



Lessons for managers responsible for running exercises

Rita Parker

Most organisations recognise the importance of exercises and drills as integral components of their risk management and mitigation strategy. Whether an organisation is conducting a drill, a desk-top exercise, simulation or practical exercise, a skilled exercise manager is essential to ensure quality outcomes.

A well managed exercise is an essential tool in the context of national security and business continuity and will show demonstrable benefits across the corporate structure, from the boardroom to the factory floor. These benefits are relevant for business leaders faced with high level strategic decisions and for front line operational workers and first responders in emergency situations. When a 'real' situation happens, the value of well managed exercises is self evident and may save lives and assets.

This National Security Practice Note provides advice on:

- The common traps in exercise management
- Planning for an exercise
- Identification of relevant outcomes prior to exercise development
- Running an exercise
- Attributions of an exercise manager

Common traps in exercise management

There is a number of traps for first-time exercise managers. Most are related to a lack of awareness of management in assigning a trained and supported manager, and a lack of awareness of the complexity and planning challenges by the assigned manager.

It is common that management appoints an exercise manager on the basis that they have had some operational experience in a related area or previous participation in an exercise. However, managing an exercise is quite different from being involved in one

as an active participant. They need different skills and knowledge as seen in the section in this Note on *Attributes of an exercise manager*.

Common traps in exercise management include:

- using previous documentation, notes, handouts and presentation slides as the basis of the exercise;
- giving a few preliminary briefings and hoping it all turns out well - without too many glitches;
- leaving everything to one individual who may have had some prior guidance or instruction where they learnt from someone else, inheriting past preparation practices and someone else's blind-spots;
- scheduling an exercise on an ad hoc basis to fit in around other responsibilities or priorities;
- allowing the operational aspects of an exercise to dominate planning and preparation; and
- neglecting or skimping on the evaluation phase and lessons learnt.

Planning for an exercise

A properly planned and executed exercise will enhance preparedness in any organisation or agency against the contingency which becomes the focus of the exercise. A well thought out and planned exercise will make the difference between an effective exercise and one which is simply costly.

In their most effective form, exercises are designed with clearly articulated goals to test planning processes, build awareness and capability development and identify weaknesses. This kind of exercise pushes the boundaries beyond known capabilities and known capacity to identify gaps in existing procedures and skills.

It is important at the outset to identify which type of exercise will be most effective to achieve the desired outcomes. Exercises might address natural disasters, insurgency, pandemic events or industrial accidents and can take different forms ranging from a full deployment operational exercise to discussion exercises.

Other forms of exercise may be more akin to drills to test standard operating procedures (eg a fire or emergency drill) to confirm existing capabilities, to demonstrate a particular set of skills and competencies or to reinforce the status quo by showing that the existing system is adequate. Occasionally public relations may be the driver where the main purpose of the exercise is to reassure stakeholders and personnel that their organisation can cope in a particular scenario.

A key common problem with planning is that exercises have no planned outcomes other than activity for its own sake. Valuable outcomes will not emerge without forethought and planning commensurate with the risk being considered. Some important outcomes are generic while others are specific to the organisation. Planning must take account of all of these to ensure an effective exercise.

Running an exercise

Exercise management is like any other kind of corporate or government management. It requires strategic skills and experience in planning, goal setting, evaluation and resource management. In short, it is a job for expert managers and not a role that can be learned as an exercise progresses.

In running an exercise it is imperative that:

- Planning and management are foremost.
- There is clear guidance on why the exercise is to be conducted.
- There are clearly articulated exercise aims, objectives, scope and governance arrangements
- Exercise planning should relate to risk mitigation strategies and threat assessments.
- An exercise should be constructed in the context of the real world, rather than an artificial environment which is designed to match the responsibilities of the testing organisation.
- The exercise plan is not simply a revamp of another organisation's exercise or even to update a previous exercise.

- The right stakeholders must be involved at the right time.

The outcomes of an exercise can vary in quality and the lessons learnt differ with different types of exercise and their management. Some exercises will produce significant lessons which could lead to a reappraisal of existing processes, operational procedures and strategic decision making. In other instances, the outcomes and lessons may suggest relatively minor modifications.

Attributes of the exercise manager

The essence of a well managed exercise is that the exercise management team has the necessary skills, knowledge and tools to deliver quality outcomes.

A skilled exercise manager has the ability to manage a wide range of exercises and the teams involved. A skilled exercise manager will be able to design and conduct an exercise in a systematic way involving stakeholders at different stages of the planning,



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preparation, conduct and evaluation phases of the exercise.

The exercise manager must have the skill set and authority to manage the high level strategic aspects of the exercise.

Below are key attributes of an exercise manager:

- Critical strategic thinking.
- Ability to act in concert with others to identify goals, objectives and desired outcomes of an exercise before the operational and deployment tactics have been developed.
- Credibility and authority to ensure that the lessons learnt from an exercise and its evaluation are integrated into management policies and used to inform standard operating procedures for the next exercise.

Training is essential in running an exercise as many people who find themselves running an exercise do not have the necessary skills.

Conclusion

The design and conduct of an exercise is a systematic process involving planning, documenting, conduct and evaluation. From a business perspective, a well managed exercise will feed into strategic planning and policy, reduce potential risks and inform business decisions. In the context of national security, well prepared, well managed and executed exercises will contribute to strategic corporate planning, infrastructure security, risk management and capability development.

About the author

Rita Parker is a strategic advisor with a well established background in national security issues. She was a Senior Policy Advisor in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in the former Office of Security and Intelligence Coordination. Rita was the National Strategic Manager for the largest counter-terrorism exercise in Australia, Mercury 05 and an expert advisor to the Department of Health and Ageing for its pandemic influenza exercise, Cumpston 06. Her capacity building and capability development experience include development of the aviation security capability framework for the Office of Transport Security and she was responsible for the management and development of specific strategic counter-terrorism capabilities in the areas of intelligence, crisis centres, police technical units, dignitary protection and negotiators. Ms Parker holds a Masters of Business Administration.

Interested in being involved in developing a curriculum for a course on planning and running exercises?

Interested in training on planning and running exercises?

If you have run, or been involved in, exercises or would like training in exercise management, the Centre would welcome your views on what should be in a curriculum on planning and running exercises.

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