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Learning from TSA's Failures

Four Tips for Avoiding Groupthink

If you've been reading my blog postings, you know that I have been critical of the damage done to the Transportation Security Agency's (TSA) reputation by the agency's reaction to the Christmas Day incident. In addition to denigrating some hard-working people, such reputation damage harms us all by calling into question the effectiveness of our national security programs. Still, there are lessons to be learned from any incident.

The real problem, in my opinion, is something called "groupthink", a condition where an organization is so homogenous that it can only look at a problem from one perspective. In reviewing the recent [White House report](#) on the Christmas Day incident, I was struck by the fact that it looks solely at the issue of intelligence failure, suggesting that the only way the incident could have been prevented was by providing the security screeners with prior knowledge about the attack. In other words, our current system doesn't work unless we know in advance that something will happen. Not the best message to send to the public, no matter how unintentional. However,

whether the focus of attention should be on the screeners, the intelligence system, or both misses the point. These are operational issues and by focusing solely on the operational level, TSA has completely missed the strategic implication: the terrorists are winning.

Why do I say that? The avowed intent of Al Qaeda is the economic destruction of the United States. If we look at the attempts on US aircraft since 9/11, we see some common threads. The operatives involved were not exactly highly trained nor were their methods particularly effective for bringing down an aircraft. However, in every case, the US over-reaction to the operational aspects of the incident has resulted in significant costs to the airlines and to the nation as a whole. Considered from this perspective, it is immaterial to Al Qaeda whether the attack is successful or fails at the operational level. The strategic objective is to provoke an over-reaction that harms the US and in this the attack has been very successful.

Anyone who has received any security training learns two basic facts: 1) no system is 100% effective and 2) all

systems are tradeoffs among risk, resources, and risk tolerance. When a security system affects an organization's ability to do business, the system is not effective. When people are told that they are 100% safe but see daily evidence that the system makes mistakes, the system is not effective. When the very population you are trying to protect is viewed as the enemy and not as allies, the system is not effective.

This brings us back to the issue of groupthink. The people making decisions at TSA are largely current or former law enforcement personnel. They see things in operational terms and don't always have the larger historical and sociological contexts that help place terrorism and its strategic implications in perspective. The use of attacks to provoke government over-reaction is a classic terrorist tactic and not something new. However, TSA continues to study each incident in isolation to determine how that *specific* incident could be prevented in the future. There appears to be no attempt to see the incident in the context of the larger picture, no attempt to "connect the dots" as we are demanding of the intelligence system. The fact that the Christmas Day incident was foiled by alert travelers did not stop TSA from targeting those same passengers with new and onerous security procedures. One is reminded of the old adage, "When you have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."


So what can we learn from all this? The problem of groupthink is not confined to TSA. I have reviewed both private and public sector emergency plans that were completely unrealistic because they were based on disaster mythology and not on demonstrated human

behavior in disaster. Most of the plans I have reviewed never considered the strategic consequences of disaster and focused solely on short-term operational and tactical response. In many cases, the plans were developed without regards to other plans or those of supporting organizations. Like TSA, emergency managers, particularly those with backgrounds in response, sometimes lack the ability to view problems from multiple perspectives. This severely limits our creativity in solving those problems.

Here are some suggestions for avoiding groupthink:

- **Think strategically.** Think about the long range implications of the issue you're addressing. Understand what it is you're trying to accomplish in terms of the overall benefit to your organization. Achieving an operational goal is meaningless if it doesn't contribute to the overall strategic goals of the organization. Aggressive debris clearance that later prevents insurance reimbursement is not a long term win for an organization
- **Use risk management principles.** Managing risk is not just about mitigation and prevention. There are times when a certain amount of risk is acceptable. We can also transfer risk through insurance. It's all about understanding the risk and balancing the mix of strategies we use to manage risk to find the best combination. Not all solutions are good solutions and just because something worked somewhere else doesn't mean that it will work in your organization.


- **Diversify your planning team.** My team in San Francisco was fairly homogenous – primarily older males with military backgrounds and considerable experience in emergency response. One member of my team did not fit the mold – not only was she a woman but she had come from the private sector and had limited emergency management experience. I am convinced that we were more effective because she frequently offered a different perspective on issues and made sure we included other partners in our planning besides the usual agencies and organizations.
- **Consider the public as allies.** One of the most persistent bits of disaster mythology is that the public is part of the problem, that they must lead firmly in a crisis by a strong central authority, and that they will panic if told the truth. Fifty years of disaster research demonstrates that this is not the case. By and large, people are self-reliant and altruistic in a disaster and they do not panic if given good information. At the same time, this needs to be leavened with the understanding that not all members of the public will react in a typical fashion. Again, you need to balance these two elements to find the best mix for your organization.

Groupthink is one of those insidious risks that can creep up on us unawares. We avoid it by keeping an open mind and an open process. There's a reason that collaboration is one of the Principles of Emergency Management. 

Upcoming Appearances

This year is already starting out to be fairly busy for me. Here is a list of my upcoming speaking engagements. Please drop on by if you're in the area!

- February 9 – *How to Design an Effective Business Continuity Tabletop Exercise* - [Association of Contingency Planners, SF Bay Area](#), San Francisco, CA
- February 22-25 – *Emergency Management: Building a Strong Program* (pre-conference workshop)/ *Keynote address/Mitigation – Situational Awareness Refined* - [Colorado Governor's Emergency Management Conference](#), Colorado Springs, CO
- March 30 – *Private Sector Risk Management ABCs* – [National Hurricane Conference](#), Orlando FL
- May 17 – *Emergency Preparedness for the Developmentally Disabled Community* - [Developmental Disabilities Nurses Association](#), Reno NV

See my [website](#) for more information on my seminars, workshops and keynote speaking services. 

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