

Lesson 2: Reaction vs Response: Stages of Untrained vs Trained

Host: Welcome back to our school safety and security series on the Threat Within. We're continuing the conversation with Vaughn Baker at Strategos. In the last segment Vaughn introduced us to the concept of Normalcy Bias – where your natural instinct is to not believe what you are seeing and to rationalize that it must be something else. Normalcy Bias, disbelief, and denial are all stages someone may go through when they are faced with a threat. What other stages are there?

Vaughn Baker: Well, we call them stages of the untrained person. Starts off with normalcy bias, then it transitions into denial which is part of that normalcy bias. Finally, we get to the panic stage. We've accepted the crisis, but because we don't know what to do, all we can do is panic. And then ultimately, that transitions into helplessness because we haven't been trained. That transitions into helplessness, and as you know, none of those several stages are productive. That's what happens physiologically and psychologically for the untrained. What we try to get into is the productive stages that happen for the trained person.

Host: So, the five stages of the untrained person are Normalcy Bias, Disbelief, Denial, Panic, and Helplessness. What about the four stages of the trained person?

Vaughn Baker: For the trained person, those productive stages after they go through training, first there's going to be a crisis acceptance. We accept the crisis and we know we can't be effective unless we accept the crisis. Once we accept the crisis, now that transitions into a recall. What are we recalling? We're recalling those tasks that have to get done for this particular crisis.

The whole process of training is we're building our little tactical Rolodex card in our head. We want to build that in training, that solution for this particular crisis in our head. That list of things that have to get done. We want to do that in training. The time to do that isn't during the time of the actual crisis because that's going to turn into an instinctual response and not going to be the proper response.

Physiologically, psychologically that will then transition into an urgent response for that particular crisis. Doing the right thing too late is the wrong thing. We've got to make sure those tasks that are time sensitive in nature, that we get those done pretty quickly. All those things we know we have to get done, that actually reduces fear on the trained side, because we're focused on the task versus focused on the fear.

Host: Okay, just to recap – the four stages of the trained person are Crisis Acceptance. Awareness. Recall of Tasks and Training, and then Urgent Response.

Vaughn, can you give an example where normalcy bias and denial affected the decisions people made during a threat?

Vaughn Baker: Absolutely. Every single crisis, I'll challenge you after the crisis, you'll see people being interviewed that were survivors. You'll see examples of normalcy bias. "Oh, I thought it was

fireworks being shot off.” All kinds of irrational explanations — a teacher at Columbine, she heard the shots being fired in the hallway. Despite hearing them, she actually went into the hallway to see it. Well, what do you think about that response? Is that the right response or the wrong response to go into the hallway where the shots are being fired?

Well, it's not the right response. The reason is, is because we're putting ourselves in danger by going out there, but physiologically, we don't understand, absent training, that the human mind makes decisions primarily based on sight, not on hearing. Even though she heard it, she wanted to go see it before she made a decision. Once she did see it, then normalcy bias kicked in. She saw the shooter shooting people in the hallway, and she says, “Oh, this can't be real. This has to be a video production.” She was actually trying to rationalize the crisis away, which is very common in this type of crisis.

Host: I found what you just said really interesting about how physiologically, the human mind will instinctively make decisions primarily on what is being seen rather than on what is being heard. How does that come into play when you are developing training on how to respond during a crisis?

Vaughn Baker: Well, when we talk about psychological and physiological, and when we're developing curriculum for crisis, period, we try analyze that particular crisis from three perspectives. The first is the true first responder's perspective. The people that are on scene when the crisis begins. What do they need to know? In other words, my wife, she works as a teacher at a school. What do I want her to know about how to respond to that crisis? The second perspective that we look at is law enforcement's perspective. They're the ones that are going to be responding. What do they need to know? And then the third is I want to look at it also from the attacker's perspective. What is his goals and objectives?

We're going to get into a psychology piece of the attacker as well, but if I understand what their goals and objectives are, now I can put together solutions that will help mitigate or make it more difficult for the attacker. And also what's going to cause them to move on to the next room as well. That's how we analyze it when we're putting together curriculum.

Host: We've really talked a lot about mindset – training our brains to respond during a crisis. But it isn't just about getting our brains thinking, right? Can fear affect our body's reaction time, too?

Vaughn Baker: Well, what happens, physiologically when the crisis occurs, is any time we're in fear of death or serious physical injury, our sympathetic nervous system will activate. How does that manifest itself? Dry mouth, tunnel vision, you'll have what we call auditory exclusion, where it becomes difficult to hear. Your fine motor skills will go away. Increased blood pressure. Increased heart rate. All those things occur, so what we don't want is for the first time for our sympathetic nervous system to be activated is to be activated in real life. We want to activate the sympathetic nervous system in training.

Our training courses are broken into three phases. The first is lecture. The next phase, next third, we spend time in letting them practice, doing demonstrations, Q & A, talking their way through lockdown, what to do when lockdown fails, and we do a walk-through of their facility, of their school. And then the third phase is when we activate the sympathetic nervous system in training. We call it stress inoculation. It's just like you would inoculate yourself from a disease. You can inoculate yourself from that sympathetic nervous system by putting yourself in that situation in training.

We can do that very safely in training. We want to activate, so we'll create a reasonable simulation of the real thing. We'll have gunshot simulators that we'll use, and we do three

or four, three-and-a-half-minute scenarios. What happens is in the first scenario to the third scenario, we see a very steep curve in terms of how productive they are. It doesn't take much time at all to get inoculated to that stress. Also, the thing we look at is making sure we give them solutions that are gross motor skilled based.

In fact, some of the solutions that they have on their person, maybe they have a key to their door. Well, putting that key in that door, that's a fine motor skill, and they need to understand that's probably not going to work on game day. "The key doesn't work today." We need to give them gross motor skill solutions, understanding physiologically what's going to happen in real life.

Host: The training you just described, that is just with the adults – like the school's safety and security team, teachers, staff and administration, right?

Vaughn Baker: Yes. In the training, we'll do realistic simulation with the staff by themselves. Then the time to practice it with the kids and the way to practice it with kids is we do it in the form of a drill. We're not going to do gunshot simulators and things of that nature. We're going to do just a very scripted drill, but the teachers can now practice what they learned in their training where they did it by themselves.

It would be nice if they could do it annually, the training. But at a minimum, bi-annually. Where they can go through that training to include scenarios and just refresh those skills and those things they learned initially. Some states are mandating it in statute, that you need to be able to document that you've done certified training. What certified training is, that's going to vary from state to state. The other way you can certify your staff is maybe you have a very large organization, and you want to have trainers yourself. We have a five-day course where you can have a train the trainer model, so your own staff can go through that. Or, you can be certified on how to do a behavior risk assessment yourself, and how to do those. And that's a two-day class as well.

Even if you didn't require certification though, any organization post crisis event needs to be able to demonstrate due diligence preparedness. That's where the lawsuits are going to start flying. Because if you can't demonstrate that you took a reasonable effort to prevent harm prior to the crisis, that's where your judgements and where your chances of losing the litigation side of it are going to increase significantly. Your insurance company is going to want to know that as well, that you've had that due diligence preparedness as well as the certification piece.

Host: Let's talk about the different levels of teams schools might have in place. Are you seeing that most schools have a safety and security team in place where the head of school or principal is on the team, the business manager, someone from grounds, indoor maintenance, school nurse, communications, maybe IT, a resource officer, and athletics for example?

Vaughn Baker: Whether we're talking about the risk assessment, behavior risk assessment teams or we're talking about our safety and security teams, we recommend having representation from different stakeholders within the organization. You may have certified staff teachers, administrative staff, maintenance custodial staff. They all see that school from a different worldview and a different perspective, and they can all bring something to the table. So making sure it's a multi-disciplinary approach to putting our teams together, and not just from one stakeholder vertical.

Host: Where do parents fit into the equation?

Vaughn Baker:

Yeah. Parents post event, whenever it happens somewhere else, they're usually blowing up the phones at the school saying, "Hey, are we prepared?" We've got to educate them on what we're doing as well. Many times, what we'll end up doing is we'll come in during the day, and we'll do the response-based training, the intruder response training for the staff. And then that night, what we'll do is invite the parents to a 90-minute seminar where they can learn what their roles and responsibilities are, and also learn from the school, how to report information they become aware of off hours, and what to look for as far as on social media or from a suicide awareness point of view. We're educating the parents.

Once they know that the school is taking those steps to train their teachers as well as train them as parents, their anxiety level goes down as well because they realize, "Hey, they're really doing the right things to prepare."

Host:

Thanks Vaughn. We're going to end Lesson 2 here. You've given us a lot to think about. In Lesson 3 we'll dive a little deeper into training with the 3 Out Model when we discuss non-linear vs linear responses.

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