

2014 INTERNATIONAL OIL SPILL CONFERENCE

Getting Big Results by Going Small - The Importance of Tabletop Exercises**Joseph J. Gleason**

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ABSTRACT 299687:

Smaller, more focused exercises are important to communities to help improve preparedness, strengthen contingency planning, and enhance inter-agency coordination. With the recent federal emphasis on META scenario exercises, it feels that “Bigger is Better” has been adopted as a premise for several exercise programs. There is a place in the exercise spectrum for full-scale and functional exercises but an over-reliance on such exercises does not always allow government agencies, private sector entities, and non-governmental organizations to focus on strategic-level issues. Discussion-based exercises such as tabletop exercises and workshops allow agencies and companies to address broad strategic issues through a smaller exercise.

For the past two years, the Coast Guard has reduced the size and scope of the Spill of National Significance (SONS) exercise to conduct workshops and executive-level tabletop exercises which have allowed the Coast Guard and other members of the National Response Team to work through many strategic-level issues such as responses in the Arctic and lessons learned from the Deepwater Horizon spill. In contrast to the 2010 SONS exercise which was a full-scale, multi-state exercise, the 2012 and 2013 SONS exercises were executive-level tabletop exercises that focused on response issues in the Arctic.

This paper outlines the benefits of discussion-based exercises and how significant change can occur by going small.

EXERCISES AND THE PREPAREDNESS CYCLE:

Contingency exercises are an important step in the Preparedness Cycle. “The National Incident Management System (NIMS) defines preparedness as a continuous cycle of planning, organizing, training, equipping, exercising, evaluating, and taking corrective action in an effort to ensure effective coordination during incident response.” (Federal Emergency Management Agency) There are five components of the Preparedness Cycle: 1) Plan; 2) Organize and Equip; 3) Train; 4) Exercise; and, 5) Evaluate and Improve. Figure 1 depicts the NIMS Preparedness Cycle.



Figure 1.

Exercises enhance our ability to respond to, prevent, or recover from disasters and major incidents. Exercises can be held for various contingencies including oil spills, natural disasters, and even active shooter scenarios. Exercises offer a tremendous opportunity to discuss priorities, share information, establish objectives, and test procedures in a manner that allows both the agency and the participants to learn lessons that validate plans, test procedures, and improve future operations. “Exercises, whether table tops, functional, or full-scale, allow participants to understand the various needs and issues that could emerge during a real world event.” (American Petroleum Institute, 2013)

This paper evaluates the benefits of discussion-based exercises and how significant change can occur by conducting tabletop exercises, seminars, and workshops. First, it is important to understand the various types of exercises. The Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program identifies seven types of exercises, each of which is either discussion-based or operations-based. (FEMA, www.HSEEP.gov) Discussion-based exercises familiarize participants with plans, procedures, priorities, and policies. Discussion-based exercises can also be used to review key decisions, develop response plans, and establish a common understanding of response priorities. Discussion-based exercises such as tabletop exercises offer more focused exercises that help improve preparedness, strengthen contingency planning, and enhance inter-agency coordination. Operations-based exercises are used to validate plans, policies, and procedures. There are three types of operations-based exercises including drills, functional exercises, and full-scale exercises. These exercises include the deployment of personnel and equipment, establishing a response structure, or both. Operations-based exercises allow a response organization to test procedures, identify roles and responsibilities, and identify gaps in training, procedures or equipment. The seven exercise types are described in greater detail in Table 1.

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Table 1 – Exercise Descriptions

Discussion-Based Exercises	
Seminar	A seminar is used to orient participants to plans, policies, and procedures. A seminar can be an informal discussion or presentation.
Workshop	A workshop is a more structured discussion-based exercise which may include several presentations. Workshops are often used to build specific products, plans, or procedures.
Tabletop Exercise (TTX)	A tabletop exercise includes participants discussing simulated scenarios. Tabletop exercises can be used to assess plans, establish priorities, and review interagency agreements.
Game	A game is a simulation that involves two or more teams working in a competitive manner to respond to a simulated scenario using rules, data, and established procedures.
Operations-based Exercises	
Drill	A drill is focused on a specific function, usually involving a single entity.
Functional Exercises (FE)	A functional exercise is a coordinated exercise that requires participants to establish a response organization and make decisions related to a simulated scenario and given injects. A functional exercise does not include any deployment of resources in the field. A functional exercise allows participants to establish a command structure and develop priorities, objectives, and simulated response actions. Functional exercises are efficient in validating plans, examining procedures, and identifying gaps in policies and interagency coordination.
Full-scale Exercise (FSE)	Full-scale exercises combine a functional exercise with deployment of resources in the field. Full-scale exercises often include the full multi-agency response organization and coordinated response actions involving the movement and operation of personnel and equipment.

With the federal government focused on META scenario exercises, there has been an increased move to conduct large complex full-scale exercises. “Full-scale exercises are as close to the real thing as possible.” (Emergency Management Institute, 2003) Full-scale exercises are designed to challenge the entire emergency management system in a realistic and stressful environment. Some of the key components of a full-scale exercise are described in Table 2:

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Table 2 – Characteristics of a Full-Scale Exercise

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establishes a command and control organization. 2. Achieve realism through: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. On-scene actions and decisions b. Equipment deployment c. Simulations d. Communication systems 3. Involves controllers, players, simulation cell, and evaluators. 4. Decisions and actions by players occur real-time. |
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(Information provided from the FEMA Exercise Design Course, Unit 7)

Full-scale exercises are more complex to design, require a lengthy planning process, and are generally more expensive to conduct than other types of exercises. There is a place in the exercise spectrum for these types of exercises but an over-reliance on large complex full-scale exercises often does not allow government agencies, private sector entities, and non-governmental organizations to focus on strategic-level issues.

MAKING A CASE FOR TABLETOP EXERCISES:

In 2012 and 2013, the Coast Guard reduced the size and scope of the Spill of National Significance (SONS) exercise to conduct workshops and executive level tabletop exercises which has allowed the Coast Guard and other members of the National Response Team to work through many strategic-level issues such as responses in the Arctic and lessons learned from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The SONS 2013 tabletop exercise focused on an Arctic oil spill scenario.

Brian Salerno from the BSEE stated that the Arctic “is a difficult environment which has some greater water depths, more ice, higher risks, and tougher logistics due to weather, climate, isolation, and distances.” (SPILL International, 2014) These conditions, and the extensive costs associated with moving people and equipment in the Arctic, are some of the reasons that a tabletop exercise is the correct exercise format for addressing National level response issues in the Arctic.

Between Fiscal Year 2012 and Fiscal Year 2013, the Coast Guard conducted 1,038 exercises, of which 27.5 percent were discussion-based. The tabletop exercise was the most common discussion-based exercise conducted during this time period. “A simple tabletop exercise is a facilitated analysis of an emergency situation in an informal, stress-free environment.” (US EPA, 2005) According to Rad Jones and Jerry Miller from the Security

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Executive Council, “tabletop exercises should be designed to meet the following objectives:” (Jones and Miller, 2011)

- Provide feedback
- Clarify responsibilities
- Identify roles
- Enhance skills
- Assess capabilities
- Evaluate performance
- Measure and deploy resources
- Motivate employees”

In an interview with Government Security News, Executive Director Michael Masters of the Cook County (Illinois) Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management stated that “Our best preparation for facing a crisis is through training; tabletop exercises allow individuals and organizations to think through the challenges of an incident. The simulation of real-time, unfolding events and issues allows participants to train for, work through and improve upon responses. This has an invaluable impact on the safety and security of our first responders and our communities.” (Courtenay, 2013)

A key point made by the one of the attendees at the SONS 2013 Executive Tabletop was that the annual operations-based exercises do not allow agencies to make the changes needed to improve preparedness or response capabilities. The fifth step in the FEMA Preparedness Cycle is to Evaluate and Improve. If an organization is too busy doing exercises, they will never have enough time to review lessons learned and implement recommendations. For 2014, the SONS Executive Steering Committee is recommending that the agencies take a year to work on lessons learned which shows a commitment to actually learning the lessons and completing the work to be done. This kind of leadership is critical to making strategic changes that enhance both preparedness and our ability to respond.

Tabletop exercises and other discussion-based exercises offer the ability to discuss response related issues without the stress and urgency of a real world event. Roles and responsibilities can be clarified, problems identified, and solutions made during these discussions. Often, agencies and organizations do not have the time to work through these issues, especially when trying to respond to a crisis or real world event.

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AN EXERCISE WITHIN AN EXERCISE:

In 2013, the U.S. Coast Guard in partnership with the Bahamian Government and Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) conducted the Black Swan exercise involving a cruise ship incident off the coast of Grand Bahama. Black Swan was the largest full-scale exercise ever conducted in the international maritime community and was extremely successful in identifying emergency response procedures for the Bahamian government and best practices. As the exercise progressed, I became more involved in what I refer to as the exercise within the exercise. Senior representatives of several cruise lines, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the Bahamian Government were participating as a Unified Command. As the exercise progressed and some communications challenges impeded inputs from the field activities, the conversations within the Unified Command became more focused on strategic-level issues. The senior leaders of the exercise began to have a tabletop exercise that fostered the sharing of information, creation of ideas, and fostering the strong partnership that already existed. The field activities identified critical logistics challenges that are being addressed by the Royal Bahamas Defence Force Police and the Director of the Bahamas National Emergency Management Agency. The discussion between the Unified Command produced even greater results in regards to strategic-level issues that will continue to enhance preparedness and response capabilities in the future.

KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL EXERCISE:

Let's exercise that! How often do we hear agency officials use that statement when faced with a new plan, agreement, or policy? Here are some key steps you need to take to ensure you have a successful tabletop exercise:

- Don't shortcut the planning process. You need to ensure that you take the proper steps in planning any exercise. Failing to plan is planning to fail. An experienced exercise planner can expedite the development of a tabletop exercise.
- Define your Objectives first. Determine what you want to accomplish during the exercise before jumping into creating the scenario.
- Use a trained facilitator. Running a good tabletop exercise requires a trained facilitator who understands group dynamics and is able to guide the flow of the discussion between the exercise participants. A trained facilitator will ensure objectives are met and can keep sustain the dialogue of the discussion.
- Involve each major participant. If an agency or organization is invited to participate in a tabletop exercise, the facilitator needs to ensure that all participants are provided an opportunity to speak. The exercise design team for the 2013 SONS exercise developed an innovative approach to managing the conversations by pre-identifying the agencies that had a stake in each issue discussed during the exercise and listing the agencies and issues on a spreadsheet which was used by the facilitator to guide the conversation.

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- Document lessons learned in an After Action Report (AAR). “When the US Army goes to war, it takes along historians. It knows that every battle provides a potential learning opportunity for making its soldiers better war fighters the next time around. It also knows that the best time to collect information about what went right and what went wrong is while events are unfolding.” (Flynn, 2013) Documenting lessons learned, recommendations, and areas for improvement is essential to ensuring the discussions and effort put forth in the exercise are not lost. HSEEP requires the development of an AAR following each exercise. The AAR is the final product of an exercise and includes observations, lessons learned, and recommendations linked to the exercise objectives. The AAR is used to inform the next planning process and to update plans, policies, and procedures as needed.
- Improvement Planning. Taking action after an exercise to build on lessons learned and strengthen gaps is critical to the planning process. Simply documenting lessons learned falls short of actually making improvements and continuing best practices.

PLAN FOR WHAT IS PROBABLE – NOT EVERYTHING THAT IS POSSIBLE!

Communities, agencies, and corporations must also look at what is probable in developing scenarios for their exercises. It is important in discussion-based exercises that you develop scenarios that keep the exercise participants engaged but do not go too far into exercise artificiality that the scenario becomes unbelievable. Unfortunately bad things do happen – just not all at once on the same day.

In his memoirs, Colonel John Mosby stated that “in this life, we can only prepare for what is probable, not for every contingency.” (Mosby, 1917) John Mosby was a Confederate soldier during the American Civil War and commanded the 43rd Battalion, 1st Virginia Cavalry. Often referred to as the Gray Ghost, his command was noted for dramatic raids throughout northern Virginia and their keen ability to elude the Union army. His unit successfully captured a Union General, two captains, and 30 enlisted behind the Union line without firing a shot. (Wheeler, 2012) We can learn a lesson from John Mosby as we develop our own preparedness, sometimes we should focus on what is probable, not everything that is possible.

In 2002, the US Coast Guard, Environmental Protection Agency, Research and Special Programs Administration (RSPA), and Minerals Management Service developed the National Preparedness for Response Exercise Program (PREP). The PREP guidelines are designed to help responders prepare for responding to potential incidents that may occur. PREP established an exercise program that met the intent of section 4202(a) of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. The PREP guidelines require that “at least one spill management team tabletop exercise in a triennial cycle shall involve a worst-case discharge scenario.” (PREP Guidelines, 2002) The planning volumes for oil listed in the PREP Guidelines published in August 2002 are:

- Average Most Probable (USCG) / Small (EPA) Discharge;
- Maximum Most Probable (SCG) / Medium (EPA) Discharge; and,

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- Worst Case Discharge.

The current triennial cycle for the PREP program includes three internal spill management team tabletop exercises of which one tabletop exercise must involve a worst case discharge scenario. Between notification exercises, emergency procedures exercises, equipment deployment exercises, and unannounced exercises, the focus is to improve preparedness and the ability to respond to oil discharges if they occur. The Oil and Natural Gas Industry Preparedness Handbook states “There is much that stakeholders would not know or not ask themselves during normal operations that can become critical during an event. Exercises help tease out this information, create the relationships that lead to the answers, and define the responsibilities of all stakeholders.” (American Petroleum Institute, 2013)

ACHIEVING SUCCESS:

The December 2013 edition of *The Responder* newsletter published by the Texas General Land Office provided an exceptional summary of the Sector Corpus Christi 2013 PREP exercise stating: “This exercise provided the response community with an opportunity to improve preparedness by validating plans, identifying weaknesses for correction in subsequent versions of the plans, identifying strengths to share as best practices, and practicing command and control within an incident command/unified command framework. Every drill conducted in our area benefits everyone involved and aids in the development of our ACP, allowing us to be more prepared in the event of an actual event.” (Texas General Land Office, 2013) The 2013 Corpus Christi PREP exercise demonstrated the value of investing in preparedness activities such as training, plan review, and exercises.

Hilary “Zig” Ziglar, noted author, salesman, and motivational speaker is quoted as saying “success occurs when opportunity meets preparation.” Conducting exercises is a key to successful operations and ensuring preparedness. The old adage of practice makes perfect is highly applicable to preparing your community, agency, or corporation for responding to an oil spill, hazardous material release, or natural disaster. Discussion-based exercises may be perceived as a simpler exercise but in reality these exercises allow agencies to take a deeper look at strategic issues or issues across multiple agencies. Discussion-based exercises also build the foundation for successful operations-based exercises. Tabletop exercises and workshops will help organizations become better prepared to respond to, prevent, and recover from disasters and catastrophic events in the future.

The Boy Scout motto is “Be Prepared”. Disaster preparedness should be the goal of every organization. Using discussion-based exercises such as tabletops and workshops to talk through likely events helps establish a foundation for preparedness and allows agencies and organizations to build the skills and resources needed to respond to any incident. Tabletop exercise, workshops, and seminars allow the response community to discuss how to respond and provide an excellent forum to work through issues such as information sharing, inter-agency coordination, and responsibilities. Don’t overlook the value of discussion-based exercises when

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you decide to exercise your plan. Tabletop exercises strengthen the partnerships and common understanding that are essential to responding to real world events.

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