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“ The Importance of Oil Spill Response Exercises”

Examining the gap between exercises and actual oil spill incident responses.

The importance of exercising

An effective response to any emergency situation is dependent upon the ability and knowledge of those responding. Very clearly an effective response plan provides the guidance for the responders and gives ready access to the tools they will need. The responders therefore must be familiar with this plan and have had the opportunity to try it, use it and develop it. The plan must be exercised and it must be exercised in advance of an emergency situation. Making mistakes is one of the most powerful learning tools, it is how we discovered what “hot” means. It is not a good idea to make those mistakes in a real incident.

As professionals we understand the importance of exercising and we go to great lengths to develop structured programmes and meaningful exercises. There remains however a great difference around the world as to the understanding of the requirements of an oil spill exercise and in the frequency or indeed the need for them. This is changing with the introduction of the OPRC convention and the requirement that signatories to that convention should have in place a published programme of exercises. We are seeing this being enforced now in the UK. In addition to this of course there has been a requirement in the USA under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 for an established programme of response exercises, the “PREP” programme.

IPIECA and IMO recognise the importance of this subject and in their excellent joint publication “Guide to Oil Spill Exercise Planning” and state that the purpose of conducting the exercise is to test the plan, the equipment and the capabilities of the response team. They also point out that no exercise therefore is complete without assessment and review that will lead to recommendations for improvements to the plan, that availability of resources or the training of personnel. The “Guiding Principles” included in that publication illustrates how to get the most out of the effort put into oil spill exercises.

Guiding Principles

- Ensure the management from the top down supports the exercise activity.
- Set clear realistic and measurable objectives
- The thrust of the exercise must be to improve not impress.
- Simpler more frequent exercises lead to faster improvements initially.
- Do not tackle complex exercises until personnel are experienced and competent.
- Too many activities, locations and participants can overcomplicate and exercise
- Evaluating the exercise successfully is as important as conducting it successfully.
- Planning and conducting a successful exercise is a significant accomplishment.

What Constitutes a Good Exercise?

Exercises come in different forms and will be used for different reasons and terminology varies. The table below illustrates the types advocated by IMO/IPIECA and those under the PREP Programme.

Table1 – General Exercise Type Comparison

IPIECA / IMO	PREP	
	Internal (Industry)	External (Agency)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notification • Equipment Deployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualified Individual Notification • Equipment Deployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Area) • Notification (Area) • Equipment Deployment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Table Top 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency Procedures • Spill Management Team Table Top 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Area) • Spill Management Team Table Top
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incident Management 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Area) • Area Exercise

The importance of having different categories of spill exercise is that they will allow different aspects of the plan to be exercised separately and it promotes understanding of the purpose and scope of the whole plan. To be effective however the exercise must achieve the objectives set and must test all the parties. These parties must of necessity include all those that will be involved in the event of a real incident. Thus it is meaningless for a major exercise not to include government and representatives of other interested parties if an incident will require their input. The added value in this is of course that regular exercising with these different parties will go a long way to building relationships that will be invaluable in the event of a real incident.

It is tempting also to load an exercise with as much reality as can be generated, but caution must be exercised not to put too much pressure on and defeat the objects through unnecessarily undermining the participants. It is recognised that response groups can be overwhelmed quickly by repeated organisational and public affairs challenges (both in actual emergencies and in exercises) but to do this in an exercise when trying to establish the basics of the plan would be completely counter to the objectives. Rather wait until that part of the plan is in need of testing and introduce the scenarios then.

A good exercise therefore is one that will deliver the benefits that we know will arise from regular exercising. They are;

- Working together as a team and making complex and potentially far reaching decisions that would not normally be expected of the participants.
- Proving of plans and procedures.
- Developing credibility with governments and the public.
- Developing individuals skills.
- To enable people who do not normally work together to understand each others goals and to develop trust between them.

We will know that we have done this only with a proper evaluation which in itself is critical to the continual improvement of emergency and crisis response capabilities. A good exercise therefore will have evaluation as an integral part of it's programme. Other key parts are the setting of realistic objectives, the development of a proper plan, a scenario that has been well thought out and communicated to all parties and a properly controlled programme. The evaluation phase must be planned in advance in order that data can be collected from players and observers and fed back while they are still immersed in the exercise, the "hot wash-up". Following that a detailed analysis of the events should be undertaken and a detailed report with recommendations produced. Again the IMO/IPIECA Guide to Oil Spill Exercise Planning shows this very clearly.

Can an exercise replicate the real thing?

We can make an exercise meaningful as we have seen above through the setting of clear objectives and working with others to deliver good recommendations to bring about changes to the plans. We can learn from this and we can teach others. We can also make exercises realistic through any number of different methods starting with the unannounced call-out. Drills and exercises that we in OSRL have been involved in have included flying our Hercules aircraft with personnel and equipment great distances, co-ordinating with merchant and naval vessels and often many different government agencies. The most realistic scenarios however sometimes come from unexpected sources, such as when students were recruited to demonstrate against a spill outside an exercise command centre and were then joined by some who thought it for real and invaded the centre. Local media picking up the activity of the exercise and believing it to be a real spill can also be an embarrassment. It is possible also that we can load the exercise participants and players to the same state of exhaustion that they would likely experience when involved in a real spill but this will never be the real thing and we should not try to make it such.

Different priorities exist during a real emergency and these are most likely not those that we wish to test in an exercise. The value of many exercises is in developing small key points to improve our overall responsiveness. It must be remembered also that a big issue is in the testing of a government response. We in industry are well funded to train and exercise. This is not the same in government and we have a role to play in working with them to improve the overall outcome. A real spill brings different priorities to many government departments and we must avoid being caught in those traps. Rather we should be aware of them and help those responsible to work with us to achieve the main response objectives.

What should we expect in the future.

Crystal ball gazing is notoriously inaccurate and often leaves the person who made the prediction with a "red face". It is the authors belief however that a few things are very likely to come about and that we should be prepared for them and wherever use them to our advantage.

It is most likely that we will see more imposition of statutory requirements for oil spill exercises and drills. This in itself means more interference from other agencies particularly in the type of exercise we must undertake but also in the frequency. At the same time we can expect the imposition of observers and perhaps a need for more participation with those authorities. In itself this may not be a bad thing except that the frequency and type being imposed may produce a financial burden while not really achieving our objectives. A more serious consequence may be in the imposition of pass/fail criteria. This will

inevitably be based on the regulatory authorities assessment of achieving objectives which again are most likely not industry's.

A more welcome change to our oil spill exercises may well be in the use of IT. This will not just add realism, particularly when used in modelling and enabling better real time response planning, but in better recording and evaluating and in the communications between parties. We see this already in the use of digital phones and computer links with digital photography. A welcome development would be in the use of IT to replicate areas of weakness and to test options either during the exercise or immediately after in the evaluation phase.

Conclusion

Oil spill response exercising is important and a valuable tool for us all to improve not only what we do but also our relationships with others. This is particularly important with government bodies and other important agencies.

Realism in spill exercises is attractive and important in some scenarios but the most important issue is the achievement of the objectives. This can easily be destroyed by an overzealous approach to realism and too much pressure on the participants.

We can not, and should not expect an exercise to be the real thing. We will learn more from a structured programme of exercises focussed on important issues of plan and responder development than we will from a real incident when we may well find objectives "highjacked" for reasons we are not privy to.

Acknowledgements;

1. IMO/IPIECA Report Series Volume 2.

"Guide to Oil Spill Exercise Planning".

2. David E Neilson.

"The Advantages, Costs and Pitfalls of International Drills and Exercises."

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