

Copyright © 2012  
Richard B. Gasaway  
Gasaway Consulting Group, LLC  
All Rights Reserved.

No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

The contents of *Fifty Ways to Kill A First Responder and Mental Management of Emergencies* are the intellectual property of  
Richard B. Gasaway, Ph.D.

Gasaway Consulting Group, LLC  
P.O. Box 13542  
St. Paul, MN 55113-0542  
Phone: 651-331-8518

If you are interested in hosting a program, please contact Dr. Gasaway at  
[www.RichGasaway.com](http://www.RichGasaway.com) or [Rich@RichGasaway.com](mailto:Rich@RichGasaway.com)

# Fifty Ways to Kill a First Responder: Barriers to Situational Awareness

Fire Chief (ret.) Richard B. Gasaway  
St. Paul, Minnesota



# Avoiding the “Blame Game”

An easy trap for observers/evaluators

- They should not have...
- They could have...
- They didn't...
- They failed to...
- If only they had...

## Look at a near-miss or catastrophic events in context:

- How did things look at the time they were happening?
- How did events unfold around them?
- What were the cues and clues?
  - Did they see/hear them?
  - Did they understand them?
  - Did they make sense?
- What were they trying to accomplish?
- What they were doing at that moment in time... made sense. Why?

## Hindsight Bias

Applying what you know, after the fact, in a way that makes the decisions look flawed or less sensible.

# Situational Awareness Barriers

## Staffing Issues.

**Under staffing**

**Unpredictable staffing**

**Response time delays**

**Lack of experience (Quality)**

## Communications issues.

**Missed radio communications**

**Updates or progress reports**



When you try to process too much information under stress, interesting things can happen.

The information passing exercise.

## Communications issues.

**Missed radio communications**

**Updates or progress reports**

**Too much radio traffic**

- Sterile flight deck...

**Incomplete communications loop**

- Sender says it... Receiver repeats it...

## Communications issues.

**Missed radio communications**

**Updates or progress reports**

**Too much radio traffic**

**Incomplete communications loop**

**Misunderstood words/phrases/gestures**

## Communications issues.

**Missed radio communications**

**Updates or progress reports**

**Too much radio traffic**

**Incomplete communications loop**

**Misunderstood words/phrases/gestures**

- "Fire through the roof..."
- "Tank on fire..."
- "What were you taught about tunnel vision?"

Miscommunications is never on purpose but can easily

## Workload management issues.

### **Multitasking**

- The conscious brain cannot multitask
- The subconscious brain can multitask
- Subconscious tasks can be performed very quickly.
- Conscious tasks require conscious thought and are usually much slower.
- ABCs and times tables are subconscious (memorized tasks)

# Human factors issues.

## **Assumptions**

- Your assumptions are influenced (in part) by your:
  - Childhood
  - Religion
  - Politics
  - Morals
  - Values

## Human factors issues.

**Lost focus**

**Assumptions**

**Over confident / Ego / Dangerous mindsets**

# Six dangerous mindsets

1. Anti-Authority
  - “The regulations/SOPs are not for me.”
2. Impulsivity
  - “I must act now. There’s no time to waste.”
3. Invulnerability
  - “Nothing will go wrong. Not to me. Not today.
4. Resignation
  - “What’s the use in speaking up. I am not in charge. No one will listen to me.”
5. Denial
  - “It’s really not as bad as it looks.”
6. Macho
  - “I’ll show everyone I can do it. Don’t you dare tell me what to do.”



## Five Step Assertive Statement Process

1. Acknowledge "Chief..."
2. "I have a concern." "I have a concern."
3. State the concern. "We still have an entry team on the second floor and the conditions are getting much worse."
4. Offer a resolution. "I think we should pull out and go defensive."
5. Seek acceptance. "Are you okay with that?"

# Human factors issues.

**Lost focus**

**Assumptions**

**Over confident / Ego / Dangerous mindset**

**Perception of reality**

(Is perception reality)

## Human factors issues.

**Complacency**

**Fatigue**

- Impacts alertness and performance - increasing errors.

**Lack of Command Presence**

# Command support issues.

## **No command aides or assistants**

- Command advisor
- Operations or safety officers
- Command boards or worksheets
- Checklists

## Data/information management issues.

**Information overload**

**Incomplete size-up**

**Lost Accountability**

## Command location issues.

**Located too close to the incident**

**Location may cause the commander to become hands-on.**

- Stress compels you to do things you're comfortable doing.

## 5 common command mistakes:

1. Failing to process the meaning of critical of the clues and cues.
2. Underestimating the speed of the incident.
3. Overestimating the abilities of their crews.
4. Feeling pressured to take “heroic” actions without conducting a risk-benefit assessment.
5. Focusing on the wrong things or trying to process too much information.

# Commander Best Practices

## 1. Prioritize incoming information.

- Smoke (fire) condition.
- Construction / decomposition of structure.
- Speed the incident is moving.
- Realistic assessment of savable lives.

## 2. Set strategy and tactics based on the quality and quantity of staffing.

- Conduct a 360 degree size-up.
  - Size-up must be on-going.
- Do not lock on to a strategy or tactics until adequate help arrives.
- Consider the risk to your personnel versus the benefit of their actions.



# Commander Best Practices

## 3. Stay focused on the big picture incident.

- Command from a vehicle or a remote location but maintain a visual fix on the incident.

## 4. Do not perform firefighter duties.

- You cannot be in command and hands-on at the same time.

## 5. Never miss communications from your most at-risk companies.

- Commanders cannot effectively listen to, and comprehend, multiple conversations simultaneously.
- The stimulus closest to the commander will occupy his or her attention.

# Commander Best Practices

## 6. Control distractions and interruptions.

- Call a personal time out
- Don't be a high-profile target

## 7. Support the commander.

- Command Advisors, teams, aides.
- Use worksheets and checklists

## 8. Establish and maintain a strong command presence.

- Control your emotions (excitement, frustration, anger, ego).
- Control your people.
- Be clear and concise with your orders.
- Keep track of your people and what they are doing.
- Keep track of the passage of time and the speed of the incident.
- Develop "meta-awareness."

# Commander Best Practices

## 9. Accelerate command knowledge and expertise.

- Develop habits and routines:
  - Training that is realistic and repetitive.
  - Realistic incident simulations.
- Pre-load your experiences:
  - Near-Miss Reports.
  - Case Studies.
  - LODD Reports.
- Learning and reinforcement:
  - Mentorship program.
  - Post-incident evaluations.

# 25 Point Situation Awareness Health Check-up<sup>©</sup>

A free download on my website.  
[www.RichGasaway.com](http://www.RichGasaway.com)

# Commander Best Practices

10. Conduct a pre-incident safety assessment to identify and correct error creep.

- Independent evaluation of your:
  - Operations
  - Training program
  - Policies and procedures
  - Equipment
  - Communications
  - Inspections program
  - Hiring and promotional practices
  - Organizational culture



**Safety begins with SA!**

[www.SAMatters.com](http://www.SAMatters.com)