

## Striving for Business Continuity Excellence

### PROFICIENCY THROUGH PRACTICE

A high rise commercial tower is successfully evacuated due to a fire;  
A firefighter rescues a trapped child in a collapsed building;  
Occupants of a capsized sailboat are rescued from a stormy sea;  
A doctor saves a life with an emergency tracheotomy;  
Lance Armstrong wins the Tour de France – again!

The successful outcome of these events depended heavily on perfecting the technique, skill and ability through determined and arduous practice.

Attaining business excellence and reliability requires continuity and recovery plans be thoroughly exercised and tested. The private and public sector consumes billions of dollars worth of services and products for which we have little assurance of continued supply. Most service and product providers have never practiced how they would manage through an emergency of significant magnitude and continue business operations.

When I teach the full business continuity process to people I often hear; “Exercising is good in theory but we don’t understand where to start, what constitutes a good exercise and worst of all exercises require a lot of effort.”

We get to the point where the plan is in place and we run out of steam – not just as individuals but organizationally. There is no desire to go further and that is the precise point at which we falter.

Exercising the business continuity plan is essentially a 3 step process consisting of; **PLANNING**, **MANAGING** and **EVALUATING**. The secret to an effective exercise program is to start with the most simple practices and build your technique, skill and ability with subsequently more complex scenarios.

Prepare a 12 month exercise program; start with a simple plan review session and build to a small simulation using command and control concepts as well as the emergency operations centre environment. The following guidelines are for a Tabletop exercise;

The **PLANNING** segment:

- WHO will be involved; design team, plan holders, employees, senior management, vendors, others?
- WHAT are the objectives and scope of the exercise; validate plans, EOC, crisis communications, command and control, recovery capability, learning opportunity?
- WHEN will the exercise occur; avoid very busy periods in the business cycle, target a maximum of 2 hours for your first table top exercise?
- WHERE will the exercise take place; on your premises or at a recovery site?
- HOW will the exercise be managed and evaluated?

Included in the planning activity is a requirement to “design” the exercise by preparing a disaster scenario that will be accepted as realistic but will challenge the participants to resolve problems in the context of the BC plans. Tacked on to the scenario are issues and events that arise during the exercise timeline. We call these fictitious events ‘problem sets’ or ‘injects’ which are designed to once again challenge the participants for a resolution based on their knowledge of the business function and the contents of the BC plan.

The **MANAGING** segment:

- Conduct a short briefing session to familiarize the participants with the objective and scope of this exercise. Issue any documents required, including copies of BC plans if that is appropriate.
- The exercise controller issues the scenario and permits a few minutes for review and questions.
- The exercise starts with the issuance of ‘injects’ or problems to be solved by the participants.
- The participants ‘play’ as if the event were real.

The **EVALUATING** segment:

- Evaluators verify actions against a set of objectives and pre-established solutions. Participants are NEVER evaluated – only procedures and processes.
- An immediate post exercise de-briefing session collects feedback from control teams and participants.
- The design team meets in the following days to evaluate the design and conduct of the exercise and required BC plan updates..
- A report is created detailing the results and providing recommendations.

While the complete exercise process has been simplified for this article it is possible to apply the principles to a tabletop exercise by taking each segment and adding content that is specific to your organization.

Exercising business continuity plans is serious business however the effectiveness of the outcomes may depend on ensuring the participants will enjoy the experience and depart the practice session with a desire to continue learning and achieve excellence.

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Vanguard EMC Inc, a thriving consultancy providing government and private sector clients with best practice guidance for all aspects of business continuity and emergency management. Brian has more than 25 years of hands on experience and leadership in telecommunications, emergency management and business continuity. In addition to currently teaching business continuity for Disaster Recovery Institute International (DRII), DRI Canada and the Canada School of Public Service; Brian is a former instructor at the Algonquin College of Applied Arts & Sciences and Development Dimensions International – instructing over 2500 individuals since 1996. Brian is the immediate Past Chair of the Canadian Centre for Emergency Preparedness and current President of DRI Canada.

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