

Introduction to the Tabletop Exercise

by Zachary Adam

The objective of a Tabletop Exercise is to simulate a complex, realistic situation with multiple possible responses *before* the students have obtained all of the knowledge of the lesson concepts. In actual earthquake hazards situations, the warning signs and circumstances will inevitably differ from those presented in classroom material on the subject (due to variable topography, weather, geology, population density, etc.), or the perception of circumstances will be affected by overwhelming feelings of stress, anxiety, or fear during and after the earthquake. The tabletop exercises are conducted only after students have a clear understanding of the causes of earthquakes obtained during the earthquake sciences portion of the curriculum (Lesson 1-6). The intention is to reinforce the idea that the students now possess the general knowledge necessary to comprehend, identify, and avoid the basic hazards that arise due to earthquakes.

Throughout the tabletop exercises, students and educators must understand that the primary objective is to strengthen the ability to develop and articulate one's rationale, rather than to recite the correct answer. By presenting students with a scenario that they must think through without clear answers provided, they have the opportunity to train for a situation where they do not have all of the information necessary to make an informed decision. This is meant to simulate, to the greatest extent possible, the thought processes and informational limitations that occur during actual emergencies.

Tabletop exercises have three distinct phases: the introduction, the exercise itself, and the post-exercise discussion.

The introduction consists of providing a basic outline of the scenario, preparing the appropriate classroom environment, and informing the students of the primary objectives of the exercise. Specific details about the scenario should be limited to preserve and reflect the limited access to information that most people have in an actual hazardous situation. It is extremely important that a classroom environment is established that encourages trust amongst the students, permits the expression of ideas regardless of verifiability or applicability to the simulation, and allows for participation by all students. Before the exercise begins, the educator should emphasize that the primary objectives are that the students learn to express their thought processes, to weigh different possible courses of action, to discuss the merits of those actions with their peers, to decide on a course of action, and finally to critically evaluate the successes and areas of improvement of their decision-making during the simulated emergency. Incorrect or improper decisions potentially form the basis of the most constructive discussions that will occur as a result of this exercise. At the end of the exercise, students must be allowed to compare and contrast their responses, and whenever possible, critiquing should come about by mutual consensus, not as dictation by the educator.

During the exercise, the educator is likely to get a wide variety of responses from the students that may or may not have relevance for the development of the scenario as it is written. This is part of the simulation experience. During an actual emergency, people

often remember only fragments of information that are helpful, and the assistance of trained professionals able to rectify or connect these fragments of information may be limited. If students suggest information or a course of action that is not particularly relevant or desirable, allow the students to explain and develop these ideas and their justifications for presenting them. If the students change their minds about the usefulness of a particular course of action or piece of information as the scenario develops, have them explain why they have changed their minds. The educator is advised to make note of these suggestions and discuss them during the post-exercise discussion.

The post-exercise discussion should be conducted immediately after the exercise has ended, while the ideas and actions covered during the exercise are still fresh in the students' minds. The success of the post-exercise discussion depends heavily upon the educator's ability to induce and allow the students to explore the implications and circumstances of the scenario. This includes, most importantly, the ideas or decisions that the students made during the scenario that may have endangered the safety of the scenario characters. Students should be encouraged to discuss unsafe suggestions, and to be responsible for determining and explaining why any particular suggestion might be considered unsafe. Alternatively, the students should also be encouraged to discuss or imagine different circumstances when a suggestion that is considered 'safe' might actually be unsafe, if such circumstances come to mind during the discussion.