



**OPE-820 Planning and Conducting  
Tabletop Exercises**



**Virginia EMS Symposium  
November 15, 2009**



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**Quick Federal Reserve Facts**



- Federal Reserve System
  - Created by Congress in 1913
  - Consists of 12 independent regional banks and the Board of Governors in Washington
  - Primary mission includes providing stability to the United States monetary and financial systems
  - Banks are not part of the federal government
  - Many interdependencies between banks



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## Quick Federal Reserve Facts



- Mission is carried through four primary functions:
  - Conducting monetary and economic policy
  - Regulatory agency for state members banks
  - Provides services to financial institutions in the areas of:
    - Payment processing (checks, electronic transfers, securities, automated or direct deposits)
    - Bank's accounting including meeting reserve requirements
    - Cash processing
    - Lender through the Discount Window
  - Fiscal agent for the U.S. Treasury

## Session Objectives

- To gain an understanding of:
  - The steps needed to plan and conduct a tabletop exercise
  - How to adapt an exercise approach based on the specified objectives
- Applying the information presented by participating in a practical exercise



## Session Topics

- What is a Tabletop Exercise?
- Exercise Planning
  - Setting Objectives
  - Planning Team
  - Format Considerations
  - Selecting and Developing a Scenario
  - Event Planning Steps
- Conducting the Exercise
- Post Exercise Follow-Up
- Exercise Planning Timeline Model
- Practical Exercise



## What is a tabletop exercise?

One method of exercising plans in which participants review and discuss the actions they would take without actually performing the actions. Representatives of a single team, or multiple teams, may participate in the exercise typically under the guidance of exercise facilitators. Exercises are designed for examination of operational plans, problem identification, and group problem solving.

Tabletop exercise success is determined from action items generated to improve plans and from participants' feedback



## Tabletop Exercise Benefits

- Allows for flexible formats
- Provides a “low risk” method to exercising
- Limits participants’ time commitment
- Creates a learning and developmental opportunity
- Occurs in an informal, low stress environment
- Incurs a low cost to conduct
- Integrates into a comprehensive exercise program (Seminars, drills, tabletop exercises, functional exercises, full-scale exercises)



## Tabletop Exercise Disadvantages

- Lacks realism
- May not provide a true test of an emergency system’s capabilities
- Potential of superficial exercising of plans, procedures, and participant capabilities
- Does not provide a practical way to demonstrate system overload



# Exercise Planning



## Setting Objectives

- What are you trying to accomplish?
  - Testing a new plan
  - Confirming response aspects
  - Training individuals
  - Providing interagency plan familiarization
- What will be gained from the exercise?
  - Verify functionality
  - Find improvement opportunities
  - Provide situational experience





## Exercise Objectives Examples

- Confirm responsibilities in supporting partners during an event that directly impacts their ability to operate
- Exercise contingency plans to assist with the participants' decision-making process
- Identify areas for improvement in contingency support processes and procedures
- Bring awareness and business resiliency training to staff
- Ensure communications and escalation protocols receive appropriate consideration
- Identify opportunities to improve coordination, preparedness and resilience of business operations



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## Reminders for Objectives

As the exercise objectives are developed, remember to ...

- Set the objectives as the first part of planning
- Keep the number fairly limited (3 to 5)
- Include goals that can realistically be met during the exercise
- Factor in who will be actively participating
- Obtain your sponsor's input and approval early on



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## Planning Team

- Sponsor
  - Champions the exercise
  - Providing overall guidance during planning process
  - Clears roadblocks encountered
  - Ensures timely availability of resources
- Planning Team Leader
  - Provides team leadership and coaching
  - Focuses the team on the exercise objectives and tasks
  - Coordinates team logistics
  - Communicates team status, task accomplishment, and direction



## Planning Team (continued)

- Subject Matter Experts
  - Provide scenario information and documentation
  - Identify, or create and validate, response approaches
  - Ensure scenario information is valid and plausible
- Logistics Contacts
  - Provide guidance on best resources to utilize
  - Coordinate exercise facilities and audiovisual aspects
- Facilitator
  - Provide guidance on exercise format and logistics
  - Gains understanding of associated plans and operations



## Exercise Planning Team Skills

- Interpersonal skills to interface with all levels of management and staff
- Effective communication skills (oral and written)
- Management skills:
  - Negotiation
  - Monitoring and tracking
- Accountability without authority
- Working knowledge of plan being exercised



## Exercise Formats

- Open-ended Discussion
  - Promotes vetting of response options
  - Better option for learning
- Timebox
  - Provides sense of urgency in decision making
  - Controls exercise pace
- Real-time
  - Clock driven
  - Events unfold as anticipated during a real situation
  - Rapid decision making required

## Exercise Formats (continued)

- Situational Models
  - Provide visual aspects to enhance decision making
  - Work best in exercising operational plans



## Selecting a Scenario

- Situation brings out points based on exercise objectives
- Plausible events applicable to your organization and plan
- Situation not overwhelming to participants
- Scenario timeframe progression aligns with actual events



## Scenario Development Steps

1. Define the scope of events
2. Assess situational trends
3. Conduct necessary research
4. Identify key uncertainties
5. Construct scenario theme(s)
6. Check for consistency and plausibility
7. Incorporate learning aspects
8. Assess required participant decision making



## Scenario Development Aspects

- Develop similar to a movie script (make it as realistic as possible)
- Incorporate remote participation via phone or videoconference
- Include photos / maps / audio clips / video segments / newsflashes
- Invite other agencies to actively participate
- Bring out stress points (e.g. Employees' injuries, deaths, communication issues, automation issues, work shifts, known and unknown vulnerabilities, etc.)

## Exercise Roles

- Facilitator
  - Sets the stage for the exercise events
  - Provides scenario information / distributes messages
  - Stimulates discussion toward in-depth problem solving
  - Keeps participants involved and engaged
  - Controls discussions / sustains progress
- Participants
  - Represents respective areas during exercise
  - Contributes to discussions by providing expected actions by or information about their area

## Exercise Roles (continued)

- Recorder
  - Documents actions taken and action items
  - Contributes to developing After Action Report
- Evaluators
  - Assess actions being taken based on plans
  - Provide improvement opportunities to consider
  - Provide feedback on exercise effectiveness
- Observers
  - Use exercise as a learning opportunity
  - Provide feedback on exercise and overall impressions



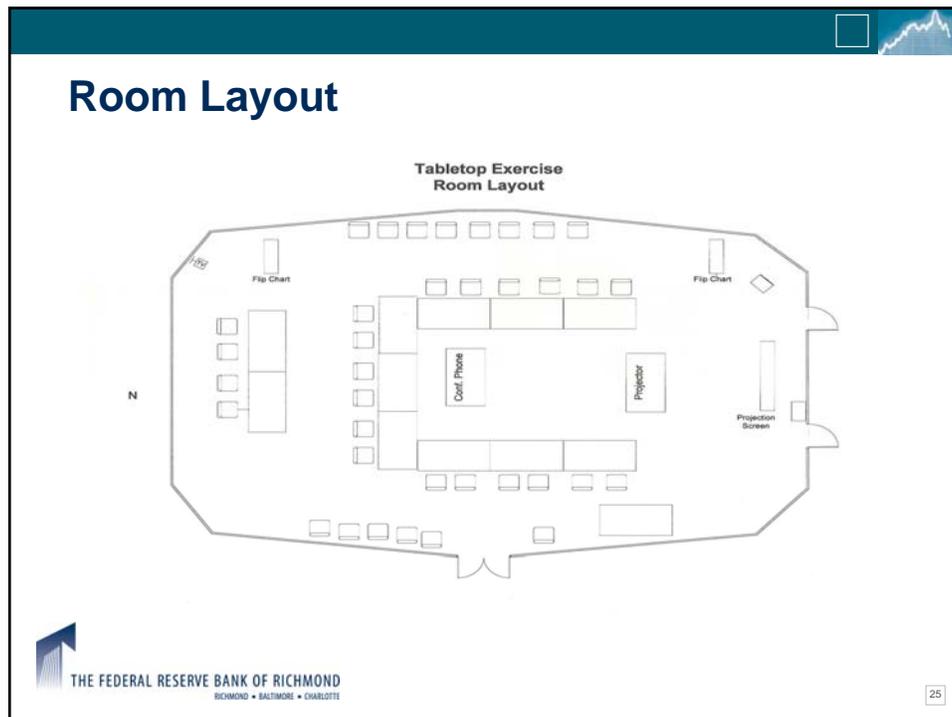
## Pre-Exercise Communications

- Exercise Appointment
  - At least four weeks in advance
  - Best sent by sponsor
- Pre-Exercise Information
  - Scenario Background Read-Ahead Materials
  - Event Objectives and Scope
  - Participant Expectations
  - Exercise Location
  - Participant Preparation
  - Participant Resources Needed
  - Exercise Format
  - Follow-up Events



## Time and Location

- Time
  - Exercise duration
  - Time-of-day that works best for participants
  - Potential conflicts
- Location
  - Primary or alternate command center
  - Offsite
  - Remote via conference call or video conference



- ## Audiovisual Aids
- Presentation (PC, projector, PowerPoint)
  - Video and audio clips
  - Handouts
  - Props
  - Diagrams
  - Telephones / Conference Phone
  - Conference Bridge
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## Supplies

- Plan copies (limited number)
- Reference materials including contact lists
- Name tents (name / title / team) and/or name badges
- Notepads / pens / pencils / laser pointer / markers
- Large Post-It pad, flip charts, and/or white board
- Forms: problem/issue forms, event log, post-exercise critique forms, etc.

## Conducting the Exercise

## Opening

- Sponsor's welcome and comments
- Review agenda
  - Example:
    - 2:30 – 2:35 pm Welcome
    - 2:35 – 2:45 pm Exercise Overview
    - 2:45 – 3:45 pm Scenario Segments 1 and 2
    - 3:45 – 4:00 pm Break
    - 4:00 – 4:30 pm Scenario Segment 3
    - 4:30 – 4:40 pm Review Exercise Action Items
    - 4:40 – 5:00 pm Exercise Benefits / Improvements
    - 5:00 pm Exercise Conclusion
- Review exercise objectives



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## Exercise Assumptions

- Frames participants' exercise roles and expectations
- Examples:
  - The scenario is plausible and occurs as presented
  - There are no "hidden agendas" or trick questions
  - Participants react as if they are in their own offices
  - Participants will focus on impacts of disruptions, not the source
  - Outside organizations will provide requested support



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## Exercise Rules

- Indicates conditions of how the exercise will be conducted
- Examples:
  - Varying viewpoints are expected
  - Decisions do not set precedents
  - Base discussion on situation updates and read-ahead material
  - Exercise is a learning event, not a test



## Scenario Introduction

- Provides the situational background for the scenario segments
- Supplements scenario read-ahead information, if provided
- Does not contain actionable information
- Injects checkpoint for participants to clarify information prior to scenario events being presented

## Presenting Scenario Events

- Events describe information participants use to assess and determine appropriate response actions
- Information should be date and time stamped
- Triggering events create a situation for specific organization plan actions to be considered
- Information should be grouped and provided in sets manageable to process
- Event aspects should provide actionable information for each participant to evaluate



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## Scenario Event Information – Narrative Example

**Thursday, November 5, 2009**

- **7:00 PM:** Security contacts the Crisis Team Chair and reports that a train has derailed directly behind building. The Fire Department's Hazardous Materials Unit is dispatched and has established a command post beside our facility. Police blocked all access to the derailment area.
- **7:15 PM:** Security is notified that placards and identification numbers on the derailed cars indicate they contain the hazardous materials Sulfuric Acid and Sodium Hydroxide. One of the cars is leaking the Sulfuric Acid liquid due to a broken pipe on the car. They state no one should leave the building at this time. The entire area is cordoned off.



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### Scenario Event Information – Narrative Example

- **7:20 PM:** The Facilities officer is working late and is among the staff in the building. The Fire Department requested a liaison be assigned to their command post.
- **7:30 PM:** News media contacts Public Information about the status of operations at the facility based on the derailment.
- **7:35 PM:** Fire Department informed the liaison that based on the threat from the damaged cars that all employees stay inside the building and access to and from the building will be closed until the situation is stabilized.

### Scenario Event Information–Presentation Example

#### November 15, 2009

- Flu strain is virulent and those who get sick are severely ill for 7 to 14 days;
- Health and Human Services considers the outbreak a pandemic and declares a Public Health Emergency;
- Outbreak is rated as “Severe” (Category 4) using the U.S. Government Severity Index (1 to 2 million infections, 1 to 2% deaths); and
- Current pandemic wave continues to spread and is expected to persist for 4 to 6 more weeks.

## Scenario Event Information–Visual Presentation Example

### Emergency Personnel Converge 11:55 AM



## Participant Discussions

- Probing questions are used to guide discussions
- Discussion focuses on impacts and anticipated plan actions based on the scenario events
- Facilitator should have list of anticipated actions to guide discussion areas, if needed
- Needed changes and key points identified during discussion should be recorded
- Items identified, but not directly related to the scenario, should be placed in a “parking lot” for future consideration



## Discussion Format - Example

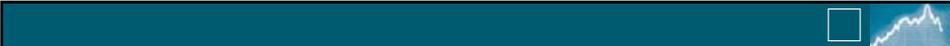
**Questions for discussion:**

1. What initial actions should be taken?
2. After the initial actions, what information does the Crisis Management Team need for ongoing decision making?
3. How and what is communicated to other locations?



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## Discussion Questions - Example

- What decisions need to be made, by whom, and how?
- What communications occur, with whom, and how?
- What other concerns do you have regarding?
  - Decision-Making
  - Communication



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## Action Items

- Review and confirm initially at the end of the exercise
- Indicates potential improvements to be investigated and recommended assignee for each item
- Included as part of the After Action Report
- Track status and report on periodically until completed

## Debrief Discussion – Example

- What do you consider to be the most significant actions taken based on the scenario presented?
- Are there any questions or areas we should have explored --- but didn't --- for this scenario?
- What were the key concerns or gaps identified during this exercise?
- Any other key points that should be discussed?



## Exercise Feedback - Example

What Went Well?	What Would You Change?
•	•
•	•
•	•
•	•
•	•



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## Post Exercise – Participant Survey

Sample Questions:

- How effective was the exercise in meeting the stated objectives of identifying opportunities to improve coordination and preparedness.  
\_\_\_ Highly Effective \_\_\_ Effective \_\_\_ Somewhat Effective \_\_\_ Ineffective
- What aspects of the exercise did you find MOST useful?
- What aspects of the exercise did you find LEAST useful?
- How was the time length of the exercise?  
\_\_\_ Too short \_\_\_ Just right \_\_\_ Too long
- Do you have any recommendations for improving the effectiveness of future exercises?
- Please provide any additional comments and/or recommendations relating to the exercise.



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## After Action Report

- Provides exercise overview and results
- Report should include:
  - Executive Summary
  - Lessons Learned
  - Overview of Scenario Segments and Discussion Summary
  - Action Items
  - Participant List (including area they represent)
  - Feedback Summary
- Distributed to participants within one month of the exercise

## Exercise Planning Timeline Model

### Six to Eight Weeks Before:

- Define exercise objectives
- Obtain sponsor commitment
- Form Exercise Planning Team
- Determine an exercise date/time, and location and reserve
- Identify participants (including customers, vendors, etc.)
- Send appointment to participants
- Begin creating scenario(s)

### Four Weeks Before:

- Review scenario(s) with sponsor

### Two Weeks Before:

- Finalize scenario(s)
- Meet with sponsor to review scenario(s) and exercise details

## Exercise Planning Timeline Model

### One Week Before:

- Send pre-exercise information to all participants. If they are unable to attend, request that they send their alternate
- Finalize exercise agenda
- Finalize exercise room set-up
- Ensure all equipment (Projector, LAN connections, speaker phone, videoconference system, etc.) is available, in working condition, and tested
- Order food and beverages
- Conduct exercise “rehearsal” and modify scenario as necessary based on results
- Finalize individuals filling exercise roles and brief them

## Exercise Planning Timeline Model

### Three Days Before:

- Send a reminder to all participants.
- Create name tents and/or name badges
- Print all handouts

### Day Before:

- Confirm all equipment is available and working (including markers)

### Day of:

- Arrive at least one hour in advance to test equipment, arrange room, set up names tents, notepads, pencils, hand-out packets, etc.
- Following exercise, collect notes, flip chart pages, etc.

## Exercise Planning Timeline Model

### Day After:

- Replenish supplies used
- Send Exercise Feedback Survey to participants

### One Week After:

- Provide draft After Action Report to Sponsor
- Request sponsor confirmation of action items

### Two Weeks After:

- Distribute After Action Item Report to participants
- Begin tracking status of action items

## Questions



# Practical Exercise



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## Resources

- Tabletop Exercise Resources
  - FEMA Online Course: IS-120 – Introduction to Exercises  
<http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is120.asp>
  - FEMA Online Course IS-139 – Exercise Design  
<http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is139.asp>
  - Disaster Recovery Journal – [www.drj.com](http://www.drj.com)
- Reference Articles



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**QUESTIONS?**

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