HIGH-RISE SOG DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

Leadership Principles and the Improvement Process



Based on the Experience of

ALBUQUERQUE FIRE RESCUE

Albuquerque, New Mexico

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Foreword

Firefighter Air Coalition produced this publication to showcase the process developed by Albuquerque Fire Rescue when the department undertook the demanding work of revising its high-rise standard operating guideline. AFR approached the project as more than a document to rewrite.

The department assembled credible operational personnel, strengthened its knowledge of local high-rise buildings, evaluated equipment and field practices, secured leadership and financial support, coordinated policy development with training, and carried the work through implementation. The process required sustained effort, careful review, and attention to the details that determine whether a guideline will function under real operating conditions.

By organizing the steps and leadership lessons described by AFR personnel, Firefighter Air Coalition presents the AFR experience as a viable and credible model for departments seeking to establish or rework a practical, locally relevant, operationally sound, and organizationally supported high-rise SOG.

Purpose and Credit

Full credit for the process, experience, and lessons presented belongs to Albuquerque Fire Rescue and the AFR personnel who performed and documented the work.

Firefighter Air Coalition's role is to showcase that process as a viable and credible means of establishing a re-write or the development of the first high-rise SOG for your department.

Source Attribution

High-rise improvement process: Albuquerque Fire Rescue and Matthew Klosterman, author of "Improving High-Rise Operations: Lessons Learned from the Duke City," published by Fire Engineering.

Leadership principles: Clint Anderson, Deputy Chief of Strategic Planning, Policy, and Training for Albuquerque Fire Rescue, author of "Fire Department Leadership: Give Your People the Reins," published by Fire Engineering.

Improving High-Rise Operations: Lessons Learned from the Duke City
fireengineering.com – Improving High-Rise Operations

Fire Department Leadership: Give Your People the Reins

Leadership Principles

Deputy Chief Clint Anderson of Albuquerque Fire Rescue identified the leadership conditions that made the AFR high-rise project possible. These principles apply to any department undertaking serious operational improvement.

Put Field Credibility at the Center

- Select members for demonstrated work ethic, initiative, judgment, operational competence, leadership ability, writing ability, and consistent fireground performance.
- Do not treat rank or years of service as the only measure of credibility.
- Include personnel who understand current field conditions, staffing, equipment, and company-level operations.
- Choose members capable of completing difficult and unglamorous work, not merely discussing what should change.
- Require members to keep the mission ahead of ego or individual preference.

Give Capable Personnel the Reins

- Allow operational personnel to lead the technical work.
- Give the working group space to conduct research, examine local buildings, evaluate equipment, develop recommendations, draft the SOG, and explain its conclusions.
- Avoid replacing operational expertise with headquarters-driven assumptions.
- Recognize that personnel currently working in the field may have the clearest understanding of emerging operational challenges.

Lead as a Facilitator

- Define the mission and expected outcomes.
- Establish major milestones and reporting expectations.
- Maintain visibility into the project without controlling every technical decision.
- Provide institutional knowledge and executive perspective when useful.
- Intervene when executive authority is required to remove a barrier, secure a resource, or obtain a decision.

Avoid Micromanagement

- Monitor progress without turning routine decisions into additional approval steps.
- Do not require every operational detail to be decided by senior leadership.
- Give the group latitude to test ideas, revise proposals, resolve disagreements, and develop subject-matter expertise.
- Preserve accountability without suppressing initiative.

Open Organizational Doors

- Connect the working group with executive leadership, finance, purchasing, labor representatives, pre-incident planning, training, logistics, and policy-review personnel.
- Help members understand budget, procurement, and approval requirements.
- Provide access to the people who can make or support organizational decisions.

Provide a Direct Executive Audience

- Allow working-group members to present their own findings to executive leadership.
- Let the personnel who performed the research answer technical and operational questions.
- Use executive presentations to increase understanding, resolve concerns, identify resource needs, build support, and establish the approval path.

Support Specialized Education

- Recognize when the working group needs knowledge that is not available internally.
- Support attendance at credible high-rise conferences or specialized training.
- Treat specialized education as an operational-readiness investment.
- Require outside lessons to be translated into locally relevant findings.

Let Training Professionals Build the Delivery

- Connect the working group with the training division early.
- Allow the working group to provide subject-matter expertise, revised procedures, equipment information, building-specific concerns, and required performance outcomes.
- Allow instructors to determine how the information should be organized and taught.

Require Chief Officers to Participate

- Chief officers should attend and participate in high-rise training.
- Participation should involve meaningful operational work, not ceremonial observation.
- Direct participation improves later decisions about policy, equipment, training, staffing, relief, and rehabilitation.

Protect Field-Generated Initiative

- Give credible ideas an audience, a structured review, a method of evaluation, access to resources, and a possible path to implementation.
- Do not reject ideas solely because they did not originate at headquarters.
- Evaluate proposals according to operational needs, evidence, feasibility, risk, and cost.

Explain Legitimate Constraints

- Recognize that not every proposal can be implemented.
- When a proposal cannot move forward, explain the actual constraint, acknowledge the initiative, identify whether it can be reconsidered, and encourage continued participation.

Connect Leadership to Operational Results

- Measure leadership by tangible results: better building knowledge, locally relevant SOG, appropriate equipment, clear assignments, realistic training, stronger executive understanding, and continuing program ownership.

The AFR High-Rise Improvement Process

The following process represents the sequence of Albuquerque Fire Rescue used to move from concern to a completed, supported high-rise program. This process is offered as a replicable model for departments of varying size and experience.

Foundation

- Review the existing high-rise SOG and determine when it was last substantially updated.
- Compare the written procedure with current buildings, staffing, apparatus, equipment, communications, and field practices.
- Treat an outdated SOG as a capability issue, not simply a document problem.
- Listen to concerns raised by personnel familiar with the high-rise district.
- Allow station-level and kitchen-table discussions to identify emerging problems.
- Convert informal concern into a defined organizational initiative while preserving the practical fireground problem as the focus.
- Establish a small team capable of sustained work; AFR used a five-member group.
- Select members for credibility, motivation, work ethic, fireground performance, leadership, project management, and writing ability.
- Avoid a group so large that scheduling, decision-making, and accountability become difficult.
- Identify expected final products and clarify the group's authority.
- Establish how recommendations will be reviewed and approved.
- Create a regular meeting schedule and assign responsibility for agendas, records, and follow-up.
- Set deadlines for foundational research, building assessments, gap identification, equipment evaluations, project proposal, budget request, SOG draft, executive review, instructor development, and rollout.
- Use deadlines to create accountability and maintain momentum.
- Review recognized high-rise and standpipe books, professional articles, case studies, incident lessons, and SOGs from experienced departments.
- Use outside material to inform local decisions rather than copying another department's procedures.
- Document the research supporting major recommendations.

Research and Validation

- Evaluate whether the group needs specialized high-rise education.
- Use specialized instruction to challenge assumptions, identify overlooked problems, compare equipment, develop contacts, and strengthen technical competence.
- Translate conference lessons into findings relevant to local buildings and operations.
- Identify every high-rise in the jurisdiction and establish a systematic preplanning process.
- Prioritize buildings by height, occupancy, life hazard, construction, stairwells, elevators, access, water supply, fire protection, and known maintenance or security issues.
- Conduct building visits and examine apparatus access, FDCs, fire pumps, standpipe outlets, sprinkler controls, stairwells, elevators, smoke control, command centers, staging, refuge areas, equipment routes, and victim-removal routes.
- Convert system information into tactical direction.

- Make the revised SOG fit the buildings firefighters will actually enter.
- Compare established high-rise practices with actual department capabilities.
- Examine water supply, FDC operations, stairwell movement, elevator use, hose deployment, communications, equipment movement, fatigue, victim movement, staging, accountability, relief, and command.
- Give special attention to recurring local conditions.
- Preserve equipment, assignments, and procedures that fit local staffing and buildings and perform reliably.
- Concentrate resources on actual deficiencies.
- Explain why established practices are being retained or changed.
- Present potential changes to respected members outside the working group.
- Ask whether each proposal will work with actual staffing, apparatus, equipment, assignments, and response times.
- Invite criticism before recommendations become final.

Equipment and Proposal

- Evaluate standpipe hose packages, nozzles, FDC equipment, ventilation, SCBA-cylinder transport, hose-carrying configurations, patient movers, and building-system tools.
- Account for cost, procurement lead time, apparatus placement, inspection, maintenance, replacement, and training.
- Resolve major equipment decisions before completing the final rewrite.
- Examine how firefighters will carry hose, tools, cylinders, medical equipment, and rescue equipment.
- Look for practical hands-free carrying methods and better hose packaging.
- Prefer simple and affordable solutions when those solutions effectively reduce workload.
- Plan for unconscious and non-ambulatory occupants.
- Evaluate lightweight patient-moving devices and determine storage, assignments, packaging methods, staffing needs, and stairwell movement techniques.
- Include the operational problem, research findings, building-specific findings, policy changes, equipment recommendations, training requirements, budget implications, and implementation of milestones in the comprehensive proposal.
- Connect each expenditure to an identified operational need.
- Give the working group direct access to executive staff.
- Allow the members who completed the research to explain the proposal and answer questions.
- Record required revisions, resources, final direction, and approval of conditions.
- Determine what will change, what will remain, what equipment will be used, how companies will be assigned, and how the policy will be supported.
- Avoid repeated revisions caused by major tactical or equipment decisions made too late.

Writing, Training, and Sustainment

- Use regular face-to-face meetings during critical writing phases.
- Review the document line by line and confirm consistent terminology and assignments.

- Examine the relationships among lobby control, base, staging, stairwell support, elevators, water supply, attack, search, communications, accountability, and relief.
- Involve the training division before the rollout date.
- Provide the revised SOG, objectives, equipment, building information, and required performance outcomes.
- Allow subject-matter experts and training professionals to perform their respective roles.
- Explain the reason for changes and cover company assignments, building systems, equipment, hose deployment, FDC operations, stairwell operations, victim movement, communications, and command expectations.
- Make the material practical and understandable.
- Use working-group members to answer questions, explain decisions, support instructors, identify misunderstandings, and reinforce organizational commitment.
- Maintain ownership through the early implementation period.
- Create reusable instructional videos and materials covering hose deployment, FDC operations, sprinkler controls, equipment use, and patient-moving techniques.
- Focus on accurate operational content rather than expensive production.
- Continue updating high-rise preplans and recurring education.
- Review the SOG after incidents, training findings, new construction, renovations, staffing changes, and equipment changes.
- Preserve expertise as members promote, transfer, or retire.
- Treat the high-rise program as an ongoing operational responsibility rather than a completed document project.

The AFR process is a model of how serious organizational work gets done through credible people, genuine authority, honest review, and sustained commitment.

Mike Gagliano
President, Firefighter Air Coalition
