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 or 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 that includes 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 the 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 the objectives
2. Select the participants
3. Set the TTX date and time
4. Develop the scenario
5. Develop the TTX materials
6. Conduct the TTX
7. Conduct the hot wash
8. Prepare the After Action Report and 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 the 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 the 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 on the following page 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

<u>Step 3: Set the exercise date and time</u>

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 the 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.

<u>Step 4: Develop the scenario</u>

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.

<u>Step 5: Develop the materials</u>

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.

<u>Step 6: Conduct the TTX</u>

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 or 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

<u>Step 7: Conduct the hot wash</u>

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. 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 and IP and conduct the After Action Conference

AARs and IPs are the main product of the TTX evaluation process. The AAR 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 and IP and submit them to the players for comment.

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

This concludes the TTX design training. If you would like more instruction on exercises, FEMA's IS-120.C: 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.