Planning a Tabletop Exercise: When and Where Will the Exercise Occur?

Planning a basic tabletop exercise for critical infrastructure protection and resilience does not need to be an overly complicated process. A few key steps and logistics considerations should factor into the planning process to ensure that the exercise runs smoothly and achieves your goals.

The Exercise Planning Timeline

Exercise Planning Team
The planning team is responsible for successfully executing the entire exercise, including planning, conducting the exercise itself, and evaluation activities after the exercise is complete. For smaller, less complicated exercises, planning teams can begin with a core group of two people. There should be an overall leader with support from other people on technical and logistical issues.

Exercise Planning Schedule

Before the Exercise

Kickoff Meeting
The planning team comes together for the first time to discuss the overall concept and objectives for the exercise. The kickoff meeting determines what is to be tested in the exercise. Have you instituted new protective security or resilience measures based on risk assessment findings that you want to evaluate? Have you moved into a new facility or opened a new branch and therefore need to consider how it would deal with potential incidents? These issues can help narrow down specific exercise objectives and also make it easier to identify a fictional but realistic scenario.

Potential discussion points at the initial meeting include:

- Overall purpose and objectives for the tabletop exercise
- Proposed scenario
- Potential exercise participants (internal and external) and evaluators
- Proposed location, date, and duration
- Key logistics requirements

Second Planning Meeting
The planning team reviews and discusses more
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detailed issues and draft documents related to the exercise, such as:

- Exercise participants, facilitators, and evaluators
- Date, time, and location for the exercise
- Draft schedule and agenda for the exercise
- Draft scenario and discussion questions
- Presentation materials needed for the exercise
- Availability of any relevant assessments, policies, plans, and procedures for participants to use
- A notional timeline for correcting any issues that are identified during the exercise
- Updates on logistics issues

Final Planning Meeting
The planning team reviews and finalizes all the materials that will be used during the exercise, confirms who is participating, and ties up any logistical loose ends.

After the Exercise

Debrief
The exercise planners, facilitators, and evaluators meet to review and provide feedback on the exercise. The planning team leader facilitates discussion and has each person provide an overview of what he or she observed. Key points from the exercise and identified strengths and areas for improvement are analyzed for inclusion in corrective action planning.

Improvement Planning Meeting
The exercise planning team and evaluators compile lessons learned from the exercise and document corrective actions that can be taken to make improvements, including timelines and entities assigned to implement them.

Notional Timeline for Tabletop Exercise Planning
For a small exercise with minimal documentation requirements:

- **90 days before exercise:** kickoff planning meeting
- **45 days before exercise:** second planning meeting
- **15 days before exercise:** final planning meeting
- **Conduct exercise**
- **1-5 days after exercise:** debrief with facilitators, evaluators, planning team
- **15 days after exercise:** corrective action planning meeting
- **45 days after exercise:** interim corrective action status check
- **90 days after exercise:** interim corrective action status check