



Search Communications

Good communications do not ensure good searches, but poor communications contribute heavily to poor searches

Clear and concise communication is critical to a safe, efficient and effective search.

To start with, be completely sure you understand your assignment before you start and if you have questions ask your team leader. If you are the team leader ask the person in the Command Post who gave you the assignment.

In order to achieve clear communications, it is essential to be familiar with the language and terminology used in SAR, as covered by this course and the FEMA courses you will take.

Before you leave the Command Post you need to know what radio channel is being used, what the telephone number for the CP is and the CP should have your cell phone number as well.

Before you leave the CP

- Know how you will communicate with each other and the CP.
- Know the CP telephone number
- Know what channel/frequency you will be using on the radio.
- Vermont has standardized the use of VTAC 13 for simplex (non-repeater) comms.
- Know how to use the equipment you rely on.

Be sure to write down the CP phone number.

It is far better to ask for clarification regarding how communications are being conducted on a search than to find the subject and not be able to contact anyone.

If you don't understand how to use your communications equipment ask for clarification.

It is important to verbally acknowledge any communications that are directed to you. The CP needs to know you received and understood the message and what your status is with regard to the directive. If you are given direction that you don't fully understand, ask for clarification.

Often a public safety repeater frequency will be given as an alternative to VTAC 13. Keep in mind that these repeaters are in use by others as well who are not involved in the search so limit communications to what is truly necessary.

Elements of Good Communications (1)

- Significance
- Clarity
- Brevity
- Security



Keep It Simple; tell what is important and save the rest for later.

Frequently while searching we may not have good communications via radio or cell phone. In those cases you will have to adapt, improvise, and figure out the best approach when communications is necessary. That might even be to send a runner (always send two for safety if possible).

Another significant factor is security. Remember the radio is NOT a private channel. Communications can be and almost always are, being monitored by the family, media, or thrill seekers. If you have something sensitive to communicate such as having found the subject, use a cell phone if possible.

Elements of Good Communications (2)

- Use Incident Command System (ICS) functional designation to identify both person calling and being called.
- Use plain English (no police 10 codes or other codes).

Keep It Simple; tell what is important and save the rest for later.

To achieve the essentials, before you start to talk, THINK about what you will say to be sure the message is appropriately transmitted.

Make sure the intended party receives it; use an ICS designator if possible such as “Command Post” or “Operations”, or the assigned designation of your team such as “Team One.”

Even though you may have a call sign in your search unit, always use the call sign which the Command Post/Incident Commander assigns you. However, don't be afraid to use a personal name if that's what it takes to assure the right person gets the message. Use plain English, do not use codes such as 10-20, etc.

The one exception to this rule would be reporting the condition of a casualty. Some incidents will have a special term or code to use to indicate a fatality over the radio. Examples might be 'black tag' or '10-42'. Whenever possible use a cell phone rather than the radio to report a find.

Q. Why do you think it is important to use plain English?

A. *Different agencies use different 10 codes and the military uses totally different codes depending on the situation and **the only important thing is clear and concise communications.***

The person receiving the message should always repeat back by paraphrasing what they understand the message means and then wait for confirmation.

Typical Hand Held Radio

- Effects of terrain and cover
- Effects of cold on batteries
- Antenna orientation



First, think of power – a radio requires batteries. Take along a spare battery for any assignment lasting longer than a couple of hours. If it is cold out, keep your spare battery inside your jacket where it will be warm and it will last longer when you need it.

If you are unfamiliar with the unit you have been issued, get oriented before fielding. Always do a radio check before you leave the Command Post area to make sure your radio is working AND on the right frequency. You don't want to be figuring it out in an emergency!

An unobstructed line of sight works best on the frequencies commonly used in SAR operations. Anything that obstructs your line of sight also interferes with the radio signal; wet dense tree cover and hills being the worst problem. Often a change of only a few feet or holding the radio antenna as high as possible can make a big difference in performance.

Speaker microphones have pros and cons. On the plus side, you can store the radio in your jacket to keep the battery warm during cold weather, or inside your pack for better protection and ease of carry. On the negative side, using the speaker microphone might cause poorer signal and problems at the connections. If you experience problems, disconnect the speaker microphone and use the radio directly.

In use make sure the antenna is vertical and is not "grounded" (touching branches, etc.). Some microphones work best by placing them in front of your mouth. Others work best by positioning your mouth to speak "across" them. None of them work unless you press the mic button BEFORE you start talking and hold it until AFTER you finish.

Typical Hand Held Radio

- Be professional
- No obscene or profane language
- Calling and answering
 - Your designation first, the other unit second



Profanity is not just unprofessional, it is against federal regulations and it is not acceptable in the SAR community. Other regulations limit use to necessary business and limit operation only to channels on which you have a license or permission to operate. Often a public safety frequency will be used during a mission. Keep in mind that these channels are in use by others as well who are not involved in the search so be considerate and respectful.

To call someone you press the mic button and wait one second, say your own designation first, then the unit you are calling and then release the mic button one second after you are done. When you answer a call give your designation first, the calling unit's designation, then "go ahead".

So when calling the Command Post it you might press the mic button and say "Ground Search Team One to Command Post" release the mic button and wait until they respond with "Command Post to Ground Search Team One, Go Ahead." At this point you can relay your message while holding down the mic button and release it when done.

Remember, Keep It Simple – 'short and sweet'.

Bad Partnership



Radio transmissions and large pieces of metal will disrupt a compass

Two-way radios (and cell phones for that matter) not only contain magnetically attracting components, but the electro-magnetic field around them when transmitting will be very disruptive to navigation equipment such as compasses and GPSs.

Large metal objects such as belt buckles can also distort magnetic readings.

Keep radio and cell phone components and large metal objects well away from any navigation equipment.

Congratulations, you have finished this module

You may close this window to return to the main course and select another module to complete.

Be sure you keep track on your course checklist so you know which modules you have completed.