

Today's Exercise: Terrorist Attack!

One of the most interesting and challenging Tabletop or Simulation Exercises is the Terrorist Attack disaster scenario. Immediate disaster response efforts have to deal with deaths and serious injuries with limited availability of normal public emergency services. Business recovery efforts have to be developed without key team members who had perished during the attack, a seriously degraded workforce, building destruction, limited alternate site resources, utility and communication outages, and restricted travel capabilities.

Attack Scenario & Fatalities

Our terrorist attack contemplated a bomb explosion destroying the home office building. In the scenario we “gave” the company a few minutes notice to evacuate; of course there were a couple of team members who were working on a rush assignment and did not evacuate immediately.

Normally speaking one tries to avoid identifying fatalities by name during an exercise. We felt that having no fatalities would be too unrealistic and that the teams should practice business recovery without the capabilities of key individuals. Fatalities, the team members who did not evacuate immediately, were selected by lottery at the beginning of the exercise.

The Disaster Environment

We were careful to accurately describe the general disaster environment during a “Code Red” terrorist attack. I have read about other terrorist attack exercises where the backup teams were preparing to fly to the hot site immediately after bomb detonations. This appears to be very unrealistic. To begin with, if the country is under this type of attack, all non-military aircraft will almost certainly be grounded. Under Code Red conditions everyone is suppose to take cover, preferable at home with other members of the family. All attention should be directed towards life safety concerns; executing business recovery steps during a terrorist attack is not realistic for most organizations in the immediate vicinity of the attack(s).

Environmental conditions throughout the recovery period need to be clearly defined. At periodic intervals available resources: staff, telecommunication, travel, alternate site availability, utility, etc. were defined. Gradually these resources would become available.

Disaster Scenario Details

The disaster scenario was a powerful bomb detonation in a subway station located directly beneath the organization’s home office building. There were also other bomb detonations in the general region that disabled or seriously degraded local travel, communications and normal utility and public services. Alternate site options for non-technology operations were limited. We did place some limits on the attack. There was no radiation, biological or chemical release. The attack was also restricted to the general Washington, D.C. area.

The Organization’s Response

Immediate disaster response actions focused on life safety procedures. How do you get medical attention to immobile and unconscious employees? If that is impossible, how do you get them to medical centers? With transportation services disabled, how does everyone get home? When and how do we assemble the recovery teams?

Initially business recovery efforts focused on assembling the teams and establishing lines of communications with employees first and then with customers. Work functions would have to be prioritized in great detail. Only very critical business activities could be addressed two days after the event. By day seven, critical business activities were operational but generally with some level of degradation. Even after 30 days, when a new permanent location could be established, shortages of experienced staff would not allow for fully normal business operations.

Planning the Exercise

To more accurately simulate an actual immediate disaster situation, the CEO wanted the entire exercise to be a complete surprise. I worked directly with the CEO and her assistant; we were the only people who were knowledgeable of the upcoming event.

The emergency management and response teams were unaware of the disaster scenario and, in fact, were completely unaware that an exercise was planned. Team members were to report to the CEO's office supposedly to review the Business Continuity Plan. Once everyone had assembled at the CEO's office they were directed across the street to a hotel where the exercise would be held. To add a note of desperation, no refreshments were served.

This is a good exercise for an experienced group, as the destruction level of the event has almost no boundary. I would not recommend this exercise as a first-time exercise for a new management group.

The company that conducted the exercise was United Educators located in Chevy Chase, MD. United Educators has a strong commitment to business continuity planning, maintaining a good Business Continuity Plan with good crisis management protocols. Quarterly review meetings are held and periodic exercises are conducted to assure the effectiveness of the plan in an actual emergency situation.

About the Author

Douglas M. Henderson (FSA, CBCP) is the President of Disaster Management, Inc., has 20 years of experience in the management and human resources fields with major consulting firms. In August of 1992, Doug was the key associate of the Emergency Response Team for a consulting firm located in South Miami-Dade County. Inspired by the real life business experience with Hurricane Andrew, Doug founded Disaster Management, Inc. in 1993. For additional information Doug can be reached at doug@disastermgt.com or (772) 335-9750.