Tips on How to Conduct an Effective Exercise
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An effective exercise program is crucial in order to ensure that your company is prepared for an oil spill and can meet State and Federal requirements. Exercises serve to identify deficiencies in training, emergency response plans and equipment, and greatly improve your ability to respond. Exercises should be conducted as a program with strategic objectives to ensure that readiness level improves over time.

A well-designed exercise is a key component of an exercise program, and should start with basic, process-driven exercises, graduating to more complex exercises with more specific objectives.

Increased demands in personnel responsibilities, reduced staffing, and cost constraints make it more challenging than ever to ensure that effective exercises are conducted. The following guidelines are presented to assist in these efforts.

1) Select Exercise Design Team

- Depending on the size and complexity of an exercise, consider forming an exercise design team. An exercise design team is typically not required for small, introductory-level exercises, but is highly beneficial for larger events.
- For even small exercises, a "trusted agent" is often beneficial. This is typically a person with thorough knowledge of the operations, and can assist by providing realistic scenario options and knowledge of issues in which the team needs improvement. This person may also participate in and help steer the exercise to ensure key objectives are met.
- For a large-scale exercises with experienced teams, it may be beneficial to have Local, State, and/or Federal Agencies participate in the exercise design team.

2) Determine Objectives for the Exercise

- Use careful thought when selecting objectives. This is the first and most important consideration when designing an exercise, and sets the foundation for the entire process.
- When selecting objectives, consider the level of experience and training of the team, lessons learned from previous exercises, vulnerabilities of your operation, and regulatory requirements.
- Design the structure and scenario of the exercise to support these objectives.
- Keep the number of objectives limited to ensure that all will be met. Meeting all objectives leads to focused and successful exercises.
- Ensure objectives are specific and targeted.
- Examples of good objectives are listed below:
  - Practice and improve familiarity with ICS forms and meetings
  - Develop and implement Incident Action Plan
  - Develop Security Plan
  - Establish staging area location, layout, and check-in functions
  - Exercise response issues and encourage familiarity with a geographic area not previously exercised.

An experienced exercise design team can help ensure that key objectives are met.
3) **Design Scenario**

- **Realism** - Select a realistic scenario that represents a specific vulnerability, such as a pipeline segment in close proximity to a major waterway or populated area. Identifying an unrealistic scenario reduces credibility with participants and may reduce the value they place on thoroughly working through issues.

- **Level of Detail** - Provide enough detail to be consistent with exercise objectives. Since the scenario is a simulated event by definition, the response can only be as detailed and rigorous as the information that is provided.

- **Product Selection** - Utilize a product that is specific to the pipeline or facility to be exercised. If there is more than one product that is stored or transported, utilize a product that supports your exercise objectives. For example, you may want to use gasoline in the scenario if you are most concerned about safety issues involving a release of a highly flammable product, or you may use a more persistent product in the scenario that is difficult to recover and will require more storage and disposal considerations.

- **Cause of spill** - Identify cause of spill to underscore a particular concern, bring attention to a vulnerability, or lend credibility to a worst-case or large spill volume. In some cases, it is not necessary to identify cause of a spill if it has no bearing on response efforts or the exercise objectives.

- **Timeline** - For a seasoned response team, it may be valuable to exercise response issues that become relevant on day two of an exercise. In this case, it may be necessary to script the simulated series of events and response actions, in order to paint enough of a picture to enable responders to address issues not previously exercised during initial response activities. These may include security, disposal, decontamination, developing Incident Action Plans, and other longer-term activities.

4) **Functions to Exercise**

Exercise objectives may be focused on testing key functions, or the entire team. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Public affairs
- Claims
- Equipment deployment
- Unified command
- Contractor availability and response time
- Agency notifications
- Command post adequacy
- Communications equipment
- Liaison with regional, crisis management, or corporate emergency management teams

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**KEY FACTS TO CONSIDER**

- If you have many inexperienced members on the team, it may be most beneficial to focus on the incident command process, communications protocols, forms, meeting schedules, and other process elements. In this case, it may not be necessary to develop too many details of a scenario, since it is not an objective of the exercise to test response procedures.

- Conversely, it may be an objective to test response procedures for a particular pipeline or facility, and a very detailed scenario is more likely needed.
5) **Exercise Participants**

Determining who will be invited to participate in the exercise is another factor to consider when designing an exercise. As a rule of thumb, it is better to train and exercise only your internal response team until they have sufficient competence for more complex exercises involving outside parties. This way, the team can focus on the process and receive supplemental training as required to achieve an understanding of the ICS response process.

Once the team is trained in the process, then more emphasis can be placed on exercising specific issues relating to operational and environmental factors. Participation by outside parties (including LEPC, fire and police department, state and federal response agencies, corporate team representatives, and response contractors) is extremely valuable, as it provides the opportunity to:

- Gain additional information regarding expectations, personnel and equipment resource availability, and environmental and socio-economic sensitivities.
- Practice working within a unified command structure.
- Practice communication and better understand capabilities and functions of regional or other corporate teams.
- Establish/enhance relationships with regulators prior to a real event.
- Gain an external perspective of response plan and adopted response processes.
- Demonstrate commitment to preparedness.

6) **Exercise Structure**

There are a multitude of exercise types and varying degrees of complexity. Exercises may range from simple, informal sessions to command post exercises that involve hundreds of participants.

**Examples of Common Types of Exercises:**

- **Tabletop exercises** – Typically, a single facilitator leads these types of exercises, and is necessary to ensure that the team stays on track and addresses exercise objectives. This format may include an open discussion in which participants address response actions and procedures. Tabletop exercises are effective for new or inexperienced team members and to assess competency levels.

- **Command Post** – These exercises typically involve actual or role-played unified command, multiple facilitators, role players, and multiple locations, and are undertaken to exercise worst-case discharges or other large scenarios. Additionally, large regional or corporate teams may conduct Command Post exercises.

- **Training** - Exercises are often combined with training in order to reinforce training lessons, and combine requirements while key personnel are gathered in the same location.
7) **Exercise Facilitation**

Regardless of the type of exercise or structure, consider the following practices:

- Focus on the objectives during the exercise. Consider posting the objectives on the wall and checking them off as completed. Make it a priority to ensure that all objectives are completed, if feasible.
- Do not hesitate to call an exercise time out in the event that a briefing is required to adjust the course or pace, or participants need to be redirected.
- Look for opportunities to provide training guidance and positive reinforcement. Remember, an exercise is not a pass/fail situation; it is a valuable training opportunity.
- Ensure that the scenario remains accurate throughout the exercise. Confusion or varying accounts of the scenario details can lead to frustration and lack of progress in meeting objectives.
- Utilize injects to challenge, but not to overwhelm participants, and as a means to meet objectives.
- Utilize your “trusted agent” to assist in facilitating change in direction, correct exercise details, or present injects. Ensure that your trusted agent is in a leadership role on the team to enable sufficient authority to accomplish this, such as Incident Commander or Section Chief.
- Be prepared to terminate the exercise early if all objectives are met, or if participants are beginning to lose interest.
- Work with the participants to ensure that thorough documentation is performed, which will serve to illustrate good documentation practices, and ensure that sufficient documentation is available for the final report.

8) **Debriefing**

A properly conducted debriefing is absolutely critical for a successful exercise. The debriefing helps to identify areas for improvement, participant’s feedback, and path forward for future exercises. Issues to consider are as follows:

- It is important to allow participants the opportunity to identify areas of improvement, positive aspects of the exercise, and potential action items.
- The debriefing process must be facilitated in order to ensure that the debriefing process remains focused and can be completed in a time-efficient manner.
- Consider facilitating breakout sessions by section, with a representative for each group presenting their findings. This process fosters collaboration and provides excellent documentation for the final report.
- Ensure that someone is dedicated to documenting all findings.
- Allow external parties an opportunity to share their feedback.
9) **Final Report**

Ideally, final report should be completed within 30 days of the exercises, and provide the following information:

- Scenario
- Participants
- Equipment deployed
- Objective met and how they were met
- Lessons learned
- Action items
- Completed PREP forms to ensure credit

10) **Follow-Up**

Designing and conducting exercises are time consuming, but valuable in providing valuable insight into planning and training efforts. The follow-up items identified provide the action items required in order to take your program to the next level of readiness.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Action Items:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Additional training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updates, additions, or improvements to response plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acquisition of additional communications or response equipment</td>
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<td>Changes to response team organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changes to EOC location, layout, or equipment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revisions to security, notification, communication, or other procedures</td>
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<td>Scheduling additional exercises.</td>
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</tbody>
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