

9. KNOW WHEN AND HOW TO TEST YOUR PLAN

Tabletop Exercise



WHY:

Disaster exercises test company disaster readiness; train employees through practice; improve employees' ability to make informed decisions when responding to an emergency; identify what needs to be done during and after a disaster; and examine a specific scenario or situation more closely.

HOW:

Gather your team, key employees, and anyone else who would benefit from the exercise, present the scenario below, and begin the discussion with the questions provided. This can be done informally, such as during lunch or as part of a staff meeting.

POWER OUTAGE SCENARIO

It is a hot, rainy Friday morning. The current time is 11:30 AM. Suddenly, the lights go out and all of the computers, printers, and copiers turn off. For a few seconds, there is silence before the chatter begins to pick up. One of your emergency lights comes on, but the rest are not working. While many of the offices have windows to provide some light, most of the hallways and interior rooms are left in the dark.

1. Take the first 10 minutes to discuss what you will do next.

It is now 1:00 PM and the lights are still out. The building HVAC has been off now for 1½ hours and the temperature inside the building is gradually becoming unbearable. Your entire power grid is without power. There is no word from the electric company about restoration of power.

2. Now what are you going to do?
3. Is your technology/computer room being dealt with? By whom?
4. Has someone turned off all computers, printers, and equipment to prevent electrical surge when power is restored?
5. Is your phone system down? How are you going to manage the phone lines?

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It is now 2:00 PM. Employees are asking if they can leave early. The word around town is that the power might not be restored for several days.

6. How will you communicate this message? What instructions will you convey to your employees? Customers? Vendors?

Continue your discussion with the following questions:

7. How are people within the organization communicating with each other (e.g., sending and receiving messages, information, and response details)? How are they communicating with other stakeholders (e.g., your customers and clients, the media)?
8. Is there a pre-determined and agreed upon central meeting place or call-in number for company leaders, management, and employees?
9. Is there a copy of your business continuity plan that you can easily retrieve?
10. Are there any business processes for which there are manual workarounds? If so, discuss how that would happen.
11. How would you find an appropriate place to operate from for the remainder of the day? For the next one or two weeks, if necessary?
12. Have you begun an assessment that includes an evaluation of the status of employees, customers, operations, and external utilities?
13. How would you ensure that customer concerns are managed?

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14. Have you begun to determine how much data was lost and how that will affect your operations?

15. Some employees are asking, "How will I know if I should come to work Monday?"

It is now 7:30 AM on Monday, three days later. The power is still out, and the Health Department has determined that "no building without running water can open for business." Clients are calling and the company voicemail system is full. Employees are texting the Human Resources Director asking for guidance.

16. What do you tell them?

EXERCISE DEBRIEF:

17. What is missing from your plan?

18. What worked well in this scenario?

19. What did not work so well?

20. What could you do differently next time that would improve your response?

21. List the actions you will take to improve your plans.

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EXERCISE WRAP UP:

This completes the exercise. In order to maximize what can be learned from this effort, have all participants write down their thoughts and concerns. You can address these and the debrief issues at future meetings.

Notes:

Exercise Date:

Next Exercise Date:

FUTURE EXERCISES

Once you learn the basics of conducting an exercise, you can easily create your own scenarios. Additionally, you can try shorter, less formal tests such as posing real-world scenarios to employees at the end of a staff meeting.

“If the alarm in this building were to go off, we would exit the building. Once outside we are told that we cannot go back into the building for one week. What would you do? How would you continue to work?”

This will get people thinking about the possibilities and get them on board with your program. You may be surprised at your employees' increased level of growth and maturity when it comes to making the correct decisions following a disaster. This type of exercise can also be a great team-building activity.