



Tips for Conducting Table Exercises



Planning for a Tabletop Exercise

Planning is key to ensuring a tabletop exercise will be productive and useful for participating stakeholders. The following is a list of the major elements involved in planning for a tabletop exercise:

- Identify the stakeholders who will participate in the exercise.
- Develop a script for the exercise, including surprise elements.
- Provide a timeline for the exercise to play-out (the exercise will probably take place in an accelerated timeframe compared to a real-life event).
- Identify reviewers who will watch the exercise and take notes.
- Provide time to review the exercise.
- Modify the plan based on what was learned during the exercise.



Participants

The purpose of a tabletop exercise is to encourage discussion among the stakeholders and to develop recognition of coordination and planning requirements. This can only be accomplished if group discussion takes place freely and without embarrassment to any individual or service. In order to ensure this type of environment exists, care must be taken when identifying a facilitator for the tabletop exercise. The facilitator of the exercise should be someone who is knowledgeable with the planning and implementation of the transportation plans for planned special events but who is not an exercise "player." Ideally, this would either be the traffic engineer or an instructor who has the responsibility and knowledge of planned special events and resources available in your community.

Planned special events tabletop exercise participants should (at least) include representatives of fire and rescue, police/law enforcement, transportation and/or public works, venue representatives, transit, emergency medical services, towing and recovery, elected officials, public information, and emergency management, and, if appropriate, a representative from the transportation operations center. Additional details concerning the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders typically involved with the traffic management for unplanned incidents is discussed in greater detail in the Roles and Responsibilities section.

In addition, since participants can not be expected to remember all that takes place during the exercise, it is critical that observers be used to: (1) watch what happens, (2) take notes on what is seen and heard, and (3) recount observations during the review process.



Scenarios

The goal of preparing a tabletop exercise for a specific emergency is not to be mistake free, but to identify potential problems areas. For tabletop exercises to be effective, they should test as many parts of the potential emergency as possible using scenarios. A number of scenarios that cause disruptions to the emergency planning or response should be developed, keeping in mind that the scenarios should be as realistic as possible. Often times during a tabletop a simple scenario is presented to initiate discussion, and as the exercise progresses the scenario is escalated. During scenario discussions, operational problems and solutions can be identified.

These scenarios typically do not require modeled network information, as their primary purpose is to test the stakeholders as to how they would react and to fine tune the responsibilities of each stakeholder and the communications protocol between the stakeholders.



After Action Review

After action reviews are conducted after a tabletop, or any exercise, has ended. The purpose of the review is to:

- Evaluate changes and corrections to the original emergency response plan.
- Evaluate what if any additional interagency or inter-department coordination is needed.
- Serve as a guide for future exercises.
- Verify the exercise goals were achieved.
- Evaluate training and staff deficiencies.

Participant input is also crucial in the review process. They can note difficulties experienced during the exercise that might not be obvious to observers. Reviewers should debrief participants as soon as possible after the exercise so participants do not forget what they experienced. These participant observations should also be included in a more extensive review of the exercise. Individuals who do not represent day-of event response team personnel or event stakeholders can be very useful in moderating the review process since they do not bring real or perceived bias into the process. Finally, all of the observations and insights are useless unless there exists some opportunity to incorporate recommended changes into the transportation management plan.



Tips to Ensure an Effective Tabletop Exercise

The following guidelines will ensure your tabletop exercise is more effective:

- The exercise should be held in a room with a conference table, or with the seating arranged in a manner in which the participants are able to see all other participants.
- Have refreshments available for the participants helps promote a relaxed atmosphere.
- Provide a large detailed map/drawing of the exercise area so that all participants can visualize the area involved.
- A recorder (not an exercise "player") should write down exercise responses and note the major issues/problems.
- Plan on at least one hour, preferably three for the exercise. If the exercise fails to become productive within the first hour, it's best to discontinue and discuss the possible reasons why this has occurred.
- After the exercise, all participants should be asked to complete an evaluation of the exercise, and make suggestions and comments with regard to emergency operations plan revisions.
- Schedule future meetings to revise the plan shortly after this tabletop exercise, while thoughts are still fresh in everyone's mind, may be appropriate.
- Additional tabletop exercises may be needed to evaluate the revisions/accomplish local goals of this exercise.