

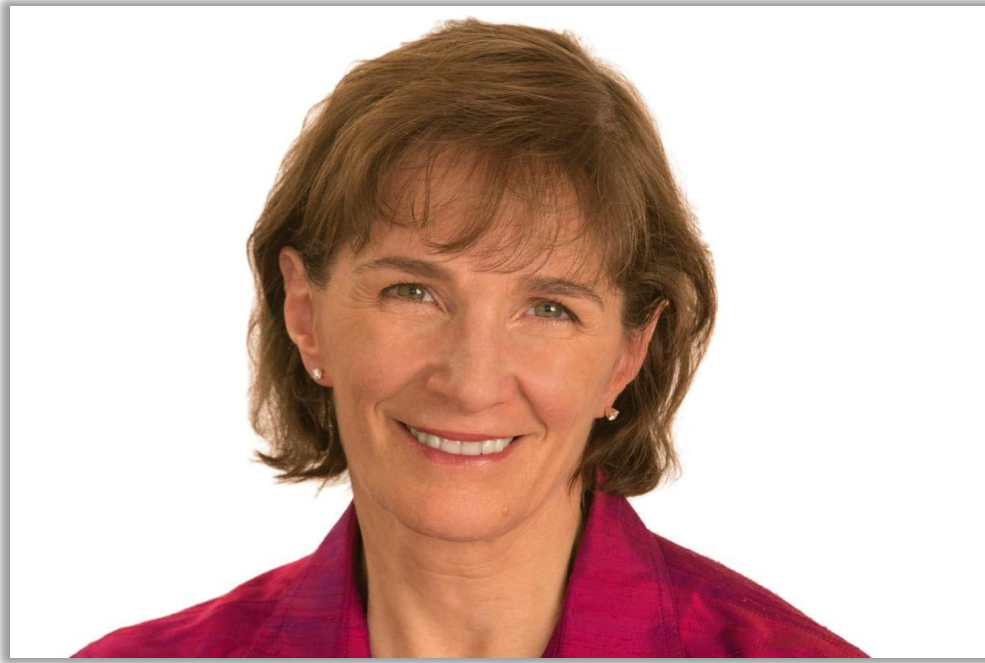


# DESIGNING TRAINING EXERCISES

*BEST PRACTICES & TIPS*  
*WITH REGINA PHELPS*

by **Regina Phelps, CEM, RN, BSN, MPA - Principal, EMS Solutions Inc.**

## **About the Author**



Regina Phelps is an internationally recognized expert in the field of emergency management and continuity planning. Since 1982, she has provided consultation and educational speaking services to clients in four continents. She is founder of Emergency Management & Safety Solutions, a consulting company specializing in incident management, exercise design, and continuity and pandemic planning. Clients include many Fortune 500 companies. Ms. Phelps is a frequent top-rated speaker at well-known conferences such as the Disaster Recovery Journal, CP&M, and the World Conference on Disaster Management. She is frequently sought out for her common sense approach and clear, clean delivery of complex topics.

## Introduction

When you go about designing the perfect exercise, there is a lot more going on “behind the scenes” than just finding a great narrative. In fact, the narrative is often the last thing I talk about in the design process. The goal of this white paper is to peel back the amazing “Golden Opportunity” that every exercise provides you and to hopefully encourage you to see your role in a new light.

## Your “Golden Opportunity”

I look at designing and facilitating exercises as one big golden opportunity. I firmly believe that exercises give you an amazing opportunity to:

- Promote your program.
- Educate your teams.
- Validate your plans.
- Engage your senior leadership.

In fact, I would even go one step further by saying that developing and conducting exercises are one of **the** most important aspects of your job. Think about it: When you take someone from just talking about an issue or problem and move them into actively engaging in a process to manage and resolve it, you have made it come alive. After all, the only way to know if plans work are if you:

1. Have a disaster.
2. Run an exercise.

I personally always vote for the latter rather than the former. It is certainly a lot less stressful and the consequences are not as great.

There are many things you can do with the golden opportunity you have been given; three things come immediately to mind:

- Influence human behavior.
- Develop critical thinking.
- Shape leadership skills.



## Human Behavior

So to set the stage, what is human behavior? ‘Human behavior’ refers to the full range of exhibited actions and behaviors. These behaviors are influenced by culture, attitudes, emotions, values, ethics, authority, rapport, hypnosis, persuasion, coercion, and genetics.

One of the primary goals of any exercise is to *influence human behavior*. You want the participants to have an experience that will help do the following things:

- Clarify roles and responsibilities. People often read their plans or checklists and think that they understand their job. But it is only when they really have to perform those tasks that they understand it fully. After all, plans are written in a vacuum. The plan or idea sounds good when you are writing it, sitting at your office with all of your utilities working, and life is great. It is quite another thing to launch that plan after a major earthquake, fire, or cyberattack when nothing is available.
- Improve individual performance. There is nothing like real practice to improve performance. Any athlete knows that. Humans have to practice to achieve any level of proficiency.
- Motivate employees. It is a great motivator when you know that you are going to have to “perform” in front of your peers. We find that the weeks leading up to an exercise, staff really engage with their plans, read them, revise them, and schedule walk-throughs and plan reviews to make sure everyone is up to speed. This is great news!
- Instill confidence. One of the best ways to be confident is to be prepared. Learn everything there is to be successful. If someone is prepared, and has the knowledge to back it up, self-confidence will soar.
- Teach leadership and decision-making skills. Good decision-making is an essential life skill most people acquire through trial and error and practice. People’s ability to lead during a stressful situation might vary greatly from their day-to-day abilities. An exercise provides the perfect environment for your team to practice these critical skills in more realistic conditions.
- Continue to build support for your program. A well-designed exercise can be inspiring to all who participate. It can light a fire under someone to improve their plan, their team, and the overall program. When people experience what it really might be like during a crisis, it is a great incentive to be prepared. Executives who engage in an exercise understand their role, the value of a program, and the importance of dedicating time and resources to make the program responsive to the potential risks.

## **Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it. This is thinking that does not blindly accept arguments and conclusions. Boy, do we need some of that at a time of crisis! When under stress, people's ability to think clearly and analyze problems often becomes muddled and decisions can be flawed. Critical thinking can help at time of crisis to:

- Clarify goals. What are you trying to accomplish and achieve? Does it make sense in this current situation? Is it achievable?
- Examine assumptions. Do you have assumptions that are silently influencing your thinking and process?
- Discern hidden values. These can be values that are unstated and yet can be the underlying purpose that really drives behavior. You need to bring these to the surface.
- Evaluate evidence. Weigh the evidence that is brought forward and assess the pros and cons.
- Accomplish actions. What is required to accomplish the actions decided?
- Assess conclusions. Step back and assess the results objectively.

All good! And isn't that what you want in an exercise – and even more during a real incident?

## **Leadership Skills**

Leadership skills and behaviors that can be developed in an exercise include the ability to:

- Manage change in stressful situations. Many people are good managers in the calm of day, but in the heat of battle, they may unravel. Practicing in an exercise can help develop this skill.
- Solve problems and make "real-time" decisions. Many times in an emergency, decisions are made with incomplete data. Very often, that's because there is no other choice. All of the information may not be available for hours or days, and actions need to be taken *now* with the information that's available. This can make people very uncomfortable. An exercise provides the rare opportunity to practice this skill.
- Manage group politics and influence others. Group dynamics can be difficult on a good day; in a crisis they can become unwieldy. A leader can practice how to manage conflicting ideas and teams at time of crisis during an exercise. They can then learn from that experience and apply it to the non-crisis world.
- Create useful communications of all kinds and to all parties. Communication is often limited and confusing in an emergency. Above all, an exercise can allow teams to practice clear, direct, and timely communication.

## Understanding YOUR Role in an Exercise

As the exercise designer, you must understand these factors if you want to design an exercise that will improve performance, mature a team and a plan, and empower the organization. If you don't, you will waste this golden opportunity!

## The Power of a Story

Telling stories is the best way to teach, persuade, and understand. When you tell a story, you can transfer experiences directly to someone's brain. They feel what you feel, they understand, they empathize. It has been proven in research that when communicating most effectively, you can get a group of people's brains to synchronize their activity. As you relate someone's desires through a story, they become the desires of the audience. When trouble develops, they gasp in unison, and when desires are fulfilled they smile together. We all inherently know this; when you hear a good story, you develop empathy with the teller because you experience the events for yourself. Stories are powerful. They have been the primary source of information before the written word – and even before the internet and Google! Consider the following:

- Stories spark emotions. People are intuitive and emotional, as well as deliberate and rational beings. People may understand what you want them to do, but if they aren't emotionally engaged, they just won't do it or won't do it well. That is a powerful thing to stop and reflect on. At time of crisis, if they don't get it or aren't engaged, they aren't doing it or they aren't doing it well.
- People use stories to make sense of things. Leaders with a shared strategic narrative can engage people in the wider context of the journey by giving others a framework to understand the changes and the actions required. A story has a core message, but can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the lens through which it's being heard.
- People learn from stories. Stories are a great way of learning from others, and can help shape cultures within an organization. Storytelling is a great tool for leaders seeking new behaviors in their teams. Sharing stories can help teams learn more quickly, and can help organizations to become more agile.

So think of an exercise like a story. Stories = exercises, exercises = stories. Exercises are nothing more than dropping your team into a story (i.e., an exercise narrative or scenario). And this story helps your team to put a more realistic context around the *theory* of their roles and responsibilities. Just reading a plan or a checklist does not “make it real” for your team members. They need a story – an experience – to truly get it.

When I do a speech or write an article, I know that people won't necessarily remember the seven points of this or that or the rationale for a particular action. They will, however, remember the story that goes with it. When your exercise is over, you want the participants to have a visceral response to the training, and therefore the knowledge and skills they just developed. This “muscle memory” will be there at the time of a crisis, where the “book learning” they got from reading a plan likely will not.

## The “Silly Little Question”

When we first sit down to design an exercise, I have one question that I want to talk about. I call it the “silly little question” because it sounds so simple and basic. The answer to this simple question holds incredible value and whether you realize it or not, this “silly little question” holds the answers to all your design questions. The question? “Why are we doing this (exercise)?”

I often start with that basic question and then ask it again and again in different ways. “What do you want to get out of this?” or “At the end of the day, what do you want to have accomplished?” or “What do you want to learn?”

The next step is the hardest thing of all. Listen. Don’t talk, just listen. Let them tell you the answer to the question in their own words and ask additional clarifying questions. Usually they will want to immediately jump to the narrative. DON’T start discussing the narrative yet, as we have found that only muddles the conversation. First you need to deeply understand why you are doing this. Once you know that, it will lead you to everything you need and want to know. It will tell you:

- What type of exercise will likely deliver the best results? It might be an orientation exercise, drill, tabletop (basic or advanced), functional, or full-scale.
- The exercise goal, scope, and objectives.
- The best narrative that will yield those results.
- What you need to know to keep you, the design team, and the entire process on track.

That may sound a bit crazy but if you are not clear you could end up anywhere in the design process, or worse yet, the exercise itself. Remember that **you** are the vision holder of the exercise – you drive the design and then the experience. You must deeply understand what management wants so you can deliver it to them. If you aren’t clear, the exercise could end up anywhere, maybe even have Martians landing in the middle of your exercise. (This is shorthand for saying that if you really don’t know where you need to go, things will happen that can take you deeply and wildly off course.)



## **Three Key Concepts in Exercise Design**

When we first sit down to design an exercise, I have one question that I want to talk about. I call it the “silly little question” because it sounds so simple and basic. The answer to this simple question holds incredible value and whether you realize it or not, this “silly little question” holds the answers to all your design questions. The question? “Why are we doing this (exercise)?”

### **Decide What You are Exercising**

It is critically important that you are clear on what you are exercising. Are you exercising emergency response? Business continuity? Disaster recovery? Crisis communications? Something else? Asking that question might sound very silly, but I have observed exercises where the planner didn’t understand this question and immediately took off on the wrong foot.

Let’s say you are focused on the narrative of the exercise (more than the question “why are we doing this?”) and you decided on a tornado scenario. The exercise clock starts moments after the tornado has hit the building. What kind of exercise are you designing? This is easy; you’re designing an emergency response exercise. I know this because no one is going to think about business continuity or disaster recovery when life safety should be the paramount concern.

I have sat through exercises that fell into this trap. They were supposed to be about business continuity, but since the exercise clock started at the wrong time, the focus was, appropriately, on life safety, not business continuity. If you want to do a business continuity exercise, start the exercise clock a few hours after the tornado incident. In the background, you carefully describe the emergency response activities that led you up to where you are now, which is the start of business continuity. When you understand the answers to the “silly little question” you will know what kind of exercise you will be holding, and you will not make this mistake.

### **Clarify Terminology**

What do you call the experience you are designing? Many designers still call them “tests.” I don’t know about you, but when I hear the word “test,” I think about grades, or passing, or worse yet, failure. Words have power. Think of the implications of what you call what you’re doing. Are you holding an “exercise” or a “test”?

When we hold exercises, we want people to fully participate. I want every participant to find out what works and what needs improvement. I applaud failure in every one of my exercises. I would rather have them “fail” with me during an exercise and then change their approach, than to have them “fail” in the real world event. Choose your words carefully and act accordingly.



## **Craft the Exercise Plan**

A well-crafted exercise plan includes all of the information that the exercise player needs to get started and be successful. This document prepares them for the experience, gives them the rules for the road and everything they need to get started. Even for a simple exercise, you need some basic data points, including all of the following components:

- Exercise type.
- Scope.
- Goal.
- Agenda.
- Objectives.
- Communications.
- Evaluation.
- Participant instructions.
- Artificialities.
- Assumptions.
- Narrative/scenario

## **After-Action Reports (AAR)**

After the exercise, you have one more great opportunity to influence behavior and enhance your program. Your observations in the After-action Report (AAR) can and will influence behavior. It will also assist in developing critical thinking and guide leadership development.

After every exercise, you should clearly answer the question of “why we did this” in your AAR. The AAR is the summary of your great work and will be fundamental in helping to build and mold your program. Always develop an after-action report and do it in a timely manner. We issue reports no later than ten days after an exercise.

You have a window of opportunity after an exercise, and that window is not open for long. You need to get an AAR out and circulating while it is still fresh on people’s minds. The AAR should be presented to key stakeholders, including senior management, corporate sponsors, and the business continuity steering, audit, and risk committees. And lastly, use it as a tool to improve the team, the plan, and the program. It is one of the best feedback loops that you have.

## **Seeing Your Role in a New Light**

You have the power to influence your program, plans, and teams through creating powerful experiences. Exercises are your golden opportunity to do just that. Creating a compelling experience will ensure that you influence human behavior, develop critical thinking, and help to shape leadership skills and abilities in your teams. You have the power to make that happen.



### About Everbridge

Everbridge provides a unified critical communication suite that helps clients be better prepared, make better decisions, and respond quickly and confidently during disruptive events. When an incident happens, whether it's a natural disaster or an IT service outage, we automate communications to ensure that the right messages get to the right people at the right time.

Widely recognized by analysts as the market leader, Everbridge solutions are trusted by clients in all major industries and government sectors to connect with over 50 million people around the world.

### THE ONLY END-TO-END PLATFORM

- **Planning:** Everbridge is easy to set up, maintain, and organize, meaning that you're always ready for a quick, coordinated response. Everbridge ensures that the right messages get to the right people - with the most advanced opt-in portal on the market, streamlined integration with internal and external data sources, and simple group and contact management.
- **Assessment:** When trouble strikes, you need rich insight, presented simply - so you can quickly assess potential impact and make an informed decision to avoid loss. Everbridge offers the only solution on the market that meets these demanding requirements, with the most advanced interactive dashboard in the industry.
- **Response:** In critical situations, ease-of-use can mean the difference between an effective response and a mistake that carries serious consequences. Everbridge is engineered to be simple to use under pressure, with a user interface that accelerates time-to-message and reduces the likelihood of errors.
- **Delivery:** Even during large-scale disruptions, Everbridge stays on. The most advanced platform in the industry ensures that you reach your contacts - every time. And with worldwide coverage and capabilities, including globally local calling infrastructure and data storage, we're ready to support you wherever your people are in the world.

Visit [www.everbridge.com](http://www.everbridge.com) to learn more.