



# Tabletop Exercise Program

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

U.S. Poultry & Egg Association created this tabletop exercise program to increase access to preparedness resources for the Poultry & Egg Industry. The materials and best practices within draw from the expertise of the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) and the United States Department of Homeland Security.

## **ABOUT THIS PROGRAM**

This program 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. U.S. Poultry & Egg Association recognizes that not all organizations or businesses have the resources or time to create their own tabletop exercises or hire a consultant team. This free and customizable tabletop exercise program simplifies the process.

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

Each scenario can be used multiple times to test different aspects of your organization's emergency plans. Additionally, the scenarios are purposefully general and can be customized for any location or organization.

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## **TABLETOP EXERCISE BASICS**

### **What is a Tabletop Exercise?**

A tabletop exercise facilitates a plan discussion in an informal, stress-free environment. It is like a problem-solving or brainstorming session, where participants share capabilities and solve problems based on their organization's plans and the exercise's objectives. The success of a tabletop exercise is determined by participant feedback and its impact on evaluating and revising 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 discussing a plan. A workshop to train and discuss a plan is often a preliminary step to holding a tabletop exercise. This program is meant to be used once your organization has a plan 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. They also provide training and awareness to staff and allow them to rehearse their roles and responsibilities during an incident.

### **How Long is a Tabletop Exercise?**

A tabletop exercise usually lasts 1 to 4 hours but can vary depending on the incident. Discussion times are open-ended, and participants are encouraged to arrive 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.

Participants – Participants are personnel who actively discuss or perform their regular roles and responsibilities during the exercise. These people work 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 organizations, e.g., contractors and vendors—essentially anyone who can learn from or contribute to the planned discussion items. This may include all entities with a policy, planning, or response role.

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

Facilitators—The facilitator leads the discussion and guides participants through the tabletop exercise. They provide situational updates and moderate discussions. They decide who gets a message or problem statement, call on others to participate, ask questions, and guide 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 are staff assigned to observe and document specific objectives during the exercise. Their primary role is to document participant discussions, including how and if they conform to plans, policies, and procedures. They also note any follow-up items, next steps, and items for further discussion.

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

Organizers—Organizers oversee the tabletop exercise process from start to finish. They ensure the exercise proceeds smoothly by coordinating the people, supplies, facilities, and other necessary components. Organizers are not participants in the exercise but should be familiar with the steps involved in preparing and executing one. They 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 exercise's planning by informing the organizers what should be tested, what to expect from participants' responses and the appropriate questions. These individuals may be considered subject matter experts and should already know your organization's plan, responsibilities, and capabilities.

## **HOW TO PLAN A TABLETOP EXERCISE**

### **How to Get Buy-In**

Part of the groundwork for running a tabletop exercise is getting buy-in from an organization's executive and decision-making team. Their support sets the tone for success. You can present a persuasive case by positioning tabletop exercises as standalone, independent pursuits and meaningful contributors to the organization's resilience. Here are a few tips on 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 specific 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 worthwhile discussions during a tabletop exercise, the participants need to be fully present at 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*

Review your emergency plans and determine the areas of your organization, its most vulnerable operations, and the functions that need evaluation the most. The needs assessment should explain why you are doing the exercise and answer the following questions: 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 be unable to test all the functions and operations 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 is 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 describes the performance you expect from participants that will demonstrate their competence.

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

- 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 helpful 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, Appendix A contains example scenarios that contain industry examples scenarios. 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 testing all aspects of your plan in one tabletop exercise is unnecessary or recommended. Each scenario can be used multiple times to evaluate different components of your plan.

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 the discussion to areas relevant to specific exercise participants and objectives.

## **How to Customize the Scenario Slides**

You and your organization may find it helpful to treat the scenarios as stepping stones to guide discussions toward more specific geographies or other organizational-specific characteristics. You and your organization may also edit the scenario slides to suit your circumstances. For instance, you may want to edit the location, date, and employees and include organization-specific information.

### **Suggestion for Success**

- Consider carefully how many people you want to invite. How many is too many?
- Ensure that the room is an adequate size for the exercise and that the available technology is appropriate.
- Prepare nameplates for participants to ensure they know whom they are talking to.

## **ENGAGING THE PARTICIPANTS**

### **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 the organization's operations. Consider who is responsible for implementing the plan and who will take the actions identified in the plan; these individuals should participate in the tabletop exercise.

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



## **ENGAGING THE FACILITATOR**

### **Who Should Be the Facilitator?**

The facilitator should have good communication and interpersonal skills. If you plan to find a facilitator from within your organization, the facilitator does not need to be senior, though they should be comfortable guiding conversations with people who may be senior to them. The facilitator's role is not to demonstrate 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). External facilitators benefit from unfamiliarity with your organization's plan, encouraging the participants to provide more detailed responses and not make assumptions. Keep in mind that this person will not be a participant in the exercise.

### **Facilitating a Tabletop Exercise**

The facilitator manages the discussion during a tabletop exercise and has several 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)

### ***Setting the Stage***

*The opening remarks and activities influence the whole exercise experience.*

*Participants need to know what to expect and feel comfortable about participating.*

*Consider including the following elements at the start of your exercise:*

- *Begin by sincerely welcoming participants and putting them at ease.*
- *Brief the participants about what will happen. This should clearly explain the exercise's purpose, objectives, agenda, ground rules, and procedures.*
- *Start the exercise by reading (or having someone read) the first two slides of background information.*
- *Try breaking the ice by beginning with a general question directed at one or two high-ranking individuals or group. Later, other questions can be addressed to different individuals.*

## **Ways to Involve All Participants**

*It is important that everyone participates and that no one person dominates the discussion. Tips for involving all the participants are summarized below:*

- *Give extra encouragement to those who are a little tentative.*
- *Recognize that junior staff might be hesitant to comment in front of senior management.*
- *Avoid the temptation to jump in with the right solutions when participants are struggling. This can hamper discussion. Instead, try to draw out answers from participants. They will be more likely to participate if they feel people are listening intently and sympathetically.*
- *Model and encourage the behaviors you want from participants.*
- *Make eye contact with participants.*
- *Acknowledge comments positively.*

## **REVIEWING THE TABLETOP EXERCISE**

### **Why Conduct an After-Action Plan?**

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

### **How to Conduct an After-Action Plan**

Collecting feedback after an exercise or actual incident is important to improve your organization's response, plans, and resources. Once the exercise has concluded, conducting an after-action plan immediately is helpful. Ideally, this is while everyone is still in the room.

### **Tips for Conducting an After-Action Plan**

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 better understand the factors contributing to the issue and develop recommendations addressing it.
- Be realistic. Consider budget, staffing, and time limitations when evaluating capabilities and developing recommendations.
- Consider all-hazards solutions. Focus on capabilities that contribute to increased preparedness and response to a range of potential incidents, including long-term ones. Also, identify concrete and validated solutions.
- Submit timely feedback, which will ensure your feedback is incorporated into the 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 them with the employees. This reinforces the continuous learning process of tabletop exercises and demonstrates that the participants' time and input are valued.

## Appendix A - Sample Scenarios of Emergencies

1. At the beginning of the day, the radio/TV alerts the staff that a snowstorm has begun in the county. Heavy snowfall has started, and blizzard-type conditions can be expected. The warning came when the facility was running full production. The facility has not had an interruption of water or power. Family members are very anxious about staying and driving in this weather. The roads are not being cleared, and it is getting worse as the day goes on. Transportation companies have pulled their vehicles, and several workers still need rides home. As you are near the end of the day, the power goes out in your half of the city.

2. The city water company informed the facility that a water line broke, causing water loss for the entire city. Repairs are underway, but the water is not expected to return until tomorrow. This is followed by a Boil Water Order for the area for the following 48 hours. The facility manager left for vacation, and the facility superintendent is attending an offsite business meeting with limited access to e-mail or phone.

3. While running a full shift, the facility's power failed. Assume that the facility either does not have a generator in place or the generator was unable to turn on and cover the power outage. The maintenance department just spoke with the power company about a disabled transformer. Power is not expected to resume for several hours. Two hours after the initial power outage, the maintenance department learned that power would not be restored for at least 24 hours due to mechanical problems with the main transformer.

4. During the day, the radio/TV alerts the staff that a tornado has been spotted, and the sirens are activated in your area. The warning came at a time when shifts changed at the facility. The facility has interrupted power, and all the cell towers were destroyed. You realized you forgot to plug in your cell phone last night. One of the managers had been called in sick that morning with the flu, so the facility is now short-staffed. While waiting in the protected area, you hear the storm arrive and leave with audible sounds of glass breaking. The radio reports that the tornado warning has passed. You receive notification that repairs are needed. How do you secure the building before leaving for the day? How do you communicate with employees?

5. Your facility receives an alert that the rising river waters in spring may cause flooding in your county. Your facility is distant from the river, and you were informed earlier that the risk to your facility was not at all likely. While the city is taking measures, it may take longer to protect the facility. Flooding is expected within two weeks. The facility

manager has been updated that flooding will likely occur. Flood waters are to arrive in about five days. On the 3rd day, the facility is informed that their building is being evacuated at Noon today due to flood waters coming this evening. What is the plan?

6. As a result of a severe thunderstorm that passed over the area. Lightning struck the east side of the building, instantly producing flames. The fire began when the facility was full of employees. Within 5 minutes, emergency services arrive to address the situation. Two hours after the emergency, the fire was put out, and damage to the facility was assessed. You are informed that the facility has been severely damaged, and operations are not continuing. The time until the anticipated reopening is one week. What is the plan?

7. Several strong thunderstorms have ripped through the county throughout the day, causing flooding in low-lying areas and minor power outages due to high winds. Heavy rain, harsh lighting, and small to golf ball-sized hail were reported. Downed power lines and debris have now led the County sheriff to close roads. One of the closed roads is to your facility because a large tree knocked down a still-active power line. The electrical crew will take several hours to get to that power line.

8. At 0900, the fire alarms were activated because when a maintenance technician was working on a piece of equipment, a fire ignited and caused a minor explosion. The technician suffers burns across 40% of his body and has difficulty breathing. One employee within the vicinity of the fire suffered minor injuries. The first responders are on the scene and have extinguished the fire. There is still a lot of smoke in the facility. The local newspaper followed the first responders and are now on the scene.

9. The weather is unseasonably warm and humid. Temperatures are hovering around 87 degrees and 90% humidity. Without warning, power to the building is interrupted. Initial news reports indicated a large truck crashed into the city's main power plant, crippling several transformers and causing a broad power failure across a 45-mile area. The emergency generator tried to start up but without success. Several attempts are made, but the generators will not turn on. The building is without power. Daylight provides limited illumination, and the sun will begin to set within the next two hours. The building temperature rises, and employees, contractors, and visitors complain of the heat. You are experiencing mechanical difficulties due to equipment overheating. The refrigeration system is not working.

10. an earthquake of magnitude 5.4 lasted for 2 minutes. All phones (landlines and cellular) are jammed. Electricity is out in your city. Employees are concerned about their families and are attempting to contact schools/homes but cannot get through. Ceiling tiles, fixtures, and other building materials have fallen or come loose throughout the facility. The Department of Transportation strongly recommends that citizens not drive due to unsafe roadways. Who are the key partners you want to communicate your status and changes in operation to, and how?

11. Weather forecasters are predicting a significant change in the atmosphere that could increase the severity of hurricanes in the next few weeks. The very next week, you begin following a tropical storm with the projected path to hitting landfall by your facility. On Friday, the tropical storm becomes a hurricane as it hits landfall. High winds and water have downed power lines and a couple of cell phone towers. Employees and employees don't want to leave the facility. What is the plan?

12. You hear loud noises coming from the breakroom, then it registers that it was a gunshot when an employee runs past you yelling, "He has got a gun!". Employees feel fear, anxiety, and even initial disbelief. You initiate the RUN-HIDE-FIGHT procedures. Where do you go? Who do you take with you?

13. Ason is upset because their mother's employment was terminated. Employees try to de-escalate the man, but he gets more aggressive. The Facility Manager tries to reason with the son. The son swings at the Facility Manager and hits him in the jaw. What do you do? What do you do with other employees? Then, after he hits the Facility Manager, he produces a knife from his pocket. You initiate the RUN-HIDE-FIGHT procedures. Where do you go? Who do you take with you?

14. A report states that a chemical release from a storage facility near you will require the evacuation of several hundred people. Law enforcement shows up at your facility and tells you it is in line with a hazardous chemical plume and that you must evacuate immediately. What is the plan?

15. The police call you, stating there is an armed and dangerous man in your area. The police are in the process of looking for him but want you to go into "lockdown" and report anything suspicious. People are coming in to seek shelter while the hunt continues, and the police tell them to get off the streets. What do you do? How do you get ahold of workers due to arrive in 10 minutes?

## **RESOURCES**

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://prepprogram.fema.gov/web/hseep-resources>