



THE 10 STEP MODEL FOR DESIGNING TABLE TOP EXERCISES

by **Steve Crimando** | March 2017

WWW.EVERBRIDGE.COM

About the Author



Steven M. Crimando is a subject matter expert and trainer specialized in human factors/behavioral sciences in homeland and corporate security, violence prevention and intervention, emergency and disaster management. Steve is a Board Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress (BCETS) and Certified Trauma Specialist (CTS). He holds Diplomat status with the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress and the National Center for Crisis Management. He has been awarded Level V Certification in Homeland Security. He is recognized as an expert in the behavioral response to CBRN emergencies, crowd behavior, and mass violence. Steve is the principal of Behavioral Science Applications and serves as a consultant and trainer for the federal, state and local law enforcement and emergency management agencies, as well as multinational corporations and NGO's worldwide.

Who's on First?

Remember the famous Abbott and Costello routine, *"Who's on First?"* Hilarious, right? It is a classic example of miscommunication. The premise of the skit is that when discussing a baseball team, Abbott is describing the player by their position, while Costello is identifying the players by name. Of course, it doesn't help when the players' names are *Who*, *What*, *I Don't Know*, *Why*, and *Because*. The joke is that this conversation goes in circles with Abbott ready to blow a fuse, and the rest of us in stitches. They are both describing the same team but from their own perspective and interpretation of the question, each using their own terms. That makes for good fun, unless that same dynamic is present during an emergency response and lives are at stake.

Baptism by Fire

The Incident Command Systems (ICS) was literally born of fire. The framework was first formed by Fire Chiefs in Arizona in the late 1960's, then more fully operationalized in the 1970s by an interagency group in Southern California called the "Firefighting Resources of Southern California Organized for Potential Emergencies or FIRESCOPE." As is often the case, tragedy drives innovation and in 1970, devastating wildfires burned in Southern California for 13 days, resulting in 16 deaths, more than 700 homes and businesses being destroyed, 500,000-plus acres burned, and over \$234 million in damages. In the After Action Report (AAR), U.S. Forest Service, along with partner agencies, studied the incident with special attention to the management structure. The two key findings were that at the field level, confusion arose from the use of different terminology, organizational structures, and operating procedures between the various agencies involved, and the approach to coordinating and handling competing resource demands and priorities was inadequate. The bottom line was that miscommunication and the lack of a common command structure cost lives.

While the 1970 wildfires were the impetus for the ICS, many of the same problems encountered in that response were frequently experienced in the interagency, interdisciplinary and multi-jurisdictional response to all types of police, fire and EMS calls around the country. The most common problems involved:

- Unclear chains of command, supervision and a lack of accountability for personnel and other resources.
- Poor communication related to communications systems and conflicting codes and terminology.



- The absence of a structured, systematic planning process.
- No identified approach to integrate inter-agency management planning.
- Rogue responders within teams operating without the direction from team leader.
- No agreed common terminology used during an incident.

In large wildfires, with “hot shot” teams responding from all around the country, it was not uncommon to have something as simple as a wrench called by several different names due to regional differences and traditions. That’s a big problem when you need a specific type of wrench in a hurry and other responders don’t know what you are asking for. That same dynamic was often present in the leadership structure when responders were unclear about who was in charge or who to take direction from. You can easily see how the question, “*Which Chief told you to do that?*” is not a far cry from, “*Who’s on first?*”

With the simple example of the wrench, two key concepts in the ICS come to the fore: Resource management and interoperability. Interoperability is the ability of systems to quickly and easily plug and play together. Interoperable Communications is the ability of various emergency response agencies— police officers, firefighters, emergency medical services (EMS) personnel, and emergency managers—to exchange data and voice communications across disciplines and jurisdictions on demand and in real time. In many instances in the past, unreliable communications compromise emergency responders’ safety and ability to respond effectively to many different types of emergencies.

One of the ways that communications, coordination and interoperability all come together is around the concept “melding.” A long-standing description of the ICS states, “The Incident Command System allows personnel from a variety of agencies to rapidly meld into a common management structure.” Regarding the interaction between voice, and data communications or the thread on the bottleneck of a firefighters breathing apparatus, this requires standardization and agreement that all players in real and practice emergency situations can seamlessly connect and immediately coordinate their response.

Perfect Practice Makes Perfect

A solid operational assumption about emergency response is the idea that during a crisis, we don't rise to the occasion, rather we fall to our training. This speaks to the importance of rehearsal and repetition in exercising. It is of equal importance to have a high degree of accuracy in exercising. You may be familiar with the saying, *"train as you respond, and respond as you train."* This means if you're going to practice in any form, from table top exercises to full functional drills, you better be practicing the right things, the right way. With that in mind, it is helpful to remember, *every exercise is an incident command system exercise*. Regardless if testing the ICS is identified as a specific exercise objective, since it should serve as the structure for all emergency related operations, it will implicitly be applied to every scenario. As such, as part and parcel of every exercise, the use and effectiveness of the ICS is being tested.

Exercise Tip: Before determining an exercise scenario, decide on a reasonable number (3-5) of specific exercise objectives. For example, if you decide to test your organizational response to an Active Shooter incident, first decide what aspects of the response you should focus on, then develop an Active Shooter scenario that aligns with the objectives. Developing the scenario before the objectives often results in confusion and a counterproductive exercise experience.

Tabletop Exercises (TTXs) are used test existing plans, policies, or procedures without incurring the same expense associated with deploying resources in a functional drill. A TTX also permits player to address a crisis scenario without the stress and pressure as they would in a more complex, operations-based exercise.

Two items that frequently, if not always be on the objective list are communications and coordination. Before you dig into the technology of communication, it is important that everyone involved speak ICS. Failure to training players in the concepts, structures and language of the ICS will likely result in frustration and difficulty in running your exercise.

ICS terminology is not intuitive. Some of the language is esoteric and it is easy to confuse some of the terms and concepts. A good example is the difference between, *"Unity of Command"* and *"Unified Command."* While those phrases sound nearly identical, they mean two completely different things in ICS-speak. A *"Unified Command"* approach is used when Incident Commanders from different jurisdictions operate

together to form one single command structure. On the other hand, “*Unity of Command*” means that any one subordinate should have one and only one person to whom they are directly responsible, thereby reducing confusion about who to take direction from in what may be a stressful and chaotic situation.

As a pre-requisite to participating in any form of exercise, it is recommended that all potential players complete Incident Command System 100 and National Incident Management Systems 700A-level training. This can be done quickly, easily and at no cost using FEMA’s online training academy at: <https://training.fema.gov/emi.aspx>. As previously mentioned, even if you have not identified “*command and control*” as specific exercise objectives, you will be testing your command structure in any and every exercise. As such, every player should have a working knowledge of the ICS.

The Ten-Step Model

Regardless of which objectives you land on, it is helpful to use the time-tested ten-step model of exercise design and development. By simply stating that effective exercises involve 10 discreet steps should suggest that you will require sufficient lead time to get this right. “Let’s have a table top exercise next week!” is a recipe for disaster, albeit a mock disaster. And before the players become anxious about being “*tested*” in an exercise, it is important to have them chant the mantra, “*Exercises test plans, not people.*” That is a critical message and should be the starting point of any exercise.



1. Review Your Existing Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan:

It is premature, and a set up for failure, to test your plan before it is complete. Testing the plan is the whole point of the exercise. If you don't feel that your plan is comprehensive or complete, it might make more sense to start with another form of discussion-based exercise rather than a tabletop. There are several accepted types of exercises that can be used in building block approach. Exercises should be planned in a cycle that increases in complexity. Each successive exercise should build on the scale and experience of the previous one. Therefore, two requirements should be met before going any further down the road to a tabletop exercise: Make sure that your organization's plan is complete and that it has been tested in lesser exercises, such as workshops or seminars.

Also, as you go forward, ensure that your existing plan has sufficient detail concerning the areas you identify as objectives. For example, if you identify emergency notification as an objective, make sure that is actually in your plan and that players are not forced to wing it as they go.

2. Define a Goal

Whether specific or more general in nature, there should be one overarching goal for the tabletop exercise. That goal should line up well with your organizations current reality, not some level of readiness anticipated or desired in the future. Test the plan you have, not the plan you want.

3. Create a Team

Exercise design, facilitation and evaluation is best done by small teams rather than individuals. It is helpful to have multidisciplinary input to make sure that the goals, objectives and scenario are plausible. While having a variety of perspectives is helpful, it is equally important to select teammates who are knowledgeable and familiar with the plan and the areas that will be identified as objectives. While this may seem obvious, remember that the people who are likely to be players in the exercise should not be on the design team. You want the scenario to be novel and challenging when it is introduced on game day. Some degree of security will be needed to keep the exercise details under wraps until the appropriate time.

4. Develop the Objectives

The objectives are the heart of the exercise. It is important to keep the scenario aligned with the exercise objectives as you move through the story line. The acronym SMART has been used by many practitioners to reinforce the essential elements of effective objects. Those elements are:

SMART

S IMPLE:	Plain language, no code; Simple and clear statements that are understandable under stressful conditions.
M EASURABLE:	Performance levels should be observable.
A CHIEVABLE:	Don't set your sights on objective that cannot be achieved within the organizations assets and commitment.
R EALISTIC:	Keep expectations about the exercise realistic; don't over promise the outcome.
T ASK-ORIENTED:	Stay focused on a specific behaviors or procedures; help participants "stay in their own lane" during exercise play.

If we know, for example, that one element of the plan identified for testing is communications, the objective might read:

Objective 1: Test ability

to quickly communicate standardized messages through incident and message templates.

Once you are actual engaged in exercise play, move through the various phases of the exercise timeline, and query those charged with communications about what templates are on hand, and how they might be used in response to both the timeframe and current threat picture. Any discussion about what gaps or issues are identified relative to any single objective should be tabled until the hot-wash or post-exercise debriefing. Stick to the exercise clock and keep the action moving to simulate a compressed timeline for the event. Don't allow participants to derail the exercise with side-bar discussions,

disagreements or higher-level policies disputes. You will lose your momentum and focus easily if you do. Effectively addressing your objectives will require skillful exercise facilitation.

5. Develop the Scenario

While you may have had a Hollywood-grade screenplay in mind for your exercise, it will be necessary to make sure that the story lines up with the identified objectives and is plausible. Graphics, video clips and other A/V aids can help bring the story to life, but don't let your production values overshadow the task at hand. A good question is, "Could this happen here?" A less productive story may be focused on an event that did happen at your organization. Tabletop exercise scenarios based upon actual or historic events that affected the organization are likely to become critiques of the response, or worse yet, devolve into a blame game in which people become defensive and leave feeling angry or abused by the process. What would happen? That's an exercise. What did happen? That's an After Action Report.

6. Identify the Right Players

Participants may be employees or other people critical to the organization's emergency management, security and/or business continuity programs, as well as critical external emergency response partners. Once you develop objectives and scenario that will test the identified objectives, the guest list usually becomes for clear. Err on the side of over-inclusion. Many tabletop exercises have fallen short of expectation when the group realizes that certain individuals should have been invited because their expert input was critical to respond to the challenge. While it may be a politically necessary to include certain individuals, try to keep player selection based upon function, and title. As a general rule, table top exercises are more a discussion of the tactical response to a situation, than the strategic response. As such, try to identify and invite the "do-ers" most familiar with the execution of necessary tasks.

7. Decide on the Logistics

Logistics include room selection and seating arrangements. Circles, horseshoes and other open arrangements are comfortable since everyone can see the other players. If not everyone in the group is familiar, you may wish to prepare cards with names and titles. Having assigned seating is a common practice in Emergency Operations Centers where related functions may be placed close together for communication and

cooperation. In your organization, it may be helpful to keep departments together. At any rate, the exercise designers should give some thought to seating.

Another model of seating may be based more on Incident Command roles. For example, the identified Incident Commander and Command Safe may be seated at one table while those forming the planning, operations, logistics and finance sections are seated at their own tables. This is a good way to model adherence to the ICS and reinforce command and control principles. There are other configurations available, but these are the most common.

8. Develop Injects

Since real crisis events are dynamic and fluid, injects of new or additional information shared with some or all of the players during the exercise helps to keep things real and challenging. It is important that injects are also aligned with exercise objectives. They should add complexity, and perhaps a bit more stress to the process, but not be so farfetched as to completely redirect the group to a whole new series of problems. Also, it is not necessary that all injects are escalations in the severity of the scenario. Since a key concept in the ICS is scalability, some injects may reflect success or a reduction in the seriousness of the event to test that the group can recognize this and adjust tempo or resource allocation accordingly.

9. Choose Facilitator, Observer(s) and a Scribe:

The facilitator or moderator is not a player, and therefore should not have a stake in the outcome. They should, though, have some solid group facilitation skills and an ability to stay focused and disciplined about the process and the clock. Good tabletop facilitators should themselves be knowledgeable about the ICS so that they can recognize when to step in and when to stay out of the way of the flow of information. The facilitator should:

- Guide, but participate
- Calls people by name and/or title (that's where those name cards come in handy)
- Keep the process on track and on time
- Allows group members to talk to each other when the talk to exercise-focused, and re-focus side conversations back to the exercise
- Provide clear, concise instructions
- Provides clarification and structure
- Remains neutral and fair

- Is comfortable allowing a degree of productive conflict, but knows when to step in

It will also be important to select a neutral observer for note-taking, and the development of the After-Action Report. Like the facilitator, the Observer should have only one task, and that is to impartially observe the process and generate quality report incorporating the play action and discussion in the debriefing or hot-wash process.

It is also recommended that a scribe or note taker be present to capture and document the process and key actions. The facilitator should not also be the scribe. Trying to keep up with note taking will be such a distraction that both the notes and exercise facilitation will suffer badly.

10. Conduct a “Hot Wash” and After-Action Report

At the conclusion of the exercise, it may be helpful to give participants a short-break for comfort and brief business tasks, but try to get them back in the room quickly for a quick debriefing. This may include acknowledgement and thanks for everyone’s effort and enthusiasm by the Facilitator, checking up that everyone is all right from the wear and tear of the exercise, and then moving on to the 5 questions. Again, the scribe should document the response to the debrief questions:

1. Identify top 3 strengths discovered during the exercise.
2. Identify top 3 areas for improvement discovered during this exercise.
3. What additional planning efforts or needs were discovered during this exercise?
4. What additional partners should be included in future planning efforts to assist the organization/department/facility in responding to this type of event?
5. What additional training needs have been identified as a result of participating in this exercise and/or needed to respond to this type of event?

The written After-Action Report (AAR) should include general observations about the exercise process and interaction between players and functions, as well as recommendations for future direction.

An AAR is slightly different than a Corrective Action Report, which is primarily focused on gaps and issues that require specific corrective actions to remedy. It is not enough to

simply identify issues and gaps, it will be important to set actions steps, delegate tasks and establish timelines and tracking mechanisms to ensure that the corrective actions are taken in a complete and timely manner. All of this is often documented in a work plan.

This suggests that the Tabletop Exercise is part of a larger, ongoing process, not an end point. Follow up is critical to ensure effective and defensible emergency preparedness and response plans. To identify a gap and now resolve it leaves your organization vulnerable on several fronts.

Make Exercising a Habit

Developing and conducting a meaningful tabletop exercise is not a quick or easy task. Once you have checked “*run tabletop exercise*” off the list of things to do, it is important to being thinking about the next one. Tabletops and other exercise should be a component of an ongoing preparedness strategy, not a one-time event. Since all organizations’ risks and resources are constantly changing, it is important to conduct tabletop exercises on a regular basis.

Tabletop exercises are a low-cost and effective approach to practicing decision-making and problem-solving under pressure. They help build confidence and move your organization closer to its optimal level of readiness. To get most from experience it is important that the exercise is well-designed, facilitated, and evaluated. It is equally important that the lessons learned from the exercise be used to improve plans and practices. As they say in Navy SEAL training, “*You don’t practice until you get it right; you practice until you can’t get it wrong.*”



About Everbridge

Everbridge, Inc. (NASDAQ: EVBG) is a global software company that provides critical event management and enterprise safety applications that enable customers to automate and accelerate the process of keeping people safe and businesses running during critical events. During public safety threats such as active shooter situations, terrorist attacks or severe weather conditions, as well as critical business events such as IT outages or cyber incidents, over 3,000 global customers rely on the company's SaaS-based platform to quickly and reliably construct and deliver contextual notifications to millions of people at one time. The company's platform sent over 1.5 billion messages in 2016, and offers the ability to reach more than 200 countries and territories with secure delivery to over 100 different communication devices. The company's critical communications and enterprise safety applications, which include Mass Notification, Incident Management, IT Alerting, Safety Connection™, Community Engagement™, Secure Messaging and Internet of Things, are easy-to-use and deploy, secure, highly scalable and reliable. Everbridge serves 8 of the 10 largest U.S. cities, 8 of the 10 largest U.S.-based investment banks, all four of the largest global accounting firms, 24 of the 25 busiest North American airports and 6 of the 10 largest global automakers. Everbridge is based in Boston and Los Angeles with additional offices in San Francisco, Lansing, Beijing, London and Stockholm.

Visit www.everbridge.com to learn more.