

Emergency scene situational awareness — The key to safe operations

By Chief Bill Jenaway, Ph.D., CFO, CFPS

Thinking back through the years, at every emergency scene I have ever been to there is something that consistently required monitoring — the situation we were entering. Whether a vehicle fire, brush fire, elevator rescue, vehicle rescue, confined space rescue, structure fire or some other event, the situation we were about to enter posed threats to firefighter safety. The threats varied, but the requirement to analyze the situation was always present. It didn't matter if I was the incident commander or the division commander, I was always required to be conscious of my surrounding environment.

In today's world there are constant reminders of this need for situational awareness in each near-miss we read about, each firefighter fatality we have information about or each accident report we review.

Situational awareness is not a new concept. In the fire service, we accept a basic level of risk to do our job with appropriate controls to hopefully protect lives and property. A higher level of risk may only be acceptable if life is in danger. By evaluating the situation, you practice actions similar to that of military officers who make calculated decisions to enter

hostile situations. Evaluating every situation will help guide you in determining the level of asset you are willing to risk. This concept takes a risk-reward approach to help assure situational awareness. It also offers an understanding of what is at risk when taking action at emergencies.

The concept of situational awareness is not only applicable to emergency scenes, but to management tasks. When performing management tasks, you are expected to analyze a situation and determine the actions necessary with regard to employee management. When I think back to officers that exhibited this quality, I recall these individuals had become experts at situational leadership — recognizing what to do and to lead based on the circumstances being encountered.

Situational awareness can best be described as “knowing what is going on in the environment around you.” Others say it is “survival instinct.” While there may be a component of basic training devoted to situational awareness, most would say it is best learned through experience. In the public safety industry, however, this has proven quite difficult. If something is identified that is threatening you and your environment, you have an obligation to take action to protect yourself, your crew and your department.

Situational awareness involves an understanding of your own actions and what impact your actions will have on the situation at hand. The absence of any situational awareness or having inadequate situational awareness has been identified as one of the key reasons accidents occur ... human error. Therefore, situational awareness is particularly critical in work environments where the wrong decisions, or poor decisions, may lead to serious consequences (such as fighting fires or treating critically ill or injured patients). In addition, having thorough and up-to-the-minute situational awareness is essential where human, technological and situational complexity come together. Situational awareness is a critical and often elusive practice. Successful decision-making covering a range of complex and dynamic systems, including firefighting and emergency medical service provision, plays a significant role in the safety of personnel performing at the scene.

Understanding the conditions around us when entering a fire or rescue situation can mean the difference between life and death to our crew. It is up to the officers in charge of the incident, division, crew or apparatus to know the level of risk they are encountering and make critical decisions of when to advance or retreat in order to risk only what you are willing to lose versus what can be saved. Remember, no building is worth the life of a firefighter — be aware of your situation! ❄️

