The purpose of a tabletop exercise (TTX) is to test existing plans, policies, or procedures needed to guide the response to a simulated incident. TTXs try to facilitate an understanding of concepts/plans, identify strengths and areas for improvement, and/or enhance coordination both within an organization and among responding agencies. During a TTX, participants:

- Identify strengths and shortfalls of emergency response plans and procedures
- Enhance understanding of utility and response partner roles and responsibilities
- Discuss roles and responsibilities as outlined in response procedures
- Enhance understanding of new concepts and information flow (communication pathways)

TTXs require an experienced facilitator who can encourage in-depth discussion and help participants to make decisions through slow-paced problem-solving rather than the rapid, spontaneous decision-making that occurs under actual or simulated emergency conditions. The facilitator can design the TTX, but an Exercise Design Team (EDT) can also be convened to assist with planning. The main responsibilities of the EDT are to identify exercise objectives, design the scenario, create exercise documents, coordinate logistics, plan for exercise conduct, and set the focus for exercise evaluation and improvement planning.

TTXs can be conducted using a single group with all participants or using breakout groups (e.g., utility and response partners split into functional areas). They can last anywhere from 4-8 hours depending on the type and complexity of the scenario. TTXs require development of several documents, including a Situation Manual (SitMan). The SitMan provides background information on the scope, schedule, and objectives for the exercise. It also presents the exercise scenario narrative for participant discussions. A PowerPoint presentation can also be developed to help facilitate the exercise. The facilitator or EDT will also need to be responsible for inviting the appropriate personnel, reserving a conference room, and developing the SitMan.

After completing the TTX, the facilitator will develop the After Action Report (AAR) and Improvement Plan (IP). The AAR and IP outline the proposed actions and improvements based on the TTX. See Step 8 of this module for additional information on the AAR and IP.

There are eight steps for developing, conducting and evaluating a TTX:

1. Identify objectives
2. Select participants
3. Set the TTX date and time
4. Develop the scenario
5. Develop TTX materials
6. Conduct the TTX
7. Conduct the hot wash
8. Prepare the After Action Report/Improvement Plan and conduct the After Action Conference

The final sections of this training module provide additional details for each of these steps.

Step 1: Identify objectives

An objective is a description of the performance expected from participants. For example:

"Evaluate the emergency response plan (ERP) for the provision of alternate drinking and wastewater services."

Objectives help the facilitator to define specific exercise goals, provide a framework for scenario development, and provide exercise evaluation criteria. Generally, the number of exercise objectives should be limited to enable timely execution, facilitate design of a reasonable scenario, and promote successful completion of the exercise purpose.

Step 2: Select participants

TTX participants can include:

- Facilitator
    - Understands the plans and policies being evaluated
    - Coordinates development and implementation of the exercise
    - Prepares and distributes TTX documents
    - Guides exercise play
    - Coordinates exercise hot wash
    - Prepares TTX AAR and IP
- Evaluator(s)
    - Documents the discussions of players; they do not interfere with the flow of the exercise
    - Helps with exercise logistics (e.g., sign-in) as required
- Players
    - Participate as the main actors in the TTX, and should include all utility personnel and response partner agencies identified in the ERP as having a support role in the scenario
    - Discuss roles and responsibilities and outline response actions to the scenario
- Observers (if any)
    - Monitor player response actions to the scenario, but do not participate or control TTX functions
    - View all or just selected portions of the TTX

Examples of potential players are listed on the next page, but you should feel free to modify the list to meet your exercise needs:

From the Utility:	Others:
• Management • Operations/Distribution/Collection • Engineering/Planning • Information Technology • Public/Customer Affairs • Finance • Administration • Consultants/Contractors/Vendors	• Emergency Management • Fire • Law Enforcement • Public Health • Hospitals • Critical Customers • Sector associations • State agencies • Federal agencies

Step 3 – Set exercise date and time

Since the value of a TTX is derived from the outcome of scenario discussions, it is crucial that the appropriate people are in the room. Thus, the exercise date should try to accommodate most (if not all) identified participants. Keep the following in mind:

1. Select a date far enough in the future so that you can appropriately plan the exercise and ensure maximum attendance from your invited participants.
2. Think about when most people start and end work, and try to keep your exercise within that time window. Also, consider whether a half-day exercise will accomplish your objectives.
3. Your exercise location should be central to all (or at least the majority) of your participants and have good parking or public transport options. Be sure that your preferred location is available on the date of your exercise!

Once you have selected date, notify the participants you identified in Step 2 of the exercise right away so that they can reserve it on their calendars. A simple “save the date” email or meeting invite serves this purpose well.

Step 4: Develop the scenario

Scenarios are the story line and context that drive the exercise. In addition to defining the threat or hazard, scenarios should be as realistic as possible and be designed to stress the resources or plans of the utility. The facilitator and EDT select a scenario (e.g., flood, earthquake, cyber attack) based on the exercise objectives.

Each scenario in this tool contains a SitMan template that has been pre-populated with “preliminary” scenario-based text. The facilitator and EDT should modify this text to reflect exercise objectives, utility-specific operations, business processes, standard operating procedures as outlined in the ERP, and any regional factors such as street names and geographic setting.

Step 5: Develop materials

In addition to the SitMan, a TTX also generally includes a presentation and an evaluation form. The presentation should be used as a guide by the exercise facilitator and players to help facilitate discussions. It is based on information contained in the SitMan and should provide an overview of the TTX, ground rules for exercise conduct, modules to drive scenario discussions, and key questions for the hot wash at the end of the TTX.

The evaluation form provides participants a chance to voice concerns and offer potential improvements while the experience is still fresh. All completed forms should be left with the facilitator at the end of the TTX.

Step 6: Conduct the TTX

To conduct an effective TTX, the facilitator should take the following steps:

Prior to the TTX:

- Reserve conference room(s) or other appropriate meeting location(s)
- Arrange for audiovisual equipment and supplies such as microphones, screens, projectors, pens, markers, flipcharts, and name badges as appropriate
- Send out reminders/notifications to players two weeks prior to the TTX
- Make copies of TTX documents
    - Sign-in sheets (used to document training requirements)
    - SitMan
    - Evaluation forms

On the day of TTX:

- Set up the exercise site(s) to include registration, seating arrangements, audiovisual equipment, and flip-charts as needed
- Conduct registration:
    - Ensure that all participants sign in and receive name badges (as appropriate)
    - Distribute TTX documents
- Facilitate the exercise using the PowerPoint presentation to introduce TTX objectives, instructions, and modules
- Terminate the TTX when all the objectives have been accomplished
- Conduct the hot wash immediately following termination of the TTX

Step 7: Conduct the hot wash

The hot wash for a TTX should be conducted immediately following termination of the exercise. At the beginning of the hot wash, the facilitator should inform players as to the purpose of the hot wash, which is to verify that exercise goals and objectives were achieved. It also gives players a chance to voice concerns and offer potential improvements to procedures, processes or interdepartmental/interagency coordination while the TTX experience is still fresh.

The most effective way of conducting the hot wash is to have the facilitator review and discuss each of the TTX objectives and determine whether they were successfully accomplished. By going through the objectives, players achieve a better understanding of the evaluation process and any factual mistakes or misinterpretations that may have occurred during the exercise can be resolved.

The hot wash can also help identify any training, staffing or equipment needs and determine whether future exercises are needed. Finally, the hot wash gives players a chance to voice concerns and offer potential improvements to procedures, processes or interdepartmental/interagency coordination.

At the end of the hot wash, the facilitator should address any final questions and describe the next step in the evaluation process, which is to produce the AAR and IP.

Step 8: Prepare the AAR/IP and conduct the After Action Conference

AARs/IPs are the main product of the TTX evaluation process. The AAR/IP is a summary of the exercise that:

- Describes what happened during the exercise
- Identifies exemplary practices
- Highlights issues that need to be addressed
- Recommends improvements, responsible parties, and a timeframe for implementation

The AAR captures observations during the exercise and makes recommendations for post-exercise improvements. The AAR also contains an IP, which identifies specific corrective actions, assigns them to responsible parties, and establishes targets for their completion. The exercise facilitator and other members of the EDT (as appropriate) draft the AAR/IP and submit it to the players for comment.

After completion of the draft AAR/IP, an After Action Conference (AAC) can be conducted with the players. The AAC is where the facilitator presents the draft AAR/IP for feedback and validation. The facilitator then incorporates the results, corrections, or clarifications of the AAC into the AAR/IP for distribution to all affected parties. This can also be accomplished by circulating the draft AAR/IP by email for comment.

Facilitation Tips!

Finally, here are some key tips for facilitating an in-person and virtual TTX:

- **Be Prepared**-know your audience and their roles, utility plans and procedures, regulations, etc. Overall, doing your homework and being prepared will set you up for success!
- **The Venue**-it is important to have the right venue for hosting the TTX. This includes choosing one that is easy to get to, has good parking, is close to food, etc. The overall quality of the room and how you set it up is also important. The right room set-up will be dependent on the number of participants (e.g., horseshoe design for tables, classroom style). Consider the location of presentations screens as well and make sure to have name cards/name tents!
- **Communication**-make sure to communicate clear guidelines and instructions for the TTX including those that are outlined in the SitMan and presentation. Review the objectives, the guidelines (e.g., this exercise will be held in an open, low-stress, no-fault environment. Varying

viewpoints, even disagreements, are expected), and the assumptions and artificialities (e.g., the exercise scenario is plausible, and events occur as they are presented).

- **Create an Inclusive and Informal Environment**-make the participants feel comfortable! Start off with introductions to get everyone speaking. State that this will be an informal exercise right at the beginning so that participants feel more relaxed and are willing to discuss the issues.
- **Listen and be Patient**-don't interrupt or show frustration with participants. Make sure to take turns by having participants raise their hands or turn up their name tents. Note though that you will also need to be mindful of time and make sure to know when to move on by recapping or summarizing this issue(s) (see below for more information).
- **Watch and Observe**-visual cues from participants are very important. Observe when participants may be bored or are wanting to say something. Nodding heads are also a good indication that participants are following along with the discussion.
- **Engage all Participants**-try to get everyone involved in the discussion to the best of your ability (e.g., Mary, we have not heard from you, what do you believe your agency's role would be?)
- **Summarize and Recap the Issues**-this brings participants back to the main topic if the discussion goes off track. Try to focus on possible ways to move on to the next subject if you get caught up on side issues.
- **Make it Fun**-bring some type of gift for participation (e.g., candy). You would be surprised at how well this works to keep participants involved!

In today's world, TTXs can also be conducted virtually, which can be just as effective as an in-person setting. If you are conducting a TTX virtually, here are some key tips:

- **The Smaller the Group the Better**-try to limit participation to under thirty (30) people if possible. You want to invite and have participation from each entity/agency involved in a response, but limit the number to 1-2 representatives from each. If the number of participants becomes too large, use break-out groups with multiple facilitators (as appropriate).
- **Send the Agenda, Objectives and Materials before the TTX**-this helps participants become familiar with the objectives so that they can gather their thoughts on the issues prior to the TTX taking place.
- **Use Presentation Slides Outlining Key Issues/Objectives**-this helps to keep participants on track. Make sure to show the facilitation question on the slide as well.
- **Make the TTX Inclusive and Informal**-same as the previous tips for an in-person TTX, but it is critical for a virtual exercise that participants introduce themselves!
- **Use Computer Audio for Responses**-in lieu of using the chat feature (if possible) as live voices keep participants more involved.
- **Engage all Participants**-check-in from time to time on participants/agencies that are not participating. This ensures that you are getting feedback from all the appropriate agencies, and everyone has a chance to weigh-in.
- **Take Breaks Often**-every 90 minutes or less so that participants get some needed downtime from the computer screen.

This concludes the TTX design training. If you would like more instruction on exercises, FEMA's IS-120.A: An Introduction to Exercises is a good place to start. More information on exercises can also be found under the Department of Homeland Security's Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program.