



Scratchline

A lesson is truly learned when we modify our behavior to reflect what we now know.



The LLC staff recently interviewed eight Logistics Section Chiefs from around the United States regarding their notable successes, difficult challenges, effective safety practices, training recommendations and unresolved issues in the Logistics Section. Special thanks are extended to these Logistics Section Chiefs for sharing their significant lessons and practices with the wildland fire community.

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Notable Successes

Customer Service Ethic is Essential

A good "customer service" ethic represents the common ingredient of most successes in Logistics. One Logistics Section Chief (LSC) notes one of the best pieces of advice they ever received, to "always remember why you are here—to support the line." In today's world, an effective LSC would expand that advice to "Logistics, remember why you are here: to support the incident." According to this experienced hand, no one, not firefighters, team members, contractors, or cooperators expects perfection, but they do want to know that someone is doing their best to listen to their concerns and responsively meet their needs.

Meeting people's needs can range from simple things like mentioning quiet hours in sleeping areas during the morning briefing or making lunches available on time; to major things such as relocating a base camp in time for a community event or avoiding damage to the local school soccer field by adjusting the camp layout. He advises Logistics chiefs to listen closely to what people are saying, make note of what they find important, and try hard to respond to their concerns and fix what needs to be fixed. He gets back to people and explains the actions he took, even if unsuccessful. When the LSC commits to a service mindset, success will occur, even when facing complex challenges.

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9/11 Response - New York City
Photo Courtesy of Jerry Hensley

Logistics Role During 9/11

During the response to the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center (WTC), one Type I IMT, assigned to supply equipment to four caches around the World Trade Center site, worked out of Pier 36 on the East River. The Logistics Section served a full range of logistical needs, including establishing a radio repeater on top of the Empire State Building. The Deputy Logistics Section Chief (DLSC) ran the operations, while the LSC worked with the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) at Pier 90 on the Hudson River, where the daily routine consisted of communicating the needs of the workers at the caches and developing action plans to meet those needs.

The LSC worked with police officers assigned the task of supporting the workers at the WTC. The LSC's lack of familiarity with the needs, communication styles, and attitudes of the police personnel represented an enormous challenge. However, after a week of ensuring that the supply process was up and running smoothly, the LSC felt himself a proud member of the OEM, due to his ability to develop a working relationship with the OEM.

Assisting Employees After a Hurricane

When assigned to assist fellow agency personnel, who are victims of disaster, an assignment becomes more personal than most. For example, while doing hurricane recovery work at Big Thicket National Park and Preserve during Hurricanes Ike and Rita, a National Park Service (NPS) all risk IMT was tasked to assist both Park operations and NPS employees. The IMT worked with NPS employees and their dependents who had evacuated from their homes due to flooding and other effects of the hurricanes. The LSC evaluated the conditions of people's homes and set up hotel accommodations for NPS staff. The ability to keep one's personal feelings in check proves key during an incident such as this.

Playing Dual Roles in Logistics

The state of Maine Incident Management Team (IMT) also deploys nationally as either a Type III IMT or short Type II IMT. When mobilizing nationally, they do so with eight to twelve members. Consequently, this IMT often ends-up managing the Logistics function with a small number of people; typically two people. By doing so, and keeping other staffing small, this IMT keeps logistics costs low compared to a full IMT. This team mobilizes with Type II qualified personnel, and they succeed at managing large incidents with few people, and significant cost savings.

Using Logistical Staging Areas

Immediately following Hurricane Katrina, members of one IMT, with hurricane recovery experience, found themselves tasked to establish a logistical staging area at Stennis Space Center in Slidell, LA, where the hurricane had wiped out the original staging area. The team's logistics section prepared parking for 600-900 trucks as well as showers and food for the truckers. Points of Distribution (PODs) held supplies for delivery to the public, and the IMT succeeded at keeping the trucks inventoried, fueled and stocked with supplies while tracking them 24 hours per day. People received supplies when they needed them with very few delays.

Last year, the State of Texas requested the same IMT during Hurricane Ike. The team moved into Galveston and set up a camp that provided food, showers, laundry and supplies for the emergency workers.

While the Red Cross and Salvation Army fed the hurricane victims, the IMT fed the Red Cross and Salvation Army volunteers and managed operations behind the scenes, allowing Texas state employees to have time to take care of their own personal, hurricane-related needs.

During hurricanes, IMTs often receive assignments like these, and they differ from the fire assignments that most IMTs typically manage. Consequently, IMTs need to prepare for diverse assignments in addition to fires. Because they may manage emergencies ranging from response to a terrorist attack in New York to mouse infestations in Florida, IMT personnel must prepare to adapt to extremely diverse environments. Consequently, LSCs need versatility to adapt to changing environments.



Logistics Staging Area

Photo Courtesy of David Utley's Type II IMT

Use ALL the Talent Around You

One LSC recalls having a bus driver assigned to an incident who was not content sitting around waiting for an assignment. The driver kept asking the Ground Support Unit Leader (GSUL) for work, but the frazzled GSUL could not think of anything for the driver to do. The driver then asked the LSC for work. The LSC inquired why the GSUL appeared frazzled and the GSUL responded with a verbal list of outstanding tasks that needed to be immediately completed. On the list, a need to place signs on the highways, fire roads, and intersections but the sign kit had not come with the cache vans. The bus driver offered to create the signs.

With little instruction, the driver went to the cardboard pile by the supply cache, asked the cache for marking pens and went to work. Deciding the signs were too hard to see or read, the driver asked the cache for some paint or brighter markers. They managed to find some bright paint; before too long, well-lettered, readable, nice-looking signs arose all over camp, at the helibase, on the highway, and with the help of personnel driving to the fire, at all the fire intersections. This bus driver made maps of the area, drove all the fire routes to identify which roads large trucks and busses would have difficulty on, marked the turn-around areas with signs for these large vehicles, and even gave the operational briefings to other drivers.

After several days the driver recommended a one way travel plan which worked better than previously devised plans. This one driver made a significant difference in driver and firefighter safety. Additionally, the entire ground support unit learned a tremendous amount. Remember to look beyond regular staff for those who can help get some jobs done.

Difficult Challenges

Remain Calm and Think Clearly

Most experienced LSCs have worked across a wide range of situations from primitive rural to complex urban; from a skeletal base camp to a small city; each bringing about different challenges. Those challenges relating to health and safety issues seem to prove the most difficult, both logistically and emotionally. For that reason, one experienced LSC recommends creating a medical plan before the first operational period, including what people need to know in order to respond in an emergency. This experienced logistics expert recommends working closely with the team's safety officer and putting the information that responders need in writing as part of the plan and use a good example from a previous incident, if one exists, as a template.

Keeping a Finger on the Pulse

Performance issues and personality conflicts can present challenges in the Logistics section. Stress always exists during incidents, but becomes even more difficult when members of the group sow seeds of discontent. Problems may include lack of performance, letting others down, making the unit look bad, and focusing on themselves rather than doing their job and supporting the operation. Sometimes someone can disrupt the team simply because they are an unhappy person or because they are unconcerned about others' feelings. The manner in which the LSC deals with these situations can make or break the incident. Morale and teamwork join together as forces that the LSC must balance regularly, but delicately. "Keeping a finger on the pulse" proves critical. When problems arise, and dealing with them effectively proves difficult, ask for the help and advice of human resource specialists accompanying the IMT.

Working with Multiple Jurisdictions

The State of Connecticut governs by “home rule.” In other words, 169 cities and towns have a great deal of autonomous authority. Factor in state and federal responsibilities, and many territorial issues can come to life for IMTs to contend with. Getting all the players to play well together can present a challenge. An IMT expecting to operate in this environment, or others like it should train to work in ways that enable them to learn the capabilities of the many people and agencies with which they may come in contact. When operating in unusual environments, strive to make sure assignments are as crystal clear as possible, to both the LSC and the entire section.

One LSC works in an urban and suburban environment and sees that applying the concepts of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS) works fine, but a lot of the training is oriented to wildfire or rural environments. Be able to scale NIMS and ICS to the operation at hand. Reading after action reviews (AAR) and lessons learned is a great way to discover where the holes are before you fall in them.

Radio Communications Challenges

Inadequate radio communications can bring safe firefighting to a quick halt. On a fire on the Snake River, one IMT experienced difficulty achieving adequate radio communications with a system based on the Forest Net. A strike team of radio technicians tried to establish a communications system for the incident, but still could not establish a functioning communications system after two days. The LSC uncovered the problem, but could not resolve it in the field. He communicated directly with communications experts at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise to correct the problem. Three hours later the complex system was in place and functioning.

Dealing with Sensitive Issues

In August of 2008, seven firefighters lost their lives in a helicopter accident while fighting fire on the Iron 44 Complex in northern California. While serving on a NIMO team during the Iron 44 Memorial in Oregon, the home state of the firefighters, the Logistics Section handled logistical support for families. The Logistics Section located the facility for the memorial and handled stage set up while the Operations Section scheduled an aircraft fly-over and the procession, as well as acting as the liaisons to families by helping to get them to Medford for the service. The team wanted to do everything possible for these families in their time of grief, but faced a difficult challenge in that agency rules and policies remain unclear. In some cases agency policy was vague, while in other cases, government regulations clearly prohibited agency involvement. This situation created raw nerves and required diplomatic approaches, including keeping communications open, and doing pulse checks on individuals.

Preplanning a Base Camp Move

One LSC experienced, firsthand, the need to quickly move a base camp to avoid a dangerous situation. Their IMT arrived at a fire assignment, taking charge of a previously established base camp. The Operations Section set up trigger points for camp. When the fire hit a trigger point, each IMT member in camp had tasks to do automatically. Meanwhile, the Base Camp Manager located a new camp location and Operations Section personnel helped break down the camp and set up the new camp. The night before, notification went out to the IMT camp members to gather and prepare their personal gear for movement. During the night, the fire made a run and embers began coming into camp. Immediately after breakfast the next morning, base camp was moved a few miles down the road. The entire base camp move took six hours from break down to set up in the new location. The preparation and organization from the Logistics Section enabled the quick move.



Large Base Camp
Photo Courtesy of Bill Hamilton

Effective Practices

Handling Pre-Orders Before Arriving

In most circumstances the LSC places a pre-order through expanded dispatch prior to leaving their home unit, and having pre-orders on hand when the IMT arrives at the incident proves invaluable. More often than not, the LSC knows what the team needs, including things like office supplies, vehicles and telephone lines, before they arrive. Plan and prepare pre-orders ahead of time, and create different pre-orders for different types of incidents, including non-wildland fire assignments.

Every LSC should also have an initial order form that lists the kind and type of resources that the incident may need. By using this form after the initial briefing with the IC and agency administrator, the team can go over the list to verify what the operations section will require and what is acceptable. These lists provide a memory jogging tool, from which the command and general staff can select what they need, providing a perfect opportunity to expedite ordering of supplies, making the LSC job more effective.

One LSC takes a business card holder to organize their contacts at the incident, and help show others where to purchase from. When operating in an unfamiliar area, learn the sources. While items may come from a seemingly unusual source, local personnel may know sources for supplies that the LSC may not consider. Always try to save money by ordering and purchasing smart, rather than sacrificing needed items. If a team is already on the incident, call ahead to find out what sources they are using, what the weather is like and what to bring along. As an alternative, call the local unit of the receiving agency or sheriff's office before arrival.

Recycling Oil from an Incident

Look for creative solutions to saving resources and money. For example, before leaving a fire, all petroleum based fuels must be purged from any equipment going into cache trailers, such as chainsaws and generators. During one assignment, the LSC took approximately 400 gallons of this used oil and transferred it to the local forest, which used the oil in a multi-fuel heater, saving the forest thousands of dollars. Making this standard practice after fires and in maintenance shops would continuously save money.

Regularly Communicate with Operations

One LSC feels surprise when they hear logistics personnel say they do not talk to their Operations counterparts very often. He recommends seeking out and talking with the Operations Section Chief at least once every operational period as a standard operating practice. A focused discussion with the Operations Section Chief enables the LSC to find out what is needed, document any changes since the planning meeting, discuss where operations are planned for the future, and note any special needs looming. This simple and obvious practice has saved the day on many occasions and sometimes serves to remind the Operations personnel of important information they meant to tell the Logistics Section but had forgotten. These few minutes of conversation prove important to Operations personnel as well, encouraging effective communication that makes their job easier and their operation smoother.



Face to Face Meeting
Photo Courtesy of Maine Type III IMT

Face to Face Meetings Pay Off

A LSC must facilitate effective relationships between themselves, the Supervisory Dispatcher, Center Manager, Buying Team Lead, and the Contracting Officer; relationships that prove professional, cordial, and frank. An effective LSC knows that there exists no way around this and no short cuts to take. Build these relationships early and be sure to praise people's good work. Hold a face-to-face meeting with the personnel at the expanded dispatch center to learn how they run their shop. Put a face to a name and let dispatch get to know your logistics section personnel. If possible meet some of the buying team members as well. Ask questions such as "How do you want orders to come?" They may say "If you just want supplies a ready message form is fine, but if you need cache items or overhead, put it on a standard resource request form." Having this knowledge and knowing how each dispatcher works helps to get things done much more efficiently.

Daily Section Meetings are Important

Two experienced LSCs find it important to have a meeting with the members of the Logistics Section members every day, letting each unit leader discuss the issues they are working on, so that everyone in Logistics knows what the other units are doing. With everyone on the same page, people can work together much more effectively and the section is more likely to be successful.

They try to hold their meetings at the same time each day, around eight PM, which seems to work well to download events of the day and ensure the section is ready for the next day. When these briefings do not occur, communication breaks down quickly and the teamwork, cooperation and coordination that is so important, suffers. According to these experienced hands, high performing teams make these briefings part of their routine; keep the briefings focused and on task, but also strive to make them enjoyable. They say that after these briefings, everyone gets back to work in a better frame of mind. Sharing key information with each other keeps the logistics section on the same page, identifies areas of overlapping responsibilities or issues to resolve, and keys the unit leaders and LSC into the latest news, as well as the information that might lead to future actions or needed changes. It always helps to have more "eyes and ears" offering their perspective to ensure the entire logistics section meets the present and future needs of the incident and it helps the LSC make better, more informed decisions.

Value of a Clear and Focused Plan

When providing support to the firefighters, helibase, and IMT, a LSC with a small staff needs a clear, focused plan. Developing the plan together with the Operations Section and projecting the plan out three days enables both the Operations and Logistics Sections to effectively provide for firefighter safety and support. With a three day plan, a LSC can set priorities to accomplish needed work. This plan also allows the Logistic Section Chief to provide unit leaders with timeframes within which they should complete tasks, and empowers unit leaders to provide timely services.

Using Apprentices from Local Units

It often helps to use one or two personnel from the local unit as apprentices in Logistics. Many units have people who, for a variety of reasons, cannot or have not had the opportunity to go out on fire assignments. Once the Logistics Section is nearly “up and running” ask the unit leaders if anyone is willing to take an apprentice, and if so, what the assignments will be. The Supply and Ground Support Units almost always will take on an apprentice. After determining the need, meet with the Agency Administrator’s representative and/or the local resource advisor, and let them know of the IMT’s interest in having local employees work with the team, either for a few days or the duration of the assignment. Tell them the skills needed but more importantly, the aptitude that is necessary. Apprenticeships like this are good for both the IMT and the apprentice; the apprentice learns a new skill and hopefully goes on to be more engaged in fire/incident management and IMT members become mentors, get some useful help and usually enjoy having a new person join the unit.

Using the Expertise of Military Logistics Personnel

IMTs work with the military on fires as well as other incidents. One LSC once had a US Marine Corps Sergeant from the incident battalion assigned to shadow her. The Sergeant asked many questions, made good observations, and learned quickly. One night after a particularly long and challenging transportation day, the team needed to prepare the transportation plan, involving two National Guard units, for the next day. This process typically takes one to two hours, but the Sergeant figured out an easier way to do it in a much shorter time frame.

This was the first of many surprises about this young Sergeant, and for the next two weeks, he was the right hand, right foot, and full brain to the LSC. He knew the military language and he understood who and what was important to the military sector. His regular assignment was “front logistics” where he was usually in the advance party that set everything up before the battalion arrives. When the military will be assigned to an incident, always request a logistics person from the military unit’s ranks to work with you.



Military Briefing
Photo Courtesy of NFFPC Type II IMT

Working with Planning Ops

During an IMT assignment, when the Operations Section uses both a Field or Line Operations Section Chief and Planning Operations Section Chief, it proves absolutely necessary for the LSC to work side-by-side with both OSCs. If the team has both a LSC and deputy LSC they can each attach themselves to one of the OSCs. However, when the IMT adds a third OSC, the IC should seriously consider adding a third LSC as well. This happens when the incident is so operationally complex that the incident warrants a full-time operations person in planning and two OSCs in the field. If the incident is this complex for Operations, it will likely prove to be equally or more complex for Logistics.

Training Recommendations

Staying Current on Forms, Contracting and Policy

Logistics personnel need more training on filling out federal forms, way-billing items back to the cache, and disposing of excess items purchased by the buying team during the incident. Logistics personnel can find the forms difficult to understand and complete. Similarly, contracts with caterers, shower units, and laundry service can also prove difficult to manage if you are unfamiliar with the process. LSCs deal with all kinds of contracts, a contracting officer may not be immediately available to help, and, if it is a very busy season, only a handful of contracting officers may be available to go around.

The USFS system for ordering supplies is complex. For example, showers have to be a certain dimension in size and must pump a certain amount of water. This is a Forest Service guideline, but the guidelines change often. A LSC must know these changes, because once a team is out on a fire, the contracting officers can, and do, make spot checks to ensure accuracy. Always stay current with contracts and the rules, which change from year to year. Make sure to use a contracting officer when they are available. Understand the intent and meaning of the contracts, but if help is needed contact the contracting officer.

Learning About Other ICS Functions

Having the right resources, in the right place, at the right time, sounds simple, but each deployment for an IMT proves different, and each one brings new perspective on how to improve. When it comes to the preparation a Logistics Section Chief should have, none seems more important than gaining exposure to other disciplines. Once a LSC gains a solid understanding of the role of the Logistics Section, they must next learn to appreciate how it can impact other support functions as well as the entire incident. An effective LSC requires both a good working knowledge of the logistics job as well as how it relates to the job of others.

Leadership Training is an Investment

LSCs must maintain technical proficiency, but more importantly, they must lead. Leadership training represents an incredibly important investment. Even though each incident is different, the IMT always needs communications, focused planning, and clear direction. The L-580 Leadership is Action course focuses on incident leadership, and helps people develop an understanding of leader's intent and provides the skills necessary to assess the constantly changing environment of a fire incident and adapt accordingly. Leadership training also aids in gaining customer service skills. A LSC must be a skilled practitioner of their craft, but combining skilled technical expertise with leadership training takes a LSC to the next level.

Customer Service Training

A LSC must learn simple customer service skills, and learning these skills represents important training for any LSC. Most incidents involve working with traumatized citizens and stressed responders, so learning to work with different personalities in a high stress, high tempo environment represents a critical skill. Agencies make training on how to work with diverse personalities available, and budding LSCs should take advantage of those training opportunities. In logistics, the ability to calm people down proves essential, as does possessing sensitivity to the needs of the people who will continue to be affected long after the IMT is gone.

Working in Units Within the Logistics Section

An IMT benefits immensely when people in the majority of the units within the Logistics Section have incident experience. Many LSCs become "qualified" by having worked in the Facilities or Supply Units. Very few have worked in the Medical Unit or Security. Some have a vague idea what happens in the Ground Support Unit, but almost none can run a Communications Unit. Consequently, individuals are becoming qualified as a LSC who do not understand the challenges of each of their units. One LSC does not feel that additional training is required, but that the NWCG needs to re-write the Task Book requiring LSCs to gain experience in a majority of the units, prior to qualification.

When a LSC candidate lacks experience in a key unit, they could complete a basic course similar to the self study Radio Operator or Receiving & Distribution Manager courses that would be a good foundation for a "detail" assignment into the Communications Unit, or Supply Cache while on assignment. During the "trainee" timeframe for an upcoming LSC, they should do a serious self evaluation with their trainer – the LSC they are working with – and identify those units within the Logistics Section in which they have little to no experience, and agree before they are "signed off" by their trainer/mentor they will work a couple days in each of these "weak link" units so they have a full range of experiences and understanding to draw from. Once LSCs become "qualified," there seems to be no going back to pick up the missing experiences.

Is Logistics for You?

Logistics is not for the faint of heart. Logistics personnel do not receive hazard pay – they often do not even receive a "thank you." It's their fault if there is not enough stuff - or too much stuff; if something is too close – or too far away. It is their fault if it is too hot, too cold, too dark, too light, too loud, too windy, too dry, too dusty, too wet. If it trips you, makes you sick, smells bad, tastes bad, looks bad, shocks you, or stains your clothes or pretty much anything else that annoys people, Logistics people get blamed. If you have Teflon-coated, thick skin and were not fazed by this rant, then Logistics is probably your niche.

Keeping up with Change

In logistics, many aspects of technological change necessitate ongoing refresher training for logistics practitioners and partial or complete overhauls of logistics related systems (cache, communications, contracting, etc.). Agencies are frequently willing to spend enormous amounts of money when there is smoke in the air, but balk at business decisions to invest in logistical improvements costing only a small fraction of those emergency expenditures.

The National Logistics Workshop (NLW) has been a great opportunity for logistics refresher training and has served as a forum to identify and resolve national or regional logistics issues for contract management, invasive species mitigation, reasonable accommodation in fire camp, all-hazard logistics or any other emerging issues. As custodians of natural resources, proper management of these and other issues is aligned in the missions of the respective wildland fire agencies. Typically, funding for this type of workshop comes from an individual's home unit who in a small-world view, is asked to spend program funds so their employee can do something elsewhere. In other words, there is value to the overall agency mission but little value for the home unit.

The NLW started relatively small, with fewer than 100 people participating. However, because it served a need, the workshop grew in attendance to nearly 400 logistics practitioners. It is because the National Logistics Workshop has been so successful at meeting the needs of logistics practitioners that it has also become a big target due to the overall cost. The Logistics Cadre is looking into different ways to increase participation and reduce cost by use of technology, but these innovations again incur up-front costs.

<http://www.fs.fed.us/logistics/logistics/nlw/index.shtml>

Unresolved Issues

Expanded Dispatch and Logistics

According to one LSC, expanded dispatch centers seem to lack understanding and appreciation for the stress and limitations that can exist in some ICPs. Coordination centers are usually in a town or city, where all the modern conveniences are readily available. Unfortunately, people working in those centers may fail to appreciate that it can take days to fully establish an ICP, including setting up power and a dependable telephone system. This experienced LSC recommends that the LSC call expanded soon after arrival to make introductions and let them know about the local conditions the team faces. It helps get the "new" relationship off to a good start and might help them understand the team's limitations. Sometimes this can make a huge difference, especially in the early stages.

Another suggestion that can help relates to training. Ordering Managers must work in expanded to complete their position task book. Conversely, one LSC suggests that everyone working in expanded dispatch should spend at least two operational periods working in Logistics on a large fire. This experience could lead to a better understanding of what unit leaders face at the incident and improve understanding between IMTs and expanded dispatch centers.

Developing an Accountability System

LSCs need a uniform system for tracking accountable items. For example, a division supervisor might sign for a pump to be used on the fireline, but this pump may then be taken over by another division supervisor. Then, when the fire closes out, the pump gets left out on the line. To overcome this, agencies could invest in GPS system tracking for expensive, accountable equipment, enabling the supply unit to track the equipment with the computer each day.

As an example, on one hurricane assignment, a forty kilowatt generator (valued at \$12-15,000) went missing. Because a GPS accountability system had been installed, the Logistics Section actually tracked it heading south through the Gulf of Mexico. It had been stolen and the suspect was shipping it out of the country. The contractor who owned the generator was able to intercept it because of the GPS accountability system.

