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Avoid becoming a victim – be vigilant!

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Have you ever wondered why most people look in the direction of oncoming traffic before crossing the road? This action is performed automatically, without the slightest hesitation, because we fear we might be hit by a truck if we don't watch out. We're not paralyzed by fear of being struck. We recognize the risk, and mitigate it by simple, proactive, adaptive behavior we have acquired through lessons we have learned by directly observing or gaining knowledge about mistakes of others. Our daily routines include many similar survival actions we know are necessary for avoiding danger.

However, risks are not always routine. Unpredictable acts of violence strike now not only in the war-torn Middle East, where the world has learned to expect terrorist actions and violence, but also at Starbucks in Jakarta, at an office holiday luncheon in Southern California and at a short distance from the Louvre Museum in Paris, the "City of Light".

Contemporary risks have intensified as high-profile incidents of terrorism and violence seem to be on the rise, so, new survival techniques should be added to our protective arsenal. To accomplish this, it is important to work through the paradoxical challenges presented by over-saturated media coverage of terrorist acts which serve to both inform and desensitize news audiences. We don't have to be frozen by fear, but we do need to be aware, and adapt.

Filter through media "noise" to find valuable lessons

Our ability to analyze incidents to determine how to protect ourselves is often compromised by information overload. As a society, we are bombarded 24/7 with sensational media content. Consider just a few of the headline grabbing calamities and incidents covered by international media since late 2015:

• Nigeria bombings – October 15 and 23
• Dhaka bombing, stabbing and shooting attacks – October 24 and 31
• Hebron and Gush Etzion stabbings – October 26, 27 and 29
• Beirut bombing – November 12
• Paris attacks – November 13
• San Bernardino attacks – December 2
• Jakarta attacks – January 16

The above list represents a fraction of what worldwide media outlets covered during this period. Now ask yourself:

• Do I remember what happened and how I could avoid becoming a victim based on the particulars of each incident?

• Did any one of these incidents make me behave differently in my daily life?

Unless you had a direct connection to any of these incidents, the most likely answer is you did not change your behavior to better protect yourself or your organization. We tend to filter this information "overload" as noise rather than learn from it and take active steps to apply the knowledge we could gain.

The power of simplicity

Vigilance requires four simple mental actions:

1. Learn from mistakes of others. Try to understand how other people got into trouble and compare their actions (positive or negative) with your own mental and physical capabilities. Would you be able to avoid a similar incident? What makes you sure of that?

2. Be aware of your immediate environment. This includes both static physical attributes — such as buildings, streets, fixed furniture and passageways — and dynamic physical attributes— such as vehicles, pedestrians and movable items.

3. Understand and maintain a personal spatial comfort zone within your immediate environment. This refers to the distance from a static or dynamic attribute that you need to feel safe and comfortable. These comfort zones are dependent on the environment at hand; for example, you might need more space at an airport or a shopping center, but less at a rock concert.

4. Recognize and understand both potential hazards and resources in your current environment. For or example, every time you stay at a hotel, typical hazards include:

• Potentially dangerous locale

• Height from your window to a safe landing spot in case you have to jump to save yourself

• Single point of access and exit – the main door to your room

• Unfamiliar areas around your hotel should you need to quickly relocate or seek assistance

• Low vigilance, negligence and occasional ignorance of hotel staff

Conversely, typical resources at a hotel would include:

• Clearly marked emergency exits as well as basic fire alarm and firefighting equipment

• Room door's safety latch, because it functions to deter or delay forced entry, providing extra seconds to act

• Speed-dial and speakerphone buttons on the room's phone to expedite calling for help and attracting attention to sounds of struggle or threatening remarks

• Small but heavy objects like glass tumblers, a chair, or even a desk lamp which could be used as projectiles to thwart an attack

• Lockable bathroom doors to offer an additional barrier of protection and delay

The utility of noting hazards and resources every time you stay at a hotel can apply to other situations. Being oblivious to your surroundings will not help you. What you don't know, or observe, can hurt you.

Preparedness is cultivated by vigilance

The primary objective of vigilance is to stay out of trouble altogether. Yet, current advice is all about reacting to imminent danger and incidents, not avoiding them.

Law enforcement in the UK has encouraged people to "run-hide-tell" while their U.S. counterparts have issued an advisory to "run-hide-fight." Both plans engage when people are confronted with incidents that will almost certainly affect

their mental and physical state, greatly reducing an untrained civilian's ability to recall even simple three-word directions.

Critical thinking before an incident occurs more productively fosters an ongoing propensity to avoid danger, but requires a comprehensive attitude adjustment. For example, reflect upon any close calls that you may have experienced or observed, and ask:

• What did I learn from that?

• What was the root cause of failing to avoid the particular incident?

• Do I understand now how to better react to a similar incident next time it occurs?

Asking these questions can promote preparedness. You can do this for your own benefit as well as for the benefit of your organization.

Organizational vigilance helps counteract overconfidence and denial

Organizational leaders are often overconfident in their ability to manage risks and protect critical assets. Consider and compare the previous list of terrorist acts with other widely publicized incidents that affected major world organizations during the same period:

• FIFA scandal – May (ongoing)

• Toshiba's accounting scandal - September

• France and Italy's investigation of Volkswagen mis-management – October

• Deutsche Bank money laundering probe – October (ongoing)

• Moldovan Bank's alleged fraud – October

• Goldman Sach's compliance scandal - October

• Fraud investigation against China Southern Airlines' CEO – November

• Barclays forex fraud allegations – November

It is important to note here that some of the organizations on the above list had previously experienced similar or identical issues and allegations. These scandals demonstrate how poor personal vigilance of employees — and senior management in particular — can contribute to potentially significant financial and operational problems for an organization, bypassing root-cause analysis and compromising risk mitigation. In contrast, organizations that cultivate enterprise-wide vigilance can dramatically reduce their vulnerabilities to reputational, financial, legal and operational damage.

Conclusion

Behavioral patterns of denial and complacency increase our vulnerability. Cultivating vigilance and taking responsibility for choices we make enhances our ability to avoid trouble and the feeling of helplessness when confronting risks.

Vigilance is not achieved overnight, it is developed by:

• Understanding your own capabilities and shortcomings – mental and physical

• Increasing your ability to recognize, understand and avoid hazards while constructing adaptive resource networks

• Learning from your own mistakes and those of others

We at Kroll maintain that it is better to stay out of trouble than to get out of trouble. ∎

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