

This brief provides basic information to guide you in conducting a tabletop exercise. We have provided an example of a tabletop exercise conducted in Los Angeles to test local capacity to carry out a violence prevention program.

What is a tabletop exercise?

A tabletop exercise is a discussion-based session with key personnel and stakeholders used to discuss roles and responsibilities during a simulated situation in order to assess their processes and procedures.

Why conduct a tabletop exercise?

Identify existing capacities and gaps:

- Finalize early program development and inform late program development activities.
- Transition to program implementation activities.
- Develop an approach to conduct an impact evaluation.

Strengthen relationships:

- Use tabletop exercise to engage community partners and build trust between stakeholders.

Step-by-step guide for conducting a tabletop exercise

Step 1	Set specific aims of the exercise
Step 2	Conceptualizing the scenario with clarification of goals and methods
Step 3	Writing the scenarios and prompts used in the tabletop exercise
Step 4	Developing the evaluation tools and methods specific for the tabletop exercise
Step 5	Selecting and preparing the facilitators and participants for the tabletop exercise
Step 6	Inviting the observers to the tabletop exercise
Step 7	Creating a space that is conducive for participation (i.e. room set up, timing, materials)
Step 8	Conducting the tabletop exercise
Step 9	Facilitating discussions and debriefs at the exercise
Step 10	Evaluating the tabletop exercise, compiling results and feeding back to stakeholders

Conducting a violent extremism intervention tabletop exercise

The purpose of the tabletop exercise was to explore how an existing violence prevention program would perform when encountering a client planning a hate-inspired, targeted attack at a school or workplace.

Two 90-minute scenarios were centered on cases of a possible violent perpetrators played by an actor. In each scenario the actor was joined by a team of two clinical interviewers from the Department of Mental Health (DMH). The DMH interviewers were asked to conduct a threat assessment, arrive at a disposition, and arrange for any services or referrals. Throughout the simulation, the moderators interjected new information into the scenario to test existing capacities and gaps. Persons from community based organizations, law enforcement, or governmental agencies participated as observers. A team of evaluators assessed the clinical teams in the tabletop.

Findings

The tabletop exercise demonstrated multiple existing capacities:

1. Ability to establish multidisciplinary teams, to conduct a robust discussion of the case among the team with a proper assessment of threat indicators, and to determine a treatment plan including case management and disposition;
2. Ability to conduct a comprehensive threat assessment which included gathering information from family and the Internet/social media;
3. Ability to determine if the assessment teams knew how to reach law enforcement when needed and had Memorandums of Agreement to do so.

Gaps identified during the tabletop included:

1. Lack of cultural competency regarding marginalized communities;
2. Uncertainty about the use of measures and tools;
3. Problems with making referrals;
4. Problems regarding activation and coordination with community leaders and organizations;
5. Uncertainty regarding monitoring and responding to media.

Overall, the tabletop findings confirmed that the existing capacities of a violence prevention program with the support of law enforcement agencies, could form the basis of a program to prevent individuals who raise concerns for conducting targeted violence against a school or workplace. The program planners used the evaluation results to identify priority gaps and begin filling them.