TABLETOP EXERCISES

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What are Tabletop Exercises?
Discussion-based exercises where personnel meet in a classroom setting or in breakout groups to discuss their roles during an emergency and their responses to a particular emergency situation. A facilitator presents a scenario and asks the exercise participants questions related to this scenario, initiating discussion among the participants about roles, responsibilities, coordination, and decision-making.
Tabletop Exercises

- Are discussion-based only and do not involve deploying equipment or other resources.
Tabletop Exercises are designed to

- Help an organization test a hypothetical situation
- Evaluate a specific group’s ability and readiness to work together and respond to an emergency
Major Elements of a Tabletop Exercise

- Evaluation of plans and procedures by policy-level personnel.
- Resolution of questions regarding coordinating responsibilities
- Facilitation of group discussion.
They are responsible for running the organization.

They are the ones who will take the heat from the media when an incident goes bad because of poor planning or lack of planning in regards to an emergency action or a continuity of operations plan.
Advantages of Tabletop Exercises

- Low stress environment
- Low cost
- Ongoing evaluation
- Facilitates group discussion of problem areas
Recommended directions for your tabletop exercise:

- This is intended to be an open, low-stress environment, not a test. Varying viewpoints, even disagreements, are expected and encouraged.
- This type of exercise is the ideal setting for considering different approaches and suggesting improvements to current resources, plans, and training.
- Responses should be based on current capabilities.
- Fight the problems, not the scenario.
- Respect the speaker.
- Use the open issue list for any item that is not directly related to the discussion at hand.
- Avoid “bar discussions.”
- No beeps, buzzes, or ringtones. Turn off and put away all personal electronics.
- Start on time, end on time, and use timers to divide up tasks.
- Look through the windshield and not the rear view mirror.
- Enough, Let’s Move On (E.L.M.O.)
- No coming and going – you can come or you can go; but you can’t come and go.
- There are no “hidden agendas” or trick questions intended to mislead participants.
- All participants receive the same information at the same time.
Purpose of Tabletop Exercises

- Primarily meant to invoke discussion.
- Guided by one or two facilitators (with shared responsibilities).
- Participants solve problems as a group.
- Consists of real–life situations.
- Keep it simple. No elaborate facilities or communications.
- One or two evaluators may be selected to observe proceedings and evaluate progress towards objectives.
- Success depends upon feedback from participants. Feedback may lead to revision of polices, plans and procedures.
Goals of Tabletop Exercises

Test the plan:

• Does it work?
• Does it have the information users need?
• Is it realistic?
• Identify weaknesses and determine how the plan can be improved to circumvent these and become more complete.
Common Exercise Mistakes

- Scenarios that are not tailored to the local area or unique organization
- Scenarios that are too complex to manage successfully with available resources
- Allocating inadequate time for exercise play
- Failing to provide a constructive critique of the exercise afterwards
- Not addressing safety issues properly
- Exercises that are planned and initiated too quickly
- Excluding critical agencies that should be included
- Failing to implement “after-action items”
Can result in action plans for continued improvement of either an emergency action or a COOP plan.

An after-action report is generated, identifying weaknesses or creating new ideas to make improvements or strengthen plans.
Key Factors for Tabletop Exercises

- Exercise Development
- Exercise Participants
- Scenario Development
When should you plan to develop your Tabletop Exercise?
You should plan on development of your tabletop exercise at least 3 months prior to presentation.
State executive branch agencies must conduct annual testing of plans, under Executive order # 41 signed by former Governor Bob McDonnell. Most agencies will use tabletop exercises as part of the testing procedures.

All organizations should try to conduct a tabletop exercise at least twice a year. One to test your emergency action plan and the other to test your continuity of operations plan.
Exercise Plan Development

- Keep it simple and straightforward!
- Don’t make the scenario too big and too complicated
- Take the time to Prepare!
Encourage internal participants to bring any material related to the scenario, such as copies of either an emergency action plan or the COOP plan.

It is a judgement call as to whether or not you wish to tell participants about the scenario before the exercise.
Tabletop Exercise Room and Setup

- Large room and/or multiple rooms needed (can be done at remote locations)
- Provide tables for agencies, table agency signs, and nametags, if needed
- For large exercises, a microphone at the command post table is recommended for notifying all participants of key developments and decisions
- Audio / visual aids add realism
At the beginning of each session, clearly define the number of hours participants have to work on each session as well as how much time passes in ‘exercise time’ compared to ‘real time’.
A key element of successful tabletop exercises

Encourage all participants to contribute to the discussion, and to remind them that they are dealing with hypothetical situations in a no-fault environment.

Facilitators also build and maintain an environment where all the participants feel comfortable speaking honestly and where differences of opinion are respected.

Help to ensure that everyone feels included in the conversation and has an opportunity to participate.

Facilitators are not there to lecture or dominate the discussion, but rather to keep conversations moving.
Characteristics of Good Facilitators

- Keep discussions on track and within established time limits.
- Control group dynamics and strong personalities.
- Speak competently and confidently about the subject without dominating the conversation.
- Have subject-matter expertise or experience.
- Are aware of localized plans and procedures.
- Capture key findings and discussion points during the exercise.
On an administrative note, facilitators should discourage side conversations, ensure cellular phones are turned off or made silent, and control group dynamics.

During the exercise, facilitators need constantly to be aware of time constraints, notifying participants about progress and letting them know when time is running short.
Never have an exercise before making sure that people are trained re: plan, process and the roles and responsibilities.
Make sure you include the right people in the room – have those involved who can make the appropriate decisions (inputs should reflect the right level – e.g., middle managers – middle management decisions).
Your team leader should be the agency head or someone who is authorized per your agency regulations to act in that position if the agency head is not available.

Make sure you identify the team leader at the beginning of the exercise.
Outside Exercise Participants

**REASONS**

- Serve as subject matter experts (Depending upon the scenario)
- Offer resources to the agency.
- Establish working partnerships.
- Bring credibility to the tabletop exercise.

**OUTSIDE PARTNERS IDENTIFIED**

- Law Enforcement Representatives
- Emergency Medical Services
- Fire and Rescue
- Hospitals
- Local or State Emergency Managers
- Local Health Departments
- School Districts
- Volunteer and Faith-Based Organizations
- Utility Managers, especially your local electricity provider
- Generator Supplier or Manufacturer
- Transportation Provider
- Sister Facilities
- Management Company
Exercise Evaluators

- Use two evaluators.
- Recommended that exercise evaluators are brought in from outside and are not internal.
- Outside evaluators can provide better input without showing favoritism or bias.
- However, please try to select evaluators who possess experience with tabletop exercises.
Determine the scope
Is this a tabletop for:
• your business (single site)?
• multi-site?
• industry-wide?
• with partners?
- Make sure the scenario has a positive outcome.
- No need to be “Pollyanna” – but the scenario should demonstrate improvement.
Hot Wash

- Marks the transition from actual exercise play to the evaluation phase where lessons are learned and corrective actions documented.

- It is important to conduct the hot wash at the end of the exercise while all participants are still present and the day’s discussions are still fresh in their minds.
A professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards in an action plan, that enables the group to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses.
Important to get feedback from the team on:

- How was the exercise?
- Was it planned and organized properly?
- Did the exercise meet their needs as far as preparedness?
- What lessons were learned from the exercise?
- Would you participate in another exercise?
Title of Document

Whether the document is classified or not and how it should be handled and/or disseminated.

Points of contact
After-Action Report Sections

- **Executive Summary**
  This section should provide a general overview of the goals, purpose and objectives of the exercise. For smaller activities such as seminars and drills, the capability analysis and/or conclusion may be included here.

- **Exercise Overview**
  Information in this section should clearly identify the specific exercise. Data should include the exercise name, date(s), location(s), and participating local governmental and non-governmental agencies, mutual-aid jurisdictions, state and federal partners.

- **Scenario**
  Provide a complete description of the narrative, major or key updates, and injects that drove player action to accomplish the objectives. In most cases, the Master Scenario Events List (MSEL) does not need to be submitted. The scenario may be presented as a separate section, as part of the executive summary or in the exercise overview.
Understand the Core Capabilities that were tested and evaluated in the exercise. Provide a description of the objectives within each capability, the observations, any discussion or analysis, and the outcomes. Recommendations are often included in this section. Seminars and workshops may include a brief analysis in the Executive Summary or Conclusion sections.

Conclusion
The conclusion should provide a general review of the exercise, its overall outcome and potential improvements. For small exercises, this may be included in the Executive Summary.

Acronyms
Acronyms specific to your community or plans should be defined for readers not familiar with your community.

- Improvement plan
  Recommendation/Improvement/Corrective Action responsible agency and office estimated completion date.
Keep them simple
Stay on topic
Keep them brief
Finally

- Take time to plan your tabletop exercise properly. Don’t just throw something together and expect the group to participate.
- The more effort you put into planning and organizing your exercise, the better it will be appreciated by your participants and it will be worth its weight in gold.
Questions
References

- IS-120.A: An Introduction to Exercises
  https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-120.a

- IS-547.A: Introduction to Continuity of Operations
  https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-547.a

- IS-550: Continuity Exercise Design Course

- Planning a tabletop exercise by Laurie Pearce & Don Bindon
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