

SHARPENING THE SAW: STRIVING FOR PROACTIVE SECURITY STRATEGIES

There are methods all successful managers can employ to go from being an incident-driven reactionary to a problem-solver

By Brian Buggé, CPP

Abe Lincoln had a nice outlook on problem solving. He once exclaimed that if he had eight hours to chop down a tree he'd spend six hours sharpening his ax. Stephen Covey, best-selling author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, echoed this same sentiment by making one of his habits "sharpening the saw."

For our purposes we will delve into ways a security agency can and should go about organizing their operations so they are "problem-oriented" (and proactive). I would venture to guess that how you are set up right now is very "incident driven" (and reactive). Let me explain and distinguish between the two.

Let's say you're a security manager of a large mall or residential and/or commercial properties. Lately you've been experiencing a rash of graffiti, vandalism and petty theft. You surmise your problem is teenagers, either loitering and/or trespassing on your property. Even without any elaborate collection and analyses of data, that might be a reasonable assumption to draw. This assump-

tion, however, misses the real underlying cause of your problem. As a result of not "sharpening the saw" so to speak (i.e., collecting and analyzing data), we have now misidentified the "problem" and will now go on to "respond" to this improperly identified problem. How will we "respond?" Normally, by treating each act as a separate and distinct "incident." We catch one kid and then another, perhaps even in the act. We'll use more frequent security patrols, CCTV and a host of other techniques to try to deter or apprehend the mischievous youths.

By doing this, however, we are being "reactive." We are also treating all these various acts as separate incidents when in fact there could be a common thread that runs through them. Something might be used as a common denominator wherein we can group all these seemingly separate incidents into one category, namely, a "problem." If we get good at this, we might even be able to alter or remove the common thread, thereby eliminating or greatly reducing the problem. That is called "problem solving." It is much more satisfying that just react-

ing over and over again to the same repeat problems.

In this example, let's say we started collecting information about this particular problem and discovered it does center on young people walking through the area. But we go further and discover these young people seem to have something in common; they all seem to be coming from the roller skating rink nearby. Now we collect information about that rink, and we quickly realize it closes around 11 p.m. (coincidentally that's just about the time most of your vandalism problems have been occurring). We observe that when it closes, there is only one bus to transport the large crowd of kids out of the area. A large portion of the kids wait for a second bus, but you observe they get antsy and don't want to wait the 15 minutes for the second bus, so they walk home and cut through your property to do so. On the way, they commit those random acts of vandalism, etc. that have been consuming your time, energy and resources (not to mention money).

You now utilize your newfound problem-solving skills and approach

the manager of the skating rink. You tell him or her about all the trouble you've been experiencing and suggest management consider adding a second bus at closing time so all the kids can be transported from the scene at once. They acquiesce to your request and no more vandalism. That's "problem-oriented security."

As another example, let's say the thefts in your parking lot are from vehicles. You could be reactive and incident driven (i.e., fill out a form, do some surveillance, more patrol, etc.), or you could be proactive and problem-oriented. To be proactive we must collect data on the problem. To do that ask yourself these two simple questions: what do I want to know and how am I going to find that out?

In this case you might want to know what is being stolen on these smash and grab thefts. Let's say you find out its women's purses. The next thing you might want to know is why are these women leaving their purses in their vehicles? Suppose you ask them and they tell you, "We are heading toward the nightclub to meet friends, hang out and dance. There's no place to put our purses in the club, so we leave them in the car."

See how the definition of what your "problem" is changes. In the skating rink example the problem actually came down to buses. Here the problem seems to be lack of places to store personal items inside the dance club. What follows from this innovative type of thinking is responses that are tailor made to the actual problem. Let's say in this case you were able to work with the lounge management and have them install small lockers with keys. Let's say you even illustrated the return on investment they would receive by charging 50 cents or \$1 for the rental. It now becomes a win-win situation for everyone. They do it and



no more purses left inside cars in your parking lot and no more thefts.

If you think this is wishful thinking, guess again. These are all real-life examples of problem solving from the police/security perspective. It has its origins in the work of Herman Goldstein, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin. In 1990 he wrote a book titled Problem-Oriented Policing. It revolutionized policing and gave the budding philosophy of community policing some legs to stand on. It can be easily transferred to the security profession. In some ways it is more suitable to private security because of its heavy emphasis on prevention of crime.

What is the best way to "prevent crime?" Professor Goldstein feels it's by solving nagging and chronic repeat problems in disorder or quality of life issues that, if left unchecked, eventually evolve into full-blown criminal behavior. He feels that to deal with it at that later stage in its development is to be reactive. To eliminate, reduce, transform or just displace whatever is the underlying cause of your specific problem before it morphs into criminal behavior is much more "effective," which is far more important than simply being efficient).

Add to this the article by Professors James Q. Wilson and George Kelling which appeared in a

1982 issue of *The Atlantic* entitled "Broken Windows: A Theory of Neighborhood Deterioration." They postulated that neighborhoods begin a vicious cycle of deterioration (and crime) because minor quality of life issues like youth disturbances, graffiti, panhandlers, speeding vehicles, garbage-strewn vacant lots, etc. are left to fester and become a sort of "broken window." Left unrepaired, it leads to more window breaking because people begin to perceive that "nobody cares."

Wilson and Kelling use the phrase "broken window" as a metaphor for such acts as panhandling, graffiti, loud music blaring in public, teenage drinking, urinating on lawns, etc. If not dealt with and repaired (i.e., problem-solving) they turn into more serious forms of "broken windows," such as: prostitution, open-air drug dealing, auto thefts, fights, stabbings, gangs and drive-by shootings. Once you have that in your community, the cycle of neighborhood deterioration is too far gone, and all you can do is react, usually by arresting bad-guys. By that time, however, decent law-abiding residents have moved out or locked themselves behind closed doors, businesses have left and the town's tax base suffers. The police now might be viewed by some residents as inept, apathetic or corrupt, because they're the ones who had the power and resources to stop this from happening.

Here's an astonishing statistic that really gets to the core of all this talk about problem solving. Back in the late 1980s, a study was done of calls for service in a Minnesota city. They discovered 68 percent of the calls for police service were generated by eight percent of the population. This study has been replicated elsewhere with similar findings. It tells us there is usually just a small core group of problem people, problem locations and problem things that contributes to a disproportionate amount of our workload. In a reactive incident-dri-

ven organizational structure we respond over and over again to the same things, never eliminating or reducing them. After many years, those unresolved problems get piled on top of new problems, which also will be unresolved, and we find ourselves running on a treadmill.

In a worst-case scenario, we now find we have no time to solve anything (or be effective). We simply try to find technological solutions, making us more efficient but ineffective. This leads to an alienated, apathetic and robotic type of workplace because workers don't get the sense of accomplishment that solving problems offers. I remember one security guard lamenting to me that "a trained monkey could do this job." The sad part was this guard was a court officer guarding a crucial location in a high-profile federal courthouse. This is what I reflect on when I read stories about all the security lapses at what is arguably the most high-tech and secure facility in the world, the Los Alamos Nuclear Lab.

Problem-oriented security comes down to four basic components. The acronym used is SARA: Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment. In the scanning stage we are trying to identify the problem in very specific and narrowly drawn terms. For example, if you just said, "I have an arson problem," that would be too broad. You could have fires being set by teenagers, who are hanging out, or a fire set by a homeless person to keep warm, or a fire set by an organized crime figure for insurance purposes. Each of those could be termed an "arson problem," but they are different. The responses to those different types of incidents would need to be much different. However, you wouldn't be able to distinguish that if you worded or labeled your problem in broad language. It is even advisable to narrow your problem down further after you've gone through the



next stage in the process — analysis.

Analysis is the keystone to the whole process, where you collect and analyze assorted data related to your narrowly defined problem. Security professionals have one up here on law enforcement professionals, because law enforcement people rely too much on criminal justice data to the exclusion of more revealing data from other sources (i.e., census bureau, property and tax records, business intelligence, interviews with various actors involved in the problem, passive observation of the pattern for the purposes of collecting data for problem solving, rather than stakeouts for the sole purpose of making an arrest). A thorough analysis might reveal the problem has been misidentified and a narrower description can be placed on it. This allows the next stage, the response, to have more impact because it is customized to the specific circumstances of your particular problem. You also will be able to mold a response that addresses the real issue at the heart of the problem, not a response that doesn't work because it was attacking the wrong thing.

The response stage is where you can get creative. Brainstorming helps. You have a specific problem and a lot of information surrounding that problem. How you respond to it can be simple. For example, move a bus stop because two different high schools

board the kids on the same street, across from each other, where they are always taunting one another which leads to constant fights breaking out. This was a real example and it actually went on for years until somebody simply said, "Why not just move one group to a different street so they're not staring across at each other?" Or it can be complex. One jurisdiction minimized their youth disturbance problem by opening up beaches at night to give the kids somewhere to go. DARE officers who had free time in the summer months because school was out monitored it. Naturally, it was alcohol and

drug free.

The last stage is often overlooked when we implement something. We often fail to document and assess the impact our response had on the problem. If it worked spectacularly, we should be able to help other locales or security operations so they can replicate what we did to some extent. If it didn't work, we want to know why. It might have been the way we identified the problem, or perhaps we didn't collect enough information and/or overlooked an important element in the equation. Our response might not have been appropriate and we need to change it or try a totally different response. You see what I mean.

This type of problem-oriented approach does work. But don't just take my word for it. Try applying these techniques on a long-standing chronic repeat problem you're experiencing. I think you'll be amazed at the results. SIND

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