

Training, Testing, and Exercising (TT&E)

By Bob Mellinger, President, Attainium Corp

Once a business continuity or emergency response plan is created, an organization often feels the job is done and gets a bit complacent. When your plan is complete and placed on the shelf, however, the job is far from over. It's like fire drills... you don't plan one and never test the escape routes. We've all done fire drills and learned from them, and no one disputes the need to continue to do fire drills regularly. We have to develop the same attitude about testing business continuity plans.

Why test the plan? There's the obvious reason, of course – to make sure it works. But TT&E also allows you to evaluate the skills of everyone involved and to improve their skills, to make sure that all contingencies have been covered, to satisfy any policies or legal requirements, and to help keep the plan updated.

To be effective, a plan must be (1) accessible and (2) a dynamic document that continually evolves to reflect changes in the environment, staffing, regulation, policies, and procedures. If you're not going to test the plan regularly to keep it current and ensure its viability, you might as well throw it away after a few months. What happens, for example, when a disruption occurs, and someone goes to the plan to find out whom to contact, only to discover that the person in charge left the company six months ago? Finally, the plan has to be easy to use. Don't make it easier for people to run for the door than to locate the correct procedure in the plan (of course, if the plan is tested and people are trained, this shouldn't be an issue).

Plan accessibility is an important issue. Everyone has to know what and where the plans are, who's in charge of what processes for different types of disruptions. Notebooks are often used, either placed in strategic locations or provided to each department or manager. There also are software programs that make it possible to access and update the plan via the desktop. Whose desktop has access to the plan? If it's the manager and his computer is down, now what? What happens if the power goes out, and the plan is now inaccessible? (You have to plan for disruptions in accessing your plan.) Do you have a way to remotely access the plan? Should you have a website you can access from any computer to make sure the information remains accessible? TT&E, when done right, also can surface problems with access to the plan.

Training and Testing Programs

A comprehensive TT&E program would encompass several components, including:

- ▲ Executive briefings for senior management that would familiarize them with the business continuity plan and policy, the emergency response and disaster recovery plan currently in place, and an explanation of their roles.
- ▲ Seminars for managers to familiarize them with the plan and explain what is expected of them and their staff to prepare for and respond to a crisis or disaster.
- ▲ Literature for all staff to inform them of business continuity news and events.
- ▲ Most important, workshops for crisis management and recovery team members, including scenario exercises and role-play sessions. These can take many forms, as described below.

Training, Testing and Exercising (TT&E) – cont'd

There are basically five types of exercises that test your plan and allow you to evaluate its effectiveness. These include the orientation, the drill, the tabletop exercise, the functional exercise, and the full-scale exercise. The primary objective of the testing is to determine whether or not your plan can successfully respond to the crisis and restore one or more business-critical processes in the allotted time. Below are descriptions of these exercises, based on FEMA's definition of each.

(1) *Orientation*. An orientation is an informal session that does not include any simulation. It provides a discussion of roles and responsibilities and introduces or reinforces policies, procedures, and plans.

(2) *Drill*. Think of the fire drill... this is a test of one function only. This is usually done "in the field" and is often evaluated.

(3) *Tabletop*. This takes the form of a discussion of a simulated emergency. It's inexpensive, low stress, and has no time limits. This exercise can help you evaluate plans and processes and review any issues with coordination and responsibility.

(4) *Functional*. This is a realistic simulation that takes place in real-time and can be quite stressful. Inputs are made via message at points throughout the simulations. All key personnel should be involved to get a realistic reading on the plan. It can test one or more emergency management or response functions or the entire plan.

(5) *Full-scale*. This type of exercise features a specific emergency scenario using real people and equipment. It takes place in real-time and, done correctly, causes high levels of stress. It is designed to test any/all of the emergency response functions.

A critical result of testing the plan, no matter what method you use, is to incorporate the lessons learned into the plan and making sure all relevant personnel receives the updates. In fact, holding a Monday-morning quarterbacking session after the test is an excellent way to surface the problems and determine how to incorporate changes into the plan.

Your entire plan should be tested on an annual basis to ensure its viability. But you don't have to test the whole plan at a time; you can test pieces of it over the year to save time and money.

It is a significant challenge to keep your plan updated. Still, that plan is critical to your ability to keep your organization – and, most important, your people – alive. A carefully constructed plan can save lives, prevent total chaos in the face of a crisis or disaster, and is a critical tool to guide an organization's recovery and survival.

SITREP – Situation Report

1. What do you know?
2. What don't you know?
3. What do you need?
4. Who do you need to talk to?
5. What are you planning to do next?

Bob Mellinger is the president of Attainium Corp, which delivers business continuity, preparedness, and crisis management services. Bob is a frequent speaker on the topics, including Business Continuity, Contingency Planning, and Crisis Management, delivering sessions ranging from the basics of Continuity Planning to the Impact of Today's Threats and Hazards to tabletop exercises and disaster simulations.

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