

EXERCISE SCENARIO PLANNING: A PRIMER

Overview: Post-incident critiques often confirm that experience gained during exercises was the best way to prepare teams to respond effectively to an emergency. Exercises should be designed to engage team members and get them working together to manage the response to a hypothetical incident. Exercises enhance knowledge of plans, allow members to improve their own performance and identify opportunities to improve capabilities to respond to real events.

Exercises are a great method to:

- ✓ Evaluate the preparedness program
- ✓ Identify planning and procedural deficiencies
- ✓ Test or validate recently changed procedures or plans
- ✓ Clarify roles and responsibilities
- ✓ Obtain participant feedback and recommendations for program improvement
- ✓ Measure improvement compared to performance objectives
- ✓ Improve coordination between internal and external teams, organizations and entities
- ✓ Validate training and education
- ✓ Increase awareness and understanding of hazards and the potential impacts of hazards.
- ✓ Assess the capabilities of existing resources and identify needed resources
- ✓ Have fun, retain members and leverage for recruiting new members

Types of Exercises:

There are different types of exercises that can be used to evaluate program plans, procedures and capabilities.

- ✓ Walkthroughs, workshops or orientation seminars
- ✓ Tabletop exercises
- ✓ Local exercises
- ✓ Full-scale Group and Wing-level exercises

Walkthroughs, workshops and orientation seminars are basic training for team members. They are designed to familiarize team members with emergency response, business continuity and crisis communications plans and their roles and responsibilities as defined in the plans.

Tabletop exercises are discussion-based sessions where team members meet in an informal, classroom setting to discuss their roles during an emergency and their responses to a particular emergency situation. A facilitator guides participants through a discussion of one or more scenarios. The duration of a tabletop exercise depends on the audience, the topic being

exercised and the exercise objectives. Many tabletop exercises can be conducted in a few hours, so they are cost-effective tools to validate plans and capabilities.

Functional Local exercises are conducted at the squadron level usually involving one or two local squadrons and may simulate a forward staging area in a real-world incident. They allow personnel to validate plans and readiness by performing their duties in a simulated operational environment. Activities for a functional exercise are scenario-driven, such as the failure of a critical business function or a specific hazard scenario. Functional exercises are designed to exercise specific team members, procedures and resources (e.g. communications, warning, notifications and equipment set-up). Ideally these events should include a reduced Incident Command staff, appropriate Skills Evaluators to sign-off SQTR tasks and COMMS capability.

A full-scale Group and Wing-level exercises are as close to the real thing as possible. It is a lengthy exercise which takes place on location using, as much as possible, the equipment and personnel that would be called upon in a real event. Full-scale exercises are conducted by public agencies. They often include participation from joint Wing operations, local businesses, Emergency Management, and other CAP (MOA) approved agencies. One distinction between Group and Wing-level exercises, Groups tend to focus on training where Wing exercises tend to put the training to work in real-world mission operations that may or may not include virtual ICP activities and interagency coordination.

Developing an Exercise Program:

Develop an exercise program beginning with an assessment of needs and current capabilities. Review the risk assessment and program performance objectives. Conduct a walkthrough or orientation session to familiarize team members with the preparedness plans. Review roles and responsibilities and ensure everyone is familiar with incident management. Identify probable scenarios for emergencies and business disruption. Use these scenarios as the basis for tabletop exercises. As the program matures, consider holding a functional exercise. Contact local emergency management officials to determine if there is an opportunity to participate in a full-scale exercise within your community.

Exercises should be evaluated to determine whether exercise objectives were met and to identify opportunities for program improvement. A facilitated “hot wash” discussion held at the end of an exercise is a great way to solicit feedback and identify suggestions for improvement. Evaluation forms are another way for participants to provide comments and suggestions. An after-action report that documents suggestions for improvement should be compiled following the exercise and copies should be distributed to management and others. Suggestions for improvement should be addressed through the organization’s corrective action program.

Developing Exercise Scenarios:

There are no single cookie cutter methodologies for developing an exercise scenario, but experience tells us that it must be a delicate balance between art and science. And, fortunately, there are any number of resources available, (including FEMA, HLS, DoD and various members of Academia) to help us with process. But let's start here by asking this question; what is scope of our exercise? Let's begin by answering these follow-on questions:

1. What is the purpose of the exercise? (Why?)
2. What is type of exercise we want to consider? (See the list above)
3. Who is going to participate, at what level and for what reason? (Who?) (BTW, this is great place to identify who will actually be on the Scenario Planning Team, and define their roles.)
4. Exercise location? (Where?)
5. Exercise dates? (When?)

Then our Scenario Planning Team starts to tackle the next critical issues; define the exercise scope, the precise exercise objectives, and a general scenario set of guidelines. Based on targets placed, practice beacons etc., develop simulated real-world scenarios designed to address the training and proficiency needs.

From here we'll develop an exercise master schedule, actually develop the scenario narrative, begin to identify the timelines and Master Scenario Events List (MSEL) items, craft actual messages injects, develop scenario data materials as required, and as always, ensure someone has the CON on quality management of the processes. These scenarios should include:

- Agency Name (Customer) – ex. AFRCC, FEMA, EMA
- High level Objectives – Missing Aircraft, Disaster Relief Imagery, Evacuation Routes
- Tasks – (Air) Route Search, Grid Search, Expanding Square, Creeping Line etc. (Ground) UDF, sUAS

Developing Exercise Objectives:

Not to insult anyone here, but I've seen many exercises be derailed by NOT clearly articulating very precise and concise, purpose-driven objectives. Remember, an exercise objective describes the performance expected from each participating organization and individual. These actions form the basis for developing the exercise objectives. It is recommended that the number of objectives be limited to enable timely execution and to promote learning and experience across the GEOHSV enterprise. What's the key to successful exercise objectives? Just remember, **SMART**: Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Task oriented. Each objective should contain

a *condition*, an *action*, and a *measurable standard*. We can spend more time on this later if you desire to.

After Action Report:

Once the smoke settles, demobilization is complete and everyone has had a chance to reflect on the SAREX, now is the time to identify lessons learned. What did we do right? What are the areas that need improvement? What did we accomplish and what is next? These things should be captured and uploaded into the WMIRS Mission Files where they can be accessed for future events. Keep in mind maintaining proficiency in between SAREX's is important. Ways that you can keep the edge is to augment your SAREX's with Table-Top exercises and Local SAREX's. Contact your Wing DO for the supporting mission numbers and the procedure for requesting Local SAREX missions.