

Plan, Manage and Evaluate Business Continuity Exercises

Executives in any organization would respond positively to an offer of reducing the potential failure of emergency or business continuity plans. And no one could deny the inherent value in conducting regular drills that provide building occupants with an opportunity to practice an evacuation. Schools do it over and over thereby implanting the process with a higher expectation that a child will follow the routine should a real emergency occur. Adults are clearly capable of much faster conditioning because legislation requires one annual building evacuation exercise in facilities of four stories or more. Cynicism aside, the reality of emergencies tells us that more practice would result in greater safety and protection of life.

An expression often heard in military circles is; “Train hard, fight easy.” This concept is readily adapted to a business environment where we rarely work in an emergency environment. Business continuity exercises must be considered as an ideal training opportunity.

In our consulting practice every organization we work with agrees that exercises are a valuable part of overall readiness but the motivation is less forthcoming. It is easy to understand why; the perception is that exercises take us away from our regular routine and put us in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable environment. A number of years ago while working as an emergency manager for a large corporation, it became evident that the only way to make emergency management exercises an attractive proposition was to ensure that the participants themselves become the promoters of the value and the experience. No matter how often we attempt to convince fellow employees that emergency or business continuity plan exercises are an essential tool in our readiness kit, reluctance is the least reaction and outright refusal is not uncommon. However when exercise participants spontaneously tell their colleagues how much they enjoyed the process and the knowledge gained, invitations to future exercise sessions are perceived in a more positive light. It takes time but with the right support and effort, plan exercising will become part of the readiness culture.

The advice I consistently give to people who are approaching an exercise design effort for the first time; start with a small, easy to control event. Learn the art and science of planning, managing and evaluating exercises. Learn how your participants perceive the value and appeal to them to become your exercise sales force.

So where should we start? Assemble a small team of employees knowledgeable in the various subject matter targeted by the exercise. Obtain approval in advance to use four hours per week of their time and plan on a project timeline of 8-12 weeks. This may seem like an inordinate amount of time; however you will use every bit of it and possibly more. The amount of time is somewhat proportional to the extent of the exercise; larger, more complex exercises require additional people on the design team and increased assigned hours.

As with any project small or large; establish a clear scope of activities. Things like date, time, duration, location, participants are all elements that are included in an exercise. If there are any specific exclusions, list those as being out of scope. Next, create the exercise objectives or goals you wish to accomplish. Don't go overboard with the number of objectives; three to six is the range that seems to be most effective. A higher number of exercise objectives will result in more complexity for the formal evaluation and the resulting lessons will lose focus. Once the scope and objectives are created they must be formally approved by an exercise sponsor. My recommendation is to secure the approval of someone who is at an equivalent management level to the highest level participating in the exercise. An exercise designed for an executive team should be approved by the President or Deputy Minister for example.

Once approval is obtained the exercise design begins in earnest with a total focus on the scope and objectives. I like to start this segment with a wide open brainstorming session for a scenario; no limit to the flow of ideas, even silly stuff is listed. A review of the organization's most recent threat assessment may also be helpful in determining a subject for the scenario. Essentially the exercise scenario is a short story of less than a full page describing something that launches a requirement for the participants to make decisions relative to response and/or recovery activities.

Once the scenario is done the team begins work on the injects and once again a brainstorming session is the best means of drawing out ideas but this time it is focused on the issues that will follow the scenario. Injects can be problems to solve or information that adds to the scenario. Each inject must address one or more of the exercise objectives and must have a potential resolution clearly described by the design team. When the majority of the injects are completed they will be organized in a time line which is often referred to as the script of the exercise.

The design team should next examine all the logistics for the exercise and any required control forms. The exercise controller and support will want to ensure that the timing is on track and a simple list of injects and their related timings is a useful tool. Plan to solicit player and observer feedback through the use of prescribed questions after the exercise. Make it a requirement for all participants to provide this formal feedback.

Prepare a briefing presentation and a participant handbook. The handbook can be emailed to participants a week prior to the exercise and will answer most questions they may have but does not contain any notion of the scenario subject or injects. Immediately prior to the exercise, the controller/facilitator will provide all participants with a briefing relative to the exercise. One of the most important aspects of the briefing is to reassure the players that the exercise is an opportunity to practice in a non-threatening environment. They can take chances and no harm will befall employees or the organization.

Once the exercise is complete, it is mandatory to facilitate a verbal debriefing of everyone who was in the room at the time. This is an excellent opportunity to gather information while people are still attached to the exercise activities. Ensure that a scribe can record everything said in the verbal reporting.

Some form of recognition and celebration is always appropriate following an exercise. A personal thank you by a senior manager or executive is most often welcomed or an article in a newsletter congratulating the various participants for their specific roles.

The exercise report addresses the evaluation which must be entirely focused on the approved scope and objectives. A report format frequently used is one that indicates observations relative to each objective, the lessons derived and the recommended actions going forward.

Any exercise that concludes a flawless performance by all personnel with no recommendations for plan improvements or associated training has not been properly designed and/or conducted. In emergency exercising: failure is even encouraged! Thomas Edison once said, "I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward." An honest assessment will always identify lessons no matter how much experience the team possesses. These lessons need to be acknowledged and addressed if the emergency management team is to mature into a highly effective response organization ready to deal with a real world incident. The goal is always to validate the organization and procedures; it is not to test the employees.



In conclusion, many organizations suffer a degree of burnout upon completion of the emergency management or business continuity plans and fail to invest in a regular training and exercise program. The best way to avoid this phenomenon is to create an annual report on the status of the business continuity program and highlight that exercises have not been done. In addition, an internal or external audit will always highlight the status of the exercise element.

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