

RETHINKING WORKPLACE SECURITY: How the Rules Have Changed

The workplace has traditionally been a dangerous place. Very early in mankind's history perils emanated from the place and type of work they performed. Long before industrialization, men mined precious metals, gems and fuel in the form of peat and coal hidden beneath the earth's surface. Extracting these materials brought with it the risk of cave-ins and being buried alive. Moreover, the quest for the most basic of all life giving substances, water, could also end in sudden death or severe injury as well shafts were dug in the soft earth.

Industrialization brought with it new and more interactive dangers to workers. Machinery in factories, on farms and aboard steamships maimed and killed with here-to-for unprecedented regularity. By the 1800's, campaigns were already underway throughout the rapidly industrializing world to introduce safety regulation and restrictions on child labor into the public consciousness, amidst the rapid growth of potentially deadly machinery. However, it was not until the mid and even later 20th century that many of these measures found full legal and societal support in the developed world. To this day, many parts of the developing world still do not protect their workers, including children, from even the most blatant workplace dangers.

Nor have machinery and type of work posed the only hazards. Workplace violence, whether instigated by striking workers seeking collective representation or employers attempting to curtail the efforts of "hotheads" and labor organizers have frequently ignited violence in the workplace both for those involved as well as those who desired to distance themselves from the strife. Arson, sabotage, intimidation, threats, beatings and even killings have too often been the weapons of choice to both sides of employment disagreements. Add to this the mayhem wrought by anarchists, radical political factions, competitors and, yes, guerillas and terrorists. The workplace has frequently been a very dangerous place, a fact we often tend to overlook. The need for workplace safety is not new.

Accepting Reality: The first Step to Security

Today, we face a new and in some ways, much more complex and potentially far more dangerous scenario. Whether in the form of a deranged current or former employee armed with automatic weapons or terrorists with their meticulously planned and well funded covert operations, either attack can be just as surprising and the carnage every bit as real and terrifying. To counter these threats, along with the full spectrum of more insidious, if less spectacular dangers, we must understand and acknowledge the dangers as well as establish appropriate preventative responses. We must also accept that we can never adequately guard against every eventuality. To believe that we can make the workplace completely "safe" is to deny reality. There will always be insufficient resources available to be committed for security purposes to make this dream possible. Furthermore, given the freedoms, privacy and civil liberties we so cherish, people today will not accept the regimen of restrictive and totalitarian measures necessary for any attempt to ensure absolute security. In fact, even if such measures could be implemented, they would undoubtedly trigger a new round of violence, on the part of those incensed by such invasive tyranny.

Given the fact that we cannot guarantee freedom from any and all acts of violence, sabotage and other misdeeds, the question becomes how are we to ensure the greatest possible measure of workplace safety and security for both our employees and the organization? To properly respond to this question we must rethink our fundamental attitudes toward security. What are the primary threats? How far does the organization's responsibility extend? It is certain that some trial lawyers seeking massive damage awards for the families of airline victims will attempt to assert that the carriers bear greater responsibility for failure to properly screen passengers prior to the September 11th attacks. However, do the airlines have an obligation to go beyond federally mandated standards? And if so, at what point would these same lawyers argue that the airlines interfere with passenger rights of privacy and freedom from racial or ethnic profiling?

We Must First Radically Change Our Thinking

Today, safety and security must no longer be viewed as add on services, afterthoughts to the way we operate. Instead, we must think strategically as to how these goals are to become pervasive in all of our planning and operations scenarios. For example, in those organizations that employ security services, whether employees or contractor staff, to what management level is the decision making responsibility for the overall scope of these services delegated? Is this and other safety and security functions included in the strategic planning activities of the executive leadership? Probably not, unless the facility in question is a nuclear power plant and recent news reports indicate that even some of those corporations did not give this issue the strategic weight that it should be accorded.

Safety and security are not band-aids to be applied at a very junior level of the organization. Instead, every executive should include these considerations as important elements of their daily decision making processes. I venture that if you are in a public company, every significant decision is weighed beforehand at least in part by what the response will be from the analysts and shareholders. Likewise, any major new corporate initiative is reviewed by the legal department before public announcement. But who with the requisite knowledge and experience "speaks" at the executive level to your organization's specific concerns of safety and security? In most organizations, no one!

I do not advocate adding yet another layer of bureaucratic administration; however, I am stating the absolute necessity of elevating our thinking regarding safety and security to the executive suite. No organization in the over-the-counter medication market would think of introducing a new product without first carefully planning what type of tamper proof packaging would be utilized. In many cases this would include multiple protective steps, such as glue sealed boxes as an outer package and then an inner packaging incorporating a further visible seal and possibly inside the bottle cap yet a third tough foil seal that the end user must puncture. All this for a five dollar bottle of nonprescription pain reliever, because a decade ago a handful of people were poisoned by a tampered product.

Incredibly, many organizations today will build new facilities, design new processes, introduce products and services and enter new marketplaces with nary a thought about safety and security issues until after all of the critical business decisions have already been made. Only then, as an afterthought, are those who understand the strategic breadth and depth of the real safety and security issues assigned the task of implementation and often not at a senior enough level to possibly make their efforts truly effective.

Old Habits Die Hard, But Die They Must

It is time that our complacency feathers are ruffled for good. If September 11th did not accomplish this in your organization then be ready, because the next crises (and there will undoubtedly be a next one) will.

Unfortunately, history has proven without exception that every new weapon or mode of destruction ever invented by man, has always, sooner or later, been put to devastating use. Even the ultimate crushing of the worldwide Al Qaeda terrorist organization will not insulate us from future despots and maniacs. Vigilance is indeed the price of freedom for the citizen and government as well as for the corporate organization. September 11th was a watershed experience. The lesson to be learned from it is not that massive acts of terror are possible, but rather that they have emerged as part of the fabric of life worldwide.

We must realize that what we have already experienced is not the upper limit of what is possible or even likely. Executive planners must anticipate that as long as purely evil people still exist anywhere on the face of the earth, at some point we will face even more catastrophic events, possibly much larger on both a geographic and human scale, as well as in the resultant long term effects of economic disruption. Armed with the explosion of technology and our rapidly increasing reliance upon that technology in our homes, autos and workplaces, just a few determined individuals can at least temporarily bring a nation or continent to a standstill and inflict untold devastation.

New Paradigms Require New Ways of Responding

Given this new paradigm, everyone involved in leadership, whether a safety and security specialist or not, must commit these issues to the forefront of their strategic thinking. To do so will require a high level of personal and organizational discipline. Other, more urgent issues can easily crowd out longer range strategic concerns, especially with no new threats or attacks to rivet our attention and compel immediate responses. When confronted with stark resource limitations, we must be careful not to reduce our commitment to the generally "unseen" activities that comprise a well conceived and systematically implemented strategic, organization wide safety and security commitment.

Moreover, if we are to take this commitment seriously and not just pay it the lip service traditionally accorded in most organizations, we must above all forever leave behind us the "old school of thought" which relegated the issue to treatment as an afterthought. Instead, we must create so pervasive an awareness throughout our organizations, that everyone thinks systemically about safety and security. By systemically, I mean from the very roots of the organization to its most far reaching operations, from strategic planning to the daily conduct of the most basic activities. It must be as much a top-of-the-mind priority for the senior executives gathered at an offsite retreat planning the organization's future, as it is for the janitorial and maintenance staff who are ever watchful for the suspicious package or security door left ajar.

Our thinking and awareness must be equally multidimensional when it comes to thoroughly assessing all of the avenues of threat and how best to combat them. In America today we are keenly aware of the threat of explosive bombs, but what about "cyber" bombs in the form of maliciously planted computer programs fused to detonate at a predetermined time/event or the "employee or ex-employee" bomb, unstable, seething with hostility and armed on an emotional hair-trigger to extract vengeance against the entire organization, executives, supervisors and co-workers alike.

Today we must view our world not from a mindset of paranoia, but rather a realism and awareness of the multitude of opportunities and conversely, the ever present dangers that surround us. The appropriate response is neither denial nor paralysis, but rather a steadfast determination to pursue our future with every ounce of vigor we can muster, while at the same time understanding how each strategic decision will impact the safety and security of the public, our organization and its people.



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