

North Central Nebraska School Safety & Security Project

Table Top Exercise Guide



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What is a Table Top Exercise?

A table top exercise tests disaster and preparedness plans by having involved individuals talk out response and actions to an emergency. A **table top exercise** is a facilitated analysis of an emergency situation in an informal, stress-free environment. The purpose of a table top exercise is to identify strengths and gaps in current preparedness plans so they are assessed prior to a real event or full-scale exercise. Because table top exercises are not overly structured, each exercise can be used again with various scenarios or information as plans are updated or altered. The repetition of the table top exercise helps to create preparedness of staff, faculty, and responders; particularly when teams of individuals must work together.

A typical table top exercise is led by one or two facilitators who provide scenario information and moderate discussions by injecting additional information into the scenario throughout the exercise or offering some limited subject matter expertise. Participants respond to the situation based on knowledge of procedures, plan, training, and experience. An exercise usually lasts two to four hours, though it can last as long or as short as necessary.

Why should my school complete a Table Top Exercise?

A table top exercise is an easy way to test your preparedness plan with those who will be most affected. An exercise can help build communication with all individuals who will need to connect in an emergency such as responders, school staff, and school administrators.

A table top exercise requires less time and resources than a full scale exercise and is an effective method to review procedures, plans, and policies. Table top exercises may prepare everyone for a larger exercise or serve as a way to review plans and procedures that are already in place.

Who participates in a Table Top Exercise?

Typical participants include all those who will be affected in an emergency. An exercise is an opportunity to test plans and relationships. For example, do fire responders know how to gain entrance to the school building after hours or who to contact to get school floor plans? Do teachers know how to instruct students to interact with law enforcement in a lock down situation? Ideally, you should invite first responders (e.g., law enforcement, fire, emergency managers, EMS), school administrators, faculty, and staff to participate in your table top. You may wish to include representatives from your school safety committee, school board, PTA, student leaders or other individuals. By including multiple agencies in your exercise, you learn from multiple approaches to the emergency.

How a Table Top Works

A table top exercise operates like a problem-solving meeting where individuals are asked to work through a situation with each other talking out potential options to get the best result. It is not tightly structured, so each problem can be worked through as it is identified.

Step 1: Select the Participants

Invite individuals who may be affected by a scenario to participate in your table top exercise. This participant list might include representatives from:

- School Administrators
- School Counselor
- Office Staff
- Custodians and Maintenance Engineers
- Faculty
- Law Enforcement
- Fire & EMS Responders
- Emergency Manager
- School Safety Team
- School Crisis Team
- School Board
- Student leaders
- Parent groups

Invite participants to attend a table top exercise session; these exercises usually last two (2) – four (4) hours. You may or may not wish to remind them to review their current plans and procedures.

Step 2: Select the Location

Exercises are best when held in the location that provides the most realistic setting for how the situation will be handled at the time, so a location at your school is ideal. Sometimes, table top exercises are held in emergency operations centers. Make arrangements to use a room in your school at a time when you can freely walk around if needed.

The room should be set up to accommodate participants so they can easily communicate with each other and see any necessary materials – such as a map or other reference materials. If you have a large group, you may work through materials in small groups and report back together.

You may wish to provide refreshments, notepads, writing utensils, or other helpful materials.



Step 3: Prepare the Materials

Next, you should prepare your materials. These materials should include:

1. Reference materials

Reference materials may include: existing plans, maps, or other materials that would generally be available to you in an emergency.

2. Agenda

Your agenda should include time for introductions, each module of your table top, time for breaks, and time for a brief evaluation at the end of your exercise.

3. Scenario Materials

Example scenarios will be found in this packet, but scenarios may be customized to your location and team. These materials should include: an introductory narrative, objectives, messages and briefing materials, and scenario questions.

4. Evaluation

At the end of each exercise, it is helpful to conduct a “hotwash” or evaluation to identify gaps and strengths of the exercise and of your current plans. This process will help your team identify next steps. For example, a school superintendent might provide fire responders with building keys or a small committee might be appointed to update the parent/student reunification plan.

Step 4: Facilitate the Table Top Exercise

Ask one person to facilitate the tabletop exercise. Duties of the facilitator include introducing the narrative or problem, controlling the pace of the exercise, distributing additional messages or scenarios, and prompting discussion by posing questions to the group. Your table top exercise should follow the general agenda below, but customize it as necessary for your group.



1. Introductions

Ask participants to introduce themselves as a way of breaking the ice for the day. Each participant can talk about why they are in attendance.

2. Welcome & Opening Remarks

Welcome participants and brief them about what will happen including the goals and objectives, ground rules, and procedures for the day.

Ask participants to select a recorder in their small group to take notes on their actions and to select a reporter to report out to the large group about their recommendations.

3. Introduction of Narrative

The scenario should be plausible and events should occur as they are presented. The narrative scope should identify who will be affected, where and when the incident will take place, and any special conditions in which the incident will occur.

Start the exercise by reading the first problem that participants will need to respond to. The facilitator may wish to break the ice by beginning with a large group question directed at a particular person or two in the room or to the group as a whole. As the day progresses, add additional messages to the scenario that add a plot twist or an additional consideration. Test your participants, but do not make them feel overwhelmed.

Continue to guide the exercises by involving everyone in attendance, interjecting additional items or problem statements for consideration into the scenario, and asking follow-up questions. As the discussion winds down, it is important to ask participants if there was any response item that they did not yet consider.

Table Top Tips

For the best success in your event:

1. **Don't rush the exercise.** Table top participants should think of this as a brainstorming session to work through scenarios together.
2. **Involve all of your participants.** Be sure to use messages that apply to all of your participants and encourage those who are more reluctant to participant.
3. **Let participants problem solve together.** Feel free to participate when necessary, but let participants work through the scenarios and issues with each other to foster conversation.
4. **Offer encouraging comments** and acknowledgement of participants' comments and suggestions.
5. **Maintain a balanced pace.** Don't move too fast or too slow; let participants work through problems fully, without talking about a problem too much.

Step 5: Evaluate the Exercise

It is important to conduct a brief evaluation at the end of each table top exercise to establish the strengths and gaps in current plans and procedures and identify next steps. By creating action items for participants, the effect their work will have on the plans and procedures will be demonstrated. The evaluation can be a facilitated, open-ended process to for the facilitator to guide and record.

Ideal questions for an evaluation are:

1. What did you think went well today?
2. What are the strengths in our current plans and procedures?
3. Where do you see gaps in our plans and procedures after today's exercise?
4. What should be done to remedy those gaps?
5. Did we meet today's objectives in this table top?
6. How will you implement what you learned today, if at all?
7. What are your suggestions for a future table top exercise?
8. What are the next steps?
9. Who is responsible for the next steps?
10. When will those steps be accomplished?

Example Table Top Exercises

The following exercises may be modified to fit your school and community. Remember:



Begin with expressing the goals and objectives. Read or share the initial narrative and incident questions to the groups or group. Ask the groups to record their responses.



Offer the narrative update and additional questions. Facilitate questions and involvement to include all participants. At the end of the exercise, ask participants to report their group's response to each question. The large group can discuss these responses.



Finally, conduct an evaluation of the exercise after all questions have been identified.

Bomb Threat Exercise

Exercise Purpose

The purpose of this exercise is to determine the operational readiness in both response and recovery of the school and staff in the event of a bomb threat and explosion.

Exercise Goals

1. Reveal gaps and strengths in plans and procedures for bomb threat response.
2. Clarify roles and responsibilities in the event of a bomb threat.
3. Build confidence in bomb threat response by school personnel and first responders.



Objectives

1. Demonstrate the ability to activate incident command to respond to a bomb threat and explosion.
2. Assess notification of school principals/administration
3. Assess emergency procedures for contacting the police and EMS, identification and use of a public information officer, and communication to public in the event of a bomb threat
4. Demonstrate proper evacuation procedures

Exercise Narrative

Scope: The exercise will take place at [our] school on today's date, at today's time and today's weather. The exercise will include all school employees and community members who are on the school safety committee. The exercise will be a tabletop exercise. The exercise may involve school personnel, law enforcement, fire/EMS responders, 911 dispatch, and the State Patrol bomb squad.

Narrative

It is today at 9:00 am with the current weather conditions. All students are in class and it is a routine day.

The office secretary has received an anonymous phone call stating, "There is a bomb in a hallway locker that will be activated at 9:30 today." The anonymous caller then hangs up the phone.

Incident Questions

1. What does the office secretary do?
2. Who is the incident commander for the school?
3. Where will you establish incident command?
4. What does the incident commander do?
5. What do school staff and faculty do?

6. How do responders and school personnel account for everyone who was in the school at the time of the bomb threat?

Narrative Update

The Incident Commander has taken appropriate action for the students. A suspicious person was sighted in the hallways by the custodian before school started.

Incident Questions:

1. How does the information about the suspicious person change your plan of action, if at all?
2. Who is responsible for taking account of staff and students?
3. How does that person account for students and staff?
4. How do you communicate the incident to the public and parents/guardians?
5. How do you communicate the threat to the students?

Narrative Update

At 9:32 am the bomb explodes in a locker located in the hallway, midway between the rows of lockers. First responders were on the scene at the time of the explosion. At the time of the explosion six students were in the hallway and two of those students were critically injured.

Nearby public comes to look at the building during the response. Media show up to take photos and ask questions.

Incident Questions

1. How do you coordinate response between school and first responders on and off scene?
2. Who notifies parents or guardians of injured students?
3. How do you communicate the incident and response to parents or guardians, community members, and nearby businesses?
4. Who answers media questions?
5. How are students dismissed from school?
6. How do you re-unify parents or guardians and students?
7. How and when is school re-opened?
8. What support do you provide to students, staff, faculty, and parents or guardians following the incident?

Hantavirus Epidemic Exercise

Exercise Purpose

The fundamental purpose of this exercise program is to improve operational readiness in the school in the event of an epidemic.

Exercise Goals

1. Reveal gaps and strengths in plans and procedures for epidemic response.
2. Clarify roles and responsibilities in the event of an epidemic.
3. Build confidence in epidemic response by school personnel and first responders.



Objectives

1. Demonstrate the ability to activate a command center.
2. Assess emergency procedures for notification of key personnel.
3. Respond to directives from state officials immediately upon receipt.
4. Demonstrate the ability to mass communicate school closure announcements through various communication channels.

Exercise Narrative

Scope: The exercise will take place at [our] school on today's date, at today's time and today's weather. The exercise will include all school employees and community members who are on the school safety committee. The exercise will be a tabletop exercise. The incident will involve school personnel, communications staff, and medical responders.

Narrative

A Kindergartener begins to violently throw up immediately after eating lunch. Within a short period, four (4) additional children begin to throw up as well.

Incident Questions

1. Should the parents and/or guardians of the child(ren) who are ill be contacted?
2. Is there anything occurring that would give rise to closing school completely?
3. Who should be involved in the response to this incident? Is incident command set up?

Narrative Update

Officials of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services contact the school. Testing of three (3) blood samples of ill children all indicate the presence of Hantavirus antibodies. NDHHS requests that the school immediately be closed pending further study and investigation.

Incident Questions

1. What steps are necessary to completely close the school?
2. How do you communicate steps with parents or guardians, community members, and media?
3. What follow up action(s), if any, are necessary? In other words, what is to be done next?

Chemical Spill Exercise

Exercise Purpose

The fundamental purpose of this exercise program is to evaluate and improve an action plan involving a chemical spill and toxic fume event in a classroom science room.



Exercise Goals

1. Establish Incident Command
2. Define roles and responsibilities of school staff.
3. Build confidence in emergency response plan.

Objectives

1. Demonstrate the ability to activate a command center.
2. Assess notification of school administration, emergency responders, community members, and media.
3. Demonstrate the ability to initiate a HazMat emergency response in all facets.

Exercise Narrative

Scope: The exercise will take place at [our] school on today at 1:30 pm with the current weather conditions. The exercise will include all school employees and community members who are on the school safety committee, as well as law enforcement, and fire and rescue personnel. The exercise will be a tabletop exercise.

Narrative

All students are in class and it is a routine day in the science lab on the second floor of a two story building. Jack and Dianne were conducting an experiment using sulfuric acid, aluminum foil, and table salt. A full 400ml beaker of sulfuric acid fell off the counter onto the floor and splashed on Jill's exposed legs. Students immediately complained of an unusual smell, trouble breathing, and throat irritation. The science teacher immediately reports the incident to the office by sending a student unaffected by the spill.

Incident Questions

1. Who is the incident commander?
2. Where will you establish incident command?
3. How does school personnel and/or responders account for everyone in your school?
4. Do you evacuate or shelter in place?
5. Where do you take the students exposed to the incident?
6. What resource do you request or are needed?

7. How should outside responders be involved in the response to this incident?

Narrative Update

All students and faculty have been accounted for except Jack and two of his friends. Jack's car is no longer in the parking lot, and attempts to reach him by his listed phone number are not working. Jack's father, a known drug dealer, shows up at the high school in a mentally altered state, angry and demanding answers about his son's location. His father is threatening the use of deadly force and yelling at someone who is not there. Thirty minutes after the evacuation, Jack's phone is found by the North Exit.

Incident Questions

1. How do school personnel and responders react to a missing person?
2. How do they react to a threat against the school?
3. How is notification given to parents or guardians, media, and students?
4. How, where, and when do you do reunification?
5. If necessary, how is incident command passed to responders?
6. How do you ensure the science lab is safe for entry?
7. When do you reopen the school?

Flash Flood Exercise

Exercise Purpose

The fundamental purpose of this exercise is to evaluate and improve an action plan involving a water main break and flood.

Exercise Goals

1. Establish incident command.
2. Define roles and responsibilities of school staff.
3. Build confidence in emergency response plan.



Objectives

1. Demonstrate the ability to activate a command center.
2. Assess notification of key personnel.
3. Demonstrate the ability to initiate a flood emergency response.

Exercise Narrative

Scope: The exercise will take place at [our] school on today with the current weather conditions. The exercise will include all school employees, community members who are on the school safety committee, school maintenance staff, and fire/EMS responders. The exercise will be a tabletop exercise.

Narrative

The custodian is conducting her scheduled 10 PM walk-through. At the entrance to main building, she observes a waterfall where the drop ceiling used to be and notices multiple ceiling tiles floating in the water.

Incident Questions

1. Who is the incident commander?
2. What notifications need to be made?
3. What is the proper immediate response?
4. What is the responsibility of the custodian and other school personnel?

Narrative Update

By 10:30 PM, the water and electricity have been shut off. A walk through of the building reveals the smell of sewer gas.

Incident Questions

1. Will school open the following day?
2. How will students, parents/guardians, and community members be notified of the incident?
3. What, if any, additional responders needed?

Bus Accident Exercise

Exercise Purpose

The fundamental purpose of this exercise is to evaluate and improve an action plan involving a bus accident.

Exercise Goals

1. Identify any potential gaps within the bus safety and response plan.
2. Identify the incident command role(s) and responsibilities.
3. Increase the confidence of school personnel in an emergency.



Objectives

1. Demonstrate the ability to identify the incident commander.
2. Determine the evacuation procedures of a bus accident.
3. Determine the protocol for notification of families.
4. Identify the roles of the incident command staff and the needed section chiefs.

Exercise Narrative

Scope: The exercise will take place at [our] school on today in the morning with the current weather conditions. The exercise will include all school employees, community members who are on the school safety committee, school transportation staff, and first responders. The exercise will be a tabletop exercise.

Narrative

A bus accident is reported at 3:53 PM involving one bus with twenty-five high school students, one driver, and two coaches on the bus heading to a ball game. The bus slid off the road on a curve, due to icy road conditions. The bus has flipped onto its side into the ditch. No other vehicle is involved. The accident happens five miles north of the community. The driver is injured, one coach is injured, and several students have injuries.

Incident Questions

1. Who is the incident commander?
2. Where will incident command be?
3. What is the proper immediate response?
4. How is emergency services notified?
5. How will individuals on the bus accounted for?

6. Who communicates with the media (Public Information Officer), serves as the liaison officer and/or the safety officer?

Narrative Update

Parents and other students on the way to the game stop at the scene of the accident. As word spreads, families and media begin contacting the school and heading to the scene.

Incident Questions

1. What is the responsibility of the bus driver and other school personnel?
2. What notifications need to be made?
3. How are students in the accident reunited with their parents or guardians?