

Tabletop Exercise Outline

UCD Veterinary Medicine Extension

Introduction

The purpose of a tabletop exercise for an animal facility is to identify capabilities, strengths and weaknesses to improve their emergency and disaster preparedness. It is an opportunity to work through common emergency management and response challenges during a discussion-based exercise. This allows the facility to practice existing plans and protocols, and subsequently determine facility-wide strengths and areas of improvement. In a no-fault learning environment, a tabletop exercise generates conversation between facility leadership and staff, as well as regional, state and federal governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that can provide resources to the facility. Through conversation, coordination is improved, perceptions can be changed and a network of partnerships is established. This culminates in improvements to the facility's contingency plan.

The goals and objectives of a tabletop exercise are determined by the Exercise Planning Team. The Exercise Planning Team can be composed of facility staff, as well as outside entities that can bring different perspectives and backgrounds to test the facility's existing plans. During the exercise, the Exercise Planning Team can function as players or fill needed roles such as evaluators, facilitators or simulators. As applicable for certain exercises, representation from the county or region and/or subject matter experts can provide new insights and ability to challenge the facility in diverse ways. Development of a tabletop exercise begins with clarifying purpose, establishing scope, setting goals and objectives, developing evaluation parameters, creating a scenario and developing documentation.

Tabletop exercises allow facility staff, leadership and others to validate training and practice strategic and tactical skills in a risk-free environment. By individuals enacting their specific role, the facility is able to gauge current levels of staff understanding of responsibilities, test their capabilities and develop their skill to effectively perform that role. The tabletop exercise scenario includes simulated events and expected player actions. It is necessary to create a realistic scenario that encompasses a clear threat, scope and emergency conditions. Additional inputs that modify the scenario ("injects") continue to challenge players to adapt to changing circumstances. The scenario and the injects steer discussion and problem-solving from players.

Part of a tabletop exercise is understanding that there are intrinsic artificialities and assumptions. It is important that the Exercise Planning Team steers players to treat the scenario as plausible and provides sufficient detail to allow players to react to presented information and situations as if the simulated incident were real. Exercise communication and coordination is limited to participating exercise organizations and venues and there are limits to exercise play in order to focus work and exclude distraction.

Lastly, safety is the utmost priority of a tabletop exercise and will always take priority over exercise events. Safety includes ensuring the physical and emotional well-being of players when tasked with challenges. There should be clear identification of participating agency affiliation and exercise roles.

Exercise Objectives and Core Capabilities

Before determining the exact scenario of the tabletop exercise, it is critical to identify clear exercise core capabilities and objectives that will be assessed. It is impossible to test every component of a disaster in a single exercise, and therefore each exercise should be focused on two to four core capabilities relating to disaster or emergency response. It is necessary to select achievable objectives that will lead to emergency and disaster planning improvements. Additionally, objectives and capabilities need to be reflective of the current facility plans, protocols and policies.

For animal emergency and disaster response situations, core capabilities can include topics such as operational communication, coordination, mass care for animals and transportation. Objectives further clarify exercise capabilities and create tangible outcomes. Objectives should be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound.

Scenario

The exercise scenario is an event at a simulated time that reflects a natural or human-caused disaster situation threatening the facility. It is critical to draw from regional geographic risks and historical data to ensure this is as realistic as possible. The scenario is documented in the form of a Situation Manual and presentation, which help guide participants over the course of the exercise scenario.

Through the course of the exercise, the scenario should continue to drive player action. This allows players the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to problems presented by the scenario. These problems should be discussed by the group and resolution or lack of resolution will be documented for later analysis. The presentation of the scenario should be led by a facilitator to remain on task and keep players appropriately involved. A well crafted scenario should identify potential events that stress preparedness capabilities.

Participant Roles and Responsibilities

During the tabletop exercise, participants can be separated into roles or areas that reflect their degree of participation in the exercise scenario.

Role	Responsibility
Player	Players are facility staff and appropriate agencies. Players should be reflective of people that have a critical role during a facility emergency or disaster. They will actively engage in conversation and initiate actions in response to the scenario.
Observer	Observers are not direct stakeholders for the facility but possible resources that would be called upon during an emergency or disaster and therefore should be aware of the facility plan of action. This may also include individuals hoping to learn from exercise.

Controller	Controllers monitor exercise progression, ensure everyone remains involved and focused on exercise play and manages the exercise staff.
Safety Officer	The Safety Officer is an individual that is responsible for ensuring safety during the exercise. Any safety concerns are reported to the Safety Controller.
Simulator	Simulators are responsible for delivering scenario inputs to the players.
Evaluator	Evaluators assess player performance against exercise objectives. They identify and document strengths and areas for improvement. They provide a global perspective of the exercise as a whole.

Exercise Participant Invitation List

It is critical for a successful tabletop exercise to invite the appropriate individuals and agencies for participation. A scenario should mimic real-life emergency and disaster events and therefore should include not only all relevant facility internal staff but also the outside agencies and resources that would be called upon in time of disaster.

Facility	City/County/Local Jurisdiction*	State/Federal/Tribal	Groups & NGOs
Facility leadership	County Office of Emergency Services	State Department of Fish and Wildlife	Relevant exotic/zoo animal facilities for the region
Facility animal care staff	County Fire Department	State Department of Food and Agriculture	County animal response team (CART)
Facility veterinary staff	County Sheriff's Office	State Veterinarian	Facility collaborators/partnering entities (mutual aid or MOU)
Facility maintenance staff	County Animal Services	State Office of Emergency Services	Zoo animal disaster response groups
	County Public Information Office	USDA Animal Care Specialist	
	County Health and Human Services	USDA Facility Inspector	
	Local Law Enforcement		

*This table section is applicable to the state of California. If outside of this location, ensure the appropriate juristical authorities for your state/territory/tribe are included.

Documents

Documents help guide the participants of a tabletop exercise, both during the scenario and afterwards to collect needed feedback.

Document	Description
Situational Manual	A document that provides all needed exercise scenario information and is used by the exercise participants to determine action.
Presentation	Mutli-media presentation is a visual representation of the Situational Manual to make it accessible by all participants. Keeps exercise play on topic.
Participant feedback form	A feedback form for player comments on exercise activity and design. Ensure to capture observed strengths and areas for improvement. Should be collected at the end of the hot wash.
Exercise evaluation guide	A standardized document for all evaluators to collect data and capture performance results. This should be developed alongside the exercise objectives and core capabilities, specific to the facility's current plan, protocols and policies.

Post-Exercise Activities

The conclusion of the tabletop exercise needs to include two components for all exercise participants: the hot wash and the participant feedback form. These are critical for allowing open discussion of the exercise and more importantly to develop an Implementation Plan for improvement. A hot wash focuses on the players' actions, communication and coordination and is reflective of the facility's plans, protocols and policies. Through this, strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement are identified. The participant feedback form is a document that captures the feedback on the tabletop exercise itself, including the exercise organization, facilitation, documents, participation and learning opportunities provided.

Within 30 days of the tabletop exercise, exercise evaluators should complete the exercise evaluation report. This form of data collection pairs exercise play and observations in relation to the original exercise objectives and core capabilities. It supports the development of the After Action Report and Improvement Plan. The entire Exercise Planning Team is involved in the creation and completion of the After Action Report and Improvement Plan. It is a document that includes an exercise overview, analysis of capabilities, and a list of corrective actions and timelines for improvements. This document is then shared with all relevant stakeholders in the facility.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the tabletop exercise will inform the design of the functional exercise, in which the players will further hone protocols and procedures by physically enacting their contingency plan.

Relevant Resources

1. FEMA. (2020). Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP). Homeland Security. <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/exercises/hseep>
2. FEMA preparedness toolkit.
<https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/hseep-resources/design-and-development>