

## Recurring Problems during ARES/RACES Exercises

Having done more emergency exercises over the past decade than I care to tally, I'm able to confidently predict that certain errors will recur in every exercise. These are the lessons NOT learned, either because teams aren't bothering with training, aren't training often enough, or have been inundated with newbies. Here are the problems that come to mind, in no particular order:

**1. Team members don't know how to work the radios they're using – even their own:** Do you know how to set your own radios and your EOC or station radios for frequency, offset, and PL tone? Can you program this into a memory channel? Do you know how to turn on the 12V supply in the EOC? How about starting up the packet or WinLink station, if you have one? If your team is supporting multiple sites, with different models of radios at each one, then the problem can be especially acute. There are several ways to tackle this problem: Have the same models of radios at each venue, make or buy quick-reference guides, aka "cheat sheets" for each radio, pre-program the memory channels with all of the frequencies you think you might use, and have ongoing training sessions with small groups of your team members on how to use the equipment.

**2. Teams use the exercise as an excuse for a work day:** I'm still surprised whenever this happens: teams decide that the day of the exercise will be a dandy excuse to take care of some antenna work, re-route cables, or whatever. If you need the excuse of an exercise to get the team together for this work, then it's better than not doing it at all, but it's certainly not the purpose of holding exercises. Plan your equipment maintenance and upgrade days on non-exercise weekends, or after the exercise, and bribe your team with a pizza binge or barbecue to get them to show up. Your served agency might even foot the bill.

**3. Teams don't check equipment in advance of the exercise:** You wouldn't wait until company shows up at your door to start cleaning house (at least I hope you wouldn't), and you shouldn't wait until the day of the exercise to check your equipment. Exercises are intended to test your "wetware" (i.e. your personnel), not your hardware. Your team should be checking all of the equipment at each site on a monthly basis. I shouldn't have to mention that disasters won't wait for you to fix your gear.

**4. Confusion about when to ID, and how to use tactical and team calls:** I hear team members give both the team's and their own call signs, and many are unaware of the protocol for using tactical calls, or even what their tactical call is. Part 97 says that amateurs must give their legal call once every 10 minutes, and at the end of their QSO. As a practical matter, since we're unlikely to have a QSO lasting more than 10 minutes during an event, then both stations can initiate contact using their tactical calls and give their or their team's FCC call only when they're done. Knowing when you really **are** done with the other station is more art than science, so I won't fault an operator for giving his legal call more often than needed. Your team can practice exchanging tactical calls as a table-top exercise, or over-the-air during or after your regular net. Decide in advance of the exercise what your tactical calls will be; they should be obvious, like "Podunk EOC" or "Station 88".

**5. Not knowing how to exchange formal traffic:** Almost none of us, including Yours Truly, get enough practice in exchanging formal traffic. This is something your team should be practicing regularly as a table-top exercise. Don't spend more than 5 minutes per session, but do it frequently.

A related problem is speaking too quickly when sending traffic. It's easy to forget that, especially in the excitement of an exercise or actual event, the person on the receiving end probably can't copy the message as quickly as you can say it. One common trick is to trace over the characters of the message as you send it, so you have a better sense of how long it takes to write down.

**6. Not using phonetics, or using non-ITU phonetics:** This should be second nature for all team members, but some are either unaware of them, or can't shake the unofficial phonetics they hear and use during casual operating. This could be remedied with some flash-card exercises. Police and fire departments use the APCO alphabet, as you're probably aware. This is the one that goes: Adam, Boy, Charles, David, etc. If your team is tasked with talking directly on public-safety radios to the responders, it should be prepared to use this alphabet.

**7. Not using "This is a drill" when passing emergency traffic:** This is important, since casual listeners (including the media) might misconstrue an exercise as a real event. Conversely, some teams get overzealous about saying "This is a drill" during all transmissions. If you're not actually exchanging simulated traffic, then it's unnecessary and you're simply slowing down the proceedings.

**8. Not keeping a dedicated radio on the team's primary frequency:** Remember that, while you're tuning around to everyone else's primary frequencies, they're likely doing the same thing, and your odds of connecting are small if you aren't constantly monitoring your own frequency. Keep a separate radio locked on it.

**9. Not advising repeater owner or control op before commandeering a repeater:** If you plan to use a particular repeater for an upcoming exercise, and your group doesn't own it, then be sure to ask the owner or control op in advance for permission to use their machine. Let them know the start/stop times and whether you intend to commandeer the repeater for the duration, or just exchange brief messages. This applies even if you've signed an MOU with the owner.

I'll embellish this list over time, but I'm betting you've already come up with a few more "lessons" yourself.

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