



‘What if...’ contingency planning

‘What if...’ scenarios prompt participants to think about unexpected situations that could occur during an emergency event. Participants are presented with a potential natural disaster scenario, and are encouraged to think about their course of action. During this exercise, ‘What if...’ cards are randomly distributed to each group. These present a range of likely incidents that could impact a generic untested plan.

The activity reveals assumptions or generalisations, so that participants question any pre-conceived ideas and consider appropriate alternative actions. The objective is to emphasise the need for families to test their emergency plans and to have multiple agreed contingencies in place.

The sample scenarios cover multiple hazard types, which allow the facilitator to select a set of cards suitable for particular circumstances, such as a bush fire event, or for targeted sector workshops, such as the elderly or child care services. A blank template is also provided, which may be populated with other scenarios as required.



Sample ‘What if...’ card

Hazards addressed

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bush fire | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sea level rise – erosion and inundation |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Drought | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Storms |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Extreme heat | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tsunami |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Flooding | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |

Resources required

- Extreme weather event scenario
- ‘What if...’ scenario cards
- Maps of area (optional – builds on ‘Playful Triggers’ neighbourhood mapping exercise)

Process

Participants are seated in small groups of up to six people. An emergency event scenario is presented to the group and, at each stage of the event, participants are asked to think about their responses and actions. These can also be written down before being discussed within their group. Some of the questions participants should consider include:

- Where would you be at this time? Where are the other members of your household?
- How would you hear about the event? How would you stay informed?
- What actions will you take at this time? What are others doing?



While this is going on, distribute random 'What if...' scenario cards amongst each group. Ask participants to discuss how this situation would impact or change their plans. Questions printed on the reverse of each card encourages people to think beyond their own immediate circumstances:

- Who can you ask for help?
- Who will you look out for?
- Where will you go?
- How will you escape?
- What will you take?

If representatives from emergency service agencies are present, they can be asked to facilitate group discussions, pushing participants to explore all contingencies through further questioning. Emergency services may also provide information on what their agencies would be doing at each point of the scenario.

Alternatives

Complete or smaller sample sets of 'What if...' scenario cards may also be provided to participants to take home to test their emergency plans with others, such as family or colleagues.

Research background and observations in practice

This activity stems from design-led community engagement methods trialled by the Bushfire CRC in the Southern Otways in Victoria in February 2010. These methods use a social process of communication, where the community participates in a dialogue rather than simply receiving information from a central source or authority, and hence build their own knowledge and experiences into the messages that they then take away (Akama et al 2012). The methods have been incorporated into training by the Australian Emergency Management Institute since 2012.

'What if...' scenarios are designed to test the knowledge gained during other activities, and requires participants to think specifically about unexpected events that may occur in an emergency situation. Akama and colleagues have shown that this reduces people's tendency to think '...that won't happen to me', which is a key obstacle to effective bush fire preparation.

The outcomes of this exercise are often that people realise that their plans are inadequate and/or need to be rethought and discussed with family. It also often results in participants deciding that they should plan to leave earlier.

References

Akama, Y., Chaplin, S., Philips, R. & Toh, K. (2012) 'Design-led strategies for bushfire preparedness', in Cathryn Gertzog (ed.) *Proceedings of the Disaster and Emergency Management Conference*, Brisbane, Australia, 16 - 18th April 2012, pp. 407-424.