



# **Tabletop Exercise Program**

## **Facilitator Guide**

## **RESPONSE SCENARIO**

You have been identified as the facilitator for the upcoming tabletop exercise. Whether this is your first time as a facilitator or you have experience, please use this document to help guide you through this process.

Before you continue, ensure you are familiar with the scope and objectives the organizers and planning team set for the tabletop exercise.

Based on a fictional scenario, this scenario is designed to test your initial response to a no-notice incident. At the start of the incident, participants must deal with initial reactions, incomplete information, and uncertainty about safety conditions. As the scenario continues, the focus shifts to business continuity concerns. This scenario does not cover the recovery phase.

This Facilitator Guide contains the text that will appear on the PowerPoint. Specific slides also include questions that you may use to encourage discussion. The questions are categorized based on the business continuity function to which they pertain as a way to help you steer the discussion to areas relevant to your participants and exercise objectives. Not all of these questions will be relevant to your organization or the particular participants. Additionally, in some cases, you may want to re-word the questions to prompt the participants to identify the problems that the questions address.

## **Introduction**

This facilitator manual contains some background about tabletop exercises, suggestions for running a successful tabletop exercise, the current exercise scenario with possible questions to encourage discussion, and notes detailing the purpose of certain slides.

## **Background**

### **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 participants' 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 discussion about a plan. A workshop to train and discuss a plan is often a prior step to holding a tabletop exercise. This program 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 1 to 4 hours but can vary depending on the incident. Discussion times are open-ended, and participants are encouraged to take their time making 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.

## **Facilitating a Tabletop Exercise**

The facilitator 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 and 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 groups. 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 hesitate 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 in a positive manner.