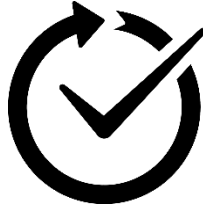


# **Business Continuity Exercises**

## **Quick Exercises to Validate Your Plan**

**By Charlie Maclean-Bristol  
MA (Hons), PgD, FBCI, FEPS**



Print – ISBN: 978-1-944480-68-4

EPUB – 978-1-944480-69-1

WEB PDF – 978-1-944480-70-7



**ROTHSTEIN  
PUBLISHING**

A Division of Rothstein Associates Inc.

[www.rothsteinpublishing.com](http://www.rothsteinpublishing.com)

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Print – ISBN: 978-1-944480-68-4

EPUB – 978-1-944480-69-1

WEB PDF – 978-1-944480-70-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020938670



**ROTHSTEIN  
PUBLISHING**

A Division of Rothstein Associates Inc.

4 Arapaho Road

Brookfield, Connecticut 06804 USA

203.740.7400

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# **WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING ABOUT *BUSINESS CONTINUITY EXERCISES***

“A great addition to the Business Continuity practitioner’s toolkit!

“Charlie’s personality shines through, and his unique approach and many years’ combined experience makes this an easy-to-read, practical guide to running short exercises. Applicable to any organization of any type or size, this book can be used to plan and execute a wide range of exercises for anyone with limited time and budget.

“As we are all being impacted by COVID-19, there is no better time to challenge our assumptions and validate the plans we have. As a profession, we need to reflect on the business continuity arrangements we have in place and ask how effectively they are working. We are faced with the challenge of how we can exercise safely in a socially-distanced work environment, and seeking ways to utilize technology to support this.

“Charlie drives home the importance of continuing to identify lessons from real-life incidents and crises, but more importantly how to learn the lessons and bring them into our plans. Running an exercise, no matter how simple, is always an opportunity to learn.”

*Deborah Higgins*

Head of Cabinet Office, Emergency Planning College, United Kingdom

---

“Overall a very interesting & informative, sometimes funny and in-depth publication that will be of great use to a wide audience worldwide I am sure, including me.”

*Tim Marjason*

BCM & Crisis Management Consultant and Instructor, Dubai

---

“Charlie’s new book is a real tour de force of how to exercise Business Continuity Plans and Programs. As a former consultant, I immediately recognized many of the difficulties and pitfalls he has identified. One is the perennial problem of getting buy-in or even interest from senior management. Another is trying to do too much in a single exercise which requires a large number of participants, excessive time commitments from busy managers, complex scenario-building and often difficulty in creating enough challenges to engage non-core attendees. The book neatly deals with many of these issues. I really liked the concept of speed exercising and I can envisage it being both fun and informative.”

*Lyndon Bird*

Chief Knowledge Officer, DRI International

---

“Business Continuity Exercising has never received the attention it truly deserves, until now. Charlie’s experience in this area shines through in this volume. Applicable to the novice or the seasoned professional, this book is a welcome addition to the Business Continuity industry.

“Charlie takes the reader from the basics through to the planning and carrying out of an exercise, which is extremely valuable. Even though I’ve over twenty years’ experience in this area, it helped me to think about areas of Business Continuity I hadn’t considered for some time.

“The structure of the book, going from planning through to conducting the exercises is well thought out and packed full of useful ideas, with templates and examples throughout the book. It’s a book I would happily recommend for the content, style and detail.”

*Gary Hibberd*

Professor, Cyberfort Group, UK

---

“Exercising means many things to many people, and in this context, this book has been written to support the development and delivery of business continuity quick exercises. The book has something to offer everyone, with a range of exercises to suit diverse scenarios and sectors.”

*Jacqui Semple*

Chair, The Emergency Planning Society, UK

---

“Charlie Maclean-Bristol captures well the essence of the exercise purpose and process with concise, easy-to-read notes. The challenge, as he rightly points out, is engagement and often the biggest collective corporate block to engagement is complacency.”

*James Royds*

Independent Consultant: risk, crisis and continuity management  
Reading, United Kingdom

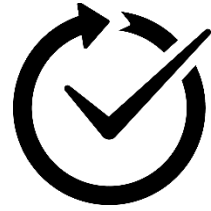
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“Charlie Maclean-Bristol has provided an excellent guide and toolset for delivering ‘Proof.’ His book **Business Continuity Exercises: Quick Exercises to Validate Your Plan** provides valuable material across all levels of Business Continuity experience. Simple constructs such as ‘What, So What and Now What’ have a significant power-to-weight ratio: very easy to apply and to deliver significant value to the pursuit of proof. ‘Red-Team-Blue-Team’ is an example of what I call Challenged Collaboration which delivers benefits greater than the sum of the individual participants working the same problem.

“While the book provides a plethora of clever techniques and scenario suggestions, I was very pleased to see an appropriate focus and depth in the aspects of debriefing and reporting – the realization of the proof and the requirements for improvement. Charlie has added real value to the Business Continuity domain and in doing so, has shown that exercises need not be arduous, drawn out, mysterious or scary.”

*Saul Midler*

BC+R Executive, Terra Firma Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Australia



# **Dedication and Acknowledgements**

## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my father Nicholas Maclean-Bristol who inspired me to write this book.

## **Acknowledgements**

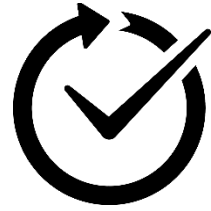
Nina Sooky for her patience in proofreading my drafts.

Kim Maclean-Bristol and Ken Wratten for the invention of speed exercising.

John Arney for teaching me Structured Debriefing.

Jacqui Semple for promoting the Three Minute Brief.

Past and present colleagues at PlanB Consulting for helping me refine the exercises.



## Preface

Exercising contingency programs of any form, particularly business continuity, is a subject near and dear to me. As the saying goes, “I wrote the book” on business continuity/disaster recovery exercises – literally! In 1997 I published the first book ever written on this subject, **Disaster Recovery Testing: Exercising Your Contingency Plan**. Looking back at that book now, I can see that while I had much to learn, the Disaster Recovery industry (as it was then known) was far more focused on developing recovery procedures than exercises.

I believe many practitioners as well as business leaders were motivated by that book and have often considered a new edition over the years. Charlie Maclean-Bristol has now brought us this work to provide, simple, quick exercise materials you can use to kick-start your own business continuity program.

I have long believed that inertia is often the biggest obstacle to getting the exercise process going. Simple, engaging and nonthreatening exercises are often the best way to get the ball

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rolling. In this book, Charlie Maclean-Bristol provides just the right combination to make this happen.

For over thirty years, I have asserted repeatedly, “an unexercised contingency plan can be worse than no plan at all.” Now, with Charlie’s expert guidance and the benefit of his broad experience, you have no excuse!

*Philip Jan Rothstein*

FBCI, President

Rothstein Associates Inc.

Publisher, Rothstein Publishing

Brookfield, Connecticut USA

October, 2020



# **Foreword**

**by Dr Claire MacRae**

I was delighted to be asked to write this foreword to support my colleague in his fantastic endeavour in writing this book which contributes formally to the fields of crisis management and business continuity.

When I was writing this foreword, the Covid-19 global crisis was prevalent and so the timing and publication of this book has never been more relevant. This crisis has exposed organisations to unprecedented challenges and risks, giving rise to new ways of working and the “new normal.” In recovering from crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, this book is a useful toolkit in preparing for future events to validate business continuity plans and to continue with “business as usual.”

This book takes a proactive approach focusing on building resilience within organisations to mitigate the negative impact of an event. It focuses on prevention of, rather than reaction to, crises as they occur

by building resilience to mitigate the impact of crises. It is a must-have for both the experienced practitioner when training colleagues, or those with little or no experience in business continuity. The book is applicable to all industry sectors, public and private due to the diverse exercises provided.

The style of the book provides a simple but effective guide for those with little or no experience in business continuity but with a need to develop their skills and knowledge. It outlines a holistic approach to business continuity considering the critical elements of team meetings, briefings which are focused, identification of key stakeholders and reporting linked to the analysis of risk.

The use of practical examples creates a narrative to engage others in planning exercises supported by an extensive variety of short exercise examples pertinent to all types of organisation – whether small, medium or large, public or private. The innovative use of techniques, for example “war gaming” in chapter 13, provides an exciting approach to business continuity and crisis management which will unquestionably engage individuals and overcome inertia.

Charlie’s forward-thinking contributions to innovative practice in business continuity, crisis management and resilience should make practice and learning dynamic and motivating.

Charlie leads an independent resilience consultancy, PlanB Consulting, which has a long-standing relationship with our University, Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), in particular our MSc and Undergraduate Risk Management degree programs. Since the 1980s, Risk Management has been taught at GCU and business continuity planning is an integral part of our degree programmes. Charlie supports the academic team at GCU teaching business continuity, crises and resilience within organisations. His diverse background in managing business continuity and contingency planning – including in the Army, large organisations and other consultancies – is a commendation to his extensive leadership skills and capabilities in this area.

As a Senior Lecturer in Risk at GCU and a published commentator and contributor to the area of risk I welcome the underpinning of the approaches in this book, in building resilience to a crisis alongside management and recovery. The role of risk, and its analysis, is a crucial part of this process and this book is a long-awaited opportunity supporting theory as well as the current integration of risk and resilience proactively in my MSc module, Risk and Organisational Resilience.

This book will feature as essential reading for students studying modules in organisational risk, resilience, and business continuity management. Charlie's extensive knowledge and expertise, both academic and real-life, are highly valued by myself in shaping graduates by providing them with real-life industry experiences.

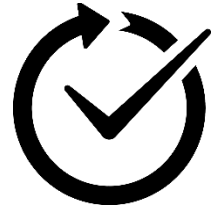
*Dr Claire MacRae*

Senior Lecturer in Risk, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow  
School for Business and Society, Glasgow, Scotland, United  
Kingdom

Former Programme Leader, MSc Risk Management and BA  
(Hons) Risk Management

Currently Programme Leader for the Doctorate of Business  
Administration (DBA) and Senior Postgraduate Research Tutor

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## **Foreword**

**By James McAlister**

I have been a friend and colleague of Charlie for well over a decade. We met at one of the Business Continuity Institute's annual conference dinners and on first impression I thought "who is this cocky Scotsman" by the way he was wearing black tie dinner apparel with bright red tartan trews. For those of you who don't know Charlie, he is a true larger-than-life character, with a booming voice, barrel chest and the energy of a springer spaniel. But if you dig beneath the brawny exterior you find a very different character who is very bright, meticulous and a complex thinker. This cocktail of conflicting internal and external qualities are what make Charlie such a terrific planner, speaker and exercise facilitator.

I think the reason we hit it off as friends and later professional rivals is mostly down to our similar working backgrounds. Charlie is ex-military and I was at the time a career police officer; both of us for many years had experienced the realities of real-world disaster and crisis management. Also in common was our 30+-year

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history in training and exercise development; both of us working with high-profile, global private and public sector clients on a wide range of diverse resilience projects.

That's Charlie, but what about his book? It manages to bring together the two worlds of hard-earned incident experience and well-practiced exercise development methodology. The book contains an abundance of very detailed exercise preparation and facilitation guidance to cater to both novice and veteran practitioners' needs. The pages are crammed with truly useful, practical content including tabled information, bullet lists, aides-mémoires, things to think about, questions to ask exercise participants, helpful diagrams and so much more.

The aspect that sets this book apart is Charlie's concept of running "quick" exercises. Most response teams nowadays don't have the time to take part in full-day exercises, so a book that enables facilitators to plan, prepare and conduct effective hour-long tests is game changing.

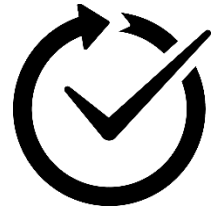
The only thing that worries me is... has Charlie given away TOO many of his exercise secrets for his own good?

*James McAlister*

MA DipBCM DipEd FICPEM Hon FBCI

Crisis Prepared Limited – Organisational Resilience Consultancy

Burscough, Lancashire, United Kingdom



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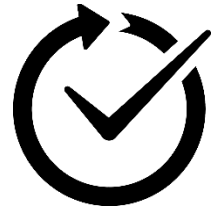
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# Introduction

## The Aim of This Book

The aim of this book is to provide practitioners and those with limited knowledge of running exercises with a series of simple exercises to improve the skills and knowledge of people involved in business continuity, crisis management, information security, cybersecurity and community safety within their organization, as well as members of the public.

Most of the exercises require modest planning and resources and can be carried out in less than an hour. All of them are designed to add to the soft or hard skills of those taking part. Some of them, such as the communication matrix and team agenda, teach key tools and techniques which have been used successfully to manage an incident.

I was prompted to write this book on observing the limited exercising of plans, people and responses taking place in many organizations. There are lots of reasons for people not to exercise: they feel they lack the skills to do it, they find it difficult to get the time with those that should be taking part in an exercise, they lack

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budget, or, even though they may not admit it, they lack the confidence to run an exercise.

I have also seen large complex exercises taking place where the participants run around and problem-solve, ignoring the plan developed for them to respond to. Those participating had not learned very much except that humans are good at problem-solving. At times when I have observed these types of exercises, I feel that the time, effort, and cost has been wasted and the learning benefit minimal.

In writing this book, I have tried to democratize exercises allowing those of you with all levels of skills and experience and different types of audiences to run successful exercises.

I have also tried to describe in detail how to run the exercise so that those who have not run exercises before have the confidence to start. All the exercises in this book have been chosen to help instill in you and your participants key lessons and tools which you can use to successfully manage an incident. By using short exercises, lack of time, budget and availability of staff become less of an issue, and so you have little excuse but to start exercising.

## **Who is This Book For?**

This book is aimed at a wide variety of people having a role in trying to improve the resilience of your organization or community by conducting exercises. You could be involved in business continuity, emergency planning, resilience, cyber security, information security, civil defense, first responders and the emergency services, or improving community resilience. You may be a full time professional, work part-time or serve as a volunteer.

For the less experienced practitioner this book can give you step-by-step advice and simple but effective exercises you can conduct yourself rather than waiting for or paying for a more experienced person to run them for you. Your confidence to run exercises will develop once you have used this book to conduct the first few.

Once you have planned and developed the simple exercises within this book you can then go on and run more complex and longer exercises.

If you are an experienced practitioner, there will be exercises in this book which will be unfamiliar, and which can help you add something new to your repertoire of exercises.

For those responsible for raising awareness of the issues associated with business continuity, information security and resilience within their own organization or the wider community, these exercises can be an ideal tool for engaging people and getting them to think about how to respond to an incident.

Another way of carrying out business continuity awareness training is through eLearning. eLearning is used in many organizations as a way to carry out awareness of other disciplines such as information security and for compliance training such as anti-slavery and money laundering. Within some organizations there is eLearning fatigue and people try to get through the training as quickly as possible without really engaging with the training or learning from the content. The exercises in this book take a similar time to conduct as eLearning but can provide a more effective way to engage with the audience and convey the required messages.

Cyber and IT professionals can use these exercises to prepare their response to an incident. Most of the exercises can be used to practice the response to a wide range of information security or cyber scenarios.

Community groups, people involved in civil defense, emergency services and those promoting community resilience will also find exercises in the book which capture the imagination of those whose resilience you are trying to improve. They will enjoy the exercises but at the same time develop skills and knowledge to be able to react if an incident occurs.

The audience for these exercises can be anyone within an organization who needs to have knowledge of business continuity

or the ability to manage incidents. This could be those with roles within incident management teams, or business continuity coordinators whose role it is to develop business continuity plans for their own part of the organization. Awareness should also be provided to general staff who could be affected by an incident and have to work from a different location or have to work in a different way in response to an incident.

## **Why Conduct Exercises**

“An organization’s continuity capability cannot be considered reliable or effective until it has been exercised.”

*The Business Continuity Institute (BCI)  
Good Practice Guidelines 2018*

Most resilience practitioners recognize the importance of exercising in validating their plans and as a tool to help those with a role in the plan to understand how they should respond to an incident. As humans we love problem-solving and trying to win against the odds. Exercises are a great way to challenge individuals, communities, and groups to overcome the obstacles of a scenario and to learn valuable lessons which you can use in a real incident. By exercising we get those responding to learn the basic lessons of managing an incident – they make the mistakes in exercises and learn from them, rather than learn them at a cost during the response to a real incident.

In my experience very few people would challenge the idea of exercising and the benefit it gives those whose role it is to respond to an incident. The difficulty many people have with large-scale exercises is that they can take considerable time and effort to prepare. Often, they have to be organized months in advance to ensure that the right people are available, and many participants lack the skills to plan and execute a major exercise. They can also

be seen as expensive due to the lack of internal skills, so external experts may be brought in to plan and then run the exercise.

On the other hand, short exercises can solve many of these issues as they can be run at short notice, with minimum experience and have many of the learning benefits of longer and more complex exercises.

## **Ten Reasons Why You Should Conduct Short Exercises**

1. To organize a complex tabletop, live or SIMEX (simulation)<sup>1</sup> exercise usually takes months of planning and preparation. A short exercise can be organized with thirty minutes notice.
2. Major exercises are usually carried out once a year and may only consist of three hours actual exercising. Short exercises can be run more often, giving you a greater total time exercising and keeping your skills up to date rather than forgetting what's been learned in between annual exercises.

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<sup>1</sup> As most SIMEX exercises take longer than an hour to carry out they are discussed at the end of this book.

3. In my experience most senior managers have a limited amount of time they are prepared to spend on preparing for incidents. Trying to get the required 3 to 4 hours to take part in the exercise needs to be diarized months in advance to ensure that all are available at the same time. A short exercise of an hour or even thirty minutes can be added before or after an existing meeting. Carrying out short exercises often can have a greater training benefit than one annual exercise. Keep in mind that longer SIMEX or complex tabletop exercises are necessary periodically as well as short exercises.
4. Carrying out shorter exercises more often allows a wide range of different scenarios to be chosen. In longer exercises there is the requirement to focus on one likely scenario. If you run a less-likely scenario you could run into issues if the scenario is being questioned, bringing the credibility of the exercise into question and losing much of the benefit from the exercise.
5. If you are just starting to implement a business continuity or resilience program, it can be a long time before it seems like anything is happening, as the activity typically involves a small number of project staff. A risk assessment needs to be developed, plans need to be written, and only then can those in the program be trained or take part in an exercise. Carrying out a short exercise or two at the beginning of the program will help to provide those responding with some knowledge of how to respond to an incident, which can be valuable if an incident occurred while the program is being rolled out.

6. For some, business continuity can seem to be a dry subject and staff members may not engage with the training they are receiving. By getting them on their feet and coming up with their own solutions during a short exercise, you can engage with them and gain their interest in the training you are delivering.
7. Some of the exercises presented here such as, “What, so what, now what” and “Horizon scanning during incidents, anticipating worst case,” can be used as tools to look at how the organization can prepare for a known future event, such as a transport strike or a protest taking part in the vicinity of one of your office buildings.
8. The outputs of many of these exercises can be used to develop response plans to different scenarios. Speed Exercising is a good means of developing the risk, issues, impacts, and actions associated with a particular incident. A large number of different people looking at the same scenario can be a lot more productive than a small group sitting together trying to develop the response and actions needed.
9. Short exercises are a good opportunity for less experienced practitioners to develop their skills and confidence in running exercises. The exercises in this book are simple to plan and run so you do not need to be a skilled practitioner to execute them.
10. Designated business continuity champions are those who have a business continuity role but are part-time and often do not conduct their own exercises. In this role you may feel that you don’t have the required skills or knowledge and wait for the Business Continuity Manager to exercise the plans. By following this simple step-by-step methodology, you can exercise your own plans without internal or external help.

## **An Example of a Short Exercise**

### **Contingency planning for the Olympic Torch overnight stay at Glasgow airport using Speed Exercising**

#### **What was the problem?**

In the spring of 2012, there was Olympic fever throughout the whole of the UK. The real start to the Olympics was the torch relay which passed through the length and breadth of the country. Everyone wanted to see it and be part of the whole Olympic experience. Over this period, I suspect that everyone in the resilience profession wanted to be involved in the Olympics in some way, partly to be part of something which might not come back to the UK in their lifetime, but also to say to their grandchildren that they did their bit to ensure the success of the games. I can admit I was one of them!

In May that year I was speaking to a colleague from Glasgow Airport. We talked about the torch relay and the Olympics and he said he was arranging for the Olympic torch to be held overnight at a hotel next to the airport. He was having some thoughts on what could befall the torch overnight and what contingency plans he should put in place to prevent them happening. Seizing my opportunity, I suggested that my company, PlanB Consulting, could come in and run an exercise to look at some of the possible issues which could happen overnight. After my initial enthusiasm for saying I was going to run an exercise, I had to very quickly to come up with a format which would be short, engaging and provide lots of ideas.

#### **How I approached it**

To take part in the exercise, I had eleven participants from a number of different agencies. The format of the exercise was to carry out a Speed exercise (see Chapter 2). Before the exercise Kim (my wife and fellow founder of PlanB Consulting) and I brainstormed a list of possible scenarios. At the beginning of the

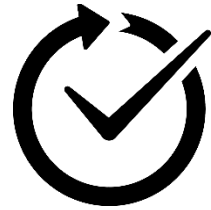
exercise we asked all participants to vote on the scenarios they would like to exercise. Each person could vote for the four different exercises they wanted to exercise. The four chosen scenarios were:

- White Cart Viaduct failure (this is the motorway bridge which connects the airport to Glasgow and is the main route to and from the airport).
- IT failure at the airport or hotel.
- Protesters on site.
- Bomb hoax with insider knowledge.

### **The Result**

The participants looked at risks and issues associated with the scenario as well as impact if the event occurred and how the authorities would respond. For each of the scenarios we came up with twelve to fifteen risks, impacts and possible actions. In the end we didn't come up with anything that those responsible for securing the torch hadn't already thought about or planned for, but all those who took part in the exercise went away feeling more comfortable that their existing planning could cope with all four scenarios. We went away feeling that we had run a worthwhile exercise and done our small bit to contribute to the success of the 2012 UK Olympic Games, for a minimum amount of planning.

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## **7. Identify Key Stakeholders by Using a Communications Matrix**

### **7.1 Exercise Overview and Exercise Details**

When I am teaching crisis management, I always say that communicating with key stakeholders is one of the most critical activities that any level of incident management team will undertake. If you forget to inform a stakeholder group during an incident, they can become your greatest critic. Identifying who your key stakeholders are, understanding their information requirements and then keeping them updated with timely and relevant information are among the most critical tasks for any incident team.

The purpose of this exercise is for participants to gain experience in identifying the stakeholders for a particular incident, and then to think through their communications requirements. For me this is a critical incident management practice and should be carried out by all levels of teams in responding to all different types of incidents.

This exercise takes a scenario and gets the group or the members of an incident management team to identify the stakeholders for the particular incident. Then they must decide how they should be contacted, who would be given the role of contacting them, what should be communicated to the stakeholders and when they should be contacted. This is a tool which should be used in an incident as well as written into the plan in advance of an incident. Bear in mind that even if there is an existing list in a plan, there is always the need to identify which stakeholders are relevant for the particular incident or to identify any additional stakeholders who are not named within the plan.

By the end of the exercise participants should have a robust list of stakeholders who can be incorporated or added to the list already in the plan.

- This exercise is best suited to a group of 3-10 people, although several groups could undertake the exercise simultaneously.
- The exercise can take between 30 and 45 minutes to conduct.
- This exercise can be conducted at any level of incident management team.
- This exercise can be done without a scenario, but to help participants understand the exercise it is best conducted with a simple scenario.

## **7.2 How to Conduct the Exercise**

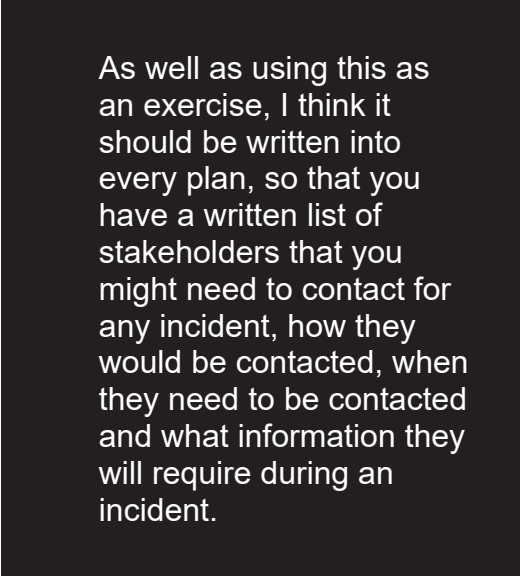
The following should be carried out to prepare for the exercise:

- Review the existing plans and check which stakeholders are already mentioned within any relevant plans.
- Decide on a scenario which has a wide stakeholder impact.

- Set up a flipchart or large piece of paper for each team. The flipchart should be divided into four columns labelled *Who*, *How*, *What*, *When*.

The following is how the exercise should be conducted:

- Explain that they are part of an incident team and they have been assigned the role of identifying the stakeholders for the incident.
- Explain the scenario to each group.
- Under the “Who” column ask each group to write down the list of stakeholders who should be contacted for the given scenario. Make the point that they may have to segment the lists. For example, there may be different customer groups depending on which product is affected, or staff may be split up into those immediately affected by the incident and those who work at the location but were not involved. Then there is the wider company staff, those off on holiday, maternity/paternity leave, those sick and those due on the next shift.



As well as using this as an exercise, I think it should be written into every plan, so that you have a written list of stakeholders that you might need to contact for any incident, how they would be contacted, when they need to be contacted and what information they will require during an incident.

- Then decide “how” each stakeholder could be contacted. This could include face-to-face, letters, social media, email, via mainstream media or through the organization’s chain of command.
- Next, participants should put themselves in the shoes of each stakeholder and write down “what” sort of information they would require for the given scenario. This could include the facts of the incident, any compensation or refunds available, any precautions customers should take, how long a certain function, service or building may be unavailable. Ask participants to think about how the information requirements of the stakeholder will change throughout the duration of the incident.
- Finally, ask them to write down “when” they think stakeholders should be contacted. Would they want to be contacted at 3AM to be informed of the incident or would they expect to be informed the next working day? Should they be informed during the weekend or wait until the start of the working week? You can also ask them to write down the frequency of updates that the stakeholder should receive on an ongoing basis.
- Once they have exhausted the list of stakeholders and their requirements, the exercise comes to an end.
- When running this exercise I find it is a good idea to get the participants to think about what generic information the stakeholders would like within the “what” column, rather than the specific information. Participants should be writing down what the shareholders would like to know regarding the facts of the incident, rather than “there was a fire in the warehouse at 2PM.”

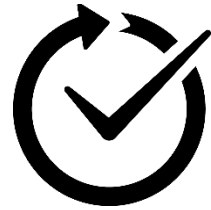
There are a number of variations on this exercise which you may want to try:

- Add a column which contains information about who will be responsible for contact with the stakeholder.
- This exercise can be done within a SIMEX (simulation exercise) or as part of a Tabletop Exercise and should always be conducted during a real-life incident.
- If a cyber incident affected the organization and all IT was out of use, discuss with the participants how they would communicate with stakeholder groups if the organization's systems were unavailable.
- If the exercise involved a civil defense group get them to think through how to get the information out to a number of different groups of the public.

### **7.3 Reporting and Follow-Up**

Compare the list of the stakeholders against any existing list in the plans, and if the what, when and how are not in existing plans, they can be added to it.

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## **17 Debrief Military Style: With an “After Action Review”**

### **17.1 Exercise Overview and Exercise Details**

The After Action Review (AAR) was designed by the American Military in the 1970s for reviewing and improving performance of their troops taking part in large-scale training exercises. It then developed organically with troops at all level spontaneously conducting after action reviews to evaluate the lessons learned from their most recent action and what they could learn from it.

Due to its widespread use it became formally adopted as established practice by the USA military. Since then it has been adopted for civilian use as well; if you search on the internet for AAR you can see a number of references to project teams using after action reviews to evaluate their projects.

The purpose of this exercise is to learn from an incident or exercise by focusing on two elements: why things happened, and to compare intended results with what was actually accomplished.

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The purpose of the AAR is to get information quickly after an incident, exercise or a training session without a lot of preparation. It is designed to be used immediately after the event, so the ideas and experiences are fresh, without giving a lot of time to think about the event more deeply and be influenced by listening to others' thoughts and opinions. For this debrief you can use the three questions detailed below, or you may need to slightly adapt them to the activity you are debriefing.

AARs are very flexible, so you can develop the questions and ask them in many ways. They require no equipment and can be conducted in 15 minutes at the most basic level. This allows the

When carrying out an exercise, don't forget to debrief the team who developed and ran the exercise. The after-action review format is a good format for doing this.

AAR to be used for debriefing the smallest of incidents or short exercises, or for debriefing a section of an exercise before moving on to the next part.

I often use the shortened technique for debriefing after I have run an exercise, training course or

workshop with any fellow consultants who have helped prepare, run or who will write up the event. In the car or on train home we can very quickly get two or three learning points for the event we have just run, and then later we can share them with the rest of the team or write them down and revisit them when we run a similar event. To get the points we don't need any equipment. Carrying out the debrief immediately after the event allows us to capture the points before we move on to the next task.

- If an after action review is being done as part of an exercise, workshop or training session the number taking part in the debrief will depend on the number of facilitators and the size of the group undertaking the activity. To make sure that all get the chance to participate the group should be between 6-10.
- This technique can be used for any level of participants.
- An AAR can be used for debriefing any event be it an incident, workshop, or training.
- The debrief can be conducted in under an hour.

## **17.2 How to Carry Out an AAR**

The methodology is flexible in its approach as it revolves around three questions/sections:

- **Question 1** – What was supposed to happen? What did we try to achieve? What actually happened? What did we actually achieve? Why was there a difference?
  - The purpose of these questions is to establish a common understanding of the incident or exercise under review and what we were trying to achieve. The Exercise Director should encourage and promote discussion around these questions in particular, and changes from the plan should be explored.

- In some documents which describe the debrief, Question 1 is broken down into two separate questions “What was expected to happen?” and “What actually occurred?” These two questions are better taken together so you can concentrate on the gap between what was meant to happen with what actually happened. This is rather than spending a lot of time establishing what actually happened, and then separately after that discussing what actually happened. You can do it either way so you can have a three or four question debrief.
- **Question 2** – What worked? What didn’t work? What was the reason for this?
  - These questions generate reflection about the successes and failures during the incident or exercise. The question “Why?” helps to understand the root causes of any successes and failures.
- **Question 3** – What would you do differently next time?
  - This question is intended to help identify specific, actionable recommendations. The Exercise Director should help in the development of concise, actionable, and achievable recommendations and actions.

According to American Army guidelines on conducting AARs, roughly 25% of the time should be devoted to Question 1, 25% to Question 2, and 50% to Question 3. It should also be noted that the participants should be speaking 75% of the time, so the Exercise Director is clear that they need to listen.

If you are short of time and the incident or exercise is not too complex you can use the questions to explore the whole incident. If the incident or exercise is longer or more complex you may decide to arrange the debrief around a number of key themes such as

communications, teamwork and content of the plan, or arrange it around chronology of the incident from start to finish.

### **17.3 How to Conduct the Debrief**

The following should be carried out to prepare for the exercise:

- Prepare the questions for the debrief and think through what you want from the debrief. When choosing questions, use general ones such as “How did you feel the exercise went?” or focus immediately on specific areas such “How well did you think communication between members of the team went during the exercise?” The debrief also works well if you ask open questions such as “What would you do differently next time?”
- Consider the most appropriate facilitator for the debrief. If it is conducted immediately after an exercise, then the Exercise Director will be most appropriate. If the AAR is conducted some time after the exercise or after an incident, then consider whether a neutral facilitator should be chosen who comes to the debrief without preconceived ideas since they have not been involved in the exercise or incident.
- The debrief should be conducted as soon as possible after the event as memories fade and myths about the event develop which will color people’s objectivity at the debrief.
- Employ a note taker for the debrief. This will allow you to concentrate on the responses, rather than trying to write down the information at the same time. Don’t use one of the participants as a note taker as they will not have time to contribute.

The following is how the exercise should be conducted:

- The sessions should start with the Exercise Director being very clear on what is the scope, timeframes and any aspect of the incident or event you are commenting on.

- They should make participants aware the AAR does not seek to criticize or find fault, and the aim is to learn from the event and so all participants are encouraged to get involved in the debrief and to be open and honest. I read a good article<sup>4</sup> on AARs on guidance in running an AAR they said “We don’t use the ‘b’ or the ‘f’ words. We don’t place blame, and we don’t find fault.” Plain speaking, however, is essential, and facilitators normally suggest to participants that they enter AARs with “no thin skins.”
- Confirm you want active participation and that it is okay to disagree, but blame is not to come into the discussion and personal attacks are unacceptable. It is very important that the right atmosphere is set up by the Exercise Director.
- Remind participants that every view is valid and has equal value. This is important to stress when participants in the AAR will consist of different levels of seniority.
- Encourage participants to talk about team performance and not about individual performance.
- Ask each of the questions one at a time and then discuss before moving onto the next.
- At each stage the exercise director should draw together the thoughts of the group, and the learning points should also be agreed.

The following is a variation on this exercise which you many want to try:

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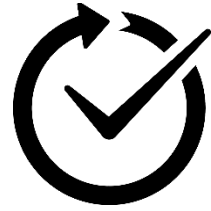
<sup>4</sup> THE U.S. Army’s After Action Reviews: Seizing The Chance To Learn, An Excerpt from: David A Garvin, “Learning In Action, A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work” (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000), 106-116. <https://www.nwcg.gov/sites/default/files/wfldp/docs/army-seizing-chance-to-learn.pdf>

- You could instruct those who attended the exercise to fill out the AAR on paper rather than carry out it verbally.

## **17.4 Reporting and Follow-Up**

A written post exercise report can be produced from the points from the debrief.

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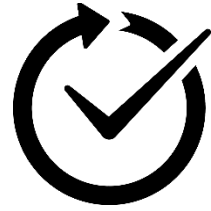
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**Charlie Maclean-Bristol MA (Hons), PgD, FBCI, FEPS, CBCI** is a Business Continuity and Crisis Management consultant and founder of an independent resilience consultancy, PlanB Consulting, and a certified training services provider, Business Continuity Training (BCT).

His first experience of contingency planning, training and incident management was as a Captain in the Kings Own Scottish Borders implementing patrols and anti-terrorist



operations in Northern Ireland. After leaving the Army he joined Anglian Water as their first Emergency Planning Manager followed by Scottish Power as Business Continuity Manager. He then worked for two consultancies before setting up PlanB Consulting in 2007.

Charlie is a former Business Continuity Institute (BCI) board member and one of the very few Fellows of both the Emergency Planning Society and the Business Continuity Institute. In 2011, he was awarded Business Continuity Consultant of the year at the CIR awards and in 2018 he was BCI European Awards – Personality of the Year.

He has a PgD in Emergency Planning and Disaster Management from the University of Hertfordshire. He teaches Resilience, Continuity, and Crises Management at Glasgow Caledonian University.

Charlie has contributed to the last three editions of the BCI Good Practice Guidelines, developed BCI training courses and a cyber incident management course.



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