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**Guidelines for exercising a Business Continuity Plan**

Table Top Exercise

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**Guidelines – Table Top Exercise (Brief for participants)**

Tabletop exercises are discussion-based events where staff with roles and responsibilities in a particular plan meet in a classroom setting or in breakout groups to discuss their roles during an emergency and their responses to a particular emergency situation. Tabletop exercises are conducted in an informal environment, with a facilitator guiding participants through a discussion designed to meet pre-defined objectives. Tabletop exercises should be performed annually. One commonly used methodology for planning and performing tabletop exercise events has the following phases:

* + - **Design.** The coordinator works with a tabletop exercise design team to design the event. The design phase is often the most time-consuming, and planning for exercises typically starts at least one month in advance. The major steps in the event design process are as follows:
      * Determine the exercise topic based on the focus of the plan being exercised
      * Determine the exercise scope based on the target audience
      * Identify the objectives of the exercise
      * Identify the individuals that should participate in the exercise and invite them to the event
      * Identify the staff for the exercise, including a facilitator and a data collector
      * Coordinate the logistics for the exercise event.
    - **Development.** The design team creates the documentation to be used before, during, and after the exercise event. Typical documentation includes a briefing, a facilitator guide, a participant guide, and an after action report.
    - **Conduct.** In this phase, the plan is actually exercised. Tabletop exercises are usually conducted in a classroom-type setting. The facilitator provides a briefing to the participants, then walks them through the scenario and initiates a group discussion using a question from the facilitator guide. As the discussion continues, the facilitator may inject additional questions periodically. The data collector documents issues to be included in the after action report. Immediately following the facilitated discussion, the facilitator and data collector conduct an exercise debrief, in which they ask the participants in which areas they excel, in which areas they could use additional training, and which areas of the plan should be updated.
    - **Evaluation.** The comments from the debrief, along with lessons learned during the exercise, should be captured in an after action report. The report should include background information about the exercise, documented observations made by the facilitator and data collector, and recommendations for enhancing the plan that was exercised. Outcomes of the evaluation could include updating the plan or any related documents, briefing managers on the results, and performing other actions.

Tabletop exercisesare discussion-based events where staff with roles and responsibilities in a particular plan meet in a classroom setting or in breakout groups to discuss their roles when actioning a business continuity plan. Tabletop exercises are conducted in an informal environment, with a facilitator guiding participants through a discussion designed to meet pre-defined objectives. One or more scenarios may be discussed during a single tabletop exercise. The duration of a tabletop exercise varies depending on the audience, the difficulty of the topic being exercised, and the exercise objectives. Tabletop exercises are cost-effective tools to validate the content of plans to ensure the plan content is viable and implementable during and after a critical incident.

**Guidelines - Table Top Exercise (Brief for BCP&M Area Rep & Exercise Facilitator)**

This guideline provides direction on designing, developing, conducting, and evaluating a tabletop exercise. The section then summarises the key elements to consider before, during, and after the conduct of a tabletop exercise. Appendix A provides a tabletop exercise sample, and an after action report template.

* 1. **Evaluate the Need for a Tabletop Exercise and Create a Schedule**

As part of BCP&M monitoring, the BCP&M area representative should routinely determine the need for a tabletop exercise for a particular plan by considering the organisation’s overall objectives for conducting a tabletop exercise and answering questions such as the following:

* + - Have the personnel who would participate in the tabletop exercise been trained on their roles and responsibilities within the plan? If the personnel have not yet been trained, the BCP&M area representative should consider conducting a training event before the tabletop exercise so that the personnel can participate more effectively in the tabletop exercise, increasing its benefits.
    - When was the last time the Faculty/Division/Service Area conducted a tabletop exercise for the plan?
    - Have recent organisational changes been made that could impact the content of the plan?
    - Have new University wide BCP&M guidelines been issued that could impact the content of the plan?

Organisations should conduct tabletop exercises periodically; following organisational changes, updates to a plan, or the issuance of new BCP&M guidance; or as otherwise needed. For each tabletop exercise, the BCP&M area representative should choose a form of tabletop exercise that is well-suited to meeting the identified needs and objectives. The BCP&M area representative should ensure that department staff are available to participate. Tabletop exercises should also be scheduled within a reasonable timeframe after a training event so that the personnel participating in the tabletop exercise are recently trained in their roles and responsibilities. It is important that when an exercise is being scheduled, managers are notified and their approval obtained. Ensuring that management has agreed to an exercise is an essential step in the development of the exercise.

* 1. **Design the Tabletop Exercise Event**

The design phase is often the most time-consuming phase of planning a tabletop exercise. Planning is typically started at least one month in advance of the exercises. Sections 1.2.1 through 1.2.6 describe the major steps in the event design process.

* + 1. **Determine the Topics**

The design team should determine the exercise topic based on the focus of the plan(s) being exercised. The topic might be contingency planning generally in relation to the plan(s) or a more specific element in the plan(s).

* + 1. **Determine the Scope**

The scope of the tabletop exercise should be determined based on the target audience. All personnel with responsibilities under the plan should participate in the exercise as the exercise will apply to the roles and responsibilities of personnel within the plan and focus on validating that the documented roles, responsibilities, and interdependencies are accurate and current. The types of questions asked of the participants during the course of the exercise should be tailored to the level of personnel exercised. To ensure that the knowledge of the roles and responsibilities identified in the plan being exercised is current, it is often effective to conduct a training session in conjunction with any tabletop exercise.

* + 1. **Identify the Objectives**

The objectives of any tabletop exercise should be validating the content of the plan and related policies and procedures, validating participants’ roles and responsibilities as documented in the plan, and validating the interdependencies documented in the plan. An additional objective is meeting requirements as per the Critical Event and Business Continuity Policy which requires areas to maintain and monitor plans. Areas are required to exercise plans at least annually.

* + 1. **Identify the Participants**

Based on the topic, scope, and objectives of the exercise, the design team determines who should participate in the event. The participants should be comprised of the personnel with roles and responsibilities identified in the plan to help ensure the exercise meets its stated objectives. Once the appropriate participants have been identified, they should receive a written invitation or announcement of the exercise as soon as possible. This is typically accomplished in the form of an e-mail or memorandum by a member of the tabletop exercise design team, but, if more appropriate, may instead be distributed by a member of management.

* + 1. **Identify the Tabletop Exercise Staff**

The design team usually designates an exercise *facilitator*, who leads the discussion among the exercise participants, and an *observer*, who records information about the actions that occur during the exercise. The facilitator and the data collector should be thoroughly familiar with the content of the plan being exercised and with the exercise objectives. The facilitator and data collector should meet before the event to discuss the details surrounding the exercise, including its scope and objectives. At this time, the facilitator and the data collector review the results from previous tabletop exercises, if applicable, to heighten their awareness of potential issues before the event.

* + 1. **Coordinate the Logistics**

One person on the design team should typically be responsible for coordinating the exercise event’s logistics. The logistics coordinator usually begins to do this at least one month before the conduct of the tabletop exercise. The checklist in Table 4-1 can be used as a starting point by the logistics coordinator to ensure the necessary tasks are completed.

**Table 4-1. Sample Logistics Checklist for Tabletop Exercise Events**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Logistics** | **Target Date** | **Completed** |
| Select a date for exercise conduct |  |  |
| Reserve a conference room that will accommodate all participants |  |  |
| Determine the need for audio/visual equipment |  |  |
| Reserve audio/visual equipment, if applicable |  |  |
| Identify the facilitator and data collector |  |  |
| Identify participants |  |  |
| Invite participants |  |  |
| Coordinate the development of the facilitator guide and participant guides |  |  |
| Arrange for the printing of name tags, if appropriate |  |  |
| Ensure conference room is available in sufficient time before the exercise to perform setup |  |  |
| Arrange for refreshments, if appropriate |  |  |
| Copy all files as a backup onto a CD, USB flash drive, or Google drive |  |  |

* 1. **Develop the Tabletop Exercise Material**

Once the event is designed, the design team should assign roles and responsibilities to its members to develop the tabletop exercise material. Tabletop exercises typically include the following documentation:

* + - **Briefing.** A briefing is created for the participants; it includes an agenda and logistics information.
* **Guide.** The guide includes the following:
  + The purpose for conducting the exercise
  + The exercise’s scope and objectives
  + The exercise’s *scenario*, which is a sequential, narrative account of a hypothetical incident that provides the catalyst for the exercise and is intended to introduce situations that will inspire responses and thus allow demonstration of the exercise objectives
  + A list of questions regarding the scenario that address the exercise objectives
  + A copy of the plan being exercised.
* **After Action Report.** An after action report is developed after the exercise event; it contains information based on pre-identified evaluation criteria. The criteria should be developed before the exercise to ensure data collectors know what type of information to capture during the exercise and, ultimately, document in the after action report. Evaluation criteria are based on the exercise objectives and provide a means to evaluate how well exercise objectives were met and identify areas where additional exercises might be necessary. After action reports are discussed in more detail in Section 4.5.

A common misconception is that scenarios must be very detailed to be effective. Actually, it is often more effective to develop a short, concise scenario. During tabletop exercises with long, detailed scenarios, participants often spend more time dissecting the scenario and discussing its content than they spend on meeting the objectives of the exercise. If a detailed scenario is desired, a trusted agent with detailed knowledge of the plan and all the procedures documented within the plan should aid in the development of the scenario to ensure accuracy. In addition, the facilitator should have the ability to redirect the participants’ focus from the scenario to the objectives, should they begin focusing too much on the content of the scenario.

* 1. **Conduct the Tabletop Exercise**

Tabletop exercises are usually conducted in a classroom-type setting. This permits a facilitator to address each individual or the participants as a group while facilitating the exercise. This also fosters communication among the participants, as does placing a name tag on the table for each participant before the start of the exercise. This is particularly important if participants and teams work within different operational areas. Participants are usually not seated with their teammates to encourage independent thought processes and provide exposure to other operational areas. A copy of the participant guide should be placed with each name tag.

At the start of the exercise, the facilitator welcomes the participants to the event and request that the participants introduce themselves by name and give a general description of their roles within the Faculty/Division/Service area. The facilitator then projects the briefing and discusses the scope of the exercise and logistics information. The facilitator then walks participants through the scenario and kicks off the discussion with one of the discussion questions documented in the facilitator guide, designed to prompt decision-making or coordination among participants. Following the kickoff, the discussion occurs naturally among participants based on the scenario and the objectives. The facilitator may inject periodic questions from the facilitator guide. If the discussion does not occur naturally, the facilitator should prompt discussion by asking additional questions from the facilitator guide until all objectives are met.

During the course of the exercise, the data collector should record observations to be included in the after action report.

Immediately following the facilitated discussion, the facilitator and data collector should conduct an exercise debrief. During the debrief, the facilitator asks participants in which areas they felt they excelled, in which areas they could use additional training, and which areas of the plan should be updated.

* 1. **Evaluate the Tabletop Exercise**

The comments that surface during the debrief, along with lessons learned documented by the data collector during the exercise, should be captured in the after action report. The introduction to the after action report should describe background information about the exercise such as purpose, objectives, participants, and the scenario. The after action report should also contain documented observations made by the facilitator and data collector during the exercise and recommendations for enhancing the plan that was exercised.

Following the development of the after action report, the plan coordinator might assign action items to select personnel to update the plan being exercised. The plan coordinator should then update the plan, if appropriate, by implementing recommendations made in the after action report. It may also be necessary to brief certain managers on the results of the exercise, update any BCP&M related documents, and perform other actions based on the exercise.

**APPENDIX A: SAMPLE EXERCISE**

**WMS**

**Delivery of Teaching Programmes**

**FACILITATOR / PARTICIPANT GUIDE**

**MSB4.02**

**[DATE]**

**INTRODUCTION**

[INSERT INTRODUCTION. NOTE: EXAMPLE INTRODUCTION BELOW]

In an effort to validate Waikato Management School’s (WMS) BCP action plan *“Delivery of Teaching Programmes”,* WMS will conduct a tabletop exercise to examine processes and procedures associated with the implementation of the delivery of teaching programmes*.* This discussion-based exercise will be a two-hour event that will begin at [Insert start time] and will last until [Insert end time].

The exercise is designed to facilitate communication among select personnel regarding the implementation of recovery operations in WMSfollowing an event. It is designed to improve the readiness of WMSand help validate existing teaching deliveryprocedures.

Participants should come to the exercise prepared to discuss high-level issues related to the recovery of the delivery of teaching programmes. To achieve the exercise’s stated objectives, discussion will focus on the following contingency planning elements:

* What would be done to recover the critical process detailed in the plan?
* What is the priority/optimal chronology of restoration?
* What is the time required for restoration and how can this be optimised?
* What are the expected results and action items that will assist system teams and improve readiness after the exercise?

Participants may choose to bring back-up reference material that will aid in answering the above questions.

**CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS**

A tabletop exercise is a discussion-based event in which participants meet in a “classroom” setting to address the actions they would take in response to an emergency situation. Tabletops are an effective initial step for personnel to discuss the full range of issues related to a crisis scenario. These exercises provide an excellent forum to examine roles and responsibilities, unearth interdependencies, and evaluate plans.

Participants will be presented with a scenario affecting the faculty*.* A facilitator will help guide discussion by asking questions designed to address the exercise’s objectives. The facilitator may choose to inject modifications to the scenario to further stimulate discussion. Participants will also be encouraged to ask one another questions.

**OBJECTIVES**

[INSERT OBJECTIVES. NOTE: EXMAPLE OBJECTIVES BELOW]

The exercise objectives are as follows:

* Validate the team’s ability to recover operations
* Validate the accuracy of recovery procedures documented in the Delivery of Teaching Programmes plan
* Identify areas of the contingency plan that need to be revised

**PARTICIPANTS**

[INSERT PARTICIPANT NAMES AND ROLES. NOTE: EXAMPLE PARTICIPANTS BELOW]

* John Creek WMS IT
* Tania Burkhart MSC
* Dan Marsh Chairperson
* John Oetzel Academic
* Hannah Beames or

Braden Kempthorne Tutor/Student

* Maria Fitzgerald Department Administrator
* Layton Aplin UoW IT
* Tricia Finn SASD
* Heather Connolly Facilitator
* Jaki Heta Observer

**AGENDA**

Date: [INSERT DATE AND TIME]

Location: [INSERT LOCATION OF EXERCISE]

00.00 -00:15hrs Welcoming Remarks and Introductions

00:15 -00:30hrs Exercise Briefing (Objectives, Rules of Engagement, etc.)

00:30 -01:30hrs Scenario Discussion

01:30 -02:00hrs Debrief

**SCENARIO**

[INSERT SCENARIO. NOTE: EXAMPLE SCENARIO BELOW]:

At the second to last week of A Semester (Tuesday 26 May 2015) staff are advised by ITS that a disgruntled student hacked into the University’s computer system overnight infecting it with a Trojan virus. This has caused all campus ICT networks to fail and the loss of all IT services including the phone system. ITS are restoring systems in order of priority and have advised WMS IT that MyWebTM is likely to be inaccessible for a period of time. Staff at ITS are unable to provide a timeline for when MyWebTM will be restored.

By 10.30 am on Tuesday students have started complaining to MSC and lecturers about the shut-down. They are primarily worried about submitting assignments and access to things such as internal assessment grades, library materials and electronic materials staff have put onto MyWebTM.

Staff are concerned that there is now no place to put lecture/tutorial slides, grades for marked assessments can’t be entered by tutors, how to mark assignments already submitted, their inability to email students and that all online quizzes have disappeared.

At this stage it is expected that the MyWebTM outage will exceed the MTO of one week.

**FACILITATOR QUESTIONS**

[INSERT FACILITATOR QUESTIONS. NOTE: EXAMPLE QUESTIONS BELOW]:

The following questions are questions designed to be used by the facilitator to guide the discussion and ensure the pre-defined objectives are met. Depending on the flow of the exercise, the facilitator may elect to use these questions or other questions to ensure participants meet the objectives through the discussion:

1. Who has authority to activate the Delivery of Teaching Programmes plan?
2. How would you be notified of plan activation and by whom?
3. Who are the key contacts? Who needs to know WHAT and WHEN?
4. Who are the key stakeholders?
5. What are the roles and responsibilities of the various teams – MSC, WMS IT, ITS, Chairpersons, SASD?
6. What are the critical items of equipment? What controls are in place to manage the disruption and how vulnerable are the controls?
7. Are recovery procedures fully documented? Are they accurate? Should additional procedures be documented in the contingency plan?
8. What are the steps to reconstitute operations at WMS*?*
9. How would the transfer of operations have occurred if critical personnel were injured or unable to be contacted and could not report to WMS?
10. What happens if it takes over 2 weeks to fix and students complain that they did not have all internal assessment marks back before they sat their exams?

**DEBRIEF QUESTIONS**

An after action report identifying strengths and areas where improvements might be made will be provided after the exercise. The following questions are designed to obtain input into the after action report from participants.

* Are there any other issues you would like to discuss that were not raised?
* What are the strengths of the contingency plan? What areas require closer examination?
* Was the exercise beneficial? Did it help prepare you for follow-on testing?
* What did you gain from the exercise?
* How can we improve future exercises and tests?

***AFTER EXERCISE ACTION REPORT***

***Table Top Exercise:*** [INSERT NAME OF EXERCISE e.g. Delivery of Teaching Programmes]

***Date and Time Conducted:*** [INSERT DATE AND TIME HERE]

**DISCUSSION / FINDINGS**

The *[insert relevant information e.g. Delivery of Teaching Programmes]* exerciseprovided information on *[insert relevant information]*. An important benefit of the exercise was the opportunity for participants to raise important questions, concerns, and issues. At the conclusion of the exercise, participants were asked to provide feedback on the information provided, additional information needed, and their thoughts on the event and topics, to be included in the after action report.

The discussion findings from the exercise along with any necessary recommended actions are as follows:

**General Findings**

The exercise provided an excellent opportunity for participants to *[insert relevant information]*. As a result of the exercise, participants left with a heightened awareness of *[insert relevant information]*.

**Specific Findings**

Specific observations made during the exercise, and recommendations for enhancement of the plan, are as follows:

Observation

1. *[Insert general topic area]*

*[Insert observation]*

Recommendation *[Insert recommendations]*

Observation

2. *[Insert general topic area]*

*[Insert observation]*

Recommendation

*[Insert recommendations]*

*Example Observation and Recommendation:*

Observation Communications

A plan identifying standardised systems for communicating with contingency plan members does not exist.

Recommendations

* The organisation should consider developing a communications plan that establishes standardised communications requirements, addresses how and where backup communication systems will be positioned, and describes procedures for personnel to access backup communication systems.
* The organisation should identify redundant communications systems to ensure that essential personnel can be contacted in the event of an emergency. Redundant communications systems may consist of home phones, mobile phones, laptop computers, and other communications systems.