Tabletop Exercises

for Added Value in Affordable Acquisition

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A tabletop exercise is an activity in which key personnel assigned high-level roles and responsibilities are gathered to deliberate various simulated emergency or rapid response situations. While tabletops frequently are used to improve team responses to disaster preparedness and emergency planning, they also can contribute to less time-critical challenges, such as program management.

Tabletop exercises can enable program managers (PMs) to:

- Evaluate all phases of programs, including emergency responses.
- Identify equipment design deficiencies or tactical shortcomings.
- Test or validate recently changed or modified strategies or tactics.
- Clarify objectives, roles, and responsibilities.
- Obtain feedback and recommendations from key participants, especially operators.
- Improve coordination.
- Develop metrics for use during program execution and actual operations.
- Identify/validate training requirements.
- Assess capabilities and identify needed personnel and material resources.
- Develop draft Concepts of Operations (CONOPS) and Techniques, Tactics, and Procedures (TTP) for further modification and improvement.
- Address fact-of-life issues, such as cybersecurity and antiterrorism/force protection.

Tabletop Versus Wargame

Most members of the military understand wargames, and that's fine. Many senior officers have participated in them, which also is fine. Wargames, however, can be too hard to schedule, prepare for and fund—especially if lots of realism and participation are needed. Tabletops are easier, faster and, in their own way, can be just as productive.

Table 1 summarizes the similarities and differences between tabletop exercises and wargames. PMs can use tabletops to focus on the requirement for platforms, strategies, and uncertain sets of tactics and procedures, rather than the actual employment of each. Tabletop "play" focuses on validation of risks, needs and approaches, keeping in mind always the realities of retaliation by the adversary.

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PMs, desperate for time and funds, but not so desperate that they want to be pushed in the wrong direction, can accomplish a great deal with a tabletop.

Setting Up a Relevant Tabletop

Figure 1 provides an overview of the tabletop development and implementation process discussed in this article. The value of the tabletop is a direct result of the amount of preparation that goes into it.

Preparation first, prediction later: PMs can see from Figure 1 that a tabletop exercise requires nothing that would not be essential to any sound Department of Defense (DoD) program. Neither does the tabletop pursue or discover any intelligence that does not have direct, measurable worth. Predictions reached as a result of tabletop are only as valuable as the preparation by all participants.

Conduct of the tabletop, over and above normal workaday management practices, can lead to validation or minor program modification, major engineering or organizational changes, or possibly program cancellation.

In the July-August 2017 issue of *Defense AT&L*, I wrote about the "Ethical Imperative and the Courage to Cancel." A tabletop exercise as outlined in this article may provide PMs with just such an imperative, and a strong, defensible justification to cancel.

At the outset, the PM must ask several questions: What do I want to learn from the players? What do I want to convey to the players? How can the tabletop exercise optimally assure its goals and objectives? How do the participants reinforce each other? How is necessary information optimally exchanged? Does my program adequately address anti-terrorism, force protection, and crisis response? The final question should now be considered an indispensable element of any DoD program.

Table 1. Tabletop Versus Wargame

Areas of Tabletop Activity	Wargame	Tabletop
Program management and improvement	✓	✓
Adaptive to program stakeholder requirements	✓	✓
Strategy and concept development	✓	✓
Preliminary validation of operations and/or tactics	✓	✓
Logistic resupply	✓	✓
Evaluate preparedness	✓	✓
Threat and risk assessment	✓	✓
Needs assessment (e.g., training)	✓	✓
Define performance metrics and measures of effectiveness	✓	✓
Resources management	✓	✓
Disaster preparedness	✓	✓
Doctrine/checklist development	✓	✓
Pre-post incident evaluation and "hot wash-up"	✓	✓
Decisions	✓	✓
Conclusions, action plans, milestones, assignment of responsibilities, feedback	✓	✓
Two-sided, opposing, umpired maneuver	✓	
Actual Armed Forces elements participating	✓	
Computer modeled simulations	✓	

Table by the author.

Tabletop Objectives

The objective of the tabletop is support of the program itself; identification of material and non-material gaps and overlaps within the program as they relate to the successful completion of the mission; development of courses of (corrective) action (COA) based on threat and risk identification and assessment; and determination of the optimal function alignment of assigned forces in the command structure, as they pertain to roles and responsibilities, and finally, determination of optimal training and qualification approaches and strategies.

Key Assumptions

Although the following are not all-inclusive, they are key assumptions for PMs and exercise planners and facilitators:

- The tabletop process will identify (if only at the early stages) the need for a robust Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Recognizance (C4ISR) approach.
- There will be a need for an anti-terrorism/force protection (AT/FP) capability, if only to protect own forces, regardless of the location or projected scenario.
- Operating forces will be subject to attack, and time on station will increase vulnerability.
- Regardless of the specific mission, operations not adequately planned or supported will take longer and increase force vulnerability, whereas well-planned and -supported operations will leave forces vulnerable for shorter periods, and therefore less vulnerable.
- Forces will operate from forward operating bases, where only limited resupply and maintenance can take place.
- Analyses resulting from the tabletop may, of necessity, be qualitative. There likely will not be sufficient data to all quantitative analyses, especially when projecting new equipment, strategy, or tactics.
- Risks (threats and vulnerabilities) that are identified and assessed will be reevaluated after a notional course of corrective action has been identified. Please see my article on

Risk Management in the July-August 2016 issue of *Defense AT&L*. In it, I employ the Formula: Risk = Threat x Criticality x Vulnerability.

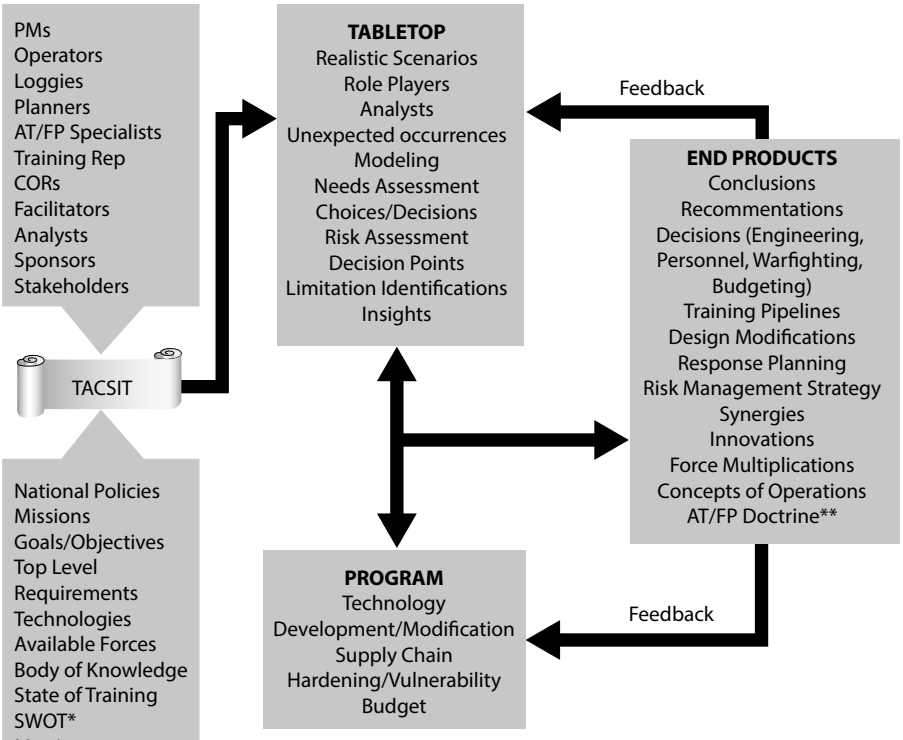
- For the purposes of this tabletop, budgeting decisions are more important than warfighting decisions.
- Findings and recommendations for corrective action will be divided into three categories:
  - — Material (technology-related)
  - — Non-materiel (CONOPS, operational plans)
  - — Functional alignment (operational chains of command)

Game play and analyses must identify areas of potential synergy and innovation (explained below).

Tactical Situations Needed

Threats, vulnerabilities, mission criticalities, (i.e., risks), and COAs cannot be assessed in the abstract. Findings and recommendations without real-world frames of reference would not be credible or supportable, despite the best efforts of subject-matter experts.

Figure 1. Tabletop Development and Use



* Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
** Anti-terrorism/Force Protection

Figure by the author.

Tactical Situations (TACSITs) are scenarios based on real-world conditions used to shape and forecast future operations. Modeling can be used when there is insufficient data or knowledge.

Figure 2 describes the creation and continuing improvement of TACSITs. As with almost any project, an ongoing feedback loop will increase productivity and potential contribution.

TACSITs should contain the scenario outline, the missions of the command(s) involved, the threat assessment, and the risk assessment (risk spreadsheets with standardized criteria).

TACSIT areas of focus should include (but are not limited to):

- Operational
  - — Force selection
  - — Exploiting the geography and the environment
  - — Integrating platforms/exploiting capabilities
  - — Tactical decision-making
  - — Ability to rapidly assess changing tactical situations
- Command
  - — Delegating authority (need for and ability to)
  - — Lines of communication
  - — Establishing information requirements for decision-making (i.e., The Commander's "Dashboard")
  - — Information processing
  - — Crisis response

In the creation phase, planners need to exploit the geography and environment, as well as the political situations. Since any product or strategy must work in a variety of places and scenarios, it makes sense to create a representative number of TACSITs.

Figure 2. Tactical Situation Development

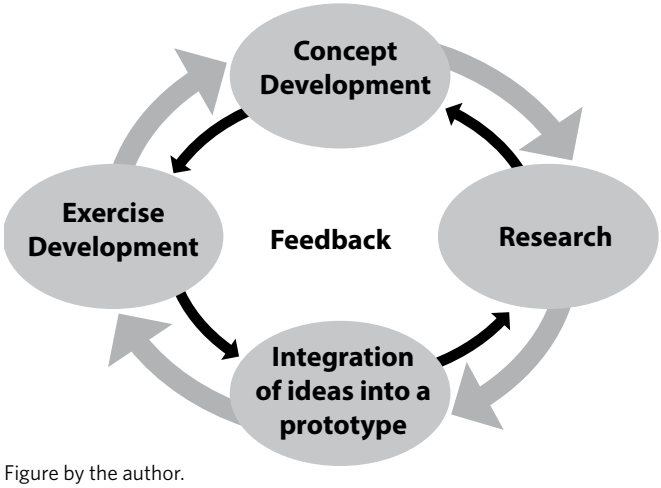


Figure by the author.

Several years ago, I helped develop TACSIT scenarios for West Africa, Iraq, Cambodia, Straits of Hormuz, Indonesia, Philippines, South Korea, and Montenegro, based on likely deployments of a joint or composite command.

Each location was an anticipated operating hot-spot region for the same contingency lead and support forces. Material solutions (new platforms and weapons) were barely in the design phase at that time. For that reason, the study group concentrated on Non-materiel (and) Functional Alignment solutions, and assessed their projected impact. We found that many problems for which new equipment was needed could, in fact, be mitigated to the same extent by realigning forces and rewriting operation orders and concepts of operations. It was in the rigorous development of non-materiel and functional alignment solutions that participants were better able to refine material solutions.

For example, movement of truck convoys in places like Iraq would be less vulnerable to attack if the current vehicles were replaced with some that offered increased armor protection and self-defense capabilities (materiel solution). However, routing those convoys around dangerous parts of town and late at night (rather than in full daylight) also reduced vulnerability to attack (non-materiel solution). Required implementation cost and time: Negligible.

Threats were identified, risks assessed, and COAs are notionalized. Risk assessment becomes risk management when participants evaluate the (projected) impact of the courses of action on the scenario.

Synergies—Making 1+1 = 2.5

In the May-June 2009 issue of *Defense AT&L*, I wrote about Synergy and Innovation. Synergy is the combined or cooperative action of two or more stimuli for an enhanced effect, and that the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Synergy can be quantified in subjective and objective metrics. Innovation is the introduction of something new or different, or the introduction of new things or methods. PMs want innovation but may not recognize it.

PMs must develop a synergy mindset that says 1 and 1 must equal 2.5 or it's not worth doing. The identification, quantification, and implementation of synergies are a vital part of the tabletop exercise.

Representative synergies to look for include enhanced survivability; force multiplication; operational reach; and consolidation of like processes. See Table 2.

Training Needs Analysis and Assessment

Tabletop participants must (literally and figuratively) come to the table knowing what they need to look at and who needs what. PMs must know what all tabletop participants need to learn and understand, otherwise problems will go unaddressed and the tabletop will fall short of its goals. Nowhere is this more important than in determining training needs. The completed tabletop should address individual and team training needs and qualifications, as well as their respective pipeline schooling.

Once identified, COAs should be categorized and collected for further discussion and the assignment of responsibilities as appropriate.

Materiel solutions require technological introduction/expansion of equipment, platforms, vehicles, computer systems, etc. Their introduction in the tabletop is the next step after nationalizing in special science and technology committees or workshops.

Non-materiel solutions do not require development of additional technologies, and presumably without excessive time and funding expenditures. Non-materiel solutions normally require internal reorganization, process development and documentation (e.g., CONOPs, standard operating procedures), and/or training, qualification, and the establishment of standards.

Functional Alignment Solutions are a special form of non-materiel solutions. These solutions may require component commanders to realign responsibilities. However, unlike the other non-materiel solutions, these may require approval at the highest DoD levels.

For purposes of illustration, we define "gap" as the difference between the level at which the capability is being performed currently and the level at which it must be performed to successfully accomplish the mission.

In addition to gaps, exercise participants should be alert to overlaps or redundancies; for example, when two subordinate commands establish separate logistics pipelines for the same parts, publish "almost identical" communication plans, or generate redundant reports.

Table 2 provides a notional listing of problems, the gaps that they creat, and the attendant impediments to mission success; measurable, replicable metrics from which to judge improvement; and the potential synergy achieved through COA implementation. One example of each of the above three categories is shown for demonstration purposes. They are not the results of any particular study or exercise. Only one example of each of the three solution categories is shown.

A robust tabletop exercise enthusiastically planned and vigorously facilitated, would likely result in 100 identified shortcomings; and be considered a good day's work. Emphasis on the word "facilitated." The tabletop must not be allowed to get hung up or stray from the agenda.

A table like this, in which the categorized solutions are assigned tracking numbers, can serve as the baseline

Table 2. Materiel, Non-Materiel and Functional Alignment Courses of Action (Fictional)

Number	Capability Affected (Fictional)	Identified By	Gap	Course of Action	Metric	Synergies
Materiel 01	Navy Task Assigned (NTA) 6.2	Component commanders	Total Operational Authority (TOA) is below needed level and includes obsolescent equipment	Upgrade component command TOAs in numbers, suitability, and sustainment	Mission and on-station times (decrease)	Enhanced survivability, Force multiplication, operational reach, and like-process consolidation
Non-Materiel 01	NTA 6.4	Component commanders	High attrition of qualified officers/enlisted personnel with specific experience	Develop specializations and paths to promotion	Personnel numbers, qualities (increase)	Enhanced survivability force multiplication
Functional Alignment 01	NTA 6.5, 6.6	Component commanders	Anti-terrorism, Force protection training, not centralized or specific	Develop standardized training (e.g., train the trainer)	Personnel trained/qualified (increase)	Enhanced survivability force multiplication

Table by author.

documentation for the tabletop. Adding two columns marked "Assigned Responsibility" and "Completion Date" is all that is necessary for tracking and follow-up. The table then becomes a dynamic management tracking tool, rather than just a dry, ponderous, final report for the file cabinet, or (worse yet) the cloud.

Findings must be "actionable." Esoteric or pie-in-the-sky musings on anyone's part has no place in a world in which real threats require real solutions.

What You Might Find Out

Here are some possible findings that may result from the tabletop:

- The design of the platform or system is too sophisticated, and the additional capabilities projected may not be required and/or may not be worth the increased time and funding requirements. This is often called "gold plating" a platform or piece of equipment.
- There is only limited stand-off chemical/biological detection capability and additional detection capabilities are needed.
- Construction engineers need lighter/stronger building materials to withstand projectiles and shrapnel.
- In-theater decisions are being made in the contiguous United States (CONUS), rather than by the in-theater commanders.
- Two (or more) subordinate commands in the operating area have created their own logistic pipelines for CONUS "reach-back." One command can do all the requisitioning.
- The reporting superior of one of the in-theater commands has placed redundant reporting requirements on the subordinate. The superior can be copied on a report already in use.
- Personnel report to the theater of operations without sufficient general or specialized training and qualification.

  Example: Port commanders and staffs report to ports of debarkation without necessary team training. This was a particularly challenging training problem when dealing with reservists recently called to active duty.

Summary

Both wargames and tabletops can help PMs to know what they know and don't know; and to find out what they don't know they don't know.

Wargames, however, can take can a long time to prepare, schedule and execute. Further, they may focus too single-mindedly on the employment of specialized technologies and equipment, but assume too much about the structured programs that turn those technologies and equipment into reality, or trivialize the need for robust CONOPs and TTPs. A program may get the direction, threat and risk identification and analysis, and the actionable intelligence it needs from a tabletop exercise. Apply the program's objectives to the tabletop. Then, craft realistic, facilitated, TACSIT scenarios; and play them out with qualified participants from all stakeholder organizations.

Look for every opportunity to identify and implement synergies. Make 1 + 1 equal 2.5 or seriously consider dropping pursuit of a program element.

Finally, generate and categorize courses of corrective action and assign metrics, milestones and responsibilities, and document them in a dynamic management tool.

Good luck!

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