

## Lesson 4: Psychology of an Attacker

**Host:** We're continuing the conversation with Vaughn Baker at Strategos. And in Lesson 2 we talked about how training for crisis situations is developed from three perspectives — the true first responder, which is most likely to be your school staff, because they'll be the first on scene. And then law enforcement and emergency response, and then from the perspective of the attacker. Vaughn, can you talk about the motivation of the attacker — is it ultimately to end their own life and take out as many people as possible before they go?

**Vaughn Baker:** Well, what they're plan is and what actually happens is two different things. It's real easy to say, "I'm going to kill myself, and I'm going to go out in a blaze of glory." Some of the guys, when the time comes, they're not quite that brave. They're good at taking other people's life but they can't take their own. The other thing is there are two categories of attackers. We have the traditional attacker, which many times those folks do commit suicide, if they're presented with a fight or if they run out of targets. And then we have the ideological attacker. Many times the ideological attacker, whether you're talking about somebody who's motivated by their political leanings or religious leanings, extremist world view. Those folks, they very rarely kill themselves. If we look at the San Bernardino attack, they escaped the initial attack. They were going to another place to commit an attack. Then law enforcement got behind them.

Well, the traditional attacker in many cases would go ahead and kill themselves at that point. But, the ideological attacker, what they did, is they decided to shoot it out with the police, and the police ended up having to take their life as a result.

**Host:** Do we train based on ideological or traditional?

**Vaughn Baker:** At the time of the attack, you're not going to know what the motivation is. The model has to be the same, and it needs to be principally based. It really doesn't matter what their motivation is. I need to put in solutions that are going to be effectively non-linear solutions as we talked, based on both of those types of threats. That model needs to be consistent for both.

**Host:** Are there signs or cues that we should be looking for?

**Vaughn Baker:** Well, when you're talking about crime or particularly these types of attacks, almost all bad acts are preceded by bad behavior and bad body language. Whether we're talking about days, weeks, months of behavior if it's a student, we want to teach our staff, certified and non-certified both, what to look for as far as behavior indicators. In that prevention phase, we can teach people what those indicators are that cause people to lead up to an attack. Very rarely are these events sudden and impulsive attacks where they just wake up one morning and do this. It's usually a series of escalation, both mentally, and through the planning process where they're going to try to achieve their goals and objectives of taking as much life as possible.

**Host:** How much of a role does social media play?

**Vaughn Baker:** Social media is an important piece of it. There's been several attackers that have posted on social media prior to the attack, whether it's a direct threat, or whether it's a veiled threat. I'll give you a few examples — the Hesston Kansas shooter that killed four and wounded 14 at a lawn mower manufacturing facility in Wichita, north of Wichita, in a small town of 3700 people. He posted in social media of him shooting with his AK-47, shooting targets on the ground. Well, that's very unusual. You don't see people shooting targets on the ground, but if you analyze that just a little bit, you realize he's practicing actually shooting people while they're down, laying on the ground, or they're in the fetal position.

The Virginia Tech and the Columbine shooters — they were seen, and they actually taped themselves. They didn't post it on social media, but they were seen at firing ranges where they laid targets on the ground and they actually shot the targets on the ground. That should have been a clue to somebody. Other clues, clues that happen right before the attack. The Virginia Tech, the attacker, the first classroom that he ended up attacking, he was seen at that classroom. The students, the survivors in that room said that he came to the room three times and looked in the room.

They thought that was odd because it was late in the semester and they were like, "People shouldn't be lost at this stage in the semester." They assumed he was lost. Well, they were rationalizing that clue away, saying, "Well, he must just be lost," versus instead, maybe they get up after the first time, shut the door, and then we let security know, "Hey, somebody's wandering around the hallways. We've never seen him before," and that's a clue that we can pay attention to that would be very beneficial to us in terms of getting a lockdown and preventing access.

**Host:** What conversations do we need to have with our school faculty and staff and with parents?

**Vaughn Baker:** We do a 90-minute seminar for parents of students, and teaching them what to look for, whether it's on social media or teaching them signs of suicide awareness.

Knowing that any of these people are intending to commit suicide at the end of their act, we want to teach them signs of what to look like from a suicide perspective as well. Just educating. When we do behavior assessments, whether it's for students or an employee at a business, we look at 16 criteria of behavior to watch for. The more of those criteria that are present, the higher the risk, and that's really how we measure that.

If we educate our teachers, counselors, administrators what to look for, now, and then teach them if they see something to say something, and say it now, then there's many opportunities that we can intervene before it occurs.

**Host:** What are some of the criteria to watch for?

**Vaughn Baker:** The 16 behavior indicators, we call them risk behavior indicators or RBIs. Some of those 16 indicators, maybe the person has a long list of failure in their life. That would be one of them, and they have a difficult time accepting responsibility for their failure. None of their failures are ever their fault. It's always somebody else's fault. Another one is they're presenting themselves as a martyr. They have an identification with other attackers. Maybe they see an attack that takes place somewhere else, and they say, "Man, that's terrible that occurred, but I can see why somebody would snap like that because I've had those same thoughts myself." That would be one of the indicators.

People that make veiled threats. "Man, some day, these people around here are going to be sorry." It's not a direct threat, but it does give us some indication that they're thinking that way. People that think in terms of victim-victimizer. Many times the traditional attacker, what they're trying to do, their worldview is they're trying to transition from being a victim of society, because all their failures are everybody else's fault. Society's fault. They're trying to transition into victimizer. Their worldview is everybody in the entire world is either a victim or a victimizer. They see the victim category is the category of failure, and the victimizer category is the category of success.

The nature of their act, and the goals and objectives that the attacker has, is they're trying to transition from failure to success. They many times will even make statements that God is the ultimate victimizer. If you look at Virginia Tech, you look at UC Santa Barbara attack, that occurred at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Columbine, in their video and in their written manifestos, the attackers all made statements similar to, "On that day, I will be like God." What they're referring to is they will have the ultimate power of taking life.

**Host:** Where do school administrators and parents strike the balance between the hyper vigilance for these 16 risk behavior indicators or being full of grace?

**Vaughn Baker:** Well, of course. You brought up an important term there. This idea of grace. But, we want to help those folks that are thinking about committing acts of violence or thinking about self-harm before they make a decision they can never come back from. That's really why we want to educate parents.

If we're talking about doing behavior assessments, so many times we'll teach the school where they can use their school resource officer or their administrators, and maybe a counselor put together a behavior risk assessment team. Teach them to objectively measure and look for behavior. As bad as missing behavior that was very important and something bad happened is stigmatizing somebody that didn't deserve it, because maybe they say, "Well, they've got Asperger's, so they must be at risk."

Well, they got that because the Sandy Hook attack had Asperger's. Well, we know that by itself doesn't mean we're at increased risk at all. But people think, "Well, I just got a bad feeling about this person." Well, that's very subjective. We want to make sure our model and what behavior we look for is very objective, to be fair to those, to prevent mislabeling somebody as well.

**Host:** Thanks for sharing your insight on the psychology of an attacker. In our final lesson of the series, we'll talk about some things schools can begin to do today to help protect against The Threat Within.

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