

Table Top Exercises

**Instructional Guide for Exercise
Directors/Facilitators**

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Table of Contents

Overview	5
Part One: Design and Development and Conducting the TTX	6
What is a Table Top Exercise?	6
Benefits of a TTX	7
Prepare an Exercise Plan	7
Designing the TTX	7
1. Assess needs	7
2. Define the scope	8
3. Write a statement of purpose	9
4. Define objectives	9
5. Compose a narrative	9
6. Write major detailed events	9
7. List expected actions	9
8. Prepare messages	10
Announcing the TTX to the Participants	10
Exercise Logistics	10
Conducting the TTX	10
Exercise Facilitation	11
Part Two: Evaluation and Corrective Action Planning	12
Eight Exercise Evaluation Steps	12
1. Plan and organize the evaluation	12
2. Observe the exercise and collect data	13
3. Analyze the data	13
4. Develop the After-Action Report	13
5. Conduct an After-Action Meeting	14
6. Identify corrective actions to be implemented	14
7. Finalize the After-Action Report/Corrective Action Plan	14
8. Track implementation	14
Appendices	15
Appendix 1 Sample Exercise Plan	15

Appendix 2	Sample Exercise Conduct Power Point Slides	15
Appendix 3	Sample Exercise Evaluation Guide	15
Appendix 4	Sample Participant Survey	15
Appendix 5	Sample After-Action Report and Corrective Action Plan	15

Table Top Exercises

Instructional Guide for Directors/ Facilitators

Overview

This instructional guide for has been developed for community exercise directors and their planning team to assist them in the preparation, conduct, and evaluation of table top exercises.

Given the hazards and risks that communities currently face, and can anticipate in the future with a changing climate, it is essential for municipalities to be prepared. Hosting regular emergency exercises, and “building back better” from lessons learned during exercise drills permits municipalities to continually enhance their readiness, and improve their core capabilities that are indeed interdependent within the system. The core capabilities include, but are not limited to:

- Planning
- Public information and warning
- Operational coordination
- Intelligence and information sharing
- Physical protective measures
- Risk management for preparedness programs and activities
- Supply chain integrity
- Community resilience
- Long-term vulnerability reduction
- Risk and disaster resilience assessment
- Threats and hazard identification
- Critical transportation
- Environmental response/health and safety
- Infrastructure systems
- Mass care services
- Mass search and rescue operations
- Operational communications
- Emergency medical services
- Situational assessment
- Economic recovery
- Health and social services
- Housing
- Natural and cultural resources

This TTX exercise instructional guide, based upon the Province of Ontario's *Guidelines for the Development of an Exercise Program*, and U.S. Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP), has been organized as follows:

- Part One: Design and Development and Conduct the TTX
- Part Two: Evaluation and Corrective Action Planning

Part One: Design and Development and Conducting the TTX

What is a Table Top Exercise?

A table top exercise (TTX) is a discussion-based exercise used to familiarize players with, or develop new, plans, policies, agreements, and procedures. A TTX focuses on strategic, policy-oriented issues. Facilitators or exercise directors usually lead the discussion, keeping participants on track towards meeting exercise objectives.

A TTX is intended to generate discussion of various issues regarding a hypothetical, simulated emergency. A TTX can be used to enhance general awareness, validate plans and procedures, rehearse concepts, and/or assess the types of systems needed to guide the prevention from, mitigation of, preparedness and response to, and recovery from a defined incident. Generally, TTXs are aimed at facilitating conceptual understanding, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, and/or achieving changes in perceptions.

During a TTX, players are encouraged to discuss issues in depth, collaboratively examining areas of concern and solving problems. The effectiveness of a TTX is derived from the energetic involvement of participants, and their assessment of recommended revisions to current policies, procedures, and plans.

TTXs can range from basic to complex. In a basic TTX (such as a facilitated discussion, plenary session, break out groups and vignette), the scenario is presented and remains constant – it describes an emergency and brings discussion participants up to the simulated present time. Players apply their knowledge and skills to a list of problems presented by the facilitator; problems are discussed as a group; and resolution is reached and documented for later analysis.

In a more advanced TTX, play advances as players receive pre-scripted messages that alter the original scenario. A facilitator usually introduces problems one at a time in the form of a written message. Players discuss the issues raised by each problem, referencing established authorities, plans, and procedures for guidance. Player decisions are incorporated as the scenario continues to unfold.

During a TTX, all participants should be encouraged to contribute to the discussion and be reminded that they are making decisions in a no-fault environment. Effective TTX facilitation is critical to keeping participants focused on exercise objectives.

Benefits of a TTX

There are numerous benefits to a municipality for conducting a table top exercise. These benefits are:

- Reveal planning weaknesses and gaps
- Improve coordination, collaboration, and communications
- Clarify roles and responsibilities
- Sets the conditions for critical thought and information sharing
- Meet Ontario Regulation 380/04 – *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*
- Understand the community complexity
- Shared understanding of community capabilities and needs
- Fostering relationships with community leaders that facilitate more effective prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery activities
- Build and maintain partnerships
- Greater empowerment and integration of resources from across the community
- Leverage and strengthen social infrastructure, networks and assets
- Increase individual and collective preparedness
- Greater resiliency at the municipal, community and provincial level

Prepare an Exercise Plan

Many exercise planning teams prepare an Exercise Plan (*See Appendix 1: Sample Exercise Plan*) or a Situation Manual for all exercise participants, and often provide it to them in advance of the exercise. The Exercise Plan contains all of the necessary information that participants need to know before and during a TTX.

Designing the TTX

There are a number of criteria to consider when designing a community-wide table top exercise. Below is a brief description of eight (8) essential elements to be addressed in the design phase.

1. *Assess needs*

- Begin with reviewing the community's current emergency plan
- Review past exercises
- From the community's emergency management program, as well as their past emergency incidents or exercise drills, determine needs assessment results, such as:
 - Primary and secondary hazards

- Problems, weak capabilities
- Skills requiring practice
- Improvements requiring testing
- Untested facilities, personnel, equipment
- Weakness in an emergency plan or Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)
- Need for role clarification

2. *Define the scope*

- Capabilities
- Type of emergency/ hazard
- Location and name of room where exercise will be held
- Participants
 - Members of the community control group
 - Mayor
 - Chief Administrative Officer (or equivalent)
 - Director of Public Works
 - Treasurer
 - Clerk
 - Chief Building Official
 - Health and Safety
 - Community Emergency Management Coordinator (CEMC)
 - Chief of Police
 - Fire Chief
 - Social Services Chief
 - Emergency Medical Services Chief
 - Medical Officer of Health
 - Solicitor
 - Media Relations Coordinator
 - Broader public safety and public service officials (such as Ontario Provincial Police Divisional Commander, conservation authorities, hospitals, nursing homes, school boards)
 - Critical infrastructure sector representatives (hydro and other utilities, telephone/ cellular companies,)
 - Private sector, including representatives from local industry and the Chamber of Commerce
 - Non-governmental organization (Red Cross, Salvation Army, Mennonite Disaster Services, St. John Ambulance)
 - Community and faith-based organizations (Kiwanis, church groups)

- Exercise type (example: TTX with a facilitator)
- Determine as the exercise director whether you need an exercise planning team, and the team composition and skill set
- Date of exercise
- Time, including the duration of the TTX, and a schedule of events

3. *Write a statement of purpose*

- A broad statement of the exercise goal
- Include what organizations will be involved in the TTX

4. *Define objectives*

- Determine what the exercise is intended to accomplish
- Objectives are essential for the design process, exercise conduct, evaluation, and corrective action planning
- Select between 3 to 5 objectives for a TTX
- The objectives should state who should do what under what conditions accordingly to what standards (example: emergency plan, SOP)
- Use the SMART¹ (specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time-related) principal when developing the objectives
- A description of the performance you expect from participants to demonstrate competence
- Objectives typically are focused on strategic, policy-oriented issues

5. *Compose a narrative*

- A narrative is a brief description of the scenario events that have occurred up to the beginning of the exercise
- Sets participant interest
- Provides information that sets the stage for later action

6. *Write major detailed events*

- Detailed events are occurrences that take place after, and as a result of the emergency described in the narrative
- The goal is to provide structure that will link the simulated event to the actions you want participants to take, and provide unity to the exercise

7. *List expected actions*

- The responses, actions, and decisions that you want participants to have or carry out in order to demonstrate competence

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART_criteria

- It is necessary to identify expected action(s) in order to develop discussion questions, and guide facilitation
- Knowing who should know what allows you to develop discussion questions that target those participants and responsibilities as well as provide a guide for your facilitator to follow

8. *Prepare messages*

- Messages or injects are used to communicate detailed events to exercise participants
- Messages serve one purpose: to evoke a response

Announcing the TTX to the Participants

Engaging elected and senior officials in the exercise is critical because they provide both strategic directions for the exercise, as well as specific guidance. You want to ensure that your exercise is supported at the highest level, and aligned to your community's needs and priorities.

When announcing the table top exercise to the participants, be sure to include all of the necessary information, and be sure to confirm your attendees. Consider the notice to announce the exercise coming from the mayor or chief administrative officer (or equivalent). It may assist you in the getting participation at the right level from the organizations you need at the table.

Exercise Logistics

Consider the exercise logistics, including selection of exercise room, room layout, room set up, audiovisual requirements, refreshments, and parking. As the exercise director, determine who will be responsible for each logistic item.

Conducting the TTX

When conducting the TTX, the facilitator/exercise director may wish to prepare a power point presentation to assist with the delivery of the exercise. *See Appendix 2: Sample Exercise Conduct Power Point Slides.*

The power point presentation should guide the exercise players through the exercise (from beginning to end), and the hot wash. The power point presentation should be structured as follows, and at minimum include:

- Cover slide with name of exercise
- Welcome page with name of facilitator and over view of administrative items (emergency exits, etc.)
- Greeting and opening remarks from the mayor
- Facilitation and evaluation team, plus observers and subject matter experts

- Participant introductions
- Exercise agenda
- High-level overview of the Exercise Needs Assessment
- Exercise scope
- Statement of purpose
- Exercise objectives
- Exercise guidelines
- Assumptions and artificialities
- Exercise structure, including the number of modules
- Scenario narrative
 - Be sure to include pictures of the community, diagrams, etc.
- Summary of key issues for each module
- Discussion questions for each module
- Hot wash
 - Strengths
 - Areas of improvement
 - Note: Hand out the Participant Survey, and collect at the end of the hot wash. *See Appendix 4: Sample Participant Survey.* You may instead advise participants that you will conduct an e-survey to solicit their feedback by using a tool such as Survey Monkey.
- Closing comments
 - Exercise facilitator/ exercise director
 - Mayor

Be sure to provide a participant sign-in sheet at the exercise, and ensure that all participants sign in. The sign-in sheet should include the name and date of the exercise, plus the name, title, department, organization, and contact information for each participant.

Exercise Facilitation

TTX's should be facilitated by an individual who is familiar with not only the exercise process, but also the community, and its emergency plan. The selection of the exercise facilitator is critical to the success of the exercise and the hot-wash. The exercise director, or the CEMC may serve in this role, or may decide to appoint or hire a qualified individual to perform this role. To be an effective facilitator, you should be equipped with the following skills:

- Flexible
- Adaptive
- Proactive
- Responsive

- Resilient
- Prepared

The following are a list of facilitation tips that should be taken into consideration by the exercise facilitator for a successful exercise:

- Start with easy-to-answer questions
- Encourage dialogue and participation
- Elicit – do not provide- responses and solutions
- Provide positive reinforcement
- Redirect, if necessary
- Know your audience and the topic
- Keep discussion focused on how critical tasks would be performed
- If appropriate, break a large group down into smaller ones for discussion
- Record all ideas and facts
- Use open-ended questions
- Honour break, lunch and quitting times
- Always remain neutral, objective and fair
- Be prepared and enthusiastic

Part Two: Evaluation and Corrective Action Planning

A critical part of the exercise program is to plan and conduct the evaluation of the TTX. This will enable a community to understand what its capabilities and capacities are, as well as determine what corrective action must be undertaken to improve the emergency readiness of the community.

There are 8 Exercise Evaluation Steps to consider when planning, and conducting the evaluation, and preparing the After-Action Report and Improvement Plan.

Eight Exercise Evaluation Steps

1. *Plan and organize the evaluation*

- Prepare a plan for evaluating the exercise.
- Determine what information is to be collected, who will collect it and how it will be collected
- Develop evaluation tools. *See Appendix 3: Sample Exercise Evaluation Guide (EEG)*
- Evaluators are identified, recruited and trained

- Determine what organizations you would like to recruit evaluators from.
Consider utilizing all members of your exercise planning team as evaluators.

2. *Observe the exercise and collect data*

- Review emergency plans, SOPs
 - Ensure that your evaluators know these plans and procedures extremely well
- Record observations and discussion that occur during the exercise
- Record identified issues, how decisions are made, roles and responsibilities, coordination and cooperation issues, recommendations from the group
- Collected data from your EEGs, hot-wash notes, facilitator's notes, and Participant Feedback Forms

3. *Analyze the data*

- Focus on assessing the adequacy of and familiarity of participants with existing emergency plans, policies, and procedures
- Conduct a root cause analysis with an actionable solution to determine the source of an identified issue. This should be conducted for each issue.
- Determine the discrepancy between what happened, and what was supposed to happened, and then, explore the source of these discrepancies
- Develop recommendations, and include:
 - What should be done and who should do it
 - Specific, succinct, and clearly stated
 - Provide suggested time frames for completion
 - Be actionable
 - Determine which capability element the recommendation pertains to, such as planning, organization, equipment, training & exercises, etc.

4. *Develop the After-Action Report*

- The After-Action Report (AAR) is a tool used to provide feedback to participating organizations on their performance during an exercise. *See Appendix 5: Sample AAR/CAP.*
- The AAR:
 - Provides a snapshot of the exercise
 - Summarizes what happened during the exercise
 - Analyzes core capabilities
 - Analyzes the performance of essential tasks
 - Analyzes demonstrated capacity to accomplish overall mission outcomes
 - Highlights strengths

- Identifies areas needing improvement and provides recommendations based on analysis

5. *Conduct an After-Action Meeting*

- The After-Action Meeting (AAM) serves as a forum to review the draft After-Action Report/Corrective Action Plan (AAR/CAP)
- Should be conducted within 30-45 days of exercise conduct
- Prior to the AAM, the draft AAR/CAP should be distributed to all stakeholders
- Seek to reach final consensus on strengths and areas for improvement
- Revise and gain consensus on draft corrective actions
- Develop concrete deadlines for implementation of corrective actions
- Identify specific corrective action owners/assignees

6. *Identify corrective actions to be implemented*

- Corrective Action Plans should:
 - Take into account the current operational picture
 - Address both short- and long-term goals
 - Be targeted to a specific time frame
 - Stress improvements that have the impact-to-cost ratio

7. *Finalize the After-Action Report/Corrective Action Plan*

- Finalize the Corrective Action Plan after the After-Action Meeting
- Ensure corrective actions/recommendations have been consolidated in the final Corrective Action Plan
- Distribute AAR/CAP to appropriate stakeholders and partners

8. *Track implementation*

- Conducting exercises and documenting the strengths, areas of improvement, and associated corrective actions/recommendations are important for a community's overall preparedness
- Corrective actions captured in the AAR/CAP should be tracked and continually reported on until completion
- Municipality should assign points of contact responsible for tracking and reporting on their progress
- Tracking corrective actions to completion allows stakeholders to demonstrate that exercises have yielded tangible improvements in preparedness
- When planning your next exercise, previous AAR/CAPs should be part of your exercise needs assessment

Appendices

Appendix 1 Sample Exercise Plan

Appendix 2 Sample Exercise Conduct Power Point Slides

Appendix 3 Sample Exercise Evaluation Guide

Appendix 4 Sample Participant Survey

Appendix 5 Sample After-Action Report and Corrective Action Plan