

Facing an emergency

How to prepare for physical threats at your business

Years ago, conversations about keeping employees safe meant providing them with technical advice about the use of hard hats, goggles and other safety equipment, or training in safe lifting techniques, parking lot safety and sexual harassment policies.

"Today, physical safety ranks at the top of the list of required training in most companies as our workplaces become ever more dangerous," says Laurie Bradley, president of ASG Renaissance and Blue Force Services.

Recent active shooter events in Colorado, Wisconsin and Alabama, for example, bring attention to the complexities of physical safety.

"This leads us to the question of whether or not we are doing all that is possible to mitigate unwanted physical intrusion into our workspace," she says.

Smart Business spoke with Bradley about how a company can protect itself against physical threats.



Laurie Bradley
President
ASG Renaissance and Blue Force Services

How does a company establish a physical safety program?

Safety programs are not one size fits all. They need to be tailored to reflect the presumed risks of a business in a given industry. For example, banks and financial institutions need a different safety program than a car rental business. However, generically, the process is typically initiated by performing a risk assessment. This entails mapping the physical facility and identifying the areas and entry points that may need different rules of access.

As you map your facility, determine and highlight the exit and escape routes, and define areas that would be sensitive to catastrophes such as fires, floods, earthquakes, bombings and utility failure. Review your procedure for the identification of authorized personnel and critique the systems used to do so, such as key card readers, biometric devices and cameras, to determine the possible vulnerabilities.

Consider the environment around your business, local crime rates, the interior and exterior of your building, and the perimeter of your space where public access is permitted. Develop a checklist as you examine poorly lit areas, trash areas that may present arson opportunities, the condition of walls and fences, and what tools or supplies that, left unattended, could be used to access the facility.

Who should be involved in the assessment?

Internal personnel, such as your security staff, may be utilized to determine and detail a current state report. Third-party security

experts are often used to identify weakness or vulnerability to your operation and may be engaged to attempt to breach the security to illuminate risk areas.

Generally, annual third-party audits with corresponding training programs help ensure physical safety programs reflect the risks brought on because of current business and political environments. Security consultants can also make certain you are aware of the latest technology developments that may enhance physical security.

Companies wanting to launch and monitor a more robust program can access information through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Additionally, the Private Sector Preparedness Council has select program standards leading to certification. The process provides a framework for businesses to assess whether they comply with voluntary preparedness standards. Many of the program's components align with the Support Anti-Terrorism by Fostering Effective Technologies Act, which mitigates legal and liability concerns for users of anti-terrorist technologies and products.

Can we ever really be safe?

No system or security program can guarantee absolute safety. Consider that HVAC systems are not normally equipped with detection devices and can be easily accessed — a fast way to hinder a worksite would be

through the air ventilation system. Preparedness is the best defense and mitigation tactic. Focus on removing the temptation to commit a crime and monitor, enforce, educate and train your staff in the procedures necessary to reduce the possibility of a physical threat.

What if a business doesn't have a robust physical safety program already in place?

Begin the discussion on safety during general staff meetings to help raise awareness within your employee population. Walk your employees through situations and the best responses to them, such as what to do when gunshots are fired, who should call 911, what the alternate routes out of the office are, etc.

Establish a crisis management team to involve key business leaders in evaluating risk, designing and conducting on-site training, coordinating public communications, assuming command roles in an emergency and providing assistance post incident. Security programs need to be holistic and embedded in all operations of a company, not assigned to a security department.

Safety and security should begin in an employee onboarding process and carry through the lifecycle of employment as part of the corporate identity. When safety and security are closely aligned with your corporate identity, it removes some of the anxiety that can be associated with safety training. Your goal is to have informed, alert and confident employees who willingly participate in the program.

What liability might a company face for not having procedures to deal with a physical threat?

Following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, property managers, security firms and security and safety device manufacturers all faced lawsuits. However, there are no defining standards to evaluate disaster recovery and business continuity programs.

In a litigious environment, we create an economic disincentive to expand safety- and security-focused services. The SAFETY Act was passed to give some protection and guidelines to mitigate these concerns for providers of products or services that are used to detect, identify and defend against terrorism. Companies developing security programs should consider adopting products that follow these voluntary guidelines, demonstrating 'best efforts' to implement a safety program that represents 'best in class' as defined by the act. <<

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