

Emergency Exercises

The Neglected Tabletop



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own company, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for the city and county of San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

One of the basic tenets of emergency planning is that a plan that has not been tested is not real. Unfortunately, while the best way to test plans is an operational exercise, the resource demands of functional and full scale exercises mean that we cannot hold them as frequently as we would like.

Because of this, we fall back on discussion-based exercises, principally the table-top exercise. However, my experience has been that even people who have been planning exercises for years frequently fail to grasp just how powerful a tool the tabletop exercise can be. It may well be the most cost-effective method we have for improving our plans and training personnel.

What is a tabletop?

The Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program describes the tabletop as key personnel discussing hypothetical scenarios in an informal setting. The description includes several criteria that are critical to the success of the tabletop:

- Key personnel – tabletops generally are directed at decision

makers and people who are integral to the successful implementation of your plan (e.g. technical experts, team leaders, etc.).

- Scenario based – tabletops are driven by specific scenarios rather than just being a wide-ranging “what if” exercise. The scenario gives focuses discussions on specifics rather than generalities.
- Informal setting – tabletops are low-stress environments. People are encouraged to share ideas and opposing points of view. The emphasis is on discussing issues rather than on problem solving.

The key to a successful tabletop lies in a careful definition of exercise objectives. The scenario is merely a tool to help you achieve those objectives. All too often I’ve seen tabletops where the facilitator threw out a scenario and then let the players run with it wherever it took them. This is *not* a tabletop. While the facilitator should encourage broad discussion of issues, a tabletop is a *guided* discussion. This means the facilitator needs to keep the group on track and focused on the exercise objectives.

Versatility

The true value of a tabletop is that you can craft it to suit the time and resources available. My colleague and friend, Mike Marinetti, developed a five minute tabletop for use in staff meetings. In San Francisco, our monthly planners meeting included a twenty-minute tabletop exercise on a current topic. I have also participated in multi-agency tabletop exercises that ran for several days.

In her new book, **EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT EXERCISES FROM RESPONSE TO RECOVERY: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW TO DESIGN A GREAT EXERCISE**, my friend and colleague, Regina Phelps, describes her version of an advanced tabletop that incorporates a simulation cell.

A tabletop also allows you to time shift. I frequently conduct exercises that move participants from an initiating event to several hours, weeks or months after the event. Remember that you are discussing *issues* and the scenario is not a major driver, so you can make assumptions as you go to move the action forward.

Preparation is the key

When I prepare a tabletop for client, there's usually a fair bit of front end work. I meet with my principal to define exercise objectives and discuss potential scenarios. I review existing plans and procedures and meet with key leaders so that I understand how the organization is likely to react in a crisis and what would constitute a realistic scenario.

I can't stress enough the importance of this front end work. You need to have a good understanding of the organization and the issues it faces to craft a solid tabletop. Keeping

your exercise grounded in reality enhances your credibility with participants.

However, realism is not always necessary. I have occasionally done tabletops with fantasy scenarios (my favorite is alien invasion, not zombies). A fantasy scenario can force decision making based on an analysis of the situation rather than second-guessing the scenario. Caution: be very careful with this type of exercise or you can make yourself look silly!

If you know your organization, you can shorten your planning time. Our twenty-minute tabletops took about ten minutes to prepare. We selected a current event, such as a demonstration or air show, made an emergency out of it, selected three questions to be answered by the players (e.g. what are your initial operational objectives, how will you task-organize, etc.) and we were ready.

Value comes from follow-up

If your participants leave the exercise without an action plan, your exercise has been a waste of time. The point of a tabletop exercise is to identify issues and potential problem areas. But it's not enough to just identify them - you have to actually *do* something about them.

During the exercise, I capture issues raised by the participants or that I notice during the course of the discussion. Following the exercise I list these issues and have the participants validate them. We then identify short-term follow-up actions, who is going to take the action, and the expected date of completion. I include long-term issues and recommendations in an exercise report but I think it is essential that participants leave with this short-term action plan. 