

ABSTRACT

Populations served by volunteer organizations may require services when a disaster strikes the community, and the need for services may actually increase under these conditions. As a result, almost any agency or organization should explore how it might protect its own resources and maintain services to clients during and following the impact of a natural or man made disaster. A simple tabletop exercise offers a way to determine what emergency procedures you need to protect the organization's resources and to continue to provide your services.

Agency Disaster Response Tabletop Exercise: A Training Design

Walter G. Green III, Ph.D.

Protecting your community from disasters is a cooperative effort of the jurisdiction's emergency services, business and industry, and a variety of government and private agencies, many of whom do not think of themselves as having disaster response roles. However, the reality is that the populations served by volunteer organizations may require services whether or not the community is disrupted by a hurricane, earthquake, tornado, etc., and the need for services may actually increase under these conditions. As a result, almost any agency or organization should explore how it might protect its own resources and maintain services to clients during and following the impact of a natural or man made disaster. Depending on the level of involvement of the agency in response to disasters, tabletop exercises offer a way to validate your emergency procedures as often as may make sense based on the level of hazard and the frequency of its occurrence.

GROUP TYPE AND SIZE

An agency tabletop exercise should involve agency staff potentially responsible for taking disaster related actions. Conceptually, tabletop exercises work well if they involve a cross section of executive, supervisory, and service provider level staff. Paid and volunteer staff should

be included. Participation by representatives of the local emergency management agency and organizations that provide similar or complementary services may be desirable.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In general individuals completing this activity will be able to:

1. Identify possible impacts of a natural or man-made disaster on their organization.
2. Identify probable impacts of a natural or man-made disaster in the population the organization serves.
3. Develop possible courses of action that will protect organization resources and allow the continuation or rapid resumption of services to populations at risk.

Specific learning objectives may be established for additional exercises following the first exercise. These may include such areas as testing emergency plans developed for the agency to ensure that likely scenarios and all responsibilities have been addressed; orienting the staff to the organization's emergency plan; and determining how well the organization's plan will interface with the plans of other organizations with similar and different roles.

Walter Green, III, Ph.D. chairs the University of Richmond's Emergency Management degree and certificate programs. A new member of AVA, he has 25 years experience in the management of volunteer emergency medical, disaster response, communications, and search and rescue organizations at the local and state level. He is a founding member of the Virginia Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, and currently leads a volunteer organization that provides an on-line emergency operations center to support voluntary agency and government disaster response.

TIME REQUIRED

Tabletop exercises can occupy time periods from one hour to four hours, based on the length and complexity of the scenario. For groups new to such exercises a period of 90 minutes to two hours should allow the exploration of an entry level scenario without exhausting interest or the participants. Even though such exercises are slow paced and relatively low key, they may still generate significant stress for individuals who have not thought about their roles in disaster response before.

MATERIALS

- One copy of the basic exercise scenario for each participant.
- One copy of each exercise message.

PHYSICAL SETTING

The size of room used for the tabletop exercise will depend on the number of participants. Each participant should have a chair and a workspace, ideally equivalent to the space of a normal desktop. The tendency to seat participants three to a folding table should be avoided as it does not allow the participants to spread out plans and reference materials or to comfortably take notes.

The room should have surfaces that can be used to record actions during the exercise or highlight key points during the critique. These may include chalkboard, white board, or flip charts, along with chalk or markers and erasers. Most participants will also find a map of the area of the scenario helpful.

Each participant should have available at their position a copy of the agency's disaster plan, resource lists, and other documents appropriate to the scenario of the exercise. In addition each position should have a notepad and pencils or pens.

PROCESS

Before The Exercise

Designing an exercise can be an involved and time-consuming process.

For a small organizational tabletop exercise, a simplified procedure will help you develop a perfectly adequate exercise that you can afford to conduct, both in terms of time and other resources.

1. Establish objectives. Every exercise should have clear, measurable objectives, stated in the same way as the organization normally states training objectives in its lesson plans.
2. Identify and invite participants. The invitation letter should be signed by the organization's chief executive (anything less and people will find other uses for their time) and provide background information, the exercise objectives, time, and place.
3. Design a basic scenario. The basic scenario (see Appendix A) sets the stage for the exercise by providing the situation participants will confront when the exercise starts. For audiences not experienced in disaster events, this should clearly describe the situation and the resources available.
4. Write the messages and determine the outcomes. In a tabletop exercise, information on the developing disaster and the problems it causes is provided in a series of messages (see Appendix B). Each message should be designed to produce specific outcomes that lead the participants to meet the exercise objectives. Although these outcomes are not provided to the participants, the exercise designer should keep them to assist in the exercise evaluation process. One message every ten to fifteen minutes should be reasonable for a beginning level exercise.
5. Reproduce the needed materials.

The Exercise

Play of the exercise is controlled by an exercise controller who provides the scenario and the exercise messages to the participants. The controller and the designer may be the same person.

1. Introduce the exercise with a short summary of the objectives and a summary of how it will proceed.

2. Provide the players the exercise scenario. Suggest that they determine how they will be organized and that they appoint a member to record actions taken in response to the evolving situation.
 3. When the players are ready, provide them the first message.
 4. Each message is presented when the participants have completed the discussion of the previous message. Messages may be distributed in rotation, randomly given to the staff member most likely to receive them, or given to the staff member who is responsible for the function addressed. Encourage the individual receiving the message to read it aloud for the benefit of all participants. At the beginner level, allow adequate time for discussion and establishment of a course of action.
 5. Terminate the exercise either when the last message has been considered or when an established time limit is reached (even if all messages have not been used).
2. *Brainstorming of Lessons Learned.* Participants should contribute items they learned about the possible impact of a disaster and the organization's capability to respond. Every participant should be allowed to contribute to this process, and lessons should be noted on a flip chart or board. Allow 20 minutes for this portion.
 3. *Assigning Action.* The senior officer of the organization present should quickly review the list of lessons, and assign or solicit individuals to assume responsibility for follow-up actions to either solve problems or capture good ideas as part of the agency's procedures. Allow five minutes for this portion.
 4. *Objective Assessment.* This can be a simple show of hands. The exercise designer should ask for participants to determine whether each of the exercise objectives was met. Note any objectives not met, as they will need to be addressed in future exercises.

The Critique

Every exercise should be critiqued by the exercise designer and the participants. Although such critiques can be almost as involved as the event itself, for most tabletop exercises a simple session, commonly known as a Hot-Wash, will be completely adequate if held immediately after the exercise concludes. Critiques have four parts:

1. *A Review of What Happened in the Scenario and What Actions the Group Took.* This should be a short summary, not a detailed discussion, to ensure that everyone has a picture of how the event unfolded. For a 90-minute exercise, this should probably be no longer than five minutes and be led by the exercise designer.

The Follow-Up

The exercise should result in a list of actions and staff members responsible for follow-up. These assignments should be checked on a regular basis, and included in future exercises to test the viability of the solutions.

VARIATIONS

Variations may be introduced into the exercise to increase stress, force new patterns of activity, or achieve specific objectives. For example, increasing the number of messages, establishing time limits for discussion, or delivering added messages while the staff is still working on a problem all increase the level of complexity and stress. However, exercise designers should resist the temptation to make the first exercise a difficult or complex one. If the participants are overwhelmed by the exercise, the only lesson they may learn is that it is impossible to be prepared and that their efforts will be futile.

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APPENDIX A

EXERCISE SCENARIO

The exercise scenario should be a simple, easy to read statement of the situation in which the participants find themselves at the start of the exercise. A well written scenario sets the stage for the play that follows by giving the participants a chance to place themselves in a different time and situation than what they know exists outside the room in which they are sitting. Scenarios, especially in a first exercise for an organization, should start from known truths and experiences common to the participants, and be structured around real problems the organization has experienced (or other similar organizations have experienced).

Some elements to include in the scenario typically include:

- The time of day and day of the week.
- The current weather conditions.
- Any forecast conditions that will influence the participants or the scenario.
- Whether or not your communications systems are working.
- What staff is available.
- The condition of the organization's facilities and vehicles.
- Whether the disaster has occurred, and, if so, what its obvious effects are.
- What the current demand for service is.
- What other organizations are doing.
- Whether there is a threat to the safety of the persons in the room, other staff members, or clients.
- What role the persons participating in the exercise are supposed to play.

A good scenario tells a story. It should be believable, and yet be written with imagination and reference to common experiences that put the participants in the mood to respond realistically to the problems.

APPENDIX B

EXERCISE MESSAGE FORMAT

Exercise messages are information the participants receive from a wide variety of sources including in-person reports, telephone conversations, news coverage, fax messages, information relayed by amateur radio operators, etc. Messages should be short and to the point, but provide enough information for the participants to take logical action.

TIME: A "Time" block indicates the time when the message enters play. This helps participants monitor the passage of simulated time during the exercise. Messages may represent a time increment of any length depending on the scenario.

FROM: The "From" block indicates who is providing the information in the message. This lets you simulate a range of sources for information, requests for assistance, taskings, etc. that are located outside the room. If the information is something that logically the participants could see or experience for themselves, the From block can indicate this.

TEXT: The message "Text" provides the information participants need to either create an exercise problem or to help resolve one. Typical text items might include a description of disaster effects, communications or utility failures, facility damage, injuries for staff or clients, etc.; or requests for help.

Also included might be changes in the status of resources and offers of assistance, reports on changes in workload, or emergency situations that require evacuation or the opening of shelters.

In beginning level exercises, the text descriptions provide all the information participants need to arrive at a solution to the problem. In advanced exercises, partial information may require participants to make reasonable deductions based on their experience.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION: In beginning level exercises it may be useful to include discussion questions to help the participants focus on the problem. Some example questions include:

- What actions should you take at this time?
- What impacts will this have on your operations?
- What does this tell us about the developing situation?