CONDUCTING AND DESIGNING TABLETOPS
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UNIT INTRODUCTION

Key Points

In this unit, you will participate in a tabletop exercise, review the steps for developing and conducting a tabletop, and design a tabletop based on school objectives.
UNIT INTRODUCTION

Key Points

The unit objectives will enable you to:

- Demonstrate emergency operations plan (EOP) procedures through participation in a tabletop exercise.
- Design a tabletop to exercise the school EOP.
TABLETOP EXERCISE

Key Points

This training addresses two main content areas:

- Conducting a tabletop exercise.
- Designing a tabletop to use at the school to exercise the EOP.

The unit begins with a tabletop exercise that will enable you to apply what you have learned in the G364 course and to identify strengths and areas of improvement for the school EOP.
TABLETOP EXERCISE

Visual 4

Activity: Conduct the Tabletop

Instructions:
1. Read the scenario assigned by the instructor.
2. Working in your school team, use the school EOP to guide your answers.
3. Respond to updates and new questions using the EOP.

Key Points

Purpose: This activity will provide an opportunity to exercise the school EOP by participating in a tabletop exercise. The school will need to use its EOP to make decisions about how to respond to each of the events.

Objectives of the tabletop are to:
- Demonstrate the ability to use the Incident Command System principles.
- Determine the effectiveness of the operational organization that manages the incident.
- Assess the ability to establish and maintain communications during an incident.
- Determine the adequacy of equipment, supplies, and facilities during an incident.

Scenario and updates. An initial scenario will be presented and then new information about the scenario will be added at intervals throughout the exercise. This information will require a reevaluation of the situation and decisionmaking based on the new data in much the same way as during an actual event.

Messages. Questions (messages) will be posed after the initial scenario and each scenario update. Throughout the exercise, the instructor will monitor the exercise to encourage problem solving, ensure everyone participates, control the pace, and evaluate the exercise.
TABLETOP EXERCISE

Visual 4 (Continued)

Instructions: Working as a school team . . .

- Read the scenario.
- Use your school EOP to respond to the scenario questions and updates.
- Identify one person to document your responses.
- Select one person to present the school’s responses to the scenario questions at the end of the activity.

The scenarios presented for this exercise have not been drawn from actual incidents. They have been developed for exercise purposes only and are intended to show how school personnel could be forced into the position of having to organize to help themselves and others following an emergency event. The exercise is also intended to demonstrate the complexities of emergency response and, therefore, the value of emergency planning for schools.
TABLETOP EXERCISE

Visual 5

Activity: Debrief the Tabletop

Instructions:
1. Present your school’s responses to the scenario questions and identify:
   - Strengths
   - Areas of improvement
2. Discuss the following questions:
   - What worked well in this tabletop exercise?
   - What changes in the tabletop would you suggest?

Key Points

Purpose: This activity will enable you to discuss the tabletop scenario, including what worked well for you and what changes you would suggest.

Instructions:

- Present your responses to each of the questions in the tabletop.
- Make notes on strengths and areas of improvement. You will need this information for the next activity.
- Discuss:
  - What worked well in the tabletop exercise?
  - What changes in the tabletop would you suggest?
TABLETOP EXERCISE

Visual 5 (Continued)

Discussion Questions:

What worked well in the tabletop exercise?

What changes would you suggest?
After-Action Report

The after-action report includes exercise findings from both player and evaluator feedback and includes:

- Executive summary or introduction.
- Why the exercise was conducted.
- Exercise summary.
- Strengths and areas for improvement.
- Recommendations and corrective actions.

Key Points

After conducting an exercise, it is important to document the overall effectiveness to:

- Plan future training and exercises.
- Revise plans, policies, and procedures.
- Take other corrective actions, such as purchase of equipment to support redundant communications methods.

As a team, develop the after-action report from exercise observations and notes, by:

- Comparing all notes and observations from the exercise.
- Resolving discrepancies in events or expected actions.
- Agreeing on what worked and did not work during the exercise, including the degree to which the exercise objectives were achieved.
- Deciding on the contents of the after-action report.

The complexity of the after-action report varies from a simple memorandum to a more formal report with:

- An executive summary or introduction that describes the main purpose of the report, why it is being submitted, a preview of the main report topics, and the evaluation methodology used.

- Why the exercise was conducted.
AFTER-ACTION REPORT

Visual 6 (Continued)

- **An exercise summary** that includes information such as:
  - The exercise goals and objectives.
  - Activities that took place before the exercise to ensure that a location is identified, materials are copied, and all other exercise needs are met.
  - A list of the players and the agencies or organizations they represented.
  - A brief description of the exercise scenario.

- **Strengths and areas for improvement:**
  - Evaluation group findings.
  - Summary of the after-action review.

- **Recommendations and corrective actions**, including:
  - Training needs.
  - Changes required to plans, policies, and procedures.
Key Points

**Purpose**: This activity will enable you to review the tabletop and develop an after-action report.

**Instructions**:

Working with your school, assign one person to record responses. As a group:

- Review your notes and observations from the tabletop exercise and identify:
  - What worked.
  - What did not work.
  - Recommendations.
  - Corrective actions.

- Prepare an after-action report using the template on the following pages.
**AFTER-ACTION REPORT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>After-Action Report Template</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Name:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise Name:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide a brief overview of the exercise that was conducted, why the exercise was conducted, the exercise objectives, the purpose of the after-action report, major strengths identified during the exercise, and main areas of improvement. (Complete the Executive Summary after you develop the report.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### After-Action Report Template

**EXERCISE DETAILS:**
- **Exercise Name:**
- **Type of Exercise:**
- **Exercise Date:**
- **Duration:**
- **Location:**
- **Scenario Type:**
- **Number of Participants:**
  - Players:
  - Facilitators:
  - Observers:
  - Evaluators:

**Exercise Objectives:** *(List each exercise objective.)*
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

**STRENGTHS:**

*List the major strengths of the school emergency operations plan, processes, and policies that were identified during the exercise.*

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## Areas for Improvement:

List the areas for improvement in the school emergency operations plan, processes, and policies that were identified during the exercise.

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## Recommendations and Corrective Actions:

For each area of improvement, list recommendations for improvements. Include updates and changes to the school emergency operations plan, policies, and procedures, as well as training opportunities and follow-on exercises.

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Key Points

The first part of the unit provided an opportunity to assess elements of your school EOP by participating in a tabletop exercise.

In the next part of the unit, you will learn about and apply the process for designing a simple tabletop: assemble a planning team, select an exercise, develop objectives, select exercise players, develop the exercise, conduct the exercise, and evaluate.
Key Points

Schools can derive many benefits from conducting tabletop exercises. For example, tabletop exercises:

- Bring together representatives from different areas: school, district, emergency responders.
- Lend themselves to low-stress, indepth discussion without time constraints.
- Incorporate collaborative problem solving. Tabletops are designed to generate constructive discussion as participants examine and resolve problems.
- Provide an opportunity to resolve questions of coordination and responsibility in the context of hypothetical situations.
- Enable participants to examine the EOP and assess policies, procedures, and capabilities and identify areas of improvement for the EOP.
Designing Tabletop Materials

- **Narratives**
  - Describe context and direction.
  - Provide background information.
  - Establish a common frame of reference.

- **Significant events**
  - Present new information.
  - Prompt expected actions.

- **Messages**
  - Provide information.
  - Complicate the exercise.
  - Initiate specific actions.

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**Key Points**

Tabletop design and development follows the process presented in Unit 7 of the G364 course. Once an exercise planning team is assembled and has identified the goals and objectives for an exercise, the next step is to design the specifics of the exercise.

Tabletop materials may include:

- **Narrative**: A scenario, or brief description of the events that have occurred up to the minute the exercise begins. The exercise narrative provides:
  - **Context and direction** for the exercise by presenting a realistic scenario description. The exercise narrative:
    - Sets the mood for the exercise.
    - Captures the participants’ attention and motivates them to continue.
    - Enables them to examine policies, procedures, and the current status of their capabilities to manage emergency response.
  - **Background information**—conditions and technical details that the participants will need to consider during the exercise.
  - **Common frame of reference** for all exercise participants.
### DESIGN TABLETOP

#### Visual 10 (Continued)

**Key points:**
- Scenarios should be realistic, plausible, and challenging without being overwhelming.
- When designing a narrative consider the:
  - Season.
  - Time of day.
  - Initiating incident.
  - Impact on immediate and extended areas.
  - How the incident unfolds.
  - Other factors that could impact response.

- **Significant events:** Important events that affect the scenario and the decisions the players make as they respond to the scenario.

  When designing the significant events, consider actions you want people to take to address the exercise objectives.

- **Messages:** Notices that convey information about significant events to players. Messages, or injects, can be used to:
  - Provide information to players in the exercise.
  - Complicate the exercise in a way that might reasonably occur in a real incident.
  - Direct or redirect the play.
  - Initiate specific actions on the part of the players.
  - Distract the players in much the same way as they might be distracted during a real incident.

  When designing messages, think about who could send a message and what that person could say to motivate the expected action to meet an exercise objective.
Conducting and Designing Tabletops

CONDUCT THE TABLETOP

Visual 11

Tabletop Exercise Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitators</th>
<th>Evaluators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set up the exercise.</td>
<td>Review exercise objectives and evaluation criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate the exercise.</td>
<td>Observe and document actions during the exercise.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Players</th>
<th>Observers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determine who will play each role.</td>
<td>Observe exercise play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take active role following EOP procedures.</td>
<td>May ask relevant questions, deliver messages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Points

For a tabletop exercise to succeed, it needs to be managed and evaluated properly. It is important to identify and prepare the participants because they are key to the exercise’s success.

- **Exercise facilitators** supervise the overall conduct of the exercise, making certain that the tabletop exercise proceeds as planned and that objectives are reached. The main duties of the exercise facilitator are to:
  - Set up the exercise by introducing the narrative.
  - Facilitate problem solving among the players including controlling the pace and distributing messages.
  - Assist with discussion, ensuring all issues and objectives are explored as thoroughly as possible within time constraints.

- **Exercise players** review the roles to be played and determine who will perform the roles. Players perform the role as they would in the actual emergency by following the procedures in their emergency plan.

  **Key point:** In determining the players to be included in a tabletop exercise, schools should consider the type of scenario and the overall objectives of the exercise. For example, some schools have conducted exercises focused on post-incident recovery in which all of the players were either school nurses, counselors, psychologists, or social workers.
• **Evaluators** observe the actions and decisions of the players in order to later report what went well and what needs improvement. To do this, evaluators need to be familiar with the objectives, exercise scenario, and organization(s) participating in the exercise. The main duties of the evaluators are to:

  o Review the exercise objectives and observe the actions and decisions of the players as they relate to the objectives.

  o Review the evaluation criteria and refine the evaluation checklists to document the observations during the exercise.

  o Document observations, capture unresolved issues, and analyze exercise results.

**Key point:** In selecting people to serve as evaluators for a tabletop exercise, schools should consider including local collaborative partners (e.g., first responders, health department, various subject-matter experts). These partners can contribute an important perspective to the process. They can also employ the hot wash as a “teachable moment” to train the participants on best practices.

Exercises provide an excellent opportunity to engage in collaborative planning, training, and drilling in one setting.

• **Observes** do not directly participate in the exercise; rather, they observe selected segments of the exercise as it unfolds, while remaining separated from player activities. In a tabletop exercise, observers may support the development of player responses to the situation by asking relevant questions, delivering messages, or citing references; however, they generally do not participate in moderated discussion.

In this activity, the same individuals will serve as both observers and evaluators.

**Key point:** When schools conduct exercises, it is beneficial to include observers from other campuses or districts. This is a good way to deliver economy-of-scale across a jurisdiction.
Conducting and Designing Tabletops

CONDUCT THE TABLETOP

Visual 12

Setting Up the Tabletop

- Select location.
- Prepare exercise materials.
- Determine room layout, arrange room, and test equipment.
- Decide on administrative and logistical issues.
- Develop checklist for needed materials and other items.

Key Points

Setting up the tabletop involves:

- Selecting an exercise location that accommodates the players and any audiovisual equipment and support material.
- Preparing exercise materials including making copies of all plans, policies, procedures, and required reference materials for players, evaluators, facilitators, and observers.
- Determining room layout and arranging the room to accommodate the exercise and players.
- Testing equipment before the exercise begins.
- Developing a checklist of needed materials and other items.
Key Points

Tabletop exercises are managed by an exercise facilitator who has several key responsibilities to ensure that the exercise proceeds as planned, which include:

- Welcoming the participants and putting them at ease.
- Introducing himself or herself and the evaluators and observers.
- Presenting the purpose of the exercise.
- Explaining to the players how the exercise will be conducted, including the roles of the exercise facilitator and evaluators.
- Introducing the narrative and the significant events.
- Ensuring all players are involved.
- Encouraging and facilitating problem solving.
- Controlling the pace and flow of the exercise.
- Evaluating exercise progress.
Key Points

The facilitator manages the tabletop and can ensure its success by involving everyone, fostering indepth problem solving, and controlling and sustaining the action.

The tabletop exercises are used to validate plans, policies, and procedures by making decisions to resolve the problems presented in the exercise narrative. The facilitator often must help the players analyze questions or problems and engage in indepth problem solving.

Exercise facilitators may use several strategies to control and sustain the action, maintaining a high interest level throughout the exercise and keeping all players involved.

- Monitoring the pace of the discussion.
  - Introduce the scenario in parts. Presenting the narrative in progressive parts can be helpful for building anticipation of future direction. As discussion on one narrative part decreases, a new part can be introduced.
  - Use the introduction of the significant events and messages so that players must interact with each other to resolve an issue.
  - Vary the exercise pace by adding messages to keep the exercise flow advancing or to redirect players who have deviated from the anticipated exercise direction.
CONDUCT THE TABLETOP

Visual 14 (Continued)

- Encouraging involvement.
  - Encourage all players to get involved in the exercise.
  - Use open-ended questions to promote players’ consideration of alternative strategies.
  - Acknowledge comments and suggestions in a positive manner.

- Managing messages.
  - Focus on one message at a time. The intent of a tabletop exercise is not to overwhelm the players but rather to resolve potential areas of conflict between policies or procedures.
  - Eliminate messages if the players have addressed the issue.

- Helping players manage time. Maintain a balance between allowing the players to spend too much time on a single issue and moving so quickly that all “solutions” are superficial.

- Addressing conflict, confusion, and frustration. Monitor the players continuously to identify confusion, frustration, or potential conflicts among the players. If players become confused, frustrated, or begin to conflict, the exercise facilitator should stop the exercise and work to resolve concerns before restarting.
**EVALUATION**

**Key Points**

Exercise evaluation:

- Assesses how well the exercise achieved the exercise objectives being tested.

- Identifies where the plan was successful or not during the tabletop.

- Identifies opportunities for improvement, including improved response capabilities and needed revisions of plans, policies, and procedures. The focus should not be on the performance of each individual player but rather on how well the policies, plans, and procedures worked.

Standard checklists to record observations during the tabletop are helpful to ensure data collected is uniform and consistent.
EVALUATION

Sample Evaluator Checklist

Evaluator: John Lee  
Date: May 5, 2010  
Location: Springfield High School  
Exercise: Shelter-in-Place  
Exercise Objective: Coordinate effective shelter-in-place

EXPECTED ACTIONS:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Met</th>
<th>Not Met</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
<th>Not Observed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ensure all students, staff, and visitors are inside.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Conduct roll call of students and staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Ensure all doors are closed, and windows are closed and locked.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Notify district office.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Place signage on doors and office.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Identify alternate water sources for rooms without sinks.</td>
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</table>
**ACTIVITY: DESIGN AND CONDUCT A TABLETOP**

**Key Points**

**Purpose:** This part of the activity will give you the opportunity to identify objectives from your school plan you wish to exercise.

**Instructions:** Working as a team:

1. Determine the objectives from your school plan that you wish to exercise with a tabletop.
2. Select a planned event or emergency incident that meets those objectives.
3. Be prepared to brief another team on your desired objectives and incident in 15 minutes.

**Key point:** Designing and developing tabletop exercises takes time and planning. This activity is a very simplified version of the process, provided to give you an idea of what your school can gain from conducting tabletop exercises.

To gain more knowledge and skill, you may wish to take one or more of the exercise design courses offered by the FEMA Emergency Management Institute. Specific course offerings are listed in the Course Toolkit.
Conducting and Designing Tabletops

Your Notes:
ACTIVITY: DESIGN AND CONDUCT A TABLETOP

Key Points

**Purpose:** This activity will give you the opportunity to practice writing a basic tabletop exercise and an evaluator checklist.

**Instructions:**

1. Develop a tabletop exercise for another team, based on their desired objectives and incident.
2. Describe the scenario in sufficient detail. Use the scenario template provided on the next page. Refer to the sample tabletop exercise in the Course Toolkit, as needed.
3. Develop an evaluator checklist for the tabletop using the template that follows.
4. Be prepared to conduct the tabletop in 40 minutes.

A variety of checklists for planning and evaluating exercises, as well as sample tabletop scenarios, are provided in the Course Toolkit under **Conducting Training and Exercises.**
ACTIVITY: DESIGN AND CONDUCT A TABLETOP

Scenario Development Worksheet

Instructions: Use the space below to create a scenario that addresses the other team’s desired objectives and incident. Determine how you will present this information to the other team (e.g., chart paper, PowerPoint, separate photocopies of the introduction and updates). Divide the facilitator responsibilities among your team members.

Scenario Introduction:

Discussion question:

Scenario Update #1:

Discussion question:

Scenario Update #2:

Discussion question:
**ACTIVITY: DESIGN AND CONDUCT A TABLETOP**

**Sample Evaluator Checklist**

Evaluator:  
Date:  
Location:  
Exercise:  
Exercise Objective:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPECTED ACTIONS:</th>
<th>Met</th>
<th>Not Met</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
<th>Not Observed</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>
ACTIVITY: DESIGN AND CONDUCT A TABLETOP

Key Points

**Purpose:** This activity will give you the opportunity to briefly practice conducting a tabletop exercise.

**Instructions:** You will now do one of the following:

- Facilitate the selected tabletop you developed.
- Participate in the tabletop, using your school plan to respond.
- Observe, evaluate, and facilitate a “hot wash” (debrief). A worksheet for your notes is provided on the next page.
ACTIVITY: DESIGN AND CONDUCT A TABLETOP

Facilitator Guidelines

**Description.** Exercise facilitators supervise the overall conduct of the exercise, making certain that the tabletop exercise proceeds as planned and that objectives are reached.

**Responsibilities.** An exercise facilitator has several key responsibilities to ensure that the exercise proceeds as planned:

- Welcome the participants and put them at ease.
- Introduce himself or herself and the evaluators and observers.
- Present the purpose of the exercise.
- Explain to the players how the exercise will be conducted, including the roles of the exercise facilitator and evaluators.
- Introduce the narrative and the significant events.
- Ensure all players are involved.
- Encourage and facilitate problem solving.
- Control the pace and flow of the exercise.
- Evaluate exercise progress.

**Strategies.** Exercise facilitators may use several strategies to control and sustain the action, maintain a high interest level throughout the exercise, and keep all players involved.

- **Monitor the pace of the discussion.**
  - Introduce the scenario in parts. Presenting the narrative in progressive parts can be helpful for building anticipation of future direction. As discussion on one narrative part decreases, a new part can be introduced.
  - Use the introduction of the significant events and messages so that players must interact with each other to resolve an issue.
  - Vary the exercise pace by adding messages to keep the exercise flow advancing or to redirect players who have deviated from the anticipated exercise direction.

- **Encourage involvement.**
  - Encourage all players to get involved in the exercise.
  - Use open-ended questions to promote players’ consideration of alternative strategies.
  - Acknowledge comments and suggestions in a positive manner.

- **Manage messages.**
  - Focus on one message at a time. The intent of a tabletop exercise is not to overwhelm the players but rather to resolve potential areas of conflict between policies or procedures.
  - Eliminate messages if the players have addressed the issue.

- **Help players manage time.** Maintain a balance between allowing the players to spend too much time on a single issue and moving so quickly that all “solutions” are superficial.

- **Address conflict, confusion, and frustration.** Monitor the players continuously to identify confusion, frustration, or potential conflicts among the players. If players become confused, frustrated, or begin to conflict, the exercise facilitator should stop the exercise and work to resolve concerns before restarting.
ACTIVITY: DESIGN AND CONDUCT A TABLETOP

Evaluator Team Worksheet

Instructions: Use the evaluator checklist provided by the facilitator team, along with the sheet below, to determine if the tabletop objectives were met and to record your notes about the tabletop exercise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator Team’s Tabletop and Presentation</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Areas for Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Team’s School Procedures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other challenges, best practices, or suggestions:
Conducting and Designing Tabletops

Your Notes:
Key Points

In this unit, the following key points were presented:

- Participating in tabletop exercises allows you to test your EOP in a low-stress environment and resolve issues around coordination, roles, and responsibilities.
- Tabletops identify areas for improvement in your EOP and enable you to make changes to improve your preparedness capabilities.

Useful toolkit resources related to this unit are provided under Conducting Training and Exercises, including:

- Exercise-related training.
- Link to the HSEEP Web site.
- Checklists for planning and evaluating exercises.
- Tabletop scenarios.
- After-action reports and improvement plans.
- Additional Web sites.
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