



Teaching with Tabletop Exercises

What is the purpose of tabletop exercises?

Tabletop exercises pose hypothetical scenarios that are designed to expose learners to problems and issues that might emerge during an actual public health emergency. They primarily focus on identifying policy issues that might surface during an actual emergency response. Examples of policy issues include: communication, roles and responsibilities, allocation of resources and equipment, and dealing with the news media. Tabletop exercises are one component of a range of exercises and drills typically used to train or evaluate an emergency response plan or system.

Why should I use tabletop exercises for teaching emergency preparedness?

They are relatively inexpensive to conduct and help agencies identify next steps for addressing critical gaps in their response systems. Learners have the opportunity to practice their knowledge and skills in a non-threatening environment and to identify issues under the supervision of an instructor or facilitator. Using tabletop exercises can be a valuable way to engage learners and make them feel involved.

Tips for teaching tabletop exercises

- **Keep the group size manageable.** Although participants are typically those that would be making decisions during an actual emergency, the size of the group should be limited to about 15 to 20.
- **Pose thought-provoking scenarios and incidents that are aimed at identifying policy gaps.** The exercise scenario will contain a series of incidents to which participants should respond. Each incident should require participants to use their knowledge and experience to identify the desired response and then to identify whether the current system in place is consistent with this desired response.
- **Use the debriefing period productively.** Ample time should be provided during the debriefing period to discuss the lessons learned and next steps resulting from the exercise. This debriefing should include an evaluation of both the value of the exercise and of the current status of the emergency response system.
- **Customize the tabletop depending on the time available.** The amount of time necessary to complete a tabletop exercise varies, but can last from one to four hours. At a minimum, it should include an introduction and instructions, the exercise, and the debriefing.
- **Let the group struggle for a while, but not too long.** If a group appears to be stuck, it is better to provide a suggested response and move on rather than let frustration build up. Remember, there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer.
- **Co-teach with an experienced instructor.** If you don't have much experience leading a tabletop exercise, try team-teaching with an instructor who is experienced with this method.