

Rehearsing the Crisis Response

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I am frequently asked about effective themes for tabletop exercises. I usually explain that the answer is contained in the first 15 minutes of the evening national news. My feeling is that the lead stories provide areas of attention for crisis management planning and rehearsal, and based on that thinking, the following are the “Hot Topics” for tabletop exercises:

- 1. Hazmat** – A train derailment occurred on February 3, 2023, at 8:55 p.m. EST, when 38 cars of a Norfolk Southern freight train carrying hazardous materials derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. This incident has been the lead story on the news continuously since then. All the colleges have some exposure to this type of disaster, from a rail car or tanker truck accident, raising questions about the effectiveness of the college response to a large-scale Hazmat event.
- 2. Protest** – Following the train stories, the news usually turns to our current political divide, usually reporting examples of the increasingly extreme liberal and conservative positions on issues ranging from gun control to women’s health issues to personal lifestyle. We often see opposing groups protesting, sometimes turning to confrontation with each other or law enforcement. These protests often seem to occur on college campuses and may be instigated by outside agitators. It does beg the question about our ability to respond to an on-campus protest event that has the potential to turn violent.
- 3. Active shooter** – Many of us feel that the chance of an active shooter on campus is low; however, the incidence of gun violence and mass shootings continue to increase. There are two types of shooting events that could occur:
 - Intentional – someone has a plan specifically directed at the college or a staff person/faculty, such as a disgruntled employee or student.
 - Unintentional – a case of road rage, gang behavior, or personal vendetta that occurs on or near campus that involves shooting that injures a college employee or student.

The above events unfold quickly, and employees are usually the first responders. Are we prepared to respond and manage the chaos that exists in the immediate aftermath of the critical event?

Fortunately, your DMI colleagues have experience with designing and conducting tabletop exercises in these three areas. In fact, DMI has prepared exercises in each of these areas that could be modified to suit your campus circumstances.

It doesn’t matter how you conduct these exercises – you can do yourself, use DMI, or another outside local, state, federal or private entity. What matters is that you practice the response. Practice builds familiarity with the response procedures and builds confidence.

We are all probably familiar with the saying, “practice makes perfect.” That doesn’t apply to crisis response; but “practice makes prepared” is certainly doable.