

A Guest's Glance

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions

by Chief Armando Bevelacqua

How often have you wondered why some company officers come to a decision so easily and others seem to have a problem with the decision some point in the process. Alternatively, you arrive on the scene of an emergency and the orders seem to flow with the incident, while at other incidents everything seems to move in the opposite direction of what should have occurred? The decision making process is sometimes thought of as a complicated operation, when in fact if a few principles are maintained the process can become second nature.

We could argue that this process is a combination of the experience and education one possesses. The experience is historical and thus the reparation of the incident has a bearing on the decision. While others state that the education of an officer will provide the skills that are required to proceed in the process. In actuality, it is a little of both. You can have the most experienced officer with the highest level of education and the decision making process may seem inappropriate. This is due to the fact that one must use the knowledge gained through reparation and education as a resource when making a decision. However, the process does not stop there. It is continuous. For example, you arrive on the scene of a well-involved house fire. You give your report and order the appropriate action. The firefighters engage in the action, yet the action is not putting the fire out. You order another action, and for our story here we have pulled one – 1¾ inch attack line without effect so we order another 1¾ attack line. Again, the fire is not going out. Why?

The answer lies in our approach. So many times I have been to fires where the same diameter attack line is pulled, a second one is pulled of same size, and yet a third one is pulled and the fire dances around the firefighters. The key to the problem is the process and how we utilize it. Let us look at our scenario again. You arrive on scene and analyze the incident. The officer has a plan and sets of actions and in this case, an attack. The plan is placed into action or implemented. This is where most fire officer's fail. At this point, they analyze their approach. Here instead of analyzing the plan and implementation, an evaluation should be done. If the initial plan worked and the fire is going out or is placed at bay, then the first analysis was the correct plan. It worked and the implementation of that plan was appropriate.

The system here is the APIE decision making process. Simply put, it is a decision making process by which we make an Analysis, Plan a method of attack, Implement this plan, and lastly evaluate the progress of the analysis, the plan and the implementation. If we look at the common method by which we look at problems in the fire service, we can see that we basically look at issues in the same light. We simply place different names to the process. For example, we see that our approach to an operation needs some common ground. In this case, we devise a set of plans or what is commonly referred to as standard

operating guidelines. From here, we train, while at the same time refining our approach. By looking at this simplified example, we can see that the same process of Analyze, Plan, Implement and Evaluation has occurred. Taking this common process a step further we see that once the SOG, training and refinement has meet our expectation, we then place it into application in the real world. If this application works (or seems to work) then the operation is critiqued and refined using the input of the responders with the observation of the command staff. If issues are brought forward, then a revision is placed into the plan. In essence, what has occurred is the APIE system of decision making.

However, this system we have dissected into rational parts of the process, is not a linear thought process. It is actually a continuum of thought with a constant movement in time. Let us look at this using an analogy. Take for example a slinky. If we look at this toy, we can see the relationship between the concept of APIE and the movement in time. Looking at the beginning of the slinky, we can see that it starts say at the 12:00 position. As we move towards the 3:00 position, we can now make the analogy of moving from the analysis position of the problem into the planning stage. Moving from three O'clock towards the 6 o'clock point, we have now gone from the planning stage into the implementation. On to 9 o'clock, we have moved into the evaluation component. But wait, we are at the 12 o'clock position but not at the same point in which we started, thus a different point in time.

All decisions follow this movement through the cycle of process, yet because of the continuous movement of time we never truly end up at the same place. In one sense, we have learned and in the other, we have evaluated the work that in most cases is always in progress. An accident, fire or technical rescue is not any different. In each emergency scene, the process of analysis, plan, implementation and evaluation is a continuous process one the moves with the incident and we as responders engage in a dance of decision-making.

Continuing our analogy, we can see that as the scene progresses and becomes more complicated, this decision making process seems to accelerate. The analysis, planning and implementation become, or seem to be one single moment in time. In addition, it is here, as stated before, that we seem to see the breakdown of the incident; that is the evaluation or better yet the re-evaluation of the process. Here, as in most decision-making, the evaluation (re-evaluation) is the pulse of the operation. Going back to the slinky, we can see that we have moved through the process in time analyzing, planning, implementing the plan and evaluating. However, lets look at this from a more global perspective and place the slinky end to end. Our imaginary slinky seems neither to have a beginning nor an end. We can say that at our imaginary beginning is the start of the incident and at the end is our termination. However, in a global sense, our beginning is the training we provide to our personnel, which is inclusive of the company inspection, preplanning and fire safety check. In essence, we are creating this slinky never to utilize the next level, which is the knowledge we have gained by performing the company inspection, preplan or safety check. However, if the situation is brought to light we have done our "homework" in order to provide the expected appropriate decision making process.

If we get right down to it, the APIE decision-making process is a slinky in a circle. As we process the information in order to provide the decision, we have moved through time, learning and acquiring knowledge as we go. As the process moves from the pre-incident stage into the mitigation and into the termination phase, the slinky has gone full circle. The decision making process has gone full circle and the completion of the slinky in a circle is the representation of this entire process of analyzing, planning, implementing and evaluating all emergency scenes.