

# Setting Priorities



**L.I.P.S.**



If there was ever a way to capture your attention I think that “lips” graphic tops em! But, on to the serious stuff...

There is a significant need for being able to set priorities in high-stress situations which most emergencies are disasters...and grid-down most certainly is. Without being able to set priorities consistently and correctly, any mission is almost certainly doomed to failure. Priorities that should be based on a mutual foundation that the entire family, group, or team has agreed to.

While possibly stating the obvious, different cultures do have different priorities. The need for your team (family, neighborhood, congregation, or community) to share a common set of priorities is paramount for cohesiveness, consistency, and ability to cooperate effectively.



Without an agreed upon set of priorities, I propose that any team would struggle to make correct and timely decisions. And I propose that is especially true when it comes to high-stress, high-risk decisions.

On what basis or foundation would/should priorities be set? And without a common set of priorities, how easy would it be to make decisions to satisfy all group members? I suggest it would be increasingly difficult to make decisions that would be acceptable to everyone, especially as the stress increases.

Now, we could get into a whole discussion of “morals” as it relates to priorities but that is best left for a conversation around a fire in your camp some evening. For the purposes of this article I will stick to a non-religious, non-cultural base that has proven to work in emergencies, disasters, and grid-down. I have seen over the decades long career in emergency services a system that works every time. Yup, it works every single time, it is that good of a system. It is called **L.I.P.S.**

Back in 2005 I was at the National Fire Academy in Fredericksburg, Maryland attending a week long course to be a qualified as a Master Instructor for all levels of the Incident Command System (ICS) (100 – 402). ICS was relatively new to the structure fire department world and I

was there to acquire certification to teach ICS to students, as well as to be able to certify other ICS instructors. During that class the head of the ICS course development team for the entire nation for all levels of government approached the class participants asking us to peer review the new ICS course materials. Now that was interesting!

One of the areas we spent a lot of time on was the L.I.P.S. system of priority setting. At the time it was something new to just about every field of emergency services, to many folks and sectors it still is. Our class developed the “S” part of LIPS. But it was too late to get it into the new training materials. Fortunately I have my notes from that review.

The goal was to develop and refine a decision making system that would be consistent across every emergency situation that first responders would find themselves in. It had to be applicable to hurricanes, structure fires, Hazard Materials (HazMat) scenes, wildfires, floods, building collapses, plane accidents, train wrecks, vehicle accidents, bridge collapses, etc. It had to be universally applicable in every conceivable emergency situation. **LIPS** was the result of our work.

**L.I.P.S.** stands for –

- Life Safety
- Incident Stabilization
- Property Conservation
- Societal Restoration

## Life Safety –

The safety of people is always paramount; people’s safety is always the number one priority. There are two areas of thought on this and they vary rather widely. I refer to them as; 1) traditional, 2) New Age.

The traditional view of “life safety” puts the safety of the person being served as the most important. The person’s life doing the act of service is secondary. In my structure firefighting world we would risk our life to save the life of a person trapped in a house fire. No, we wouldn’t do it stupidly, but in the traditional view, the other person’s life had great value and was worth taking a substantial risk.

The New Age view of life safety is the value of the life of the person providing the service carries far more value than the person needing the rescuing. The “risk” threshold virtually evaporated in the New Age version. In other words, the rescuer would take much less risk, if any, trying to save a person they should be serving. They placed a much higher value on their own life than that of the person needing rescued. This new way of viewing life safety manifested itself as I saw the newer firefighters being hired making statements such as, “Hey, I have go home at the end of the day.” Or, “My life is more important to me than theirs.” The

New Age folks also use the self-justification, self-centered concept that “If we get killed or injured doing our job, then who will take care of the original victims?”

An unspoken question kept coming to mind for us fire department veterans, “If you don’t risk your life to save another, then in reality they are only fatalities waiting to happen?”

There is a middle ground...“mitigating risks.” There is risk in almost any high-stress situation such as emergencies and disasters. Actually, even the “stress” itself carries risk to a person’s health. So the key is mitigating the high-risk actions to fall within the “reasonable risk” or “acceptable risk” categories. And that is a decision, a standard, which each family, group, team, or department must make. I will go into risk mitigation at a later time.

Whatever philosophy you adhere to, the common ground is *life safety* is the number one priority.

## **Incident Stabilization –**

This principle is pretty easy to understand when you realize that when an emergency or disaster has occurred, people are having a bad day. Your goal is to ensure that you or your team doesn’t make it worse. In other words – you want to stabilize what is happening so it doesn’t continue to escalate in terms of loss of life and property.

A good way to view this is through an example. As a firefighting crew we would respond to a house fire, it was important that we arrive on scene as quickly as possible. Upon arrival we could then attempt to rescue people inside the structure or begin firefighting operations.

However, none of that would be possible if the fire engine driver drove too fast, or recklessly, and had an accident on the way to the fire. If an accident occurred there could be multiple injuries, fatalities, and property damage. The result of that accident would be to tie up more emergency personnel responding to the accident vs. responding to the original house fire.

Another example would be a wildfire burning in an industrial area with woods on three sides. On the fourth side was a large number of propane tanks in close proximity to a gas station. Where should the firefighters focus their actions?

Of course it would make sense to, prevent the fire from affecting the propane tanks and gas station. If the wildfire spread to that facility the wildfire would transition to a far more serious, and potentially more catastrophic structure fire and a HazMat situation.

## **Property Conservation –**

The particular principle changed into “property/environment conservation” not long after the original DHS course material was developed. I personally would rather it state “resource

conservation” but **LIRS** wouldn’t sound as good as **LIPS**. Regardless of the terminology...the principle stays the same, *don’t destroy anything you don’t have to*.

The reasoning behind it is fairly straight forward. Everything has value; don’t destroy that value -resource- if you don’t have to. I will add to that, “because you may need it later.” Bottom line, don’t tear stuff up unless there is a really good reason to.

The perfect example of this comes to mind taking me back once again to my structure firefighting days. One of the early methods of fighting a house fire was to enter a house with the water flowing from the nozzle as you searched for the fire itself. The concept was to push the heat and smoke away from the firefighters. However, it also put hundreds, if not thousands, of gallons of water in the home doing tremendous unnecessary damage. Smarter minds eventually prevailed.

The original tactic was changed to avoid flowing water till you found the base of the fire. Then you put only enough water on the fire to extinguish it. That saved 10’s of thousands of dollars of water damage to homes.

I remember clearly one day my crew rolled up on a house fire that was located in their kitchen. My nozzleman and another firefighter pulled the 1-3/4” attack hose and headed for the kitchen. Before they could spray any water and flood the kitchen, I stopped them. I had the driver run the five gallon pressurized water extinguisher to us. I used about two gallons of water/foam mixture to put out the fire. Standard techniques with a fire hose would have probably dumped 500 – 750 gallons of water into that same kitchen.

Don’t destroy or damage any resource you don’t need to.

## **Societal Restoration –**

This is a somewhat nebulous principle, even for emergency responders. Naturally, emergency personnel are trained to come into a bad situation and then stop that situation from escalating. However, normally/usually damage has already been done before responders can stop it. However, since the immediate threat has been resolved, the first responders usually pack up and leave. But, what about the victims? Their problem is only half resolved, maybe the easiest half. What about restoring the victim to the state they were in before the incident occurred?

Once again take the example of the house fire. Firefighters come in and extinguish the flames, get the smoke out of the house, and even remove some of the water that they used to put out the fire. But, they also did what’s called “overhaul” to ensure there is no more fire, so some of the walls and ceilings now have large holes in them. The last of the fire trucks drive away...is the nightmare over?

Maybe the imminent threat to life and property is over, but is that family back to a normal life?

Hardly! They have to secure the home, find a place to live, contact the insurance company, deal with the adjuster, find contractors, have the home repaired, repair or replace damaged personal possessions, and try to salvage family treasures. The fire may have taken hours to put out, but it may take months for that family to live in their home again.

Now, take that same concept and expand it to an entire community, town, or state. The idea is to return society, family, or community, to the same condition it was before the incident occurred.

Restore the victims to the condition they were in prior to the event.

## SUMMARIZING LIPS

Let's restate **LIPS** this way –

- The #1 priority is to protect people from death, injury, and sickness.
- The #2 priority is to not make a bad situation worse.
- The #3 priority is not to destroy resources you don't have to.
- The #4 priority is to restore the situation back to normal.

Having as common foundation for your team to set solid and practical priorities is a necessity in a fast-paced environment such as emergencies, disasters, and especially during a grid-down event. Use a system that works every time, in every situation...**L.I.P.S.**