5 Steps to Creating Crisis Simulation Tabletop Exercises

The Complete Guide to Creating and Delivering Crisis Simulation Tabletop Exercises

An eBook by Robert Burton

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The Author

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Rob is a Principal at PreparedEx where he manages a team of crisis preparedness professionals and has over 20 years of experience preparing for and responding to crises. Part of his leadership role includes assisting PreparedEx clients in designing, implementing and evaluating crisis, emergency, security and business continuity management programs. During his career Rob has worked for the US State Department's Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program, as a crisis management consultant in Pakistan and Afghanistan where he negotiated with the UN and Pashtun tribal warlords and he served with the United Kingdom Special Forces where he operated internationally under hazardous covert and confidential conditions. Rob was also part of a disciplined and prestigious unit The Grenadier Guards where he served Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at the Royal Palaces in London. Rob was a highly trained and experienced infantryman serving in Desert Storm and commanded covert operational teams and was a sniper. Rob has keynoted disaster recovery conferences and participated in live debates on FOX News regarding complex security requirements and terrorism. Rob has a Queen's Commendation for Bravery.

The 5 Steps

My 5 Stepped Process Guarantees Your Tabletop Exercises Will Be Successful

I decided to put these 5 easy steps together to help you create and deliver more productive and engaging tabletop exercises.

As the Managing Director of a company that supports mid to large sized organizations in their efforts to become better prepared, we find that most organizations fail to create impactful exercises, or, they don't conduct them at all. This eBook provides you with all the necessary information to help you create engaging and meaningful tabletop exercises that will have your audience begging for more.

Each Chapter in this eBook represents a step in the process to creating and delivering tabletop exercises. There are five chapters.

These are the 5 easy steps:

Step 1 – Pre-Exercise Planning
Step 2 – Scenario and Exercise Design
Step 3 – Final Exercise Preparations
Step 4 – Exercise Delivery and Evaluation
Step 5 – Post Exercise

Chapter 1

Step 1: Pre-Exercise Planning

1.1 Review Vulnerability Assessment

Start your exercise development by reviewing risks and vulnerabilities that should be documented within your current risk assessment documentation. If you have not accomplished a vulnerability assessment, review your organization's history of incidents and current concerns. What keeps you up at night? Based on this list, select a topic to address during the exercise.
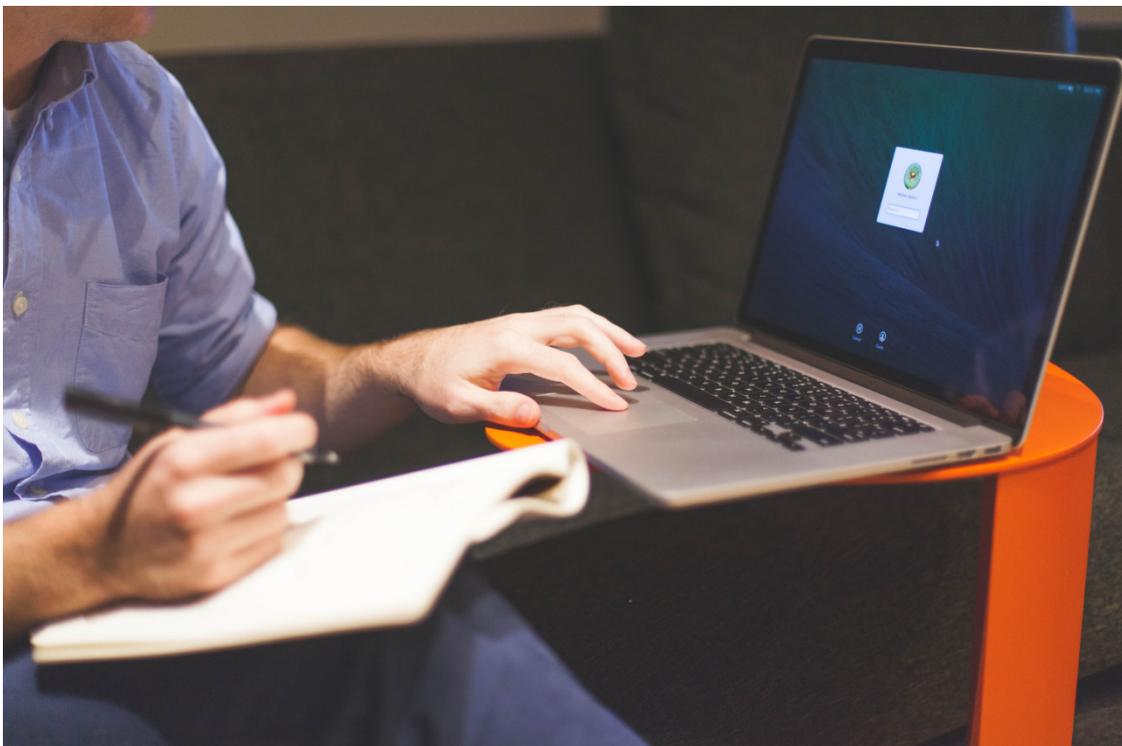
5 Steps to Creating and Delivering a Tabletop Exercise

> **Tabletop Exercises bring together heads of lines of business and leaders of business processes to evaluate their state of readiness for crisis management, disaster recovery, and business continuity. Realistic scenarios are presented in an engaging, low-stress environment, where teams walk through their plans for responding to an unfolding situation.**

1.2 Determine the Type of Exercise

Selecting the type of exercise is important. (e.g., Seminars Workshops, Tabletop Exercises, War Games, Drills, Functional Exercises, Full-Scale Exercises, Command Post Exercises, Operations Center Exercises). Select the type exercise that will best allow you to achieve your objective(s). Tabletop exercises, for example, have been used with great success for assisting in the development of business continuity plans and to determine existing plans where holes or gaps exist. And functional drills and full-scale exercises reinforce expected actions under simulated emergency / crisis conditions. These activities focus on the needs of the organization as well as the need to enhance individual skills and abilities.

1.3 Determine Exercise Objectives

One of the most important, if not the most important step, in the preparation of an exercise is to determine the objective(s). Once the objective(s) are determined, then you decide what scenario will allow you to address the stated objective(s).

Criteria for Selecting Objectives

Don't be too ambitious when selecting objectives. Pick a core set of objectives. Not too many. If you have set up, for example, a five-year exercise program, there will be time for another exercise with different objectives. Don't try to do everything in one exercise. Instead, spread out your objectives. Pick a few different ones at each exercise and ensure coverage over the lifespan of the exercise program.

Tabletop Exercises don't require too much effort with regards to preparation and can be delivered in almost any setting.

Chapter 2

Step 2: Scenario and Exercise Design

2.1 Developing the Scenario

The scenario is designed to meet the objectives, and NOT vice versa. For example, many organizations require periodic exercises as part of their emergency preparedness program. The aim of these exercises is to verify, on a periodic basis, that the organization is capable of meeting their response objectives. Therefore, it is those response objectives that drive the choice of exercise scenario.

Scenario construct: Writing a scenario is like writing a story. And like a good story, it should be fun to read - or in this case fun to act. The plot should be believable, and the story captivating. Events should be physically possible and as much as possible, they must be credible. You may at times include events that are currently thought to be highly improbable; for even improbable things happen, and it's worth examining how your organization will respond when the events do happen (e.g., Hurricane Sandy). A successful exercise is when there is an initiating event and as it runs its course, things happen naturally.

Scenario mechanics: There are a couple of approaches to the mechanics of developing a scenario. One is the "bottom-up" approach. In this approach, start with the final events (e.g., evacuation, shut down of operations, start of recovery) and work backwards towards realistic initiating events (e.g., explosion, impending hurricane). Tie the whole series of events into a "story."Another approach to developing a scenario consists of starting with an initiating event (such as a hurricane or an explosion) and play out its consequences. In either approach look at the emergency plans and procedures for the organizational and interface aspects. Once that story is fleshed out, you can add details for injuries, emergencies, loss of revenue, impact of social media, etc.

> Social engineering, in the context of information security, refers to psychological manipulation of people into performing actions or divulging confidential information. A red team exercise can evaluate this threat.

Scenario security is important: It helps ensure that the participants react in a realistic way. The team preparing the exercise should not share information on the scenario with the players. The controllers and evaluators should know the scenario very well. Everybody else shouldn't. Some people will have this urge to know the scenario in advance. To counteract this natural tendency, the players should be given a short document detailing the schedule, the objectives, the participants and the organization running the exercise. This will demonstrate that the exercise is well thought out and hopefully answer the legitimate questions they may have. For those players that remain uncomfortable, explain that they will learn a lot more if they have to think through all the events without knowing the answers in advance.

Are your employees prepared to be interviewed? Have you conducted mock media interviews to validate media training?

A mock interview is an emulation of an interview used for training purposes. The interview tries to resemble a real interview as closely as possible, and provides experience for the employee.

2.2 Develop Exercise Injects

To run the scenario, you will need injects and data. It is important to understand the difference between the two. Injects are basically the many individual parts of the scenario you have developed. For example if you have developed a scenario to examine your contingency response to a hurricane at your facility the first inject could be a media weather report of a tropical depression that is developing into a hurricane. The next inject would be a follow-on report of the hurricane tracking toward your area. Injects link the simulated event to the actions that you want people to take.

They provide unity to the exercise and are provided by controllers to drive the scenario. Injects usually happen regardless of the actions of the players. For example, a simulated road emergency could impair the ability to evacuate via a key road. This is an inject because the controller would inform the players at a pre-set time that this simulated event has taken place, regardless of the actions of the players. These are several ways injects can be provided:

- Verbally (by simulating the originator)
- By phone, fax or radio
- Written, by handing out the inject (the best way in cases where there is a language barrier)
- Visually (e.g., picture, video, etc.)

Data is given only when the players take appropriate actions to acquire the information or there is already a process in place to automatically provide the data. All information needed but not actually available must be simulated. To understand what data will be required, ask:

- What will the players do as a result of this inject?
- What information or data will they need?
- Will that data be available?
- Is it essential for their performance?
- In what form is it normally obtained?

It is very important to the scenario credibility factor that data is provided in the form that it would normally be obtained using their own standard procedures. This will enhance the value of the exercise.

There are various ways of providing simulated exercise data. The simple rule is: try to find a way that most resembles reality.

2.3 Develop Master Scenario Events List (MSEL).

A MSEL contains a chronological listing of the injects/events that drive exercise play. The MSEL links simulation to action, enhances exercise experience for players, and reflects an incident or activity that will prompt players to implement the policy or procedure being tested. Each MSEL record contains (minimum):

- Designated scenario time
- Event synopsis
- Expected action (player response after an MSEL inject is delivered)
- Intended player (agency or individual player for whom the MSEL inject is intended)
- Notes section (for controllers and evaluators to track actual events against those listed in the MSEL, with special instructions for individual controllers and evaluators)

The MSEL is usually restricted for use by the facilitators, controllers, simulators, and evaluators.

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Chapter 3

Step 3: Final Exercise Preparations

3.1 Conduct Pre-Exercise Training

Conduct pre-exercise training sessions (as necessary). In exercises where you will have breakout groups and require moderators to preside over the group activities, you will want to conduct some pre-exercise training sessions. The training should emphasize the exercise's objectives and expected output (i.e., products developed by the respective groups). Go over the individual injects to ensure the moderator understands what action(s) injects are intended to solicit.

3.2 Coordinate and Prepare Exercise Delivery Team

Provide evaluators of exercise with complete package of information (e.g. exercise objectives, evaluation criteria developed for exercise, etc.). If possible provide exercise material to evaluators well in advance so they can become familiar with the objectives and evaluation criteria.

3.3 Exercise Logistics

Reserve in advance adequate exercise and break out rooms and schedule refreshments and lunch for exercise date. This is a key course of action in any exercise. Double check on your room reservation and request for refreshments and lunch. The neglect of this logistic action has spoiled more than one exercise.

Crisis leaders should create an environment where trust and openness are accepted and practiced.

Identify facilitator and moderators (if breakout sessions are used during exercise). Your facilitator is key to a successful exercise. Facilitators guide exercise play and are responsible for ensuring that participant discussions remain focused on the exercise objectives and making sure all issues are explored as thoroughly as possible within available time. A key facilitator role is to encourage all participants to contribute to the discussion, and to remind them that they are dealing with hypothetical situations in a no-fault environment. Ideally, the facilitator will be someone who has both subject-matter knowledge and facilitation experience. If this is not possible, using an experienced facilitator who can keep the discussion on track is more important than specific subject matter expertise. In the event your exercise requires breakout groups, you will also require moderators. The moderator is an individual who presides over the group's discussion. They monitor the exchange between participants and move discussions from one topic to another to keep conversation organized.

There are various ways of providing simulated exercise data. The simple rule is: try to find a way that most resembles reality.

Develop exercise materials. As the exercise approaches you will assemble handouts, agenda, and reference material for participants, facilitator, moderators, and observers. These include but are not limited to your plans, policies, and procedure documents and evaluation forms for distribution at the end of exercise. If paper handouts of injects are being used, ensure that you have sufficient copies for all involved in the exercise.

Create a shared vision within the crisis management framework

Crisis leaders should create an environment where trust and openness are accepted and practiced.

Build reputational capital by cultivating external relationships with key stakeholders.

3.4 Validate injects and MSEL.

Throughout the development of the exercise each inject and the MSEL should be reviewed and validated by the exercise coordinator and/or designated trusted agents within the organization.

The review is primarily to determine if the injects are realistically portraying operations or procedures within the organization, who should receive the inject, and to verify the likely or excepted response by participants who will receive injects.

Chapter 4

Step 4: Exercise Delivery and Evaluation

You should now be prepared to conduct the exercise and the follow-on Hot Wash.
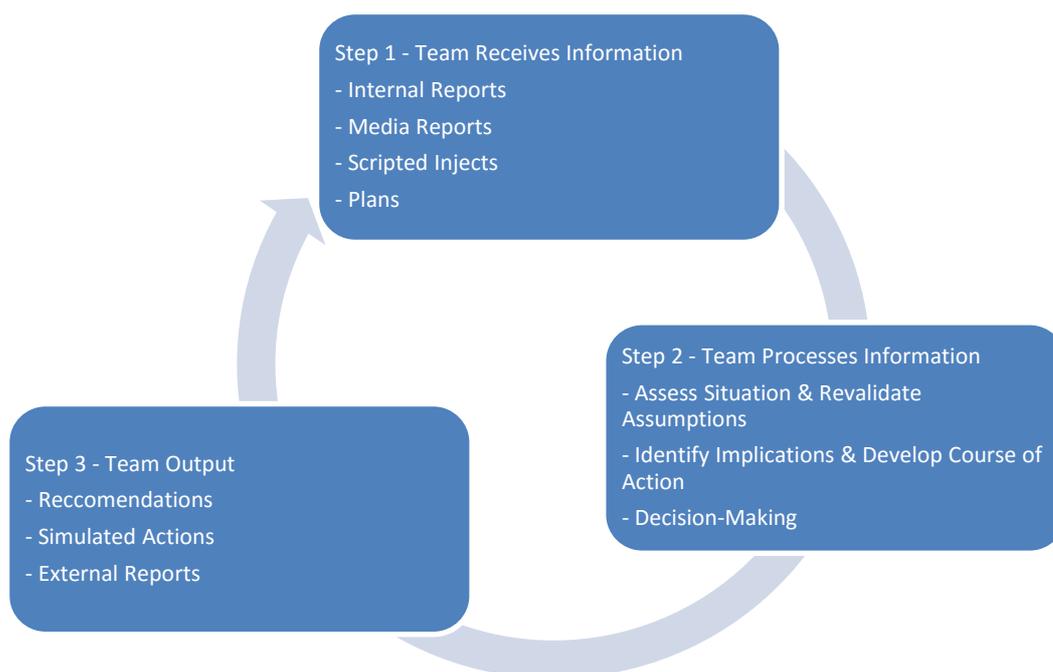
4.1 Conduct of Exercise

Senior leadership within the organization should give the introduction and provide an insight to what they expect the exercise to achieve. Following the introduction by senior leadership, the exercise coordinator will discuss the agenda for the day or duration of the exercise and any administrative remarks (e.g., safety instructions, break times, lunch, etc.). Next, the Facilitator will take over and provide the mechanics of the exercise and introduce the group moderators (if break out groups will be used during the exercise). The Facilitator will control the flow of injects and the pace of the exercise.

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4.2 Exercise Methodology

Regular overall technique employed for exercises is based on an input – action – output paradigm. Using information provided by a scenario or scripted injects, participants address and act on issues related to the specific session. Participants will address issues embedded in the scenario and injected events to develop the product required at the end of the session. The facilitation team will guide the participants in their discussions and generation of the products required at the end of each session.

The following depicts the general flow of this interactive technique. This process can be tailored to meet the objectives of this specific exercise.

Step 1 - Team Receives Information
- Internal Reports
- Media Reports
- Scripted Injects
- Plans

Step 2 - Team Processes Information
- Assess Situation & Revalidate Assumptions
- Identify Implications & Develop Course of Action
- Decision-Making

Step 3 - Team Output
- Reccomendations
- Simulated Actions
- External Reports

Crisis leaders should create an environment where trust and openness are accepted and practiced.

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4.3 The Hot Wash

In order to wrap up the exercise, participants often end by having an informal conversation, commonly referred to as a "hot wash," where they share their perspectives on key strengths and areas for improvement. The facilitator should remind the participants that this a no-fault exercise and they should feel free to be open and honest in their assessment about the exercise. It should be clearly stated that the exercise is no longer in progress. The facilitator needs to elicit feedback from each participant or in large group from each group leader. Observers, facilitators, moderators, and evaluators may be allowed to participate in this session. Hot washes are important because they mark the transition from actual exercise play to the evaluation phase where lessons to be learned and corrective actions are 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. The hot wash is generally the last agenda item during a tabletop exercise and occurs once the scenario and discussion questions have been thoroughly explored. The facilitator guides the hot wash and asks each participant to share his or her personal thoughts about strengths and areas for improvement that were identified. The facilitator will also ask for potential action items for the organization to implement moving forward. A note taker from the exercise planning team or a designated participant should capture the insights and suggestions offered by participants during the hot wash. This information will factor into evaluation activities after the exercise and should be used to improve processes, plans, and policies, as required. The exercise planning team can also collect written feedback from participants as part of the hot wash. One simple approach is to provide participants with a simple feedback form or blank note cards on which to document their thoughts about issues raised during the exercise and potential solutions.

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Chapter 5

Step 5: Post Exercise Activities

5.1 Develop After Action Report (AAR).

The AAR provides a summary of the exercise and usually includes:

- Executive Overview
- Exercise Background
- Exercise Objectives
- Simulated Scenario
- Participants
- Exercise Methodology
- Key Findings
- Summary of key issues, observations, lessons to be learned, and recommendations

The AAR is usually prepared by the overall exercise coordinator or by someone designated by the exercise coordinator. The report is based on inputs from the "Hot Wash," observations from the "Control Team," and observations from exercise evaluators. Once the recommendations have been implanted, the process begins again. Ensure that your next set of exercise objectives includes your findings from the previous exercise.

Is your team ready for a functional or full-scale exercise?

Tabletop Exercises bring together heads of lines of business and leaders of business processes to evaluate their state of readiness for crisis management, disaster recovery, and business continuity. Realistic scenarios are presented in an engaging, low-stress environment, where teams walk through their plans for responding to an unfolding situation. Participants are presented an evolving set of facts and circumstances that require them to make a series of real-time decisions. The goal is to test both their established plans and their ability to respond to unanticipated events.

Exercise objectives are set by the organization to test a plan and the team who are responsible for implementing the plan when activated. Plans range from crisis and business continuity to emergency and security management. The tabletop scenario is carefully designed to ensure exercise objectives are met. In addition to assuring that the organization has effective plans in place, the tabletop exercise brings together internal teams and critical partners to work in a simulated environment so they are prepared for real crises. Working together in a simulated crisis environment is the most effective way to build trust and effective communication among the team members who might not otherwise have regular contact under normal business conditions.

PreparedEx creates unique-to-your-company tabletop exercises, delivered with our industry-leading technology.

"A victorious leader plans for many eventualities before the battle; a defeated leader plans for only a few. Many options bring victory, few options bring defeat, no options at all spell disaster."

- Sun Tzu

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