

# Side-Stepping the Search for Motive

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by Steve Albrecht

## NECESSARY TOOLS FOR **WORKPLACE** VIOLENCE PREVENTION

**TICKING BOMBS:** Defusing Violence in the Workplace, which I co-wrote in 1994, was one of the first books published on the complex and potentially tragic Business Security issue. The centerpiece of the book featured my prison interview with Robert Mack, who in January 1992, had shot and killed the HR supervisor handling his termination from General Dynamics in San Diego, and shot and wounded his boss (who later died from those wounds).

In retrospect, the Mack interview fell into the same trap that we see in the news media coverage of workplace and school shootings, even 17 years later: an attempt to answer the question of motive. From the U.S. Post office shootings in the 1980's, through Columbine and Virginia Tech, to the recent incident in Tucson, Arizona involving Congresswoman Giffords, our collective understanding of the "why" behind workplace and school-based shootings often centers

around the media's constant search for an understandable motive.

The problem with this attempt is that it is rarely satisfying. Perhaps the motive in a workplace shooting was revenge for a perceived bullying incident involving a co-worker or supervisor; or in response to a termination; or for a domestic violence-related shooting, because the suspect's former wife began dating a co-worker.

The point here, is that the search for a motive is an exercise in futility because it



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doesn't answer the key question: How do we stop these people, males or females, young or old, students or employees, patients or strangers, customers or taxpayers, angry citizens or ex-boyfriends, from shooting people they believed had harmed them in some way?

Shouldn't our national focus be about interrupting the opportunity, rather than searching for, or trying to understand, the motive (which may or may not ever be known)? Our collective actions as security practitioners should be centered exclusively on knocking the subject, as the U.S. Secret Service calls it in their insightful research about shooters, “off of the path from ideas to actions.”

What follows is a set of tools for your security toolkit, each, when used effectively and early enough, can help you and your colleagues in HR, Legal, EAP, and the other stakeholders in the organization, intervene in cases involving threats from people inside or outside the facility.

### **Better Background Checks and Hiring Practices**

If the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, then we need to do a better pre-screening of the people we let behind our corporate walls. The applicant should do most of the heavy lifting here, by providing waivers for background screens done by reputable investigative firms; written permissions to contact former employers; copies of past performance evaluations; and answers to interview questions not just about technical competencies, but about their previously-demonstrated ability to fit in to a team and work with others at all levels.

### **Constant Security / Access Control Improvements**

Since many big security changes are made in the aftermath of an incident, we need to be better at making smaller improvements over time. It's not necessari-

ly the installation of a \$100,000 CCTV system that will keep the facility safe; it's often more about making sure all of the key card readers work and that employees are taught, told, and reminded not to prop open the facility side doors. Small changes and security upgrades over time can be easier for senior management to swallow and can reinforce the idea that a protection mindset is always in place.

### **A Challenge Culture for Employees**

Every employee should feel like he or she is in charge of keeping the facility safe. There should be visible rewards (public praise, time off, gift cards) for employees who report physical security problems. There should be support and an immediate response to employees who report behavioral problems, threats, or criminal activities involving co-workers, customers, or strangers, so that the culture does not “shoot the messenger” when it gets news that is not always positive.

### **High-Risk “Customer” Service Training**

If your employees deal with customers, vendors, or taxpayers who have the potential to become enraged over their receipt of the goods or services you provide, then they will want and need training. This includes training for the critically-important reception and front desk personnel, call center employees, and others who are the public face of your firm.

### **Hunters or Howlers?**

Dr. Fred Calhoun and Steve Weston have done significant research, training, and writing to support their groundbreaking model that some people “howl” (make overt threats, draw attention to themselves, frighten others intentionally) and some people “hunt” (develop a hidden plan, acquire the tools to harm others, work in stealth, and attack with little or no warning).

- Organizations are often overly-responsive to the attention-seeking howler (evacuating the facility for a phoned-in bomb threat with no details or no suspicious devices found upon search) and either unaware, or worse, over-rationalizing for a hunter who uses

menace over verbal threats.

- As Calhoun and Weston so accurately put it: "Howlers don't hunt and Hunters don't howl. When Howlers start to hunt, they are no longer Howlers."
- The exception to the Hunter-Howler threat dynamic is when the victim and the suspect have had a previous sexual relationship. When the suspect says, "If I can't have her, no one else will," we take these threats very seriously, as they are the mark of a hunter.

## Safe/Humane Discipline and Terminations

It is the desire of many HR folks to be rid of the problematic employee as soon as possible. This may be intuitive (especially since HR has a larger population of female directors and employees), but it can also create the possibility of revenge as a reason for the harshly-disciplined or the just-terminated ex-employee's return to the facility.

Many organizations that see the wisdom of a humane HR approach use the concept called "benevolent severance." Here, the terminated employee who has been fired for threatening behaviors is given a parting package that may involve severance, continued medical benefits, access to continued Employee Assistance Program (EAP) care, outplacement help, agreement for how to handle reference calls, and a single point of contact in the HR office to manage his or her needs. These are not rewards; they are transition tools.

## Consequence-Based HR and Security Dept. Thinking

For those with dogs and children, you know this to be true: if there are no consequences for the behaviour, you can expect either no changes or escalation. There must be consequences for employee behaviours that put the organization at risk. The HR and Security Departments can do their part by supporting the frontline supervisors and department heads. Begin by using coaching as a best, pre-discipline step to focus on small behavioral issues (where warnings and reminders about policies can help; then, follow up by enforcing the progressive discipline and security / access control policies in ways that suggest the company is firm, fair, consistent, and especially,



PERHAPS THE MOTIVE IN A WORKPLACE SHOOTING WAS REVENGE FOR A PERCEIVED BULLYING INCIDENT INVOLVING A CO-WORKER OR SUPERVISOR; OR IN RESPONSE TO A TERMINATION; OR FOR A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE-RELATED SHOOTING, BECAUSE THE SUSPECT'S FORMER WIFE BEGAN DATING A CO-WORKER.

proactive.

## Threat Assessment Teams (TATs)

The key to safety and success when responding to any threat of workplace violence is the "Threat Assessment Team" approach. By gathering the stakeholders into a room or via conference call, we can get a lot of work done and come up with a viable plan in a relatively short time span. This includes representatives from HR, Security, Cor-

porate Counsel, EAP or other mental health professionals, local law enforcement if applicable, the union representatives, safety and facility directors, and any others who can contribute to the knowledge about the person, the incident, and potential solutions.

## Safe Rooms and Work Place Violence (WPV) Drills

Like the use of TATs, the next best response to the threat of an actual active shooter is the use of safe rooms, or so-called "shelter in place" protocols. The use of safe rooms in school shootings and workplace violence incidents has saved lives, but it is not a perfect solution, bearing in mind the homicidal intent of a perpetrator. Safe rooms could include a break room, restroom, training room, conference room, supervisor's office, storage closet, or any other room that can be locked or barricaded.

Obviously, the first response to an active shooter in the building is to evacuate to a place of safety outside the facility. If that isn't possible, then the safe room concept (hiding out) offers the next best solution.

## Courageous Management

The previous nine tools are useless without this last one. Business owners, executives, directors, department heads, and frontline supervisors need to have and exhibit the courage to respond to any potential threat of workplace violence. There is a tendency in these cases to "wish them away" and hope that inaction will lead to minimization. The reverse usually occurs.

We aren't trying to create a nation of tattle-tale employees. We aren't trying to turn our workspaces into locked-down prison camps. We aren't trying to make it unpleasant to come to work. We are, however, trying to be responsive to potential behavioural, HR, and security situations that could put the organization at risk.

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