NYC EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
Tabletop Exercise Toolkit

Organizer Guide

Version 1.0

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit will help you navigate the process of preparing for, conducting, and reviewing a tabletop exercise regardless of your organization's size or familiarity with tabletop exercises.

Exercising your organization's plans is a highly valued preparedness strategy. NYC Emergency Management recognizes that not all organizations or businesses have the resources or time to create their own tabletop exercises or hire a consultant team to do so. This free and customizable tabletop exercise toolkit simplifies the process.

The toolkit is structured so that, depending on the needs of your organization, each section can be read and used independently. The toolkit covers the basics of tabletop exercises, what needs to be considered when planning to run one, why and how to review the exercise, as well as scenarios to exercise.

Each scenario can be used multiple times to test different aspects of your organization's emergency plans. The scenarios include references to actions taken by NYC agencies based on past experiences and interagency planning and discussions. It is helpful to note that the actions and times used in the scenarios are specific to that particular scenario. The City's response and timing to a real-world incident will differ based on many variables. Additionally, the scenarios are purposefully general and can be customized to apply to any location or organization in the city.

NYC Emergency Management hopes you find this toolkit useful, and welcome your thoughts and feedback at publicprivate@OEM.NYC.GOV.

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What is a Tabletop Exercise?

A tabletop exercise is a facilitated discussion of a plan in an informal, stress-free environment. It is like a problem-solving or brainstorming session where participants share capabilities and solve problems as a group based on their organization's existing plans and the determined objectives of the exercise.

The success of a tabletop exercise is determined by feedback from participants and the impact the feedback has on the evaluation and revision of policies, plans, and procedures.

What a Tabletop Exercise is Not

A tabletop exercise is neither the tool through which you make a plan nor the place for training and discussion about a plan. A prior step to holding a tabletop exercise is often a workshop to train and discuss a plan. This toolkit is meant to be used once your organization has a plan in place and is ready to evaluate it.

Why Run a Tabletop Exercise?

Tabletop exercises build organizational capacity, help organizations evaluate their business continuity plans and identify strengths and areas for improvement. These exercises provide training and awareness to staff who have an opportunity to rehearse their roles and responsibilities during an incident. Plus, they are low-cost and low-stakes.

How Long is a Tabletop Exercise?

A tabletop exercise usually lasts from 1 to 4 hours, but can vary depending on the incident. Discussion times are open-ended, and participants are encouraged to take their time in arriving at in-depth decisions without time pressure. When the time is up, the activity is concluded.

There is never a perfect moment to run a tabletop exercise for everyone, but try to do so at a time that doesn't compete for everyone's attention.

What Are The Roles in a Tabletop Exercise?

Types of participants involved in the exercise, and their respective roles and responsibilities, are described below. Depending on the size of your organization, some roles may be combined and some roles may not be necessary.

Players - Players are personnel who have an active role in discussing or performing their regular roles and responsibilities during the exercise. These are the people who play through the tabletop exercise, and discuss or initiate actions in response to the simulated emergency. The objectives of the exercise dictate who should participate. It can involve many people and many organizations, e.g. landlords and vendors—essentially anyone who can learn from, or contribute to, the planned discussion items. This may include all entities that have a policy, planning, or response role.

Observers - Observers do not directly participate in the exercise. However, they may support the development of player responses to the situation during the discussion by asking relevant questions or providing subject matter expertise.

Facilitators - The facilitator leads the discussion and guides players through the tabletop exercise. Facilitators provide situational updates and moderate discussions. They decide who gets a message or problem statement, calls on others to participate, asks questions, and guides the participants toward sound decisions. They also provide additional information or resolve questions as required. Members of the Planning Team may also assist with facilitation as subject matter experts during the exercise.

Notetakers - Staff assigned to observe and document certain objectives during the exercise. Notetakers' primary role is to document player discussions, including how and if those discussions conform to plans, polices, and procedures. They also note any follow up items, next steps, and items for further discussion.

Organizational Leadership – Comprised of executive-level staff and other key decision-makers, your organization's leadership may or may not play in the tabletop exercise. Regardless, their buy-in and support are important for the success of the exercise.

Organizers – Organizers are tasked with overseeing the tabletop exercise process from start to end. They ensure that the exercise proceeds smoothly by coordinating the people, supplies, facilities, and other necessary components of the exercise. Organizers do not play in the exercise but should be familiar with the steps involved in preparing and executing one. Organizers may also be part of the planning team described below.

Planning Team – The planning team helps set the parameters of the exercise. They guide the planning of the exercise by informing the organizers what should be tested in the exercise, what to expect from players' responses, and what are the appropriate questions and injects. These individuals may be considered subject matter experts and should already be familiar with your organization's plan, responsibilities, and capabilities.

How to Get Buy-In

Part of the groundwork to running a tabletop exercise is getting buy-in from an organization's executive and decision-making team. Their support sets the tone for success. By positioning tabletop exercises as not just standalone, independent pursuits, but rather as meaningful contributors to the organization's resilience, you can present a persuasive case. A few tips of how to do so follows:

- Consider tying the purpose and objectives of the exercise to your organization's strategic plan or mission
- Check with your organization's auditors; a tabletop exercise may fulfill certain requirements

As much as the organizational leadership needs to find value in running a tabletop exercise, the participants must also see that this is a valuable way to spend their time and energy. For there to be worthwhile discussions during a tabletop exercise, the participants need be fully present in the moment and engaged. Consider what participants can gain from participating in the tabletop and be sure to communicate that.

How to Set the Scope and Objectives

Begin with a Needs Assessment

The needs assessment should answer why you are doing the exercise. Review your emergency plans and determine the areas of your organization and its operations that are the most vulnerable and the functions that are most in need of evaluation. It should answer the following: Who, Where, Why, and How.

Set the Scope for Your Exercise

Consider the time and resource constraints. Depending on the nature of your organization and the available time, you may not be able to test all of the functions and operations that you identified in your needs assessment in one exercise. Prioritize which ones you want to evaluate most.

Develop a Purpose Statement

The purpose statement is a broad statement of the exercise goal. It focuses and controls the whole exercise, and governs the selection of objectives, which in turn govern which scenario you will choose and which participants you invite.

Once you have set a scope, developing a purpose statement should be easy—one method of doing so is simply to incorporate the scope decisions into a single sentence (e.g., "This exercise will evaluate

the ability of our human resources, payroll, and timekeeping divisions to operate when access to our primary facility is restricted").

Set Objectives

Objectives go hand in hand with the purpose statement, but are more specific and performance-based. An objective is a description of the performance you expect from participants that will demonstrate their competence.

Objectives must be clear, concise, and focused on participant performance. They should contain:

- An action, stated in observable terms.
- The conditions under which the action will be performed.
- A set standard of performance.

In other words, an objective should state *who* should do *what* under *what conditions* according to *what standards*.

One useful guideline for writing objectives is the SMART system. SMART objectives are:

- **S**imple
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**ealistic
- **T**ask Oriented

How to Pick Which Scenario to Run

To better support your organization's planning, NYC Emergency Management will continue to develop new scenarios which you can customize for your organization. Each of the scenarios will be designed to help you evaluate certain aspects of your emergency plans.

Determine which scenario best matches the objectives you have created. Remember that it is not necessary, or recommended, that you test all aspects of your plan in one tabletop exercise. Each scenario can be used multiple times to evaluate different components of your plan.

Please refer to the Scenarios Table in the resources section of the NYC Emergency Management's Private Sector Partner Portal for the full list of scenarios and which plan components they are relevant for. The scenarios are differentiated as no-notice incidents or notice incidents, and are then further categorized by the phase of the incident: response or recovery.

Along with the scenario slides in the Facilitator's Guide are possible questions for discussion. These possible questions are broken out based on the business continuity functions to which they pertain. Since it may be difficult for organizations to test all of their operations in one exercise, these sub-sections of questions will help facilitators steer discussion to areas relevant to specific exercise participants and objectives.

How to Customize the Scenario Slides

NYC Emergency Management has attempted to make the scenarios general enough to apply to all of New York City. You and your organization may find it helpful to treat the scenarios as stepping stones to guide discussions toward more specific geographies, industry sectors, or other organizational-specific characteristics. You and your organization may also edit the scenario slides as needed to suit your circumstances. For instance, you may want to edit the location, date, employees, and include organization-specific information.

The goal of the tabletop exercise is not to debate the City's response, but rather to evaluate your organization's plan as it relates to the incident. Incorporated into the scenario slides are various City-related response times and actions so that your exercise is not operating in a vacuum, but it is important to note that each event is unique and exact responses may vary. **Do not modify the City's actions in the scenario.**

Suggestion for Success

- Consider carefully how many people you want to invite. How many is too many?
- Ensure that a room is booked and that the size of the room and the technology available in the room are appropriate.
- Provide food; happy players are productive players.
- Prepare nameplates for participants to ensure they know whom they are talking to.

Getting the Right People to the Table

The scope and objectives of your exercise should determine who will be invited to participate. In any case, the individuals you invite to the table should have decision-making power, such as those in leadership roles, or have expertise in organization's operations. Consider who is responsible for implementing the plan and who will take the actions identified in the plan; these are the individuals that should participate in the tabletop exercise.

Be sure to also consider how many people will be too many. If possible, the number of participants should be kept to around 20 individuals. Breakout sessions may be needed if there are more participants.

Who Should Be the Facilitator?

The facilitator should be someone with good communication and interpersonal skills. If you plan to find a facilitator from within your organization, the facilitator does not need to have seniority, though he or she should be comfortable guiding conversations with people who may be senior to him or her. The facilitator's role is not to demonstrate their knowledge or expertise of the plan, but to manage and encourage discussion.

It may also be appropriate to have the facilitator be an outside individual, such as from another office branch of your organization, industry group, or professional organization (see resources page). Outside facilitators benefit from not being familiar with your organization's plan, thereby encouraging the players to provide more detailed responses and not make assumptions. Keep in mind that this person will not be a player in the exercise.

Facilitating a Tabletop Exercise

The facilitator manages the discussion during a tabletop exercise and has a number of responsibilities, including:
- Introducing the narrative
- Encouraging problem solving
- Controlling the pace and flow of the exercise
- Stimulating discussion and drawing answers and solutions from the group (rather than supplying them)

Instructions for the facilitator are included in the Facilitator's Guide that is available with each scenario.

Why Conduct an After Action Review?

The scenario itself is just one component of a tabletop exercise. The follow-up after action review process is equally important. The after action review identifies the lessons learned and next steps for the organization. It reinforces that preparedness is a continuous learning process and that the evaluation of your organization's plans is not a one-time occurrence.

How to Conduct an After Action Review

Following an exercise or a real incident, it is important to collect feedback as a way to improve your organization's response, plans, and resources. Once the exercise has concluded, it is helpful to conduct an after action review immediately following. Ideally, this is while everyone is still in the room.

Tips for Conducting an After Action Review

To obtain feedback, reconvene participants as soon as possible to discuss performance.

- Compare what occurred to the plan and use it as a reference to identify gaps, overlaps, and conflicts.
- Provide an assessment of the overall performance related to a task or skill. Don't assign blame or fault to a specific individual.
- Don't speculate. Focus on providing feedback on operations your organization is directly involved with and responsible for.
- Identify root causes. After identifying what occurred, determine why it occurred. This helps to generate a better understanding of factors contributing to the issue, and to develop recommendations addressing the issue.
- Be realistic. In evaluating capabilities and developing recommendations, be mindful of budget, staffing, and time limitations.
- Consider all-hazards solutions. Focus on capabilities that contribute to increased preparedness and response over a range of potential incidents and which are long term. Also, identify solutions that are concrete and can be validated.
- Submit timely feedback, which will ensure your feedback is incorporated into official documentation.
- Update organization personnel and partners on deliverables that are developed from the after action review recommendations.
- Once recommendations have been formed, print these out and share it with the employees. This reinforces the continuous learning process of tabletop exercises and demonstrates that the participants' time and input is valued.

RESOURCES

NYC Emergency Management
Business Preparedness
https://www1.nyc.gov/site/em/ready/businesses.page

Private Sector Partner Portal
PrivateSector.NYC

Partners in Preparedness program
www.nyc.gov/partnersinpreparedness

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
Private Sector Resources
https://www.fema.gov/private-sector

Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) Policy and Guidance
https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/hseep-resources