

## **Workplace Violence Security Threat Plans; Not Just Another Plan**

Most people spend the majority of their adult life at work, and I'm sure you would agree that workers should not be threatened or intimidated while earning a living to support themselves or their families.

Unfortunately, not a week goes by without reports of a threatening situation occurring at a workplace or institution. While this type of situation is not as common in Canada as it is south of our border, it does happen.

Bill 168, which came into effect in June, 2010, requires Canadian companies and institutions to implement workplace violence policies, programs, measures and procedures that educate employees about the importance of reporting violence and harassment in the workplace and increase the awareness of how to recognize it. Most companies have complied with this new legislation which goes a long way to prevent such acts from occurring at the workplace. As a result, employees are increasingly able to recognize the symptoms or acts of bullying or other threats in the workplace, which has impacted those of us in the Emergency Planning profession in a way that was never anticipated -- an increase in the number of reported incidents requiring the near or full activation of some form of Workplace Security Threat Plan.

Over the years most large companies have implemented processes that report "near-miss" incidents in the workplace to help identify areas of potential risk and implement processes or procedures to eliminate or mitigate future incidents. When reporting processes such as this are implemented, most companies observe a measurable spike in reportable near-miss incidents. Once the reporting mechanism is in place and employees gain the trust from management that there are no repercussions from reporting, the numbers can be initially overwhelming. As a result, management may question the sudden increase. The reality is that in most cases these near-miss incidents were always occurring in the workplace, but now that a safe reliable process is in place to capture the occurrences, a true picture of what is happening has emerged.

Similarly, as companies roll out their workplace violence policies and employee awareness training, employees become better equipped to recognize workplace violence and their obligation to safely report it. Employees are become increasingly aware of the requirement to report any events in their personal life that may directly impact the safety of the workplace. Issues such as spousal abuse or violent relationships that threaten to play out at the workplace or on company property should be reported to help protect the employee involved and those who work with them. This awareness coupled with a safe trusting reporting process can result in a measurable increase in the number of workplace violence reportable incidents. As with near-miss incident reporting, companies are now gaining a truer picture of the number of incidents that in most cases were already happening but were not being reported.

## **Developing a Workplace Violence Security Threat Plan**

The rise in reportable incidents has driven the need for companies to develop Workplace Violence Security Threat Plans. These plans must be in place to protect employees should a situation arise, which potentially jeopardizes their safety. The optics of preparing, testing and communicating these plans can be a “tough sell”, requiring sound justification and convincing of senior management on the part of the emergency planner. After all, such plans introduce unfamiliar terms such as “active shooter”, “lock down” or “shelter in place” into the employee vocabulary and there may be some hesitancy for fear of alarming employees or even customers. The business case for such plans needs to be positioned such that not having such plans is a much greater risk to the organization than that of alarming employees. A well designed employee communication plan, which is covered later, is the key to overcoming such hurdles.

Before you begin the design process ensure you have complete buy in from senior management. Their support will be invaluable during the communication and rollout process. Once approval has been given to proceed consider the following key elements in the design of the Workplace Violence Security Threat Plan:

- 1.) Ensure your plan links to any existing emergency plans such as fire evacuation plans or bomb threats, so that employees understand that this plan is being designed to protect them just like these other examples.
- 2.) Determine how all your facilities can utilize this plan and take into consideration the building design, existing security protocols and number of employees at each affected location.
- 3.) If your company utilizes a security threat matrix or emergency status level make sure this plan is linked to those existing measures to reduce confusion when activated.
- 4.) Investigate whether others in your network of external contacts have experience in developing a plan for their organization. Don't hesitate to tap into others and learn from their efforts rather than re- create the wheel.
- 5.) Talk to your local Police Services to gain any insights or support they have to offer. In the event you ever have to activate this plan, they will be a key component to the safe resolution of the issue.

Once you have drafted your plan, ensure you vet it through all your internal support groups to ensure they have input and that it is technically correct. Groups having responsibility for your building maintenance, employee relations, corporate security, and employee communications can all add valuable insights to components to your security plan.

## **Testing the Workplace Violence Security Threat Plan**

As any good emergency planner knows, once the plan is prepared it must be tested or activated to find the gaps that are inevitably there, regardless of how much time and effort went into its creation. Unfortunately, when I was developing a security threat response plan for one organization an incident occurred at one of their facilities which drove the early activation of the plan before it was finalized. While not an ideal way to test a plan, the event did in fact provide us with an accurate test of our security plan and the post-incident review produced many valuable recommendations. I can't stress enough the importance of a thorough well-documented incident review process. Regardless of the type of incident your company may experience, documenting your learning's from the event and having a rigorous follow-up process to ensure the recommendations are carried out increases the resilience of your organization to weather any type of emergency event.

If you are fortunate enough not to experience a real event to test your plan, an emergency exercise is your next step. In my case we also held a workplace violence mock exercise after the actual crisis. I strongly recommend engaging your local Police Services to participate in the design and execution of your mock event. In a worst-case scenario where a threatening intruder has entered your place of work the local police having jurisdiction will be the first responder to the event. The advantages are twofold; engaging them in this exercise will educate you with regard to the proper communication protocols and resources they need from you and secondly, it allows police first responders to gain important information regarding your building and surroundings which will greatly help in their emergency response should they receive a real call at their 911 center. In this case we engaged the local Police Services early on in the design process of the Workplace Security Threat Response Plan, to provide comments on the plan from their perspective. This gave us valuable input and the required contacts as we proceeded to organize the exercise. As in any exercise the objectives must be clear and measurable. It is important to keep focused on your goal of the exercise and manage the scope creep when dealing with multi-agency planning groups.

In this type of exercise, participant and employee safety is a key consideration. If your scenario involves agencies bringing weapons into the workplace, there must be checks and double checks in place to ensure the weapons are not loaded. If shooting blanks is part of the scenario, there must be procedures in place to ensure the handling and firing can be carried out safely and by qualified personnel only. Protocols must also be put in place to manage the "gawking factor". When the general public notices a Police Incident Command vehicle in your parking lot complete with officers dressed in full tactical gear, they are bound to be curious. In this situation we set up police blockades at the parking exits with signs stating that a "Police Training Session" was taking place. The local media outlets were also advised ahead of time through an approved external communication to address any inquiries from a concerned public.

To ensure your business is minimally impacted and not interrupted, the exercise should be held after hours or on the weekend. Either works depending on the nature of your business. In one situation, a small group of employees who are critical to the operation work after-hours shifts. Employees present in the workplace during the exercise must be made aware of the exercise and given proper direction and accommodation if needed, to avoid the area. Also make sure any contract staff such as building maintenance or cafeteria staff who may be scheduled to work during the exercise, are made aware and accommodated if possible. After all you do have a business to run.

Begin the exercise with a briefing to ensure everyone involved including any employee volunteers are aware of the exercise protocols. Include topics such as what areas of the building are “in play” and what are not, visual identification of employee players and observers and what to do if the exercise must be suddenly stopped or cancelled. In the briefing ensure anyone entering the building to observe or to take photo or video documentation of the event is clearly identified visually. The tactical team involved in the exercise will respond as if it was a real event and it is imperative that they can quickly differentiate who is in play and who is not. Any police officer entering the building must also be checked to ensure they are not entering the building with a loaded weapon. For the safety of all involved, I recommend no live ammunition being allowed into the exercise area.

Then you simply let the exercise begin, watch and learn...

### **Incorporating your Learning's**

Documenting the exercise both with observers who will be making comments using pre-designed questionnaires and using photos or video footage is a must in gathering your results. An event de-brief is also of utmost importance. This provides everyone involved an opportunity to offer up their comments and observations verbally regarding how the event unfolded while it is still fresh in their minds. After you have gathered this input, a formal de-brief with the local Police Services personnel who helped plan the exercise is also very helpful. Here everyone shares learning's in a safe and secure environment.

The last step is incorporating your learning's in your internal Workplace Violence Security Threat Plan processes, procedures and training programs. It is a shame in this business to waste all the input and documentation of holding such an event and not use the information to everyone's advantage.

### **Communicating the Workplace Violence Security Threat Plan to Employees**

In my experience, communicating the plan to employees is best done in measured steps. Step one was an email from the executive sponsor outlining what the employees will soon see. This set the tone and reinforced that the plan was supported by the senior leaders.

The next step could involve a brief “pop-up” video or DVD sent to all employees explaining the Workplace Violence Security Threat Plan and the new terms that employees would be hearing. We felt that hearing the context of terms like “armed intruder”, “lock down” or “shelter in place”, would lessen the alarm factor, before seeing them used in computer based training (CBT) programs where the context may be misunderstood. We then rolled out a Computer Based Training (CBT) program. By this time most employees were well aware that the training was coming, they knew it was supported by senior leaders of the company and were familiar with some of the new terms. Using this approach you should experience a high take-up rate for the training program and very few questions or concerns will be raised. A majority of employees understood the plan was created for their personal safety and were supportive of the concept. The final step was lock down and shelter in place drills, in each of the larger offices across Ontario. This really brought home the fact that the company was taking this issue seriously and that they were not willing to wait and see if a real incident was experienced before they practiced the key safety components of the plan.

Many companies use the slogan “our most valuable asset is our employees”. Developing and maintaining a robust, resilient workplace violence plan supported by an open, honest employee communications and awareness training demonstrates that this belief is more than just a slogan and that the company’s values are where they should be -- with their employees.

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