Action Planning Workshop Guide

This Action Planning Workshop Guide was developed as a part of FEMA's Continuous Improvement Technical Assistance Program (CITAP). This resource builds on information provided in the National Continuous Improvement Guidance (NCIG) on action planning. NCIG can be accessed on the CITAP Preparedness Toolkit website: https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/cip-citap/ncig

Introduction

The Action Planning Workshop Guide outlines an approach to prepare for and conduct an Action Planning Workshop. An Action Planning Workshop brings together multiple stakeholders to facilitate the development, adoption, and implementation of recommended actions as part of the after-action review process for an incident. The guide also provides an approach to conduct action planning during the Resolution Phase of the continuous improvement process. The approach is outlined in two primary stages: (1) preparing for the workshop and (2) facilitating the workshop. The approach further describes key elements within these two stages.

The action planning process builds on the observations identified in the Validation Phase of the continuous improvement process. Observations are developed based on analysis of quantitative and qualitative data and are categorized as an identified strength, area for improvement, potential best practice, or mission critical issue.

Figure 1: Continuous Improvement Phases

Observations are commonly documented in after-action review products (e.g., after-action reports), which may also include associated, potential recommended actions. In turn, observations and the potential recommended actions are used to develop an Action Plan, which serves as a central repository for these observations and associated recommended actions. Based on observations, recommended actions are developed and validated. In developing an Action Plan, agreement on the final recommended actions and associated approach for implementation is addressed by the organizations with responsibility for these actions during an Action Planning Workshop. Some baseline considerations for developing an Action Plan are provided at the end of this guide.

Action Planning Workshop

As part of an after-action review process for an incident, organizations can coordinate and conduct an Action Planning Workshop to socialize recorded observations and to develop and finalize appropriate recommended actions. These recommended actions will be included in the final Action Plan.

The workshop brings together multiple stakeholders to facilitate the development, adoption, and approval for a path to implementing the recommended actions. The workshop includes appropriate representatives from organizations potentially responsible for implementing recommended actions. The final product of the workshop is an Action Plan that documents all actions that will be taken, who is responsible for ensuring completion of the actions, and what metrics will be used to determine when and how the recommended actions have been completed.

Individuals at the workshop will have one of the following roles:

- **Participant:** Responsible entities and leadership.
    - Responsible entities:
        - Have authority to carry out recommended actions based on observations.
        - Play an active role in developing recommended actions during the action planning process, including writing recommended action language, determining recommended action assignments, and establishing timelines for recommended action completion.
        - Complete recommended actions according to the timeline established in the Action Plan. It is important to note that sometimes the Action Plan will not have a timeline, or there are unforeseen barriers to implementation. In certain instances, recommended actions will be completed outside of the initially recommended timeline. It can be beneficial to allow some flexibility in how and when responsible entities address recommended actions.
    - Leadership:
        - Decides which recommended actions will or will not be implemented.
- **Facilitator:** Leads the workshop by explaining the purpose of the meeting, establishing ground rules, communicating the level of consensus, and focusing discussion on selected topics. If possible, the facilitator

should not be someone who will also be responsible for recommended actions or affected by recommended actions.

- **Notetaker:** Documents any decisions made during the workshop, including finalizing recommended actions and responsible entities.

- **Action Plan Manager:** Manages the plan and ensures accountability by regularly tracking and updating the status of recommended actions in the Action Plan after the workshop. If possible, the Action Plan Manager should be someone who is not involved in implementing recommended actions and who can hold responsible entities accountable. The individual(s) serving in this role can have other primary duties, but adequate time should be dedicated to action tracking as this process may involve extra work in engaging responsible entities to understand the status.

Preparing for an Action Planning Workshop

Planning for the workshop involves the following four steps: (1) identify potential attendees, (2) identify additional facilitation team support, (3) send out a workshop invitation, and (4) develop priority matrix of draft recommended actions (optional step).

- Identify Potential Attendees
  - The first step in preparing for the workshop is to identify the appropriate attendees, including entities that may be responsible for implementing or supporting the implementation of final recommended actions.
  - To ensure all key stakeholders can attend and provide input, consider the dates and times potential participants are available to attend the workshop. If a key organization is unavailable during the scheduled time, it may be worth rescheduling the workshop.
- Identify Additional Facilitation Team Support
  - After identifying the responsible entities, it is important to identify a lead facilitator, lead notetaker, and any additional support that may be required or helpful (e.g., co-facilitator or second notetaker).
  - More than one facilitator or notetaker may be needed if there are many participants, complex recommended actions, or sensitive topics. If possible, organizations may consider having a second notetaker so that one notetaker can record notes on a white board or shared screen for participants to follow, while another notetaker captures more comprehensive notes for future reference.
- Send Out a Workshop Invitation
  - The workshop invitation should include an invitation message, workshop agenda, and copy of the after-action review product (e.g., draft after-action report) which will commonly contain draft recommended actions.
  - Invitation Message

    - Explains the purpose of the workshop, prompts stakeholders to read the attached after-action review product.
    - The message can ask stakeholders to rank their top five priority observations from the draft after-action review product. These priorities can be compiled and assessed to provide the facilitator and participants with an idea of stakeholder priorities. These priorities can also be used to develop a priority matrix (see Develop a Priority Matrix section below). The goal of asking for a ranking is to determine the most important observations/recommended actions to address during the workshop.
  - Agenda
    - Keeps the discussion on track and ensures participants can follow the meeting progression.
    - Sending the agenda to all participants prior to the workshop allows them to prepare for the most significant topics, and it may encourage attendance.
    - The agenda can be as specific or as vague as desired based on the approach of the workshop facilitator(s), but it should always include ground rules, time designated for discussing recommended actions, and time designated to define next steps.
  - After-Action Review Product
    - The workshop message should include the draft after-action review product, such as an after-action report, or the drafted observations and/or recommended actions.
    - By providing the after-action review product to participants prior to the workshop along with adequate time to review, participants can consider observations and draft recommended actions (if developed) and begin brainstorming additional recommended actions prior to the workshop.
    - Some after-action review products contain draft recommended actions linked to specific observations. Recommended actions are designed to resolve areas for improvement and mission critical issues that arose during response and recovery operations, as well as to guide the codification of strengths and potential best practices, if they are not already captured in doctrine or policy.
    - Some organizations may not develop recommended actions in an after-action review product or draft recommended actions prior to holding the Action Planning Workshop. In these situations, it may be beneficial to encourage relevant stakeholders to come prepared to the workshop, either by having read the after-action review product or by considered recommended actions before attending the workshop.
- Develop Priority Matrix of Draft Recommended Actions (**optional**)
  - If there are more observations and/or recommended actions than can be reasonably discussed during the workshop, the facilitator may consider using a priority matrix to identify which recommended actions or observations to discuss during the workshop.

- The Priority Matrix should be designed to combine and compare stakeholder priorities. The facilitator should develop the Priority Matrix using priority recommended actions and/or observations identified by workshop participants in response to the workshop invitation. The Priority Matrix should consider individual ranking responses and calculate a ranked list of the top priority observations.

- Priorities can be ranked using a points system, where higher prioritized observations are awarded more points (e.g., a stakeholder's top priority is given five points, second priority is given four points, and so on). Using this method, the facilitator can decide to focus on the recommended actions that received a certain number of points on up for discussion (e.g., three points or higher).

- While the facilitator should develop the Priority Matrix prior to the workshop, it can be updated and finalized during the workshop based on discussion with stakeholders.

- If time allows, the Action Planning Workshop should discuss all recommended actions and/or observations. However, even when there are no time constraints, it can still be helpful for facilitators to first identify and discuss top priority recommended actions to ensure these are addressed in case the review takes longer than expected.

- For additional resources related to developing a Priority Matrix, visit FEMA's Continuous Improvement Technical Assistance Program (CITAP) Preparedness Toolkit website: https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/cip-citap/templates-and-resources.

Facilitating the Action Planning Workshop

When preparing for an Action Planning Workshop, consider the amount of time that will be needed to address all observations and recommended actions. Use this estimate to determine the length of your workshop. There may be a need for an additional workshop(s) if there are too many observations to cover in one session or if the session would be too long to allow all participants to attend. Throughout the workshop, the group will collectively assign recommended actions to appropriate responsible entities. These assignments should be recorded in the Action Plan.

- Facilitation
  - At the beginning of a workshop, the facilitator should explain the purpose of the meeting to ensure all participants understand both the intended focus of the workshop and their role in the discussions.
    - The facilitator should also communicate the decision-making process when conversations do not have consensus (e.g., final decisions for pursuing some recommended actions may be determined by department directors).
  - The facilitator should follow the agenda with the goal of assigning every recommended action to an appropriate responsible entity or entities.
  - The facilitator should clearly establish the workshop ground rules prior to beginning the discussion of the recommended actions. Examples of ground rules include:

  - The final recommended actions and responsible entity will be recorded in the Action Plan.
  - Observations are final and cannot be edited.
  - Observations have already been validated.
  - Desired outcomes are already determined.
  - The purpose of the workshop is to determine and finalize recommended actions.

- The primary focus of the workshop should be to determine the following items for each recommended action:
  - feasibility,
  - time required for implementation,
  - agreed upon recommended action,
  - responsible entity (i.e., organization and point of contact),
  - any associated success metrics,
  - risks to completion, and
  - risk mitigation strategies.
- Throughout the workshop, the group should discuss each of these items in relation to specific recommended actions.
  - If a remote option for participation is provided, the workshop room should be equipped with telecommunication capabilities that allow for effective video- or tele-conferencing for remote participants.
  - Audio-visual tools, such as microphones or in-room presentation screens, should be used to ensure all in-person participants can hear the discussion and view presentation materials.
- Priority Matrix (optional)
  - During the workshop, the facilitator keeps the discussion focused on the recommended actions under consideration. This can either include all recommended actions in the after-action review product or the top-ranked ones based on a Priority Matrix.
  - The draft Priority Matrix created before the workshop can be updated based on discussions during the workshop. In this case, the facilitator calculates the final ranking by combining the points from cumulative feedback and records the top-ranked observations in a new Action Plan template which will serve as the basis for the workshop.

Creating the Action Plan

As noted earlier, the Action Plan is the central repository for observations and associated recommended actions resulting from an after-action review. The Action Plan can be used to present recommended actions that were determined for each observation and to provide a plan for implementing these recommended actions. The Action Plan serves as a single data source for observations and recommended actions that can be referenced and updated as necessary to ensure actions are implemented. The Action Plan is also used by responsible entities to address their assigned recommended actions.

The Action Plan is a living document. It can be updated, changed, or modified as needed. As responsible entities make progress on recommended actions, the Action Plan Manager tracks and updates these recommended actions in the Action Plan until all recommended actions are complete. In some cases, a recommended action may become obsolete (e.g., a fix in a particular form becomes irrelevant if the form is no longer used), and in these cases, the reason for closing the recommended action prior to completion should be documented in the Action Plan. Additionally, organizations can manage observations and resulting recommended actions from multiple after-action review products (from exercises and incidents) using a single corrective action matrix or issue resolution tracker or system (described in additional detail later in this section).

For an Action Plan template and associated instructions, include an example Action Plan, visit FEMA's Continuous Improvement Technical Assistance Program (CITAP) Preparedness Toolkit website: https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/cip-citap/templates-and-resources.

- The Action Plan can and should be customized to meet organizational needs and priorities.
  - When possible, the Action Plan should also include success criteria and/or metrics for measuring the success of each recommended action. A recommended action can be considered successfully implemented if the assessed outcome resembles the desired outcome described in the observation.
- Though the specific fields, or data categories, in an Action Plan may vary by organization, some common types of information include the following:
  - **Observation Type:** Each observation is categorized as a strength, potential best practice, area for improvement, or mission critical issue, which allows users to quickly determine the general focus of each observation.
  - **Status:** Describes the status of the recommended actions with one of four (4) categories: (1) complete, (2) in-progress, (3) not started, and (4) cancelled. Cancelled indicates a recommended action that was initially proposed but later determined it would not be pursued.
  - **Observation:** Details a specific strength, potential best practice, area for improvement, or mission critical issue that is derived from the data collected and validated related to the incident. Each observation describes what happened during the incident and the associated effects on the organization's mission or operations. Observations identify an underlying root cause of the effects in this description.

- **Status Description:** Describes the status of a recommended action in detail to add information to the status (e.g., complete, in-progress, not started, and cancelled).
- **Recommended Action Number:** Numbers the recommended action to align with a specific observation. For example, if one observation has two recommended actions, the first recommended action would be numbered 1.1, and the second would be numbered 1.2.
- **Risks to Completion:** Describes problems or limitations identified in the program or system that may act as barriers to the implementation of a recommended action.
- **Recommended Action:** Describes an action that is being taken to address the identified observations. Recommended actions establish a path for formalizing potential best practices or strengths and addressing areas for improvement and mission critical issues.
- **Risk Mitigation:** Describes actions taken to resolve or minimize identified risks and their potential effects on completing the recommended action.
- **Core Capability:** Identifies the associated core capability or capabilities for each recommended action. By identifying core capabilities, organizations can filter recommended actions to identify any trends. For additional information on core capabilities, refer to: https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/mission-core-capabilities.
- **Success Metric:** Defines a quantifiable measure for successfully implementing the recommended action.
- **Responsible Entity (Organization, Position, and Individual):** Lists which organization(s) is responsible for addressing the recommended action. In some cases, more than one entity may be listed as a responsible entity, depending on who has the authority to carry out the recommended action.
- **Target Completion Date:** Lists the date a recommended action should be implemented.

Observation	Recommended Action #	Core Capability	Recommended Action	Responsible Entity	Point of Contact	Status	Target Completion Date
Area for Improvement: Multiple city departments did not have updated Continuity of Operations (COOP) plans at the time of the ice storm incident, which resulted in gaps in the city's ability to provide certain critical city services.	1.1	Planning	Each city department must develop or update a departmental COOP plan and establish a regular review and maintenance cycle for the plan.	Each city department, in coordination with the city's Office of Emergency Management	Continuity coordinators of each city department	Complete	August 30, 2021
Area for Improvement: Multiple city departments did not have updated Continuity of Operations (COOP) plans at the time of the ice storm incident, which resulted in gaps in the city's ability to provide certain critical city services.	1.2	Planning	In alignment with the city's Integrated Preparedness Plan, develop and conduct exercises every other year focused on departmental COOP plans for each departments' personnel.	Each city department, in coordination with the city's Office of Emergency Management	Each department's Continuity Coordinator and the Training and Exercise Officer of the city's Office of Emergency Management (John Smith)	In Progress	March 31, 2023

Figure 2: Action Plan Example

- Issue Resolution or Action Tracker
    - A comprehensive issue resolution system and/or action tracker provides a central resource for tracking recommended actions from all after-action reviews products from all incidents. Some organizations call this a corrective action matrix. Any observation from all open Action Plans can be tracked using an issue resolution or action tracking system. The advantage of using an issue resolution system is consolidating the management of all open recommended actions in a single location. Doing so can improve the ability to manage recommended actions, rather than sorting through multiple Action Plans to track the status and responsible entities.
    - By using a singular location to track recommended actions from all after-action reviews, the Action Plan Manager can sort information using applicable tags, such as core capabilities; planning, organization, equipment, training, and exercises (POETE) area; and/or community lifelines. The ability to use these tags for considering recommended actions can help to identify potential trends of recurring issues and avoid pursuing contrary or duplicative recommended actions developed during after-action review processes for different incidents or exercises.

- By using a singular location to track recommended actions from all after-action reviews, the Action Plan Manager can consider all recommended actions by responsible entity, which can be useful when requesting status updates regarding assigned recommended actions.
- An issue resolution system may include actions from both real-world incidents and exercises. Including both in one tracking tool allows for organizations to connect outcomes and recommended actions from exercises and real-world incidents.
- For an Issue Resolution Tracker template, visit FEMA's Continuous Improvement Technical Assistance Program (CITAP) Preparedness Toolkit website: https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/cip-citap/templates-and-resources.

Conclusion

The Action Planning Workshop Guide provides an approach to conduct action planning during the Resolution Phase of the continuous improvement process. The Action Planning Workshop includes all steps from planning and facilitating the workshop, to the development of the Action Plan and issue resolution tracker. Creating an Action Plan allows organizations to socialize recorded observations, develop and finalize appropriate recommended actions, and document all actions that will be taken and by which responsible entity.

Preparing for an Action Planning Workshop can require a significant time and resource investment as it involves multiple steps. If resources are limited, one way to help manage the workload is to use a Priority Matrix to prioritize which observations are most important to address.

The Action Plan is also an after-action review product that can be used to present recommended actions, as well as the plan for improvement, to leadership. Ultimately, the Action Planning Workshop brings together multiple stakeholders, engages leadership, and provides responsible entities with a clear path forward for recommended actions.

Learn More about FEMA's Continuous Improvement Technical Assistance Program

This Action Planning Workshop Guide was developed by FEMA's Continuous Improvement Technical Assistance Program (CITAP). For additional information about the program, visit https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/cip-citap/community-home or email FEMA-CITAP@fema.dhs.gov. This Action Planning Workshop Guide is referenced in the National Continuous Improvement Guidance, which can be found at: https://preptoolkit.fema.gov/web/cip-citap/templates-and-resources.