



TABLETOP EXERCISES: 9 STEPS TO MAKE THEM MORE EFFECTIVE

By Ray Miller



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Part of the CMS Emergency Preparedness Guidelines now applicable to Senior Living communities across the United States include a variety of ongoing training and testing. Use this information to get the most out of your community's tabletop exercises so you can review and update your plans, procedures and policies while building team rapport. As always, it's up to you to consult with a qualified legal expert to determine what's best for your situation.

1. Pre-Planning:

- Identify an exercise planning team
- Develop an exercise timeline/milestones
- Establish a draft-planning meetings calendar

2. Exercise Identification

Because it defines both the reasons and needs for the exercise, this might be the most important step. Done properly, your Tabletop Exercise (TT) will provide an opportunity to test your plan and your team relative to how you would and should respond in an actual event. First, select from your actual, identified potential hazards, then focus on what capabilities might be needed as well as what your current capabilities are. If you know your Emergency Preparedness (EP) plan has a weakness, such as capacity, capability or operational effectiveness, consider using that for your TT. A well-designed and -run TT allows you to identify gaps and ways to make improvements. Critical exercise activities will become apparent. The outcome will be an improved EP Plan.



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3. Identifying Scope

- Plan elements to be practiced, tested, evaluated, strengthened, etc.
- Determine participating departments, roles and job tasks (based on functions to be tested)
- Define the specific, realistic and clinically relevant hazard scenario(s) and exercise location
- Clarify job and emergency-response role functions that participants will practice during the TT

4. Purpose Statement

- An overarching, single-sentence statement of the exercise goals that focuses and directs the entire exercise
- It should a) enable the selection of objectives and b) clarify the exercise purpose
- For example: The purpose of this exercise is to test, coordinate and strengthen departmental and individual responses in the instance of a/an (e.g., loss of power, elopement, internal fire, specific severe weather-related event, etc.)

5. Exercise Objectives

Whether you consider the exercise objectives to be the framework or the heart of the scenario, if they are well written and consistently adhered to, they will serve to guide the scenario development, the evaluation criteria and focus support on exercise priorities. As with other/most objective-writing undertakings, consider:

- Following the acronym SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-framed)
- Having a limited number of objectives
- Using them to maintain focus, meet timelines, guide scenario design and ensure successful completion of exercise goals.
- *Sample objective 1:* Test day shift staff's capability and capacity to evacuate residents externally
- *Sample objective 2:* Test the management team's capability and capacity to respond to and re-plan due to significantly changing severe winter weather warnings and patterns (supply replenishment needs, staffing challenges, electrical grid outages, laundry shortages, etc.)



6. Narrative

Effective scenarios can be laid out as "written narratives" or "event timelines." As you develop your scenario, keep referring back to and align with your scope, purpose and objectives and avoid the temptation to write a "screenplay." Be careful when using audio-visual and powerful images – these can quickly overshadow or even derail your TT. Your TT should be a) a team-building exercise, b) an EP plan-testing discussion and c) a decision-making experience.

Your tabletop exercise should also be based on the findings of your actual All Hazards Risk Assessment. It's worth asking, "Could this actually happen here?" To be most effective, your TT scenario must be a) clinically relevant, b) real-world and c) CHALLENGING. Keep in mind though that while it should test your EP plan and the TT participants, your TT should not overwhelm them.

To the degree possible, include your local realities. In other words, think about time-of-day traffic patterns and actual distances, highway construction and flooding issues, staffing and volunteer challenges, potential census variations, electric grid dependability, historically accurate weather patterns, supply replenishment, storage issues and limitations, expected response and assistance levels of the local EP office, first responders and community resources, and so on.

A reader of the scenario should be able to explain at least these things:

- a. What is the story line?
- b. How will participants meet the exercise objectives?
- c. What are the important scenario details, conditions and events (timeline, significant challenges and conditions, plan elements to be tested, etc.)?

7. Inserts (AKA Facts That Change Over Time)

As the facts of an actual event rollout are revealed, plans and responses will have to be modified or changed (both big and small). That is all part of the testing and the learning when conducting a TT exercise. In essence, your TT team will hone their skills in a simple but important process of monitoring, assessing, learning, modifying and communicating.

You will need to run your TT exercise in much the same way as a real event. That is the only way you will actually test both the EP plan and the TT participants. The goal of any properly designed and conducted TT is to create the scenario and the “scenario environment” that engages the participants and causes them to discuss and decide on realistic actions while learning from and teaching each other.

To accomplish this, you will need to develop a list of “changing scenario facts” that you will, as the exercise progresses, hand to the TT team (on a slip of paper or text/email/etc.) Things like: unplanned-for freeways closure, fuel shortages, stranded employees, generator failure, significantly lower temperatures, hurricane direction change, a 2nd/3rd hurricane, federal confiscation of your evacuation vans and buses, etc. How will your TT team respond? How quickly can they identify the impact, the needed plan modifications and any alternatives?

8. I.D. the Right Participants

Your first thoughts are to include your ED, DON, Dietary, Housekeeping, Laundry and Maintenance staff. But who else should attend and perhaps, who instead of? Thinking about who else is CRITICAL to the organization’s emergency management, security, inventory and purchasing, business continuity programs, institutional knowledge and experience.

In a very real respect, some personnel choices will depend upon the scenario, scope, purpose and objectives that you selected. But don’t leave out first responders, transportation, the power grid and Area Emergency Preparedness participants. Remember to never lose sight of the fact that by including external stakeholders, you develop the all-important “pre-event” relationships that will be so very important at the time of a real event. In all cases though, make sure participant selection is based on function and not politics. Always ask, “Who most familiar with what has to occur to make this a successful TT?” And realize that there will be times front-line staff should be added to the TT team.

“Just think of the institutional knowledge a longstanding CNA might offer,” says Ray. “They would know things that others simply could not. Together, you can conquer anything.”



9. Management

To ensure tabletop exercises aren't a lecture, establish roles to encourage participation and efficiency. Naturally, you'll want a good scribe. But even more important here is the role of the facilitator, whose job isn't to lead the conversation, but to get everyone involved. (At the same time, everyone should act as a facilitator, too.) As both a group discussion and brainstorm, your TT should generate ideas and a plan from which to develop over time. Assumptions, negative comments and judgments have no place in these meetings – be sure to reinforce that, if necessary.

As far as time commitment for tabletop exercises, expect preparation to take up to eight hours if done alone versus about just two hours if collaborating. The exercise itself should take two to three hours while the follow-up of an After Action Report and EP plan revisions may take up to four hours.

Because there are so many variables in an emergency, the first tabletop exercises may be somewhat challenging. But you'll quickly master and learn to highly value them. When done right, they produce so many benefits and so many reality checks.

And please, **use an After Action Report.**

Store emergency preparedness documentation, track routine compliance tasks and more on TELS Platform. Visit [TELS.net](https://www.tels.net) to learn more.