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Exercise is back on the table

How tabletops and wargames can (re)ignite
positive organizational change

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The tabletop as a versatile tool

The public-sector emergency management field has undergone a seismic shift in recent years in response to a more interconnected world.[1] Causes of major disruptions today go way beyond natural disasters. In fact—and in spite of the historic pressure climate change is putting on public institutions—extreme weather is just one of many aggravating factors in a crisis rather than its single leading cause. Today, an organization can suffer from an insider threat cyberattack shutting down its global supply chain as potential misinformation about the event on social media may lead to a reputational crisis and congressional inquiry. To navigate today's minefield of potential threats and hazards, organizations may have to transform at a moment's notice, efficiently adopt new technology, comply with new and ambitious regulations, find and manage risks they rarely before considered, and forge relationships with partners they did not know existed. In short, they need to imagine, discover, create, test, and prepare differently—and do so in an efficient and effective manner.

For activities that do not directly enhance an organization's day-to-day operations, there is often a higher burden of proof to demonstrate a return on those investments. Understandably, activities that help the organization do their mission better, stronger, and faster take the lion's share of resources over those that simply make the mission more resilient. Therefore, activities like contingency planning, wargaming, and exercising often take a back seat—if they are done at all, they are done only as frequently and thoughtfully as required. However, seeing exercises solely as a way to meet an annual requirement, for example, greatly under appraises the broad mission-related return they can have on a relatively minor investment.

Breaking the mindset that exercises are distractions with a low return on investment is a paradigm shift for many organizations. It will involve seeing exercises as versatile tools to achieve progress for the mission, and it will require some expertise to deliver the right types of exercise for the right problems. A typical starting point is with low-risk discussion-based exercises like tabletop exercises (TTXs) and wargames.[2] These can be short events executable in less than half a day and can be appropriate for a multitude of **nontraditional uses cases**. TTXs and wargames can breathe new life into many different efforts and kick-start progress where other methods to improve the organization may be stalled. Some of these nontraditional use cases are described in figure 2.

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[1] Kyle R. Overly, "The evolving status of emergency management organizations," *Domestic Preparedness Journal*, January 19, 2022

[2] The *Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) 2020* categorizes "tabletops" and "games" together under the category of "discussion-based exercises," distinct from "operations-based exercises" like drills, functional, and full-scale exercises, which involve real movement of personnel and equipment.

A new perspective on exercising

Traditionally, TTXs and wargames are venues where mission performers and support teams rehearse plans and procedures through a facilitated discussion, often against a familiar scenario, with a goal of updating those plans based on lessons learned. With that approach, audiences and outcomes tend to be simple, predictable, and limited. For example, correcting a discrete, outdated element of a plan might pass as an "insight" from a traditional TTX.

Modern TTXs and wargames should be immersive analytical experiences where interdependent decision-makers imagine and test out new solutions to new problems. They should bring decision-makers together for structured exploration into scenarios that defy easy solutions and provide a safe space to *explore innovative solutions to hard organizational problems*. The goals can vary, but generally they seek to *generate insights to spark positive changes in policies, procedures, or people*. They should also map back to a *strategic question*, such as those presented in figure 1.

Figure 1. Sample strategic questions

What are the benefits?

Well-designed and delivered TTXs and wargames can be *transformative experiences for people and organizations*. They can achieve a diverse spectrum of benefits, some obvious and traditional—and yes, compliance with an annual requirement can be one—but also for reasons that may be entirely novel for many leaders. A TTX or game can be designed to discover new threats an organization is facing, for example, and provide actionable leads to proactively change the organization's structure, policies, procedures, and technology to meet that new threat head-on.

More than just a chance to simply go through the motions, TTX and games can be hyper-efficient catalysts for growth and organizational improvement. They drive progress when training comes across as tedious and unidirectional, performance reviews are seen as punitive, and working groups descend into months-long echo chambers for problems without solutions. In as little as a few hours, TTXs and games can help revitalize stalled projects, improve policies, motivate people, and identify leading technology worth considering for future investment.

What are the 'modern problems' they can help with?

Methods to solve organizational challenges should be as diverse as the challenges themselves. Our experience is that TTXs and games can be tools to help leaders achieve goals, a sample of which can be found in figure 2. Change management and strategic communications are great use cases. It is one thing to announce that a policy change is coming, for example, but a TTX or game can place people in a situation where the change makes sense in practical terms—this can drive home the "why" in such a way that the affected workforce can truly understand.
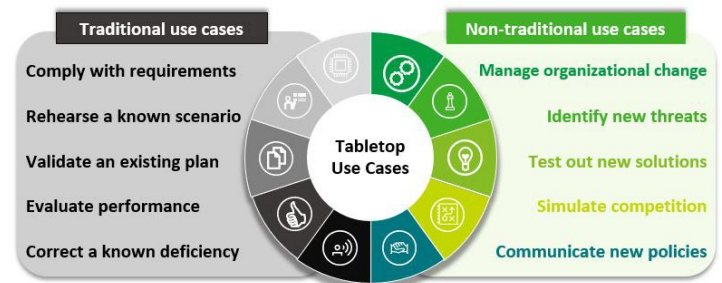

Figure 2. Tabletop exercise use cases

Taking traditional design to the next level

From a design perspective, discussion-based exercises follow a similar methodology whether they adhere more or less strictly to tried-and-true federal doctrine or other academic schools of thought on exercising and wargaming.[3] Our cross-sector experience is that the differences between design methods are mostly semantic. The core design process and sequence are the same: Good TTXs and wargames **start with a purpose**, which may be one of the traditional or, increasingly, nontraditional use cases, as detailed in figure 2.

Managing big organizational change
Deloitte designed and delivered four wargames for a **US military service** with officers and senior executives across global commands **to communicate changes** to the service's new model for generating combat-ready forces under the new national defense strategy. The TTXs **advanced the implementation** of the service's new model for force generation and increased comprehension of the resourcing and tactical maneuver required to employ those forces in a near-peer conflict.

To provide our clients with the benefits of wargaming and tabletop exercises, Deloitte has developed the ***Wargame and Tabletop Exercise Community Handbook (WATCH),*** a project planning document derived from the common elements in federal exercise doctrine and our lessons learned. The handbook helps our teams actualize our Deloitte approach to delivery—a tool that brings orthodox rules of exercise design to another level and lets us expand the use cases for TTXs and games well beyond the traditional.

Our approach is built around the "five C's" of leading exercise and wargaming services:

- **CONTROL.** Deloitte's overall aim is to **help organizations** to take control of change and mitigate related issues head-on. We specialize in setting up clients to use regular TTXs and games as instruments to manage their biggest organizational changes, assess new or unforeseen risks, and try out all new ideas in safe-to-fail settings.

- **CUSTOMIZATION.** We understand TTXs and games should reflect the organization's real operating environment. Using current threat assessments, proprietary commercial data, and private-sector connections, **we configure our exercise design** to immerse participants in realistic cross-sector response situations.

Preparing for new threats
Deloitte customized a series of TTXs for a **federal civilian agency** to operationalize the agency's new crisis management plan. The TTXs **identified new threats** to the agency's mission from an emerging reputational crisis. The TTXs **enabled the agency's congressional and public affairs teams** to confront the compounding crises of COVID-19 and reputational effects of disinformation about the agency's mission.

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[3] Examples include *HSEEP*; *Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual*; US Naval War College's *War Gamers' Handbook*; and the US Army War College's *Strategic Wargaming Series Handbook*.

Strengthening partnerships

Deloitte built a series of creative TTXs for a **federal defense health program** to strengthen interoperable partnerships across the program and increase medical surge capacity in a mass casualty repatriation scenario. The TTXs **vetted the feasibility of certain response options** against existing infrastructure and policies. The TTXs provided leads to tackle both capacity limitations and the lack of codified procedures. The after-action report (AAR) led to recurring, targeted training and corrective action across the entire stakeholder system.

- **CONTEXT.** Deloitte embeds our exercise service within the full cycle of planning, training, and corrective action to bring intention to an **organization's overall preparedness**. We eliminate the one-off randomness of the exercise experience by affixing it in a master calendar of events, so lessons learned help drive efforts to prepare the organization.

- **CORRECTIVE ACTION.** We believe the AAR is the most important, lasting artifact from a TTX or wargame. The AAR is both the case for change and the road map to get there. It needs to tell a story to have an effect, so we use data visualization to create more than just text-based reports.

- **CREATIVITY.** Our proprietary exercise tools, such as those listed in the following table, help our clients to **redefine the exercise experience** for participants and to maximize engagement.

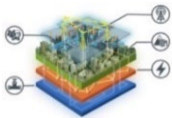| Technology	Description and benefits
Generative AI	Deloitte leverages Generative AI to rapidly produce a TTX scenario based on the organization, its objectives with the TTX, and desired outcomes. Our model produces a scenario in minutes rather than days. This enables us to **work with clients on the human elements** of TTX.
Unity game engine	Deloitte uses Unity to build applications that **enable collective decision-making,** as well as strategically fence off participants in accordance with red and blue team roles as part of the TTX scenario.
FutureScape™	Deloitte uses this modeling and simulation platform to **create digital replicas of large-scale systems such as urban infrastructure.** The platform puts users in immersive simulations to see the impacts of a major disruption and set ground truth to backstop a TTX scenario.
PolicyRecon™	Deloitte uses this advanced text analytics tool to automate search, analysis, and insight extraction from thousands of regulatory and policy documents. We can use this tool to **pinpoint gaps in policies,** then work with clients to prioritize fixes based on needs observed during the TTX.
Data visualization	Data visualization enables impactful storytelling, using maps, timelines, charts, or sequential visual stories to deliver insights. We apply end-user design to tailor visualization, inputting dashboard-style visualizations to **break the mold of the traditional text-heavy AAR.**

Get in touch

Our leadership team has managed TTX and wargame projects from start to finish, helped clients build broad exercise programs, and provided technical facilitation during events.

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