

Oil Spill Exercise Planning

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Abstract

Recent global and UK oil spill incidents have highlighted the high profile such events now have in the media and the subsequent impact this may have on an organisation. Critical to influencing external perception is how the incident is managed by the various responding stakeholders. To ensure the most effective response can be implemented and sustained pre-agreed processes, procedures, personnel and equipment needs to be put in place and then sustained. The implementation of an exercise programme is a proven method for constantly testing systems and confirming veracity within a controlled environment.

The skill required in planning and executing a successful exercise is to simulate a real incident that will trigger the responses from participants and arrangements. It is important to identify the organisations to be tested along with clear, focused and realistic objectives. Driving the exercise is the scenario. It is critical that it is realistic and contains sufficient technical detail that will yield the anticipated response. Supporting the scenario is a comprehensive set of documents that will provide all participants with the necessary information to respond appropriately.

Artificial facts may have to be introduced to provoke a particular response. These need to be scripted and articulated to the participants through pre-exercise joining instructions and briefings.

Exercise controllers or Directing Staff are necessary to ensure the exercise is delivered in accordance with the scenario timeline and participants remain within the boundaries of the exercise.

Coordinating the exercise is the planning team and key to its success is its membership. Experience has shown that large planning teams require strong leadership, effective communications and clear rules of engagement and empowerment. Equally as important is the early establishment of the necessary funding that will allow appropriate planning resources to be brought on board.

Following the preparation of the exercise is its execution. A series of Directing Staff, Evaluator and Role-player briefings should be held prior to the exercise. A central command centre needs to be established from where the Exercise Directors can coordinate activities.

The performance of the participants needs to be captured by the Evaluators. It is therefore necessary to have in place performance indicators which will provide a measurement of effectiveness.

Following the termination of the exercise it is necessary to collate all the feedback from the evaluators, directing staff, role-players and participants. The collated information can then be passed on to the personnel responsible for compiling the Post Exercise

Report (PXR) detailing the key exercise events but importantly contain SMART actions which can then be simply implemented to improve arrangements.

Determining objectives and participants

The skill required in planning and executing a successful exercise is to accurately simulate a real incident that will trigger the expected responses from the exercise participants to assess their performance.

Initially it is important to identify the organisations to be tested along with the associated processes, procedures and arrangements. Once understood, clear, focused and realistic objectives can be established and agreed between key participants.

It is then necessary to engage exercise participants who may comprise of individual personnel and / or organisations either in part or as a whole. It is essential that where a process is being tested the owner of said process is represented to replicate a realistic and measurable response. The recently run UK National Oil and Gas Offshore Exercise “Sula” required the coordination of over 200 participants representing over 24 companies, government agencies and Non Government Organisations (NGOs).

Scenario development

Driving the exercise is the scenario and timely injects containing the necessary information to involve the exercise participants. It is critical that the information communicated is realistic and contains sufficient technical detail that will yield the anticipated response. This requires appropriate technical personnel to be part of the scenario development to guarantee technical accuracy who may then be utilised as part of the evaluation team. Planning experience indicates that the greater the number of

real participants the less complex the exercise scenario and timeline is to compile. This eliminates the requirement for the planning team to develop the anticipated responses from non-participants.

Documentation

In addition to the scenario is the requirement to have in place a full set of documents that will provide all participants, Role-Players, exercise Directing Staff and Evaluators with the necessary information to respond appropriately to their designated role. The size of the exercise will determine the number of documents and the level of detail required with version numbers closely monitored to ensure the most current versions are distributed. The main documents include but are not limited to joining instructions, scenario outline, scenario timeline, participants briefing, Role-Players briefing, telephone directory, Evaluator and Directing Staff briefing, evaluator assessment sheets and faxes.

Measuring Performance and Exercise Control

Assessing the participants during the course of the exercise is necessary to measure performance. It is therefore a requirement to strategically locate experienced subject matter Evaluators at the various response points / centres to monitor the participants response against the performance criteria. This will then form the basis for the post exercise report.

In addition to the evaluators it may be necessary to put in place exercise controllers or Directing Staff whose primary role is to a) ensure the exercise is delivered in

accordance with the scenario timeline b) that the participants are briefed on exercise parameters c) participants remain within the boundaries of the exercise d) where necessary provide clarity especially with regards to artificial elements.

Managing exercise parameters

Where real organizations cannot be represented it is important that an accurate reflection of their anticipated interface be captured and incorporated into the exercise to ensure a realistic response. This should be done through well briefed Technical Role-Players overseen by a Role-Player Coordinator strategically located close to the response centres and to the Directing Staff. There should be sufficient and robust communications with contact details entered into the exercise telephone directory alongside real players. Depending upon the scope of the exercise it may be appropriate to have in place subject matter role-players e.g. media to probe and test specific parts of the organisation.

Artificial facts about the scenario may have to be introduced into the exercise to provoke a particular response from the participants e.g. the weather forecast to transport an oil slick to a particular location. These need to be carefully considered and integrated into the script through the time line and / or Role-Players and then carefully articulated to the participants through pre-exercise joining instructions and briefings. Directing Staff then need to be alert during the exercise and exert guidance where necessary.

The role of the planning team

Coordinating the exercise is the role of the planning team and key to its success is its membership with regards to size and composition. Experience has shown that large planning teams require strong leadership, effective communications and clear rules of

engagement and empowerment to eliminate conflict of activity, layers of bureaucracy and politics that may influence the development of the exercise objectives and/or the scenario. Leadership / Chairing is either undertaken by a representative of the sponsor organisation or delegated to a company or individual familiar with exercise planning. Regardless of the number of people engaged in the planning team, and the organisation they represent, it is critical that at least one member is familiar with the processes and procedures for planning and executing an exercise and is able to provide guidance to the other members on their remit. Equally as important is the early establishment of the necessary funding that will allow appropriate planning resources to be brought on board in a timely fashion. Where possible exercise participants should not form part of the planning team to avoid any pre-prepared responses that could undermine the credibility of the exercise.

For exercises requiring the deployment of physical assets (e.g. oil spill equipment) it is necessary to determine whether this is best achieved live, in direct response to inputs during the exercise, or against a set deployment programme independent of the exercise timeline. This decision depends upon the criticality of testing the response and in the event of a delay, such as poor weather, the impact on the rest of the exercise.

Exercise Delivery

Following the preparation of the exercise is its execution, the level of its success being linked directly to the amount of effort undertaken during the planning phase. A series of Directing Staff, Evaluator and Role-player briefings should be held prior to the exercise so all those involved understand their remit with clear command and control arrangements and communication pathways in place. A central command centre needs

to be established close to the main response centre from where the Exercise Directors can communicate with the Directing Staff and coordinate activities.

The performance of the participants needs to be captured by the Evaluators or depending upon the size of the exercise the Directing Staff. To assist this process it is necessary to have in place key performance indicators detailing the anticipated response which will then provide a measurement of team, individual or process effectiveness. However, in addition to the observations captured by the exercise staff it is also good practice to give the participants the opportunity to provide feedback. This should be done directly after the exercise at the “Hot debrief” facilitated by the Directing Staff.

Observers

Major exercises are normally associated with the need to meet a specific legislative requirement. By extension this will also attract requests to observe proceedings from non participating organisations. The inclusion of observers is a great opportunity to broaden awareness and knowledge but needs to be carefully managed to avoid conflict with the running of the exercise. If attempted this should be undertaken by a dedicated observer planning team, normally provided by the sponsor organisation. Key areas of focus should be on who and how many to invite. In addition the logistics required to transport personnel, brief, chaperone and provide catering need to be taken into consideration.

Feedback and reporting

Following the termination of the exercise it is necessary to collate all the feedback from the evaluators, directing staff, role-players and participants. It is beneficial for all the

exercise staff to have a closed door debrief to confirm all elements of the exercise are shut down and to provide a brief resume of how the exercise went. The collated information can then be passed on to the personnel responsible for compiling the Post Exercise Report (PXR). A timeframe should be set for a draft copy to be forwarded to a predetermined review panel for comment before being finalised for distribution either by email or hard copy.