

How will your employees react to an active shooter?

It is an ordinary workday until you heard gunfire. In the next few seconds, everyone will go through three steps that will have a profound impact on the outcome of the incident.

We've all seen the videos of the aftermath of shootings in places like Parkland, the YouTube campus, and Noblesville. But very little media attention has been given to one of the most important elements of those shootings: how ordinary people react.

Disaster response psychologists have identified a predictable pattern of physical and emotional responses. Those responses can be summarized into three stages. Knowing each of those stages and what to do can keep you and your employees alive.

You're probably quite familiar with the Columbine High School shooting, but there's a critical fact about that incident that received little to no media coverage. It's that four minutes and ten seconds elapsed between the time the teacher who called 911 saw two armed boys on the soccer field and the time they entered the school. That teacher didn't make the call until the boys opened fire and injured her and she retreated into the school.

That illustrates the first stage of disaster response psychology. It's denial, and it's the most deadly. What happened the last time you thought you heard something like a gunshot? Most likely, the noise stopped you in your tracks, and then you began to rationalize other causes. It couldn't really be gunfire, could it? It's probably some kids setting off firecrackers or an engine backfiring. We could call 911, but we don't want to look stupid when it turns out to be nothing. We don't want to waste the officers' time.

When the Columbine teacher saw two boys carrying long guns on the soccer field, she began to rationalize just like the rest of us and decided they must have been making some kind of video project. She tried to get their attention, so they'd come into the building. She did get their attention, becoming one of their first targets. We know that in hindsight outcomes are usually perfect, but had she called 911 upon seeing them, the police would have had at least four minutes to respond before the students reached the school.

Denial is deadly. If you think someone might be shooting, call 911. Let the police sort it out, because that's what they get paid to do. They'd much rather make 100 runs to check out something that turns out not to be gunfire than one run where they arrive too late to stop a shooter.

The second stage is deliberation. This is when your employees will decide what they're going to do. One thing employees must overcome is the physiological response to danger. When the gunfire sounds, their heart rates will begin to speed up from the normal 60 or so beats per minute. At 90 beats per minute, fine motor skills begin to degrade. At 120 beats per minute, blood is rushing to their arms and legs, because even if they don't realize it's time to flee, their bodies do. At over 150 beats per minute, they begin to lose their peripheral vision and may not even hear you calling their name and telling them to run.

The key to successful deliberation is training. They need to be able to calm themselves and take control of their breathing. They have to shift their emotions from panic, focusing instead on determining how to avoid the danger, denying the shooter entry, or defending themselves. They may need to grab stunned co-workers and tell them what to do.

The third stage is what's known as the decisive moment, when they take action. That may involve calling 911 or leaving. To deny an attacker, they may lock the doors, turn out the lights, or barricade the attacker's path. And if they're face-to-face with the attacker, they may have to use distraction techniques or fight back.

Your employees need to know that they are not helpless in a situation such as an active shooter, and that the steps they take matter. That's where professional training comes in. Its purpose isn't to frighten employees, but to help them understand, devise a plan, rehearse it, and control their own responses.

We make fun of reptile brains, but they have a big advantage over humans. When a gecko sees a cat moving toward him, he doesn't stop to analyze what the cat might want. He runs away and saves his life. With the right training, your employees can become just as skilled at survival.

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