



Workplace Safety

## Emergency Preparedness Training: Tabletop Exercises vs. Mock Drills

Gillian Scott | Aug 26, 2021

When it comes to emergency response, routines and procedures can get rusty because they are seldom used. Here's how you can make your emergency preparation safety program the best it can be.

Maybe you live in *Tornado Alley*. Perhaps you're situated along the East Coast of the United States, where *hurricanes are common*. Or maybe you just want to be ready in case of a *major power outage*.

Whatever your particular situation, preparing your facility for an emergency goes beyond having an emergency action plan. You'll also need to walk through different mock disaster plans and hold drills to make sure employees know what to do should the worst happen.

Why is this important? Because emergency response routines and procedures are usually rarely used, so they tend to get rusty. A good way to counter this tendency is to make sure employees participate in training, drills and exercises frequently. The more often your employees practice these procedures, the more likely it is that they will remember what to do in the event of an emergency—even if they don't practice response skills every day.

### Emergency Prep Training: Drill Exercises

Performing regular drill exercises can prepare workplaces for emergencies like chemical spills, fires, severe weather, toxic fumes and electrocution.

But safety managers should think beyond preparing for basic emergencies, such as making sure they have clear exit routes or *the tools and supplies on-site* to clean up a spill, and also consider the risk of business interruptions that stem from natural disasters, acts of terrorism and workplace violence. Taking this kind of "all-hazard" approach to drill exercises can increase your efficiency and simplify training for your workers.

In addition to identifying possible workplace risks, emergency response planning should clearly define employee roles and responsibilities, establish a chain of command, and mark evacuation routes and assembly points.

While having an emergency response plan on paper is a step toward being prepared for an emergency,

without open lines of communication, training, drills and exercises, employees may not have the skills necessary to instinctively handle emergency situations. For this reason, it's worth making sure all employees know their roles during an emergency, as this helps to ensure a more successful and safe response.

*Is your facility ready for bad weather? Read **Severe Weather Preparedness for the Workplace** and download our checklist.*

## What OSHA Requires for Emergency Prep

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) does not specifically require tabletop or mock drills, but it does require emergency plans in a *variety of standards*.

For instance, in the standard **29 CFR 1910.38**, emergency action plans, the agency requires companies to have procedures in place for emergency evacuations, to designate and train employees to assist in evacuations, and to review the plan with all employees who will be affected by it.

Other standards, such as **29 CFR 1910.120**, hazardous waste operations and emergency response, require the development of an emergency response plan and require it to be "rehearsed" but do not say what the rehearsal should look like.

Likewise, on its emergency preparedness page, OSHA recommends but does not require "arranging training drills for responders and facility personnel to practice emergency procedures together."

In its ***Evacuation Plans and Procedures eTool***, OSHA calls practice drills "a good idea." "Include outside resources such as fire and police departments when possible," the agency suggests. "After each drill, gather management and employees to evaluate the effectiveness of the drill. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of your plan and work to improve it."

## Emergency Prep Training: Tabletop Exercises

According to the ***Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program*** (HSEEP), practice exercises can be categorized as either discussion-based or operations-based.

Tabletop exercises, also referred to as "TTXs," are one type of discussion-based exercise. Others include seminars, workshops and games. Discussion-based exercises "focus on strategic, policy-oriented issues, and facilitators or presenters lead the discussion, keeping participants moving towards meeting the exercise objectives," the program says.

During a tabletop exercise, an emergency situation is simulated in a meeting room or classroom and discussion of various issues takes place, with a goal of pinpointing problem areas and potential roadblocks.

TTXs can be used to enhance general awareness, validate plans and procedures, rehearse concepts,

and/or assess the types of systems needed to guide the prevention of, protection from, mitigation of, response to, and recovery from a defined incident, according to the HSEEP.

The HSEEP says a simple tabletop exercise will involve just one scenario, while in a more complicated exercise, new information will be introduced at different points during the exercise to see how team members react to changing circumstances.

In its *"Tips for Conducting Table Exercises,"* EHS Support recommends that facilities planning to hold an exercise identify key stakeholders; develop a script, including surprise elements; provide a timeline for the exercise; and designate reviewers who watch and record what happens.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency created a *series of tabletop exercises* for use by private sector organizations. The scenarios cover *hurricanes*, earthquakes, cyberattacks and other emergencies.

## Emergency Prep Training: Mock Drill Exercises

Mock drills are a type of operations-based exercise. Other types include functional exercises and full-scale exercises.

These exercises can be used to validate plans, policies, agreements and procedures, to clarify roles and responsibilities, and to identify resource gaps, according to the HSEEP. Operations-based exercises are characterized by actual reaction to an exercise scenario, such as initiating communications or mobilizing personnel and resources.

Drill exercises are useful for seeing if emergency action plans can be carried out as designed or if more training is required. They are also good for practice—to reemphasize procedures and roles.

For every drill, "clearly defined plans, procedures, and protocols need to be in place," the HSEEP says. Personnel need to be familiar with those plans and trained in the processes and procedures to be drilled.

In order to prepare for a mock drill in the most effective way, managers should be careful to set them up for times when everyone in a facility is available and able to take part. It's also important to shut down machinery, as necessary, to protect workers participating in the drill and emergency workers who might enter a site.

Managers may also take the opportunity to measure how long it takes people to gather at assembly points during a mock drill, or how long it takes to put on any personal protective equipment that is needed for the drill.

**"After each drill, gather management and employees to evaluate the effectiveness of the drill. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of your plan and work to improve it."**

OSHA

## Post Emergency-Prep Training: What to Do After a Drill

Once a drill is over, organizers can analyze how things went and decide if changes are needed.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's publication *"How to Plan for Workplace Emergencies and Evacuations"* suggests gathering both management and workers to evaluate the effectiveness of the drill.

"Identify the strengths and weaknesses of your plan and work to improve it," the agency says.

You may decide you need to train your employees. If so, consider requiring annual training, OSHA suggests. You may also offer training when you do the following:

- Develop your initial plan
- Hire new employees
- Introduce new equipment, materials or processes into the workplace that affect evacuation routes
- Change the layout or design of the facility
- Revise or update your emergency procedures

## Preparing for COVID-19 Emergencies

The challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic mean employers must now consider ways to protect employees in the workplace.

As OSHA notes, without sustained human-to-human transmission, most American workers are not at significant risk of infection. However, workers involved in some industries where sustained contact is required are at risk.

OSHA's **COVID-19 webpage** provides information for workers and employers about the pandemic and ways to prepare for emergencies and protect workers.

Employers should adopt infection prevention and control strategies based on a thorough workplace **hazard assessment**, using appropriate combinations of engineering and administrative controls, safe work practices, and PPE to prevent worker exposures, according to OSHA.

Depending on where their operations fall in OSHA's **exposure risk pyramid**, workers and employers should also consult additional, specific guidance for those at either lower (i.e., caution) or increased (i.e., medium, high or very high) risk of exposure.

The exposure risk pyramid and a workplace **hazard assessment** can help workers and employers identify exposure risk levels commonly associated with various sectors, OSHA says.

The most up-to-date information on the virus and the pandemic may be found in OSHA's publication "**Protecting Workers: Guidance on Mitigating and Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace.**"

*This article was updated from a previous version to include information about the COVID-19 pandemic.*

***How do you put your emergency plans to the test? Were you aware of all the recent changes? Share your insights in the comments below.***