



TABLETOP EXERCISES BEST PRACTICES

Background: Many organizations have adopted the Tabletop Exercise (TTX) as a tool for building collaboration, identifying gaps, solving difficult problems, and/or developing strategy and policy (among other things). TTXs are usually two-to-five-day events where groups of people meet to address a topic of interest of concern (participants can be from the same, or different organizations, departments...etc.). TTXs, if facilitated correctly, are invaluable as they provide an opportunity for an exchange of (diverse) ideas and collaboration across a large number of individuals and organizations. As valuable as a well run TTX can be, if they are unorganized and not facilitated well, they can prove devastating to an initiative and have the opposite effect by increasing confusion, contention, and resistance.

Three Broad Methods for TTX Facilitation: Every facilitation team runs a TTX their own way, but the vast majority are based around some form of facilitated group discussions and subject matter expert (SME) presentations. Current TTXs tend to fall into one of the following three categories:

1. **Presentation Focused:** This type of event, from our experience, is the most common method for facilitating TTXs and working groups. These events tend to last three to four days and consist of various SMEs providing a series of presentations about the subject of focus- with large group open discussions and/or firmware that captures discussion points and provides weighted metrics. From our perspective these events tend to lose the audience's attention, and therefore their value, around halfway through Day Two of the event ("death by PowerPoint").
2. **Design Thinking Focused:** This type of event came into favor around 2015/2016, when "innovation" became the buzzword of choice throughout government and industry. These events focus on small group exercises with minimal/no boundaries in order to encourage creative

thinking and develop unique solutions to “wicked” problems. Common challenges encountered with Design based events are the resistance of participants to be too “touch-feely”, the likelihood of rabbit hole discussions far off topic, and finally the lack of “actionable” or valuable information and obvious lines of effort.

3. **Case Study Based:** This method of TTX facilitation has increased in popularity in the past few years (2019-present) and consist of pre-determined vignettes (either real world cases or made-up cases) to spur thought and discussion. Scenarios are created with specific points of interest identified to “drop anchor” and discuss in small or large groups. Potential pitfalls associated with Case Study events are poor scenario development, lack of “practice runs” through the scenarios, and inconsistent facilitation if using the small group format.

Common TTX “Traps” and Missteps: All TTXs share some common “risks” to be mindful of- factors that if not considered and mitigated can derail even the best facilitated events. Some of the more common considerations are as follows:

1. **Participants/Attendees:** This issue is two-fold: a successful TTX is built around the “correct” participants as well as the right number of participants. A few strong personalities can remove the motivation from the room and disrupt the flow of events and exchange of ideas. Similarly, too many participants become unwieldy and counterproductive as small group exchanges prove difficult to manage, salient thoughts are not easily captured, and numerous good ideas are lost/never heard as introverts are less likely to engage. Finally, it is imperative that facilitators build a diverse participant list (across orgs/depts and up/down the chain of command) and take the time to be deliberate in building small groups.
2. **Scope:** A clear and precise scope is essential to an event’s success- it is often wise to break events into multiple events to maximize exchange of ideas and fully explore problems/solutions. Too broad of scope results in an unclear and overwhelming agenda, with participants becoming frustrated and therefore less likely to participate or remain engaged. Due to “life” and attention spans, the ideal TTX is three days of activities with the final day being a “wrap up”/read out towards the latter half of the day. Many organizations make the mistake of trying to cram too much into one week and create a five-day agenda, only to realize that the audience has decreased to minimal participants by the afternoon of the third day.
3. **“Rigidity”:** Facilitators and sponsors cannot be rigid, as there are countless variables that will affect the flow and dynamic of the event. The worst thing to do is try to develop a rigid agenda and idea of how each evolution/discussion will unfold- this is unrealistic and often results in a frustrated participant group that feels the event is scripted and predetermined (and therefore worthless). The best facilitators (and sponsors) understand that these events are like jazz- you must be able to “riff” and remain adaptive as the evolutions and event unfolds. To be clear, this doesn’t mean abandoning the plan, it means being ok with spending more time in some areas, less in others, and working as a facilitator-sponsor team to maximize the event.

The BVG Solution: BVG & Company is comprised of former operators with extensive experience in the Joint, interagency, whole of government, and capability development “world”, as well as decades of experience as TTX participants and facilitators for some of our Nation’s most daunting challenges. We have developed a TTX template that utilizes a combination of all three facilitation methods (presentation, Design/small group, and Case Study) to maximize participation, collaboration, and exchange of ideas. We

make each event (or series of events) unique to the needs of our customer (generic/" cookie-cutter" has minimal value) but follow this process:

1. **Scope Development-** this is vital to a successful event, so we spend half a day (minimum) ensuring we understand the customer's pain point and that we fully appreciate "what right looks like" from the customer's perspective. It is beneficial to take the time to discuss/explore with customers as they often don't realize exactly what they want to solve, and this effort pays dividends with expectations and ensuring a properly scoped effort/event.
2. **Event Development-** We request multiple half day engagements to refine the following:
 - a. **Participant List-** This is essential to ensure diversity and identify potential "strong personalities" of concern (and develop contingency plans). Additionally, pre-reading will be developed and provided to the participant list.
 - b. **Agenda Development-** ensure each evolution flows logically and results in the desired result (as outlined in the scope). This provides sponsors/customers with the ability to modify scope, Case Studies, and/or evolutions to maximize value by fully understanding the intent of each evolution. BVG provides suggestions on ratios for presentation, Design/small group, and Case Study usage, but is open to feedback as sponsors/customers know their respective organizations much more intimately.
3. **Facilitator Training-** BVG and Company spends one week conducting our walk through of the event, ensuring presentations, evolutions, case studies, and small group outputs are aligned and make sense. Small group frameworks will be developed so small group efforts and outputs are as consistent as possible- with the understanding that some small group facilitation will have to be modified due to group dynamics.
4. **Pre-Event Walk Through-** Facilitation team will conduct a full walk through with customers/sponsors to ensure sponsors will receive what they expect. This is a final chance to:
 - a. **Review presentations-** BVG goal is to utilize presentations only to "level the bubbles" of understanding and transition to case studies/small group activities as quickly as possible. Some up-front education is required for a successful event but should be minimized to avoid "death by PowerPoint".
 - b. **Review Case Studies-** ensure case studies make sense, are realistic, and address the event's focus/scope. Additionally, areas identified to "drop anchor" and pre-established questions to spur deeper discussion are reviewed for relevance and sponsor/customer concurrence.
 - c. **Review Small Group Participant List and Outputs-** Ensure each group is diverse, that no "personality clashes" are expected in the groups, and that outputs are logical and lead to the desired end state of the sponsors/customers.
5. **Event**
6. **Event Output-** "Actionable" information as determined by the scope (per customer/sponsor).