A TABLETOP EXERCISE IS A DISCUSSION-BASED EVENT IN WHICH PARTICIPANTS MEET IN A “CLASS-ROOM” SETTING TO ADDRESS THE ACTIONS THAT THEY WOULD TAKE IN RESPONSE TO AN OFFENSIVE, DEFENSIVE OR OTHERWISE EMERGENCY SITUATION—a preliminary “proving ground” for a product prior to its completion. Tabletops can be an effective initial step to deliberate the program goals and objectives as well as the full range of issues related to the product(s) to be developed—in operational or even crisis scenarios. These exercises provide a relevant, credible and consequential forum to examine roles and responsibilities, unearth interdependencies, develop needs and risk assessments, and evaluate contingency plans.

In the last two issues of this magazine, I discussed the value of simulation in decision making and recommended that Tabletop and/or Wargame exercises replace traditional case studies in both classrooms and in actual decision making. That is, replace the static case study goal of examining “What happened?” with the dynamic tabletop goal of determining “What if?”

Razzetti, a retired U.S. Navy captain, is a management consultant, auditor, military analyst and frequent contributor to Defense Acquisition magazine and the former Defense AT&L magazine. He is the author of five management books, including Fixes That Last—The Executive’s Guide to Fix It or Lose It Management, and has served on the advisory boards of two business schools.
Figure 1 (from Part I) summarizes the general requirements for simulation in a tabletop or wargame exercise. Part II expanded each of the four areas in Figure 1, to suggest that proven management practices and approaches lead to “excellent” decisions.

Part III will go into more detail on TACSIT development—the principle part of the tabletop. Through the employment of Tactical Situations or TACSITs in the tabletop exercise, we’ll move on to “What’s next?” and (hopefully) “What a good idea!” Part III, like its predecessors, is based on my previous experience as a military analyst and developing the tabletop exercise concept for reserve units mobilized to deploy to the Middle East. Part III will add still more detail to the work of the simulation development processes, helping planners and program managers to create effective and realistic tabletop or wargame exercises in real time, and leading to actionable conclusions, recommendations, and executions.

This is also where to employ what the late, great management guru Dr. W. Edwards Deming called “Profound Knowledge.” Deming’s theory of profound knowledge is a management philosophy grounded in systems theory and based on the principle that an organization is a system of interrelated processes and people. The success of all participants within a program or project depends on the ability of the Department of Defense (DoD) to orchestrate the delicate balance of each component to optimize the entire system.

**Tabletop Development**

The specific program objectives become the tabletop’s specific objectives.

Tabletop development is where planners do what they are supposed to do: plan. All areas of operational and programmatic expertise meld the TACSIT into a functioning, dynamic, living structure, with a goal of creating a comprehensive exercise that uses the best information to arrive at (all) the best possible conclusions, recommendations, strategies, tactics and concepts of operations (CONOPS).

The Tabletop Planning Team should include experienced tabletop and/or wargame facilitators, who can orchestrate and streamline the processes. Referring to Figure 1: “Concept Development,” “Research” and “Integration of Ideas Into a Prototype” are the same as those developed for the product and should cover the same goals and objectives. Accordingly, “Exercise Development” should both follow and reflect the same developmental process as the product. You can’t do this with a case study.

The exercise (again, either tabletop or wargame) now includes battlespace management, or who does what—and where. Standard operating procedures (SOPs), CONOPS and checklists, reduce the battlespace management to workable and replicable practices and procedures, chains of command and communications networks. Logistics planners structure the supply chain for normal and surge operations in accordance with the threat scenarios, timelines, weather and the environment.

This also is where planners and program managers take a critical look at technological “yield.” That is: Do the resources—however complex—optimally and successfully accomplish the missions. Or is a greater mastery required? The specific objectives of the program become the specific objectives of the tabletop.

Figure 2 (from Part II, see Defense Acquisition, May-June 2019) includes some of the abbreviations with footnotes to avoid any confusion. Most of the terms, are in common use in the military. The red box to the left covers the best management practices that are essential to program management in general, and, particularly, to forming the exercise and the decisions that come from it.

TACSIT simulations (in tabletops and wargames) are supported by pointed, actionable approaches that modern management books collectively call the practice of excellence, and excellence must become the way the system does everything.

We discuss the benefits of modeling and simulation in tabletop exercises for DoD in general terms only. Actual TACSIT scenarios vary with each program or project. The
private sector already uses tabletop exercises in areas such as Business Continuity Management. Many consulting firms offer TACSIT development, facilitation services and gaming software. They can be found on the Internet. The TACSIT scenario, developed and/or chosen for its greatest applicability, forms the basis of the tabletop.

**Tabletop Play—an Exercise, Not a Homework Assignment**

Tabletop participants, normally seated around a long conference table, deal with a scenario affecting the command and its mission. An experienced facilitator will guide discussion by asking questions designed to address the exercise’s objectives and to keep participants focused. He or she may choose to inject modifications into the scenario to further stimulate discussion. Participants also will be encouraged to question their own beliefs and understandings, as well as those of the other participants.

Figure 3 describes the actual creation and execution of the tabletop. The subject matter in the box marked “Input/Preparations” reflects

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**Figure 2. Expanding “Exercise Development”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Planning</th>
<th>Risk Identification/Mgmt.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metrics Development</td>
<td>Gap Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Synergy</td>
<td>Innovation</td>
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<td>Value-Add</td>
<td>Root Cause Analysis</td>
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<td>Technology Transfer</td>
<td>Vulnerability Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWOT* Analysis</td>
<td>Needs Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISO 9000/27000/28000****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities and Threats
** Pronounced KONN-struct; used as a noun
*** Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration
**** Quality, Information Security, and Supply Chain Security international management standards

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**Figure 3. TACSIT Play**

**Input/Preparations**
- Goals/Objectives
- Taskings
- Models/simulations
- Assumptions
- Risk assessments
- Checklists
- Feedback loops established
- Initial SOP/CONOPS
- Team (operators/engineers)
- Threat assessments
- Battlespace shaping
- Resources identified
- Timeline established
- Questions to be answered
- Sensor performance predictions
- Draft C5ISR (Note 1)
- Initial considerations (Note 2)

**TACSIT Play**
- Environmental Assessment/Play Modeling Simulations
- Red Cell (enemy play/database)
- Battlespace assessment
- Host Nation support
- Database review/update/mgmt

**Conclusions/Recommendations**
- TACSIT reconstructions
- Mission assessment
- Goals & objects met/not met
- Decision times
- Revised SOP/CONOPS
- Revised risk assessments/mitigations
- Summary of innovation opportunities
- Non-material solutions
- Revised needs assessments
- Revised database
- Revised checklists
- Training requirements
- Logistics requirements
- Revised C5ISR (Note 1)
- Revised battlespace shaping
- Revised considerations (Note 2)
- Design changes
- Configuration controls
- Follow-on modeling & simulations

Feedback/Revision

Note 1: Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Combat Systems, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance
Note 2: (Notional) Mission preparation time, payload, crew size/loading, speed, distance, time on station, loads, survivability, vulnerability, situational awareness, connectivity, supportability, leathality
the work of Figure 1, and is needed to make the TACSIT realistic and actionable.

You won’t get this material with a case study.

Team members assigned to various positions (e.g., friendly forces, host country, Command Center, enemy) “game” the TACSIT by iteratively introducing changes and simulations into the scenario, such as (to name a few):

- Monsoons, sand storms, temperature extremes
- Dock worker strikes and work stoppages
- Intrusions, attacks (including chemical/biological), sabotage, improved explosive devices

Modeling of a simulated chemical/biological attack (for example) should include:

- Situational awareness, risk and probability of attack
- Agent detection and identification
- Defensive and avoidance measures and safe stay times
- Avoiding and/or rerouting around the contaminated areas and the probability of additional contamination
- Determining alternate routes or storage areas
- Personnel and material decontamination and definition of acceptable levels
- Utility losses and back up capabilities (e.g., portable generators)
- Resupply of expended decontamination material (including Continental U.S. reachback as required)

Make sure the TACSIT is comprehensive and ready to be modeled. First draft TACSITs can be either too general or too narrow; not dealing with specific details; and thus not ready for play and incapable of creating credible intelligence for decision making.

Please take a good look at the “Conclusions/Recommendations” box in Figure 3. These are the potential harvests of dynamic and thoughtful TACSIT play. Developing and/or revising all of these (or as many as possible) virtually guarantees the success of the simulation and goes a long way toward guaranteeing program or project success. You won’t get this material with a case study, either.

It could be argued that the same end products (a CONOPS, for example) could be developed from a case study. However, the data robustness and credibility, plus the ownership that comes from modeling and simulating different conditions, and the interplay and modeling of outcomes could not be replicated using even the most comprehensive (but static) case study.

### Tabletop Facilitator and Participants

The primary role of a facilitator is to ensure that the tabletop exercise proceeds on schedule and achieves the desired outcome of determining the soundness of the program and the viability of the final documentation. To achieve those results, there are numerous (and often spontaneous) questions that can be asked as the exercise begins and then throughout TACSIT play, and finally to the assignment of responsibility for corrective actions.

A facilitator also has the option to introduce “roadblocks” to the players, to further identify gaps or weaknesses in the documented strategies and plans, as well as the hardware, and to add additional failure conditions during the tabletop exercise. It’s better and safer to have these issues injected in the conference room than on the job, or in the field when it often is too late.

Tabletop participants should include operational commanders, program managers, technicians, operators, intelligence specialists or others critical to the mission of the forces from all the key commands and organizations—the most qualified that you can find. Public affairs specialists keep up with changing situations and draft media releases. Participation also should include the contractors, DoD specialists in finance, human resources and public relations, as well as vendors and other supply-chain partners. Each must understand his or her own responsibilities and those of the others. All organizations...
must send at least one qualified member, empowered to act for his or her parent organization during the exercise and to commit that organization to the action steps that follow the tabletop’s findings.

Findings and Conclusions

Participants should complete initial after-action reports (discussions, debriefs or “hot washups”) as soon as possible after the tabletop, in order to maximize its benefit. Data, albeit raw in some instances, are presented at that time. Participants compare findings with program goals; and action plans are initiated for all the tabletop findings identified.

Tabletop exercise findings can include, for example:

- Product designs require modification.
- Documentation requires revision or additional detail (i.e., CONOPS out-of-date).
- The Commander’s “Dashboard” of situational awareness, critical data and required reporting lack sufficient input.
- The product’s advertised Top Level Requirements (TLR) are insufficient or excessive for the missions of the product, as developed in the concept design stages (Example: a landing craft may not require an especially shallow depth).
- The sequence of tasks and strategies needs review or change; timelines are not realistic.
- Additional assignment of responsibilities is needed, for example, to ensure continuity of command for all key missions.
- Training programs and logistics pipelines are unrealistic, and/or lack sufficient range and depth.

Reports provide not only the list of action items but also the justification for each. Supporting and feeder reports (where required) should assess more in-depth data analyses, gaps discovered, and the corrective actions needed to correct those gaps. This last part is critical. Early on “buy-in” from the highest levels and continuing support is essential to success of the tabletop.

The Plan of Action and Milestones—Who’s Responsible for What, and When

Nothing is worse (or more common) than valuable intelligence sent to the file cabinet or placed on a shelf. “Wrap up” reports may contain everything worth knowing. However, like the case study, they may be considered an end in themselves, instead of the beginning.

The best way to ensure that the findings continue receiving proper attention and action is to go the last step in the tabletop process and create the Plan of Action and Milestones, or POA&M, with responsibilities, tracking methods, and milestones/completion dates included. The POA&M is a working document that keeps all stakeholders focused.

Table 1. Notional Plan of Action and Milestones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal II</th>
<th>Develop the Concept of Operations (CONOPS) for Employment of the RH-XX Helicopter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>II.1</td>
<td>Develop Supporting Plans</td>
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<td>II.2</td>
<td>Develop Tabletop Exercise</td>
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<tr>
<td>II.3</td>
<td>Conduct Tabletop</td>
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Table 1 takes a notional program goal, breaks it down into objectives, assigns responsibilities and completion dates. Here is where you legitimate those otherwise lofty TLR goals in an actionable format that can be tracked by all stakeholders. Again, Table 1 is not from any actual contract or program.

Managing the POA&M on an EXCEL spreadsheet (and perhaps on a network) makes it easy for stakeholders to track, update and follow up, without need for special meetings or supplemental reports.

Case studies can tell us a great deal about the past but very little about the present and virtually nothing about the future, unless we are determined to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. DoD should take whatever worthwhile case study/history data it can extract from the past and use it to inform and predict the future—discarding what it doesn’t need and modeling the rest to enhance what it does need.

Tabletop exercises can provide a cost-effective method of exercising missions, concepts and products, while causing minimal disruption to real-world operations. Modeling and simulating events and conditions effectively raise the level of operational and training awareness and proficiency.

The POA&M is a management tool and not just a wrap-up report—and it’s the only report that the tabletop needs. The work to be done (however formidable) is broken down into dynamic, actionable component steps. Responsibilities and completion dates (milestones) are tracked at all levels.

DoD acquisition can profit greatly by the increased use of tabletop exercises and wargames.

The author can be reached at generazz@aol.com.

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