

COVID-19 Tabletop Exercise

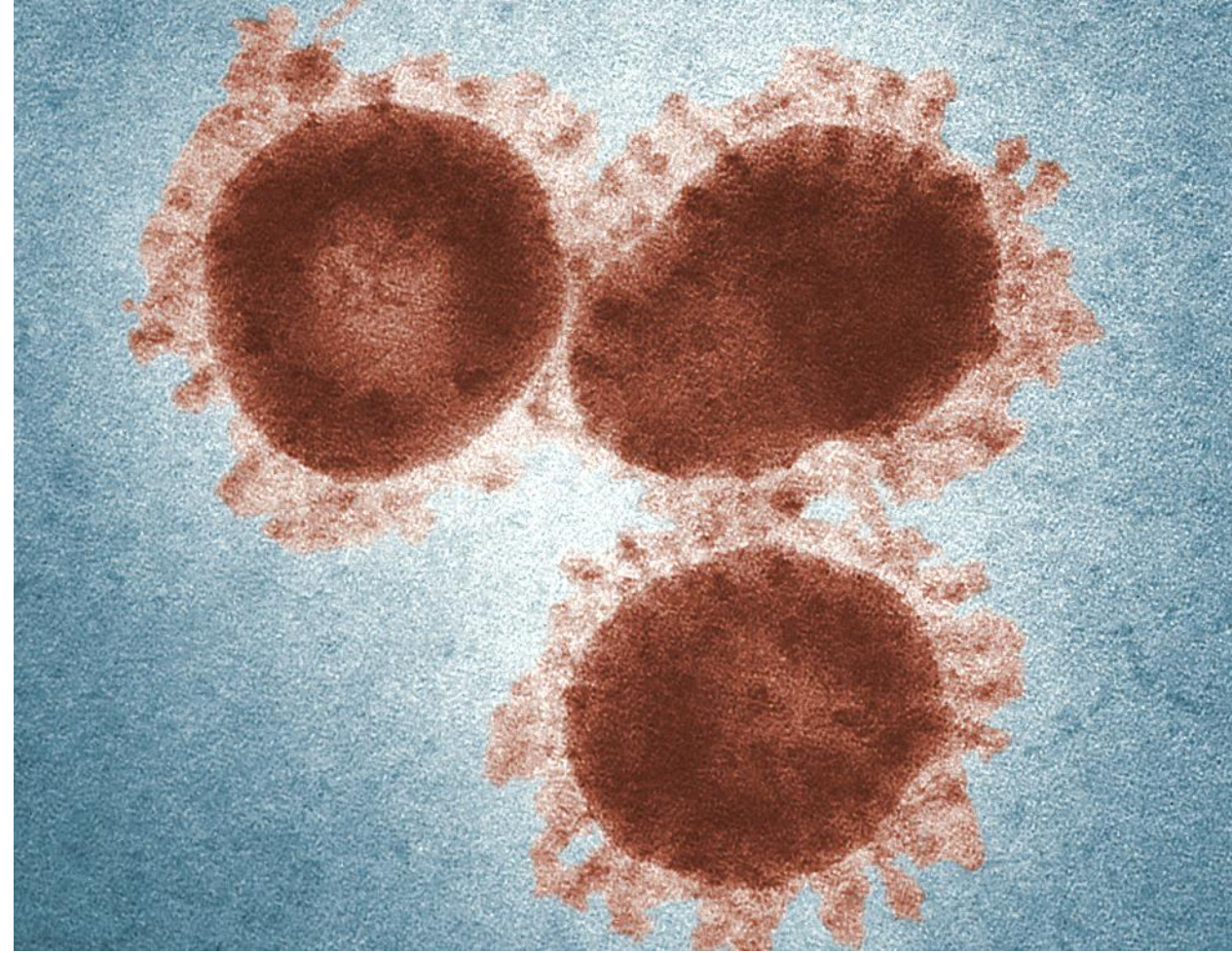
Facilitators Guide
6 March 2020

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The Pillars of Pandemic Preparedness

Pandemics aren't your usual business disruption. Unfolding over months, these events require an extra set of activities that include consultations with epidemiologists, critical role identification and third-party evaluations.



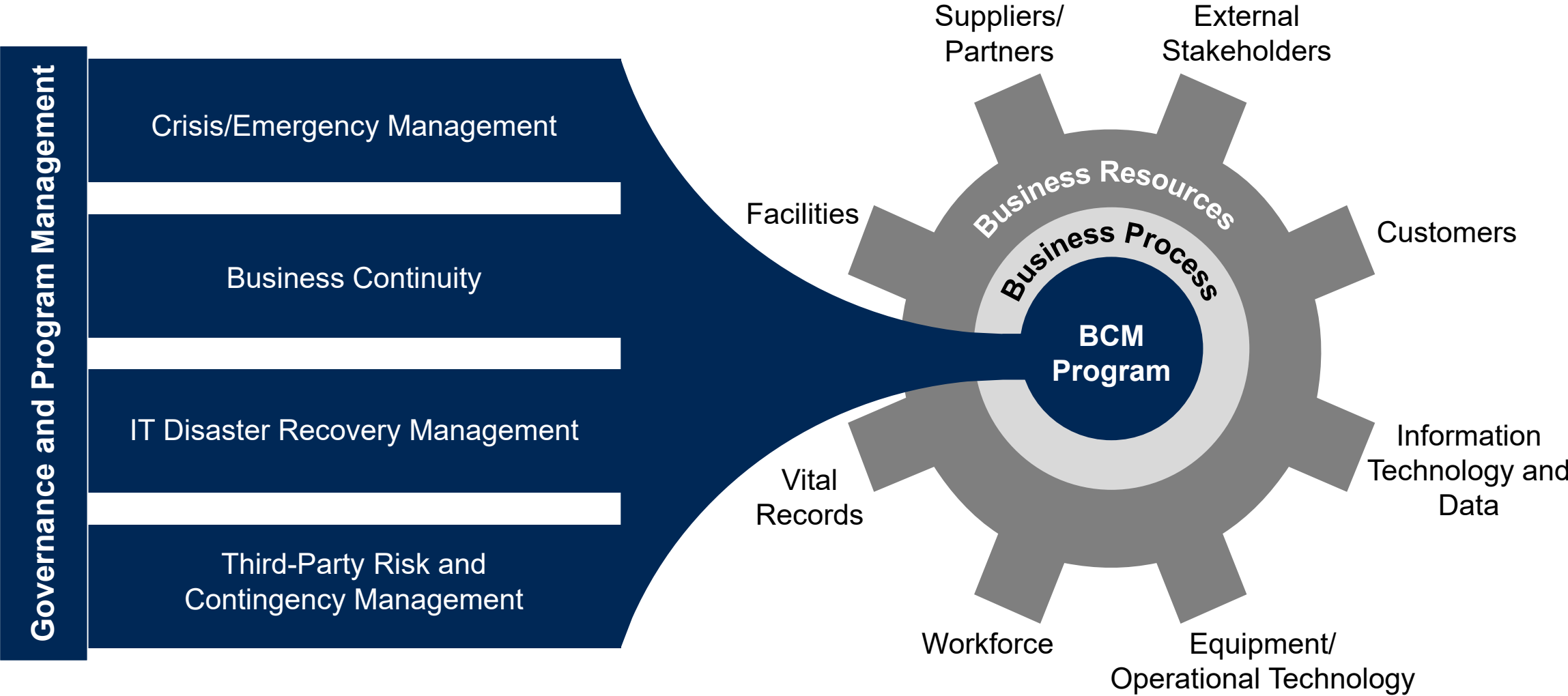
Organizational Resilience Risks: A Pandemic Is an Operational Risk

- Environmental
- Natural Disasters
- Facility
- Country
- Biohazard
- **Biological Disease/
Pandemic**
- Geopolitical
- Social Unrest/Networking

- Information Technology
- Cybersecurity
- Legal and Regulatory
- Third Party
- Business Process
- Separation of Duties
- Workforce
- Corporate Culture



Business Continuity Management Defined



Tabletop Exercise - Overview

Tabletop exercises test the effectiveness of procedures and safeguards in place to respond to and recover from a specific threat. They are an effective way to gauge organizational preparedness and awareness as well as to uncover flaws or gaps in recovery plan design. Process improvements identified during the exercise are filtered back into enhancements and upgrades to the current process.



Scenario Method

Tabletop exercises are designed around a hypothetical scenario. Just like a fire drill helps you practice exiting a building, a tabletop exercise is a safe place to practice a coordinated response. Should the risk event occur, your team is better prepared and can minimize losses. Participants better understand their roles and the priorities for the organization. It's good practice for everyone.



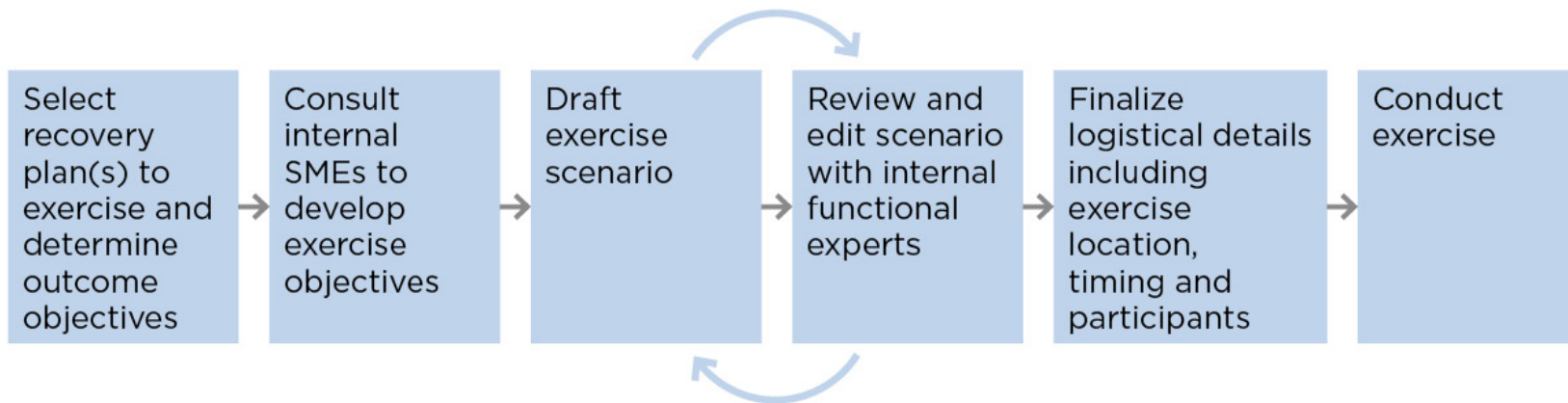
The Value of Conducting a Tabletop Exercise

- Minimize the impact upon staff
- Minimize the impact on the supply chain
- Minimize the impact upon service delivery
- Minimize the impact upon the IT infrastructure
- Protect corporate reputation
- Reduce financial impact
- Return to new normality sooner

Exercises Preparation

Preparing for a tabletop exercise, including developing the scenario itself, accounts for most of the effort expended in running an exercise. Those running an exercise should therefore begin preparation two to three months in advance to coordinate the relevant stakeholders and reserve the necessary space for the activity.

Figure 1: Key Preparation Steps in Advance of a Tabletop Exercise



Source: CEB analysis.

RISC180656

Principles for Writing Effective Tabletop Exercise Scenarios



More time should be spent on developing and drafting the exercise scenario than on any other part of the tabletop exercise process. Depending on the scenario's scope and complexity, the exercise leader will spend up to a month drafting, revising and validating the scenario.

Three key principles should be kept in mind when drafting tabletop exercise scenarios:

- **Take a crawl, walk, run approach:** The scope and complexity of tabletop scenarios should correspond to the organization's level of experience with them. It is easy for first-time participants and facilitators to become overwhelmed by overly complex scenarios, resulting in inaccurate findings. Starting with simple scenarios gives both participants and facilitators a chance to familiarize themselves with the purpose and process of tabletop exercises before developing complex scenarios.
- **Ensure scenarios are realistic and relevant to the audience involved:** Scenarios used in tabletop exercises should be realistic and relevant to the response plans being tested. For example, if the site is near a known fault line an organization exercising its capability to respond to a natural disaster should incorporate earthquakes in its scenarios. Further, organizations should reflect how they conduct business and include familiar resources by name (e.g., internal IT platforms, distributors, external business partners, etc.). Coordinating with relevant external partners and internal functional experts, will also make the scenarios more realistic.
- **Focus exercise scenarios on specific continuity response plans and associated team members:** The scenario used in a tabletop exercise should directly target the response plan being tested as well as the individuals involved in enacting it as much as possible. Exercise authors should use the response plan in question as a basis for developing the scenario. This ensures the exercise is adequately comprehensive and that each participant will have a role to play on the day itself.

Exercise Roles and Responsibilities



The single most important consideration when conducting a tabletop exercise is the clear assignment of roles and responsibilities for participants and facilitators. Successful tabletop exercises should include each of the following roles:^[1]



Participants

Exercise participants actively involved in responding to the presented scenario. They are responsible for enacting the response plan or not. Those directly involved in the response plan are there to practice enacting it, while those without direct responsibility participate as a cross-training or awareness opportunity. Ideally, mix of functional leaders and frontline management.



Facilitator

The individual responsible for running the exercise. This includes presenting the scenario as well as any additional elements, such as injects. This can be an internal employee, such as the head of business continuity, or an external party such as a hired consultant. Experience of conducting and facilitating group workshops should be prioritized above knowledge of the business and its operations when selecting a facilitator.



Observers

Individuals from the organization who know the business well but are not directly involved in the exercise. Players consult these individuals during the exercise to learn more about certain elements of the scenario. Ideally, observers should be functional experts in all affected functional areas of the scenario.

[1] Roberta Witty, "Implement an Exercise Management Strategy to Strengthen the Effectiveness of Recovery Plans," Gartner Inc., March 2017.

Exercise Roles and Responsibilities



The single most important consideration when conducting a tabletop exercise is the clear assignment of roles and responsibilities for participants and facilitators. Successful tabletop exercises should include each of the following roles:^[1]



Scribes

Individuals from the business who document the key actions taken, issues and findings from the exercise. These individuals work with the facilitator to ensure all findings are adequately captured.



Evaluators

Individuals from the business who know the processes being exercised and evaluate players' responses against the established objectives. Functional expertise for evaluators is critical as they must be able to consider the feasibility and efficacy of players' decisions.



Recovery Team Communicators

For larger exercises, players may be broken into smaller teams to represent specific business functions/units. One player is selected from each team to act as a liaison with other teams. Only team communicators can communicate between teams. At the end of the exercise, they also communicate lessons learned to the scribes.

[1] Roberta Witty, "Implement an Exercise Management Strategy to Strengthen the Effectiveness of Recovery Plans," Gartner Inc., March 2017.

Agenda for Each Scenario

Illustrative

- 0:00 am Introduction From Sponsor
- 0:02 am Review Objectives for Session, Roles and Responsibilities
- 0:10 am Introduce Scenario Information
- 0:15 am Teams Collaborate to Address Scenario
- 0:32 am New Information A
- 0:34 am Teams Continue to Work on Scenario Considering New Information
- 0:54 am New Information B
- 0:56 am Teams Continue to Work on Scenario Considering New Information
- 1:00 am Begin Debrief and Facilitator Comments
- 1:20 am Next Steps, Changes and Process Improvements
- 1:30 am Conclude Session

Objectives for the Session

It's important to identify the specific objectives for the session. Every organization is unique and has specific requirements. Generic objectives are included on the left side below. What do you want to get out of this exercise? Please write in organization-specific objectives on the right side of the page.

Generic Tabletop Objectives:

- Determine the effectiveness of plans, policies and procedures.
- Identify the level of cooperation between departments and executives.
- Determine the organization's ability to provide timely and accurate information to stakeholders.
- Determine the adequacy of resources (e.g., allocated funding and equipment).
- Increase awareness of crisis response procedures.
- Train the team on practice-aligned responses.

Additional Org-Specific Objectives:

-
-
-
-
-
-
-

Roles of Tabletop Participants

All participants involved in the exercise will have assigned roles and responsibilities. High-level responsibilities for participants are included below.

For Your Organization:

<p>Participants respond to the presented scenario and are responsible for determining which actions they or their team would take.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • •
<p>Observers serve as functional experts to answer questions and provide more information to players during the exercise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • •
<p>The facilitator presents the scenario and subsequent updates and guides discussions throughout the exercise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • •
<p>Scribes work with the facilitator to ensure findings from the exercise are captured, typically documenting actions taken, issues and findings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • •
<p>Evaluators use their functional expertise and knowledge of processes to assess the feasibility and efficacy of player decisions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • •

Introduce the Hypothetical Scenario

The facilitator will read the scenario for the group to consider. Write down any notes or key assumptions you may have as you are listening to the scenario.

Key Assumptions:



Other Notes:

What Should You Do?

Based on the scenario that was communicated by the facilitator, what actions would you take? Answer the questions to prepare your thoughts. Rate your confidence and disruption level in the shaded box at the lower right corner.

(A) What are the key considerations? What is your recommendation?

(B) What should the other executives do to be supportive? Are there any dependencies that should be considered?

(C) Is there anything else that should be considered?

- On a 1-to-10 scale (where 10 is very confident):
- How confident are you that the leadership team can manage through this? _____
 - How disruptive is this event to annual objectives (1 is little disruption, 10 is severe disruption)? _____

New Information A: The Situation Worsens

Based on the new information that was communicated by the facilitator, what actions would you take? Answer the questions to prepare your thoughts. Rate your confidence and disruption level in the shaded box at the lower right corner.

(A) What are the key considerations? What is your recommendation?

(B) What should the other executives do to be supportive? Are there any dependencies that should be considered?

(C) Is there anything else that should be considered?

- On a 1-to-10 scale (where 10 is very confident):
- How confident are you that the leadership team can manage through this? _____
 - How disruptive is this event to annual objectives (1 is little disruption, 10 is severe disruption)? _____

New Information B: The Last Straw

Based on the new information that was communicated by the facilitator, what actions would you take? Answer the questions to prepare your thoughts. Rate your confidence and disruption level in the shaded box at the lower right corner.

(A) What are the key considerations? What is your recommendation?

(B) What should the other executives do to be supportive? Are there any dependencies that should be considered?

(C) Is there anything else that should be considered?

- On a 1-to-10 scale (where 10 is very confident):
- How confident are you that the leadership team can manage through this? _____
 - How disruptive is this event to annual objectives (1 is little disruption, 10 is severe disruption)? _____

Debrief (Where Can We Improve?)

What went well, and what should we start doing? What are mistakes to avoid?
Independent and objective third-party observations can help your team learn from other organizations.

Keep Doing	Start Doing	Avoid

Next Steps and Follow-Up

As a team, you'll want to make sure the process enhancements are implemented. List steps that should be taken as a follow-up to the tabletop exercise. Be clear who is accountable for each change.

Process Change	By Whom	Due Date	Notes

Gartner Resources

COVID-19 Resources	Business Continuity and Tabletop Exercises	Scenario Planning Resources
<p>Toolkit: Pandemic Preparedness Briefing. Use this Toolkit to double-check your pandemic preparedness framework. It will ensure that you are taking appropriate precautions. The toolkit includes presentation slides and checklists for key functions such as HR, IT, Business Operations and others.</p>	<p>Ignition Guide to Conducting a Business Impact Assessment. Executives can use this step-by-step blueprint to establish a BIA process or to conduct their first business impact assessment. The guide is web-based and includes downloadable tools.</p>	<p>Ignition Guide to Conducting Scenario Analysis for ERM. Executives can use this step-by-step blueprint to create their own process and establish critical infrastructure for scenario planning. The guide is web-based and includes downloadable tools.</p>
<p>The Pillars of Pandemic Planning. Pandemics aren't your usual business disruption. Unfolding over months, these events require an extra set of activities that include consultations with epidemiologists, critical role identification and third-party evaluations. This article addresses concerns from various leaders throughout the organization.</p>	<p>Business Continuity Toolkit. This collection of templates, policies, best practice examples and benchmarks will inform your thinking on how to mature a business continuity function. Executives can use the toolkit to get started or to benchmark current processes.</p>	<p>ERM Scenario Analysis Toolkit. Executives can build resiliency into their organizations by preparing for multirisk scenarios. This toolkit provides guidance on how leaders can create a sustainable process for analyzing scenarios. It proposes several common scenarios and shows how to create new multirisk scenarios.</p>
<p>Coronavirus: How to Secure Your Supply Chain. This research article will help you respond to key risks in the supply chain and with vital third parties. It shows how organizations are taking a methodical approach to mitigating key supply chain and third-party concerns.</p>	<p>Tips for Running Successful Business Continuity Tabletop Exercises. Executives can use this presentation of key findings to double-check their own tabletop exercises. The guide provides a generic template that can be used for COVID-19 and other crisis exercises.</p>	<p>Winning in the Turns: Scenario Planning for Economic Uncertainty. The best organizations find opportunities in both growth cycles and economic downturns. This research shows where leading organizations change and pivot their strategy while industry peers are unable to change.</p>

Scenarios

Scenario One – Basic Pandemic Absenteeism

This scenario is best used for organizations that are new to the concept of tabletop exercises. It is the most basic and easy to deliver scenario. Read scenario to participants. Give them time to collect their thoughts in the workbook. Discuss steps that participants will take. Let them collaborate to find out what makes sense in terms of response.

- The executive leadership team (ELT) has a regular monthly meeting and operational review coming up tomorrow. Two senior leaders on the ELT, the Chief Information Officer – [NAME1], and Chief Audit Executive – [NAME2], recently returned from an audit of a top 50 critical IT supplier. It was a site visit for the risk assessment.
- Over the weekend, the region that the supplier is in experienced a spike in COVID-19 cases. The local government quarantined the community. The data center and engineering offices that NAME1 and NAME2 visited were a 15-minute car trip outside the city center, which is outside the quarantine zone.
- Several ELT members have expressed to the CEO that the ELT meeting should be cancelled. NAME1 and NAME2 are healthy and exhibit no flu-like symptoms. The CEO sent an email to canvass functional leaders and see if the ELT meeting and operational review should be held or postponed to a later date.
- Question: What considerations are included in your response to the CEO? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll discuss. Instruction: Let's go around the room and share your thoughts.

Scenario One – Basic Pandemic Absenteeism

Inject new information into the conversation. Give participants time to write down thoughts in their workbook. Discuss updated thinking with the group. Look for opportunities for collaboration between participants.

Inject A – The Situation Worsens

- There is a rumor that [NAME1] is not feeling well and has been taken to the local hospital emergency room for monitoring. He is unresponsive to emails. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether the hospital has a suitable test kit and appropriate materials to make a verifiable identification for a possible COVID-19 case.
- A few days later, several managers' report up to the operating executive that there is a slight, unexpected increase in absenteeism in department such as IT, Internal Audit, Compliance and Physical Security. It's flu season so it's difficult to assume this absenteeism are COVID-19 related. In some of the departments, absenteeism is as high as 10%.
- Question: What steps should the management team begin to consider? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll pull up for discussion. Instruction: Let's go around the room and hear your thoughts.

Inject B – The Last Straw

- A few days later [NAME1] condition worsens. He has a pre-existing medical condition. There is still no conclusive evidence that this is COVID-19 related since the test kit has not yet come back from the lab. However, more departments are reporting high absenteeism. The operating executive, [NAME3], reports that absenteeism at headquarters is almost as high as 20% in certain departments.
- Question: What steps should the CEO and their key direct leaders take at this time? What should they do, and what should they consider for the next few weeks? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll pull up for discussion. Instruction: Let's go around the room and share your thoughts.

Scenario Two – Critical Third Party Is Down

This scenario is best used for organizations that have a supply chain or critical third-party dependency. It is a more difficult scenario and includes a second risk.

- Ever since the global financial crisis, the organization has been sensitive to costs. It's looked to outsource whenever possible. The view of the leadership is, "Why do something in-house when you can find a quality supplier to help out?"
- Vendor risk management is an important aspect of the procurement and assurance program at the organization. There is a sustainable process in place with a robust critical third-party management process. The top 50 third parties by contract value and criticality are well known and complete a rigorous annual risk assessment that includes Financial, IT and Compliance risk assessment questions.
- While we have no operations or customers in geographies affected by the pandemic, we received an email this morning from one of our critical top 50. The email from the critical supplier said,
- *"We have a concern for one of our part suppliers that is in a quarantined area. We are concerned that they will not be able to provide adequate service delivery and the parts we need for our components. Thus, we anticipate that we will not be able to meet our production schedule next week. We are working with them to find a solution to this situation. We'd like to make you aware of the delay and we are currently assessing when we will be back to full schedule."*
- Question: What considerations should the leadership team consider? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll discuss. Instruction: Let's go around the room and share your thoughts.

Scenario Two – Critical Third Party Is Down

Inject new information into the conversation. Give participants time to write down thoughts in their workbook. Discuss updated thinking with the group. Look for opportunities for collaboration between participants.

Inject A – The Situation Worsens

- The EVP of Sales, [NAME1], recently returned from an industry conference. After making a speech about Technology 2025, she met with several key customers and various industry peers. While the conference was far from a pandemic-affected geography, [NAME1] felt unwell when she returned from the conference. She stayed out of the office, and after a few days, was admitted to the hospital emergency room for respiratory symptoms. A COVID-19 kit was ordered and administered. It came back a positive. A few hours later, [NAME1]'s administrative assistance was also admitted to the hospital as well as a University Co-Op student in the Marketing Department.
- Question: What steps should the management team begin to consider? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll pull up for discussion. Instruction: Let's go around the room and hear your thoughts.

Inject B – The Last Straw

- While production is being delayed, the organization is taking appropriate supply chain precautions and assessing risks in other third parties. About ten percent of the employees have communicated that they are sick. Unfortunately, while this is occurring, the weather in the Southern States has deteriorated. A Category Four hurricane is expected to make landfall near a major distribution center and customer service center in five days. The company has not experienced a hurricane in this area before.
- Question: What steps should the management team begin to consider? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll pull up for discussion. Instruction: Let's go around the room and hear your thoughts.

Scenario Three – Pandemic and Cyber Breach

This scenario is best used for advanced organizations that are experienced at tabletop exercises. Read scenario to participants. Give them time to collect their thoughts in the workbook. Discuss steps that participants will take. Let them collaborate to find out what makes sense in terms of response.

- The executive leadership team (ELT) has a regular monthly meeting and operational review coming up tomorrow. Two senior leaders on the ELT, the Chief Information Officer – [NAME1], and Chief Audit Executive – [NAME2], recently returned from an audit of a top 50 critical IT supplier. It was a site visit for the risk assessment.
- Over the weekend, the region that the supplier is in had seen a spike in COVID-19 cases. The local government has quarantined the community. The data center and engineering offices that [NAME1] and [NAME2] visited were a 15-minute car trip outside the city center.
- Several ELT members have expressed to the CEO that the ELT meeting should be cancelled. [NAME1] and [NAME2] are healthy and exhibit no flu-like symptoms. The CEO sent an email to canvass functional leaders and see if the ELT meeting and operational review should be held or postponed to a later date.
- Question: What considerations are included in your response to the CEO? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll discuss. Instruction: Let's go around the room and share your thoughts.

Scenario Three – Pandemic and Cyber Breach

Inject new information into the conversation. Give participants time to write down thoughts in their workbook. Discuss updated thinking with the group. Look for opportunities for collaboration between participants.

Inject A – The Situation Worsens

- There is a rumor that [NAME1] is not feeling well and has been taken to the local hospital emergency room for monitoring. He is unresponsive to emails. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether the hospital has a suitable test kit and appropriate materials to make a verifiable identification for a possible COVID-19 case.
- A few days later, several managers' report up to the operating executive that there is a slight unexpected increase in absenteeism in department such as IT, Internal Audit, Compliance, Finance, and Physical Security. It's flu season so, it's difficult to assume this absenteeism are COVID-19 related. In some of the departments, absenteeism is 10%.
- A few days later [NAME1]'s condition worsens, and he falls into cardiac arrest. [NAME1] passes away that evening from breathing complications. He has a pre-existing medical condition. There is no conclusive evidence that this is COVID-19 related since the test kit has not yet come back positive for COVID-19.
- The following day as news of [NAME1]'s passing is circulated around to [NAME1]'s staff and colleagues, funeral arrangements are made. The leadership team have set aside time to attend the funeral. However, more departments are reporting high absenteeism. The operating executive, [NAME3], reports that absenteeism at headquarters is almost 20% in certain departments.
- Question: What steps should the management team begin to consider? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll pull up for discussion. Instruction: Let's go around the room and hear your thoughts.

Scenario Three – Pandemic and Cyber Breach

Inject new information into the conversation. Give participants time to write down thoughts in their workbook. Discuss updated thinking with the group. Look for opportunities for collaboration between participants.

Inject B – The Last Straw

- The funeral and high absenteeism has created a thinly staffed IT department. Among the employees unable to work are two key information security staff members. In a miscommunication, each was under the impression that a weekly software patch maintenance would be handled by the other. Unfortunately, a routine patch from Microsoft cyber security was not installed.
- Furthermore, a procrastinating employee clicked on a suspect web advertisement to purchase a medical face mask and downloaded a virus into the IT environment.
- After the cyber-attack was identified, email was frozen to prevent further loss of customer data. Employees are now without email communications. The Operating Office, [NAME3], reports that in some departments, 40% of employees have reported in ill.
- Question: What steps should the CEO and their key direct leaders take at this time? What should they do, and what should they consider for the next few weeks? Instruction: Take three minutes to jot down thoughts in your workbook. After that we'll pull up for discussion. Instruction: Let's go around the room and share your thoughts.

This complimentary research is part of Gartner's ongoing coverage of the business impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

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