Guidelines for conducting tabletop exercises  
Penn Mission Continuity Program (MCP)  

Questions? Send a message to: askmc@lists.upenn.edu

All Penn organizations are advised to conduct annual tabletop exercises (TTX) to test their Mission Continuity plans. Here are some ideas to help you do that. Our thanks to the School of Arts and Sciences and the Division of Public Safety for sharing their knowledge based on experience with tabletops.

Help team:  
People are ready to help you design and conduct your TTX:  
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Anita Gelburd, Project Manager of Mission Continuity Program, Information Systems and Computing  
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Definition of a TTX:  
• A simulation of an emergency situation in a stress-free environment. The participants – usually decision-making level personnel - gather around a table to discuss general problems and procedures in the context of an emergency scenario. The focus is on training and familiarization with roles, procedures or responsibilities

Purpose of a TTX:  
• Primarily a discussion  
• Guided by a facilitator or two facilitators with shared responsibilities  
• Participants solve problems as a group  
• Consists of real-life situations  
• No attempts should be made to arrange elaborate facilities or communications (keep it simple)  
• One or two evaluators may be selected to observe proceeding and progress towards objectives  
• Success depends upon feedback from participants and the impact this feedback has on the evaluation and revision of policies, plans, and procedures

Goals of a TTX:  
• Test a plan:  
  • Does it work?  
  • Does it have the information users need?  
  • Is it realistic?  
  • Identify weaknesses and determine how can it be improved, to become more realistic and complete  
• Evaluate policies and procedures for dealing with outages or emergencies, including:  
  • Alert/notification about emergent crisis condition  
  • Communications, internal and external
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- Resource management during an emergency or outage
- Continuity of operations
- Users get practice and become more invested in the plan. They have:
  - The opportunity to think through what they might do in an emergency; for example, who will have what roles and responsibilities during an outage or emergency?
  - The opportunity to give us feedback about what would be most useful to them
  - Greater familiarity with the plan because they have worked through using it; this improves organizational coordination in the event of a real emergency
- Increase buy-in for Mission Continuity planning in general
- NOTE: let the TTX participants know: it is NOT a test of the users, only the plan.

Who should be invited to the TTX?
- The attendees depend upon which plan is being tested. For example:
  - To test a Loss of Technology plan, make sure to include the users who make decisions about what to do if the computers are down (faculty, staff members), as well as the IT support people. It is also helpful to include the IT support people in the construction of the tabletop exercise.
  - If your plan includes assembling an Incident Management Team, include all members of the team, then tell them several are either on vacation or out with the flu. This lack of availability will simulate real life.
  - To test a Loss of Building plan, make sure to include people who make decisions about what to do if that facility is unusable, such as a Department Chair, or the Director of a Center, as well as the Building Administrator or Manager.
  - General guideline: make sure that everyone responsible for one or more steps in the plan is invited to the TTX, and is available in person or by phone.

Constructing the TTX:
- Decide on the timing when the imaginary outage would occur. Include:
  - Day of the week
  - Time of day
  - Time of year (e.g., during advance registration, right before a grant deadline, etc.)
  - General weather conditions (snow, rain, extreme heat?)
- Decide on people to take the following roles:
  - A TTX facilitator, who will direct the action.
  - A facilitator’s lieutenant, to keep an eye on the time, to make sure that participants know what they need to know, to take notes and to do anything else that needs doing.
- Decide on an imaginary trigger to set off the outage. For example: at 4:15 pm on a Wednesday in early September, the fire alarm goes off in a certain facility. Since this is something everyone will know, put this information on a PowerPoint slide and project it.
  - From here forward, any information that all participants will know can be projected on PowerPoint slides – for example, “At 4:25 pm, the fire department arrives.”
- At this point, the plan should be activated. From here on, there will be certain events that only specific people will know about, such as, “At 4:17, Joan calls you to tell you that smoke
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has been detected in the kitchen next to the server room.” Put those items on index cards the facilitator will give to those individuals.

- **NOTE:** Do not provide participants with every detail of the information they need. Often in real life, people dealing with an emergency don’t have complete information, and they have to figure out how to deal with that situation.
- **NOTE:** Actual phone calls should NOT be made during the TTX, unless the person being called has agreed to participate in the TTX.
  - To be thoroughly prepared, obtain the names and phone numbers of critical service providers from outside of the department conducting the TTX (such as in Facilities and Real Estate Services or Business Services), so the participants know they are available in the plan.

**Logistics:**
- Decide which plan will be tested. Any of the BETH3 plans can be tested, so select the one you think covers the most ground, or is the most crucial.
- First, go over the plan and update it in Shadow-Planner, so the TTX will be on the most up-to-date and complete version.
  - Make sure to include communications strategy, with both internal stakeholders and external people (such as the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, which may wish to report on the emergency).
  - Think through the likely risks in the situation and think of strategies to mitigate those risks. Include these in the plan.
- Determine who will be invited to the TTX (see *Who should be invited to the TTX*? in this document).
- Schedule the TTX. Schedule a conference room with a projector so powerpoint slides can be used.
  - The computer used to project the powerpoint slides can also be used to construct simulated e-mails that all participants would receive.
  - Also, schedule a second room nearby, room for private consultations and simulated phone calls.
- Make enough paper copies that everyone attending can have a copy of the plan being tested.
  - Be sure to include the appropriate call lists.

**Facilitating (Managing) a TTX:**
- Introduce the narrative (setting the stage)
  - Welcome
    - Put audience at ease
    - Ice breaker (if desired to let people get to know each other)
  - Briefing
    - Purpose and objectives
    - Ground rules
    - Procedures
  - Narrative
    - Read the narrative
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- Introduce the first problem
  - Questions directed at higher-ranking officials or the group as a whole initially
  - Get others involved as the TTX progresses
- Involve everyone
  - Involve questions so that all entities must deal with a question or problem
  - Encourage those who are reserved to participate
  - Listen intently and sympathetically; hold off on giving solutions
  - Model and encourage behaviors you want from the participants:
    - Good eye contact
    - Acknowledge comments in a positive manner
- Promote in-depth problem solving
  - Resolving problems or making plans as a group
  - Accept real solutions – not superficialities
- Control and sustain the action
  - Use multiple event stages
    - Introduce an issue until discussion begins to fade
    - Introduce the next segment
  - Vary the pace
    - Add or delete problem statements or messages to alter the speed of action for the TTX
    - Occasionally, give two messages to pick up the pace of the TTX
  - Maintain a balance
    - Don’t talk a problem to death
    - Don’t move along too quickly either
    - You control the flow of the exercise
  - Watch for signs of frustration or conflict
    - Help resolve conflicts
    - Make participants feel comfortable
  - Keep it low-key
    - Avoid a bad experience

Ground rules for the TTX:
Here are some recommended ground rules; feel free to revise as you see fit. Distribute these at the beginning of the TTX and go over them, so everyone understands.

- **Exercises of this nature have the greatest value when they are treated as real.** So, although it may feel strange, as much as possible we want you to behave just as if this is really happening.
- **Don’t actually call someone outside of this room during the exercise.** If you would contact someone who’s not here for information, talk to one of the facilitators as if he/she were that person, and they will (do their best to) provide the information.
- **You can only use the information you have here in this room.** If you need to call someone, for example, and their phone number isn’t in the plan information and you don’t have any other way to get it, then you need to think of what your plan B would be in that case.
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- Please try to avoid thinking out loud, especially when you first receive your “trigger.” Remember that we are trying to simulate the (sometimes limited) flow of information in an emergency. If you have a clarification question you can try to quietly ask one of the facilitators.

- Sometimes things will be unclear – this happens in real life too. You can seek clarification the same way you would in the actual situation, for example by calling or emailing someone.

- Nobody is being graded or evaluated on their performance here. The purpose of this exercise is to practice, and to evaluate the plan for its effectiveness.

- Use the plan as a guide, but not a rule book. We are testing the effectiveness of the plan, so if at some point you decide it would make the most sense to do something different from what the plan says, then do that and we will decide later whether the plan needs to be changed.

- Don’t assume anything. Verify information if necessary. All information provided by the facilitator is considered to be valid. However, as in real life, it may not be clearly communicated, and participants must deal with that.

Tips:
- Do a run-through of the TTX with willing participants who are not from the targeted department before running the actual TTX.

- When a trigger occurs, participants may respond differently from what is in the plan. That’s fine – it allows the opportunity to figure out if the plan should be changed to be more realistic and complete.

- Afterwards:
  - Do a brief Lessons Learned/Best Practices exercise
  - Talk about what went well
  - Identify and document issues for corrective actions
  - Ask for input from observers
  - Follow up by changing the plan appropriately
  - Change the TTX as appropriate and save it, so you can use it again, or adapt it to use on a different plan.
  - Additional information for TTXs can be found at the URL as follows: http://www.training.fema.gov/emiweb/1S/is139lst.asp; see Unit 5