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Forget the Scenario!

Six Ways to Improve Your Exercises

There's been a lot of buzz lately about the use of unusual scenarios in exercises. Judging by recent conference presentations, email list traffic, and blogs (including mine of August 28 and November 5), the current preference seems to be for zombie attacks as a metaphor for pandemic flu.

There appear to be two reasons for this interest in non-conventional scenarios. The first is that folks may be a bit burned out on the usual scenarios. After all, how many times can you vary the same event in the same geographical area before your scenarios become predictable? A more interesting theory is that by divorcing your exercise from the expected, you focus more on the process of multi-functional response. When presented with an unusual scenario, players need to be more creative in their response and will fall back on a functional analysis of the situation.

This is all well and good but, in my opinion, we may be placing a bit too much emphasis on the scenario and not enough on what we're trying to accomplish with the exercise. All too often, I have an initial discussion with

a potential client that goes something like this:

"Lu, we want to do an earthquake exercise."

"That's great – what are your exercise objectives?"

"We want to do an earthquake exercise."

"Yes, I understand that but what do you want to accomplish?"

"Well we're really worried about earthquakes..."

You get the idea. The client is focused on the scenario but has not really asked themselves, "WHY are we doing this exercise?" So for what they're worth, here are the rules I try to keep in mind when developing an exercise:

1. Define your exercise objectives.

We frequently allow exercises to be driven by factors that dictate a specific scenario. For example, a grant from the Department of Homeland Security might require that you do an exercise with a terrorism scenario. Your board of directors is concerned about pandemic flu and wants a pandemic exercise. I understand these requirements but your first question must always be, "what are we trying

to accomplish with this exercise?" Forget the scenario and focus on what your organization needs: we need to test our plan; we need to test our external communications; we need to test recall procedures.

2. Make sure your objectives are measurable.

This seems self-evident but I've seen (and, unfortunately, written) many objectives that have no metrics. Your objective should be framed in such a way that a participant can tell you afterwards that they either met or did not meet the objective. For example, rather than a vague objective like "test the crisis communications plan," consider something like "test the ability of the crisis communications team to produce an initial media message and update the corporate website within one hour."

3. Pick a scenario that supports your objectives.

A lot of what we do in an exercise is, to a certain extent, independent of the scenario. This means that objectives can be achieved through a variety of scenarios. For example, if your objective is to test procedures for establishing congregate shelter facilities, you could use either a natural hazard scenario or a human caused event. Even if you are constrained by a requirement to use a specific scenario, knowing your objectives allows you to manipulate that scenario to achieve those objectives. We once used a terrorist scenario to test our ability to do a mass evacuation in San Francisco. We could have used a tsunami scenario but we needed to use terrorism for grant purposes.

4. Keep your scenario simple.

I once helped craft an exercise that was a thing of beauty. A small plane takes off from a local

airfield and crashes into a fuel farm causing a major fire that spreads to the nearby rail yard, panicking the animals in the circus train that is parked there. The ensuing chaos causes a major traffic backup on the Interstate. A trucker driving a tank of methyl-ethyl bad stuff tries to take a short cut at excessive speed. The truck overturns, causing a hazard materials spill that forces the evacuation of the surrounding community. Given this scenario, could you identify the exercise objectives? Neither could the players. Keep you scenario simple and focused on your objectives.

5. Keep your exercise as realistic as possible.

I have lost count of how many times I have seen an exercise message that reads something like, "a citizen contacts the emergency operations center to report ..." My first question is always, "You actually provide your EOC telephone numbers to the general public?" After a bit of discussion it usually turns out that this message would actually be reported to a dispatch center who would deal with it before it ever reached the EOC. It's simply not a realistic exercise inject and will actually detract from the realism of the exercise. It's a bit more work, but think about the action you want to drive, what would realistically drive such an action, and how that information would actually reach the players.

6. Link your exercise to corrective action.


We sometimes forget that exercises are part of a continuous cycle of improvement. We need to capture the lessons learned in the exercise and translate them into corrective action. A corrective action program is a requirement under standards such as NFPA 1600, ASIS SPC.1-2009, and the Emergency Management Accreditation Program Standard.

I use a two step evaluation process for most of my exercises. First, I conduct the standard post-exercise debriefing or “hot wash” aimed at capturing what the players thought went well and what can be improved. Depending on the size and nature of the exercise, I try to have the players leave with a short term action plan consisting of specific actions and action agents for tasks that can be accomplished quickly.

I then ask players to complete an anonymous written survey aimed at identifying more controversial issues and long term solutions. Results from both are incorporated into an after action report.


By the way, my after-action review includes not only a review of lessons learned in the exercise but also looks at the exercise itself and ways to improve future exercises.

One last though about exercises that often gets overlooked: exercises are qualitative assessment tools. Yes, I know that they have a significant training value and yes, I know we do them in a no-fault atmosphere to avoid hurt feelings or controversy and “test” is a bad word. However, the true value of an exercise to the emergency management program is its use as an assessment tool that helps you identify weaknesses in your staff and plans.

Clearly defined objectives, realism, and a link to corrective actions are the keys to ensuring that your exercises contribute to the continuous improvement of your program. 

From the Bookshelf

One of the highlights of the recent IAEM Conference for me was the opportunity to finally meet Dr. Thomas Drabek. I’ve admired Tom’s work for years – his books are insightful and accessible to average reader and he always has something of value to say. He was kind enough to autograph a copy of his latest book, *The Human Side of Disaster*, and I am looking forward to reading it. You might want to check it out for yourself – it’s available from [CRC Press](#).

Another book that has come my way in recent weeks is *How to Save Your Stuff from a Disaster* by Scott Haskins. Scott is a professional conservator and his book is chock full of ideas for both mitigating damage and for restoring books, artwork, photographs, etc. The book is available on his [website](#). 

Keeping in Touch

As a “boutique” consultant, I often joke to my clients that I’m like Burger King®: you get it your way. Thanks to my tech gurus at [Media Pro](#), you can now get it your way as well. You can connect to me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Linked-In](#), depending on your preferences.

And a final reminder to you procrastinators: I’ve had to switch blog sites so if you haven’t changed your RSS feed to the new site, you’re missing out. By the way, you also now have the option of getting my blog by email as well as RSS feed. You can find all the options in the [Free Resources](#) section of my website. 