

How to Run a 90-Minute Tabletop Exercise

A Facilitator's Guide for Emergency Management Professionals

WHAT IS A TABLETOP EXERCISE?

A **tabletop exercise (TTX)** is a **facilitated**, discussion-based session where team members walk through a simulated emergency scenario. No deployment. No equipment. Just people, a scenario, and honest conversation about what they would actually do.

Purpose: Test plans, expose gaps, and build shared understanding — before a real incident forces you to find them.

BEFORE YOU START — 5 PREP STEPS

#	Action	Notes
1	Define the objective	What specific plan, procedure, or coordination gap are you testing? One focus = better learning.
2	Select the scenario	Choose a credible, plausible threat for your sector: fire, spill, cyberattack, mass casualty, power failure.
3	Identify participants	6–15 people is ideal. Include decision-makers, not just coordinators.
4	Prepare 3–5 injects	Injects are new pieces of information introduced mid-exercise to escalate the scenario.
5	Set ground rules	No blame. No rank. All responses are for learning only. What is said in the room stays in the room.

THE 90-MINUTE RUN SHEET

	Time	Phase	Facilitator Action
1	0:00–0:10	Welcome & Ground Rules	Introduce objectives, confirm roles, and set the tone for a safe learning environment.
2	0:10–0:20	Scenario Briefing	Present the initial incident scenario. Read it aloud or display on screen. Allow no responses yet.
3	0:20–0:45	Round 1 Discussion	Inject #1 — Ask: 'What do you do first? Who calls whom? Who is in command?'
4	0:45–1:05	Round 2 Discussion	Inject #2 & #3 — Escalate: 'The situation has changed. Resources are arriving. Now what?'
5	1:05–1:20	Round 3 Discussion	Inject #4 (optional) — Push harder: 'Resources are stretched. Who decides? What is the priority?'
6	1:20–1:30	Hot Wash	Structured debrief — see Page 2 for the 10 questions that matter.

5 RULES FOR EFFECTIVE FACILITATION

- 1 You are not the expert in the room — your job is to ask questions, not give answers.
- 2 Silence is data — if no one answers, the plan has a gap. Name it.
- 3 Follow the energy — if productive tension emerges, stay there longer.
- 4 Stay scenario-bound — redirect all off-topic discussion back to the scenario.
- 5 Capture everything — assign a dedicated note-taker before the session begins.

The Debrief & Follow-Through

Do not skip this section. This is where the learning happens.

THE HOT WASH — 10 QUESTIONS IN 30 MINUTES

#	Question	Focus Area
1	What actions in the scenario matched your plan exactly — and worked?	What Went Well
2	Which team or individual decision stood out as effective? Why?	What Went Well
3	Where did coordination feel smooth? What made it that way?	What Went Well
4	Where did the plan break down or fall short?	What Didn't Work
5	Which role had the most confusion about responsibilities?	What Didn't Work
6	What information was missing when decisions needed to be made?	What Didn't Work
7	What assumption in your plan proved wrong during the exercise?	What Surprised You
8	What gap did you discover that you did not know existed?	What Surprised You
9	What is the single most important corrective action from this session?	What You Do Next
10	Who owns that action, and by when?	What You Do Next

LESSONS LEARNED — CAPTURE ON THE SPOT

Before participants leave, record findings below. Aim for no more than 5. Specificity beats volume.

Finding	Category	Priority	Owner	Due Date
<i>e.g. EOC notification chain unclear</i>	Plan Gap			
<i>e.g. ICS roles not understood by ops staff</i>	Training Need			
<i>e.g. No backup comms for field teams</i>	Resource Gap			
<i>e.g. Mutual aid request process unknown</i>	Coordination Issue			
<i>e.g. Social media response had no owner</i>	Communication Gap			

COMMON FACILITATOR MISTAKES TO AVOID

X	Running a TTX without a clear objective — it becomes a meeting, not an exercise.
X	Letting senior leaders dominate — junior staff often see the gaps first.
X	Skipping the hot wash — lessons not captured are lessons permanently lost.
X	Treating the TTX as a performance — it is a safe space to fail on paper.
X	Writing a report no one reads — assign one owner, three actions, one deadline.

WHAT COMES AFTER — MINIMUM VIABLE FOLLOW-THROUGH

A TTX with no follow-through is worse than no TTX — it signals that gaps do not matter.

48 HRS	1 WEEK	30 DAYS	6 MONTHS	Action Required
Distribute 1-page summary	Assign corrective actions with named owners	30-day check-in to review progress	Schedule the next exercise	

"Preparedness is not a document. It is a habit."