

Monthly Message from the Chief

Thank you for the many comments I received in reference to my expectations of adherence to chain of command in my first monthly message. For that reason, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify how business should be conducted among and between the Department's programs, at all levels, in order to serve everyone.



Merriam-Webster first defined the term in 1898 as “a series of executive positions in order of authority.” It is a command concept embraced by the military that translates to a business practice for other disciplines. This concept is particularly effective for a paramilitary organization like CAL FIRE.

Chain of command is an established hierarchy of authority. That hierarchy in CAL FIRE includes all employees. Unity of command is the concept that each person within an organization reports to one and only one designated person. This protects employees from conflicting direction, which can directly affect priorities and work environment. Organizational charts should illustrate who that one person is.

The Incident Command System represents perhaps the clearest and most reliable example of how we use chain of command. When dealing with an emergency incident, it is imperative that all know who they answer to. Emergency incidents more often than not present chaotic situations to responders. Making order from chaos is best achieved by relying on common training, terms, communications, and organizational structure. Doing otherwise intensifies confusion and makes us less effective.

At our stations, camps, and bases the concept of chain of command is adhered to routinely; firefighters take direction from ranking company officers, and those company officers take direction from battalion chiefs or camp division chiefs. Having said that, I am sure most of us can recall a time when the chain was broken at that level resulting in a less than desirable outcome.

Our programs have program managers at the Sacramento and Region levels. Any time the services of a unit or region employee are requested, or direction is given by Sacramento staff, the request or direction should be channeled through region and unit management. Correspondingly, region program managers are expected to go through unit management.

The chain goes both ways. I expect those seeking a decision to go through their immediate supervisor before taking it up the chain. Adherence to this practice and commitment to communication is essential to maintaining an effective organization such as ours.

The intent here is not to preclude information sharing or discussions between employees at any level of our organization. The chain of command process should be invoked when a request or order, by a person who is not their direct supervisor, will affect their availability to do the work that their supervisor is expecting them to do. It also keeps those in the chain of command informed of program issues and provides additional assurance that the request or direction is addressed.

Like safety, adherence to the chain of command is everyone's responsibility, and ironically, safety is one of the few reasons to depart from it. If you are ever asked or directed to do something that seems to veer from the chain of command, you should feel free to advise the person addressing you that you need to check with your supervisor first. However, if your safety or that of another is at risk, act immediately using your best judgment.

I have noted during my career that not all programs utilize the chain of command model and I have confirmed, through discussions with many employees, that the majority of our department prefers the tried and true adherence of the chain of command and unity of command concepts in all dealings with Region and Sacramento staff. This has been a time-tested approach.

Emergency activity will be picking up as the days get warmer. Make good use of this time to prepare for the months ahead, and above all, be safe and take care of each other!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Del Walters', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Del Walters, Chief
Director