

# **Guidelines for conducting tabletop exercises Penn Mission Continuity Program (MCP) Spring 2022**

Questions? Send a message to: [askmc@lists.upenn.edu](mailto: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 conduct your TTX:

Mike Fink, Deputy Chief of Police, Division of Public Safety

Anita Gelburd, Director of Continuity Planning, Office of Information Security

Paul Gentile, Senior Project Leader, Information Systems and Computing

Gene Janda, Chief of Fire and Emergency Services, Division of Public Safety

## 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
- Participants solve problems as a group
- Consists of real-life situations
- One or two individuals may be selected to observe proceeding and give feedback
- Success depends upon input from participants and the impact this input 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 plans can be improved to become more realistic and complete
- Test Business Impact Analysis (BIA) information:
  - Are critical functions, systems and processes listed?
  - Are Recovery Time Objectives (RTOs) and Achievable Recovery Times (ARTs) accurate and realistic?
- Evaluate policies and procedures for dealing with outages or emergencies, including:
  - Alert/notification about emergent crisis condition
  - Communications, internal and external
  - Resource management during an emergency or outage

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- 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 outage or 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 plans and BIA information because they have worked through using them; 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.

## 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 the facilitator as if he/she were that person.
- **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.
- **Ask questions, but understand that answers may not be readily available.** 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.
- **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.

## Who should be invited to the TTX?

- **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.
- Other attendees:

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- Invite people whose jobs are relevant to the scenario 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.
- 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.
- Include leadership if possible, for example the Department Chair, or the Director of a Center.
- Include people who deal with facilities, such as the Building Administrator or Manager.
- Include a note-taker, someone who will not participate in the actual exercise but will record the discussion.
- **Note:** Representatives from some central University organizations such as Information Systems and Computing, Public Safety and Facilities and Real Estate Services will attend each TTX. They are there to answer questions about how the University would respond in specific situations.

### Logistics:

- Decide whether your TTX will be all virtual, on-premise, or a hybrid
- Review the BCP and BIA information and update it in Shadow-Planner, so the TTX will test the most up-to-date and complete versions.
  - Make sure to include communications strategy, with both internal stakeholders and external constituencies.
  - 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. If doing the TTX on-premise, schedule a conference room with a projector so power-point slides can be used.
  - The computer used to project the power-point slides can also be used to construct simulated e-mails that all participants would receive.
- Create reports of the BCP plans and BIA information contained in Shadow-Planner and distribute these in advance to the attendees.

### Structuring (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 of the exercise
    - Ground rules for the session (please see above)

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- Scenario and discussion
  - Project the slide deck
  - Each slide contains a statement of what is occurring and a series of questions
  - Try to involve as many participants as possible in the discussion, so everyone feels invested in the exercise
  - Maintain a balance between dwelling on a problem and moving through the scenario
    - Don't talk a problem to death
    - Don't move along so quickly that participants don't have a chance to contribute
- Promote in-depth problem solving
  - Try to resolve problems or make plans as a group
  - Aim for realistic solutions

### Tips:

- You may wish to do a run-through of the TTX with willing participants 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.