

Preparing for emergency drills and exercises

Emergency drills and exercises are some of the best ways to get ready for real-life crises. But if they're rushed or poorly planned, they can do more harm than good.

The most common pitfalls include:

- No clear objectives
- Scenarios that are too complex
- Not enough time for interaction
- Skipping post-exercise critiques
- Ignoring participant safety or emotional impact
- Leaving out key agencies
- Failing to act on lessons learned

Avoiding these mistakes starts with a clear plan. Follow these six steps to make your drills and exercises effective and meaningful.

Step 1: Develop emergency plans

Don't run a drill until your plan is in place. A solid plan includes:

- A master emergency or crisis plan
- Role-specific guides for key staff
- Quick response guides for your organization

You can't predict every hazard, so focus on responses, not scenarios. Most emergencies fall into these 10 categories: Evacuation, reverse evacuation, lockout, lockdown, clear the halls, shelter-in-place, medical emergency, closure or cancellation, death, and vehicle accident. Tailor each response to your site and note when it should be used.



Step 2: Train employees

Everyone should be trained at least once a year on the plan and their role. Share plans with local emergency responders—but don't make them public.

Step 3: Run tabletop exercises

Tabletop exercises are discussion-based practice sessions where participants talk through a scenario without disrupting the workday. They will:

- Test knowledge of roles and responsibilities
- Reveal weak spots in plans or training
- Allow safe, low-cost practice

Keep them small at first (management, safety staff, maintenance, etc.), then invite local responders. Document improvements and run tabletop exercises annually (at the minimum)—or any time your people, building, plans, or equipment change.

Step 4: Hold drills

Drills provide hands-on practice for specific procedures like fire, lockdown, or shelter-in-place. Make them realistic by varying times, weather, or staffing. Here are some tips:

- Keep them controlled and focused on one procedure
- Involve all building occupants
- Train building occupants first so expectations are clear
- Invite local responders to observe

Step 5: Conduct functional exercises

Once drills are familiar, scale up. Functional exercises test how your plan works with outside agencies in real time (without moving people or equipment). They will:

- Involve multiple departments and responders
- Stress communication and coordination across rooms and buildings
- Require careful planning, oversight, and advanced notification

Step 6: Test with full-scale exercises

Full-scale exercises are rare but powerful. They simulate real emergencies with multiple agencies, jurisdictions, and moving parts—sometimes including mock damage, rescues, and mass transportation. They take months to plan and are costly, but they're the ultimate test of readiness.

Don't skip the follow-up

Every drill or exercise should end with two key steps:

1. After-action report: Document what worked, what didn't, and what needs to change
2. Improvement plan: Turn findings into clear goals, deadlines, and responsibilities

These steps ensure lessons learned turn into safer, stronger plans.

To learn more about emergency drills and exercises, contact your independent insurance agent or email losscontrol@emcins.com.

