Tips for Running Successful Business Continuity Tabletop Exercises

Risk Management Leadership Council
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Overview

Tabletop exercises for business continuity management (BCM) test the effectiveness of procedures and safeguards in place to respond to and recover from specific continuity incidents. They are an effective way to gauge organizational preparedness and awareness as well as to uncover flaws or gaps in recovery plan design.

Preparing to run a tabletop exercise accounts for approximately 60% of the time spent on the exercise process.[1]

Drafting the exercise scenario is the single most time-consuming step and (depending on the size and scope of the exercise) teams should allow up to a month to finalize it.

Clearly defined facilitator roles and responsibilities are most critical to the effectiveness of tabletop exercises. This applies during exercise development, while conducting the exercise and for assigning follow-up action steps.[2]

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Exercises Preparation

Preparing for a tabletop exercise, including developing the scenario itself, accounts for most of the effort expended in running an exercise. Those running an exercise should therefore begin preparation two to three months in advance to coordinate the relevant stakeholders and reserve the necessary space for the activity.

Figure 1: Key Preparation Steps in Advance of a Tabletop Exercise

Select recovery plan(s) to exercise and determine outcome objectives → Consult internal SMEs to develop exercise objectives → Draft exercise scenario → Review and edit scenario with internal functional experts → Finalize logistical details including exercise location, timing and participants → Conduct exercise

Source: CEB analysis.
Principles for Writing Effective Tabletop Exercise Scenarios

More time should be spent on developing and drafting the exercise scenario than on any other part of the tabletop exercise process. Depending on the scenario’s scope and complexity, the exercise leader will spend up to a month drafting, revising and validating the scenario.

Three key principles should be kept in mind when drafting tabletop exercise scenarios:

• **Take a crawl, walk, run approach:** The scope and complexity of tabletop scenarios should correspond to the organization’s level of experience with them. It is easy for first time participants and facilitators to become overwhelmed by overly complex scenarios, resulting in inaccurate findings. Starting with simple scenarios gives both participants and facilitators a chance to familiarize themselves with the purpose and process of tabletop exercises before developing complex scenarios.

• **Ensure scenarios are realistic and relevant to the audience involved:** Scenarios used in tabletop exercises should be realistic and relevant to the response plans being tested. For example, if the site is near a known fault line an organization exercising its capability to respond to a natural disaster should incorporate earthquakes in its scenarios. Further, organizations should reflect how they conduct business and include familiar resources by name (e.g., internal IT platforms, distributors, external business partners, etc.). Coordinating with relevant external partners and internal functional experts, will also make the scenarios more realistic.

• **Focus exercise scenarios on specific continuity response plans and associated team members:** The scenario used in a tabletop exercise should directly target the response plan being tested as well as the individuals involved in enacting it as much as possible. Exercise authors should use the response plan in question as a basis for developing the scenario. This ensures the exercise is adequately comprehensive and that each participant will have a role to play on the day itself.
## Exercise Roles and Responsibilities

The single most important consideration when conducting a tabletop exercise is the clear assignment of roles and responsibilities for participants and facilitators. Successful tabletop exercises should include each of the following roles:[1]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Players</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Observers</th>
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<td>Exercise participants actively involved in responding to the presented scenario. They are responsible for enacting the response plan or not. Those directly involved in the response plan are there to practice enacting it, while those without direct responsibility participate as a cross-training or awareness opportunity. Ideally, mix of functional leaders and frontline management.</td>
<td>The individual responsible for running the exercise. This includes presenting the scenario as well as any additional elements, such as injects. This can be an internal employee, such as the head of business continuity, or an external party such as a hired consultant. Experience of conducting and facilitating group workshops should be prioritized above knowledge of the business and its operations when selecting a facilitator.</td>
<td>Individuals from the organization who know the business well but are not directly involved in the exercise. Players consult these individuals during the exercise to learn more about certain elements of the scenario. Ideally, observers should be functional experts in all affected functional areas of the scenario.</td>
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**Scribes**

Individuals from the business who document the key actions taken, issues and findings from the exercise. These individuals work with the facilitator to ensure all findings are adequately captured.

**Evaluators**

Individuals from the business who know the processes being exercised and evaluate players’ responses against the established objectives. Functional expertise for evaluators is critical as they must be able to consider the feasibility and efficacy of players’ decisions.

**Recovery Team Communicators**

For larger exercises, players may be broken into smaller teams to represent specific business functions/units. One player is selected from each team to act as a liaison with other teams. Only team communicators can communicate between teams. At the end of the exercise, they also communicate lessons learned to the scribes.

Recommendations

To ensure success, heads of ERM conducting tabletop exercises to evaluate business continuity and disaster recovery plans should:

- Prioritize tabletop exercises by first addressing regulatory obligations, then response plan maturity, criticality to business operations and finally response plan complexity.

- Establish three to five clear exercise outcome objectives (e.g., minimum acceptable recovery time) and communicate these to stakeholders at least one week before the exercise.

- Design exercise scenarios for specific recovery plans and the relevant individuals who will enact them. Using the recovery plan itself as the basis for exercise scenarios ensures all steps and protocols are included and evaluated.

- To prevent overwhelming participants and facilitators, organizations should start simple and gradually move to more complex exercises as facilitators and participants become more experienced.
This complimentary research is part of Gartner's ongoing coverage of the business impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

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