands or resources (such as parks, refuges, marine sanctuaries, etc), Federal land and resource managers have authorities and responsibilities comparable to those of local and state responders and Indian tribes. For this reason, Federal land and resource managers should be invited to participate in the Unified Command for spills on Federal lands and resources under their control. Similarly, for incidents on tribal lands of Federally recognized Indian tribes, a representative from the Indian tribe should be invited to participate in the Unified Command.

Responsibilities of the Unified Command

The following is a list of responsibilities or practices that the Unified Command of any response should perform or assign to the appropriate members of the Command or General Staffs:

- Develop mutually agreed-upon incident objectives, response strategies, and priorities;
- Review and approve Incident Action Plans;
- Agree on the appropriate Command and General Staff position assignments to ensure clear direction for on-scene tactical resources;
- Assign objectives to the appropriate staff; Agree on an incident response organization;
- Engage the media with a unified voice. If established, this may be accomplished through an Information Officer or Joint Information Center (JIC);
- Direct the response;
- Ensure integration of response organizations into the ICS/UC;
- Establish procedures for joint decision-making and documentation;
- Agree on logistical support procedures and coordinate resources, as appropriate;
- Agree on cost-sharing procedures, as appropriate;
- Coordinate effective communication; and

- Ensure worker and public health and safety.

How does the Unified Command make decisions?

The Unified Command does not operate under "decision by committee." The principals are there to direct the incident response. Time is of the essence. The Unified Command should develop synergy based on the capabilities that are brought to bear by the various representatives. There should be personal acknowledgement of each representative's unique capabilities, a shared understanding of the situation, and agreement on the National Response Team (NRT) Unified Command Technical Assistance Document 11 common objectives. With the different perspectives among members of the Unified Command comes the risk of disagreements, most of which can be resolved through an understanding of the underlying issues.

Contentious issues may arise, but the Unified Command framework provides a forum and a process to resolve problems and find solutions. If situations arise where members of the Unified Command cannot reach consensus, the Unified Command member representing the agency with primary jurisdiction over the issue would normally be deferred for the final decision. Issues that need further interagency discussion may be referred to the Regional Response Team (RRT).

The bottom line is that the Unified Command has certain responsibilities, as noted above. While the Unified Command structure is an excellent (and the only nationally recognized) vehicle for coordination, cooperation, and communication, the Unified Command members must make the system work successfully. A strong Unified Command is essential to an effective response.

What are the advantages of Unified Command?

Unified Command integrates the Responsible Party, local, state, and Federal response efforts—through common structures, training, and joint exercises—to ensure safer and more effective incident response. National Incident Management System identifies the following advantages of a Unified Command:

- A single set of objectives is developed for the entire incident;
- A collective approach is used to develop strategies to achieve incident objectives;
- Information flow and coordination is improved among all jurisdictions and agencies involved in the incident;
- All agencies with responsibility for the incident have an understanding of joint priorities and restrictions;
- No agency's legal authorities will be compromised or neglected; and
- The combined efforts of all agencies are optimized as they perform their respective assignments under a single IAP.

Additional advantages identified by the NRT and others are that a Unified Command:

- Allows multiple stakeholder involvement in the decision making process;
- Includes the RRT as a valuable resource to obtain consensus when the Unified Command cannot;

- Includes local government Incident Commanders as key participants in establishing Unified Command;
- Allows for collective approval of operations, logistics, planning, and finance activities; and
- Allows for shared facilities, reducing response costs, maximizing efficiency, and minimizing communication breakdowns.