

Tabletop Exercises: Cost Effective, Verifiable, Practical

by Paul DeMatteis and James Brown, The Trident Group

When a crisis that may have a profound impact on human lives confronts your organization, regardless of origin, will the voluminous manuals and plans that have been painstakingly documented and admirably archived in your bookshelves provide you, the presiding executive, with the ability to make those very critical, time sensitive decisions for taking the appropriated course of action? Be advised, the layers of dust that have probably accumulated on those elegant plans cannot be magically sprinkled while the crisis may be spinning out of control.

For centuries, the military has used simulated exercises and “games” to prepare their troops for the heat of battle; more recently, the federal government and corporate America have adopted the “tabletop exercise” for simulating scenarios to evaluate participants’ crisis management skills based on a discussion and documentation of how they would and how they should (according to those elegant plans) resolve an incident of potential crisis.

An expansion of the case-study approach for business training, "tabletops" provide a non-threatening way to work through all of the considerations of managing an incident. Participants are encouraged to confirm their understanding of procedures and adapt procedures to a realistic set of circumstances. The tabletop format also allows personnel to voice concerns about their responsibilities in a time of crisis and where they feel the company is particularly vulnerable. In essence, a tabletop is a unique way of looking at the incident's "big picture" which can expose problems that may not have occurred to anyone before. Furthermore, the tabletop can also serve as a documented validation that the organization has taken every reasonably best effort for training their staff on risk management matters that could be an issue of liability at some point in time.

One of the most compelling reasons to embrace a tabletop exercise is the fact that it is the most cost-effective way to train and validate the staff of an organization for an incident. Conducted in a few hours, the tabletop requires minimal resources: a scenario, a set of carefully developed questions, the participants, and a knowledgeable facilitator to guide the discussion. Once the initial expenditure has been made for the development of the core curricula, the same scenario may be adopted for several different departments of the organization, resulting in an economy of scale and shared resources. Tabletop exercises equip your staff with the knowledge to identify and respond effectively to real and potential risks and threats from natural, civil, criminal and terrorist events that may affect your organization by facing realistic scenarios where their roles and responsibilities will be defined and tested.

“There are two kinds of Executives; those that have lived through a crisis and those that will...I know this all too well from the devastating aftermath of the 1994 Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles. The goal of response and recovery planning is rapid response and recovery, not adhering strictly to written documentation. The plan is only a tool. The end result is what counts. In a disaster, the only valid result is recovery and continuity. In

a tabletop, the only valid result is enhanced response and recovery capability”, says Jack Klein, retired Chief Operating Officer of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.

The tabletop can be an invaluable tool in your preparedness program. For incidents or a full-blown crisis, the experience gained in the tabletop exercise can go a long way toward reducing the uncertainty and stress of performance during an actual incident. The ability to act swiftly and make decisions which may save lives or leverage assets of the organization for responding and recovering from a crisis is not easily transferable from the owners manual to fixing the problem. Ultimately, the price you pay for conducting table top pales in comparison to the price that is paid if your organization does not respond appropriately in the face of a crisis.

Paul DeMatteis is presently the Senior Adviser on Corporate Security Programs and Director of John Jay College of Criminal Justice Leadership Academy. He instituted the College’s external consulting group which performs security and emergency management and terrorism related threat and risk assessments and has developed and presented security related courses for Masters Degree and Continuing Education Programs since 1991. Paul has supervised and conducted vulnerability assessments and training for Jewish communities nationwide. Paul can be contacted at paul.dematteis@thetridentgroup.org

James Brown is the founder and CEO of the Trident Group. Trident offers a broad spectrum of services related to Jewish community and organizational safety and security including blended learning experiences such as Tabletop exercises. Members of the Trident Group have been engaged in Jewish community consultations on safety and security in the United States and in many countries around the globe for many years.