

# “Struck” in the midst of action - Incident command in everyday emergencies

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## Introduction

This project investigates micro-sociological events which affect the construction and negotiation of sense in the handling of emergency situations. Through participatory observation and action-cameras attached to Fire Brigade incident commanders, critical events are identified and condensed. The effects of these critical events upon the incident commanders are analysed in dialogical sessions. The dialogical sessions reveal vulnerability when critical events affect them cognitively, but especially when affected emotionally and physically. Acknowledging and understanding the effect of these striking moments is the baseline from which incident commanders and researchers can gain insight into the realities of practice.

This project argues that in order to gain insight into the actual practice conducted in the midst of everyday action we need to shift our view of incident commanders from privileged sense-makers to privileged sense-facilitators.

### Keywords:

Incident command, struck, emotions, everyday-perspective, sense-making, action-camera, learning, decision-making, practice-learning, fire-brigade, vulnerability



## Method

The methodology applied allows for access to emergency responses in a real setting, which has been requested by (Njå & Rake, 2009). The field studies were conducted at the Copenhagen Fire Brigade, Denmark. Access to the Copenhagen Fire Brigade was established through an evaluation-project (Sachs & Boehm, 2013).

### Studying tacit dimensions of a struck

Four incident commanders were followed as they responded to emergencies all over the city from June 2014– October 2014. The data has been collected with action-cameras (DRIFT-HD) attached to incident commanders with specially constructed clamps. The incident commanders wore the camera for every incident, not only those incidents which initially seemed atypical or severe.

The recording was then analysed with the purpose of outlining events where the incident commander engaged in the construction and negotiation of sense. The critical events related to the sense-making process were those identified as “overt behaviour” (Lahlou, Le Bellu & Boesen-Mariani, 2015, p. 219).

These situations were then described and used as a platform in the dialogical sessions which the incident commanders participated in. The purpose of the dialogical sessions was to engage in a reflective as well as reflexive dialogue (Chia, 1996; Cunliffe, 2002a; Cunliffe, 2002b).



## Empirical findings

The empirical findings indicate that we have to extend our understanding of incident commanders beyond a merely cognitive focus. Incident commanders do conduct recognitions based on intuition and mental simulation as stated by Klein (1998), and they do a lot of problem-solving where they draw on prior experience and SOPs as stated by Schön (1983), but the main finding in the empirical material is that, from an everyday perspective, this is not what affects them.

It is possible that we would find a higher degree of mental simulation and challenge in assessing a much larger atypical incident where the recognition pattern-matching is challenged, but from an everyday perspective, physiology, particularly emotion, seems to have a great impact upon incident commanders.



## Conclusion

This project argues that a revised notion of the incident commander as privileged sense-facilitator rather than privileged sense-maker would be more appropriate in explaining their practice in the midst of action.

The dialogical sessions show:

- That incident commanders are especially vulnerable in situations which affect them not only cognitively but also physiologically and emotionally.
- The emotional struck is often linked to interpersonal cooperation with the squad leader(s) and to the rate and quality of information that the incident commander receives from the squad leader(s).
- Events which affect them cognitively, physiologically and emotionally lead the incident commanders to attempt to protect their decision-making, resulting in reactive incident command where the focus is upon cover-my-back actions and leads to feelings of isolation and role failure for the incident commander.

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