

Exercise Basics



Plan → Prepare → Protect
Specializing in Exercises, Training & Consulting

Exercises test organizations' plans, policies, and procedures, and the organizations' ability to carry out those plans, policies, and procedures. In short, exercises test capabilities – the skills organizations need to have, in order to face the threats and hazards they have identified.

Scenarios are just the fiction – the theater – that helps guide exercise participants through the process. We don't exercise scenarios; we exercise capabilities.

Exercise Types:

Discussion Exercises:

- Walkthroughs, workshops, or orientation seminars: These are great for learning about problems and developing plans, policies, and procedures, or seeing how existing plans might apply to a new circumstance. When we “don't know what we don't know” a workshop is a great way to discuss the threat or hazard and begin to produce a plan.
- Tabletop exercises: These are low-pressure, usually not real-time discussions that help test out plans before they are exercised in real time. When multiple agencies or departments need to work together, a tabletop exercise helps identify the gaps in plans between those units, and helps smooth out the wrinkles.

Operations Based Exercises:

- Drills are simple exercises, wherein one department or agencies demonstrates a particular capability. The typical school fire drill is aptly named, because it tests a school's ability to do one thing: evacuate the building in an orderly and safe fashion.
- Functional exercises are those where a command center (Incident Command Post, Emergency Operations Center, or others) test their ability to command and control operations. However, there are no responding assets in operation. Those are typically simulated by exercise control staff.
- A full-scale exercise tests both the command and control staff with the ability of field operations to execute their capabilities. A full-scale exercise is a combination of a functional exercise and several interconnected drills.

Exercises are evaluated based on standards and plans. For example, a school may have a standard of complete evacuation within 60 seconds, using a defined evacuation plan for each room. Evaluators will check to be sure each room followed its plan, and will measure the time it takes to complete the evacuation.

Exercise objectives limit the scope of an exercise; few exercises evaluate everything that happens. Objectives usually include testing certain capabilities.

Immediately after an exercise, a “hot-wash” or short discussion allows the players to give instant feedback on what they learned, what they did well, and what they think they need to improve. They are also opportunities to comment on the exercise structure and process itself.

After-Action Reports compile the findings of the evaluators and the exercise documents and notes. They identify the shortcomings and successes, and include reference to the standards and plans that were tested.

“Lessons Learned” are often surprises (good and not-so-good) that arose during an exercise, that are significant enough to be documented for the future.

The Improvement Plan accompanies the After-Action Report and identifies a to-do list involving changes to organization, planning, training, or equipment needed to bring an organization to a higher level of performance. These become part of the input for future exercises, so an organization can demonstrate that it has improved.

