Regina Phelps looks at how to ensure successful emergency management exercises by outlining basic tools in the planning process

Designing effective emergency exercises

EXERCISES ARE A MAINSTAY OF emergency management. They are the way we validate our plans, train our staff and prove that we can recover our company, organisation or agency. What I have observed in my years of professional practice is that although many organisations hold exercises – and the designers may be emergency response subject matter experts – they do not necessarily excel in the discipline of conducting the actual exercises, which means the company simply does not get the best results out of the effort.

I have been in the field of emergency management since 1982 and regularly design over 100 exercises a year. What I have learned from doing so many exercises for so many years is that with a bit of careful planning, creativity and vision, you can develop not

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just a good exercise, but a great one that will really help you develop your programme, build your plans, and help your team mature.

What do you want to have in your exercise toolkit? I highly recommend these four 'gadgets' to ensure your exercise success: The right question; the secret weapon; the right type of exercise; and the simulation team.

The first important tool in your toolkit is a question. This is the one question you will want to ask yourself, your colleagues, your design team and others who have a role in the exercise over and over again during the design process. This question will help you stay on track and keep your vision from start to finish. The question is: "Why are we doing this exercise?" Do not be turned

off by the simplicity of that question, its answer holds the key to your exercise.

I started asking this simple question when I noticed how easy it was for people to get caught up in the excitement of the exercise. The team would be so fully engaged in the process that before we knew it, there were Martians landing in the middle of the scenario. This is a metaphor, of course; what happened was that elements were being added that did not meet the goal or the mission of the exercise. In a similar vein, it might be that someone has a deliverable – or even a covert agenda – and they want to see if the exercise can deliver on it.

Years ago, as a result of one such exercise design process deteriorating into a participant's personal agenda, I came up with the idea of asking: "Why are we doing this exercise?" as a regular part of the planning process. When it seems like the exercise is heading in the wrong direction, or I question someone's agenda, or the group's enthusiasm is taking us into fun – but not necessarily helpful – territory, I just ask that simple question. The discussion that inevitably follows helps to realign the energy and makes sure we are delivering on the exercise objectives.

So, be alert. If you're not, off-mission components can snake their way in to the exercise. Keep asking why you are doing this exercise, both during the design process and the exercise itself, to lessen the chance that your exercise will be filled with elements that have nothing to do with your objectives and which could end up derailing the experience.

In addition, when embarking on the design process, this simple question can help you to:
- Determine what type of exercise will be likely to deliver the best results;
- Develop the exercise goal, scope, and objectives;
- Assist you in determining which narrative will yield those results; and

- Keep you and the design team on track.

Now that you know the simple, and yet powerful, question, you need to learn about the secret weapon in exercise design: the design team. Many emergency management professionals tell me that they design their exercises by themselves. Honestly, I cannot imagine how they do that effectively. I do not care how smart you are, how long you have been at the organisation, or how many exercises you have done in the past, you cannot know or think of everything. What makes an exercise hit home and really sizzle is a narrative and highly specific injects tailored to the inner workings of the company. You cannot do that alone; you need some help. Your design team has two main jobs, to validate the narrative, and to develop the injects.

It also turns out that in addition to performing these two important functions, there are great side benefits to having a design team. The design process is an excellent way to bring more people into the fold and, therefore, into your programme. The design team members become believers, and they share their belief with others.

The design team learns so much when it is involved in designing an exercise. Its members learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the processes and the plans. The insight that the design team gains by

being part of the exercise design process can help build awareness in its sphere of influence, along with engaging and exciting others to make the plans and the programme better.

A top-notch design team member will have several qualities, the first of which being that they will have a good basic knowledge of the overall business. Furthermore, they will have been with the company for a year or more, so that they know some of the ins and outs of the place. Also, they will be a subject matter expert in an area you are likely to be touching upon in the narrative of the exercise.

Team members

A typical design team will include members from the facilities department, which is critical if exercising a 'hard' incident scenario (a hard incident is an event with a physical effect – something that can be seen or felt. Fires, earthquakes, tornadoes or hurricanes are all examples of hard incidents). The team will also include members from the information technology department and from security, as well as human resources (especially if there are lots of human capital issues involved). A good design team will have representatives from the key affected departments or lines of business, to help develop highly specific injects.

Note that the departments listed above are

The design team is one of the most important aspects to consider when putting together an exercise
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typical to design teams. Your organisation may benefit from having team members representing a different aspect of your business.

By way of an example to illustrate why it is important to have all the right players, I once did an exercise where the client wanted the exercise narrative to be a fire. I thought that was not an effective narrative; after all, they were in a contemporary high-rise building with full sprinkler fire protection, but he was still eager to have a fire scenario. I suggested we first introduce a water mains failure, which would disrupt water delivery to the building for 24 hours while it was being repaired. Then the fire – possibly suspicious – could occur.

I asked the client if the building had a fire cistern (reliable water sources for firefighting efforts; a common high-rise back-up water supply for just such an occasion). When he said that the building did not, I insisted we include a representative from the facilities department on the design team to validate that, along with other building assumptions. Sure enough, our facilities representative confirmed they had a cistern with 25,000 gallons of water available. By calling in additional brain power to the design process, we learned that a fire scenario simply wouldn't have worked for this exercise.

If you launch a narrative or insert an inject into your exercise that is incorrect or poorly

vetted, your exercise can go flat and you lose credibility. The players will wave off the incorrect information or the inject; too many wrong pieces of information and eventually the exercise is over in their minds, probably before the actual end of the exercise. Your design team will help ensure that the information is accurate.

As you read this, you might be getting an idea of who would make a good team member. I often find that people who like this part of the process enjoy being on the team and will often sign up repeatedly. When picking design team members, look for the following skills: Creativity; meets or exceeds deadlines; detail-oriented; can think independently; can keep a secret; and are not on the exercise team. **CRJ**

■ *Part two of this series will review the last two tools for exercise success.*

Author

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