



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own practice, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

You may reprint this paper provided you include my copyright, the source, the author, and "reprinted with permission."

Why Do We Live in Fear?

A risk free society is an unrealistic goal

On a bright summer morning, four heavily armed men entered a school house in rural Pennsylvania. The men were members of separatist organization seeking independence from the government. On entering, they immediately shot the teacher, who, as he lay dying, begged them to spare the children. His pleas fell on deaf ears. The men brutally butchered the children with knives and axes, killing nine of the twelve children in the classroom. The crime was so heinous that even the leaders of the separatist organization disavowed their actions, calling them cowards.

If you saw this as breaking news, you would be shocked but not surprised. These are the times we live in. But the date was July 26, 1764. The men were Lenape braves who were supporters of Pontiac's Rebellion seeking independence from the British Crown.

Violence for political motives is not a recent development in the history of our country. We've seen the assassination of Presidents by anarchists and conspirators. We've lived through bombing campaigns by domestic terror groups. We've experienced violence aimed at gaining media coverage.

At the same time, we are probably safer than we have ever been at any time in our history. So why is it that we seem to live in constant fear?

When will we be satisfied?

One reason may be that we are victims of our own success. Because we have achieved such a high standard of living, we fear losing it to outsiders. This phenomenon has been noted by sociologists: the more the level of affluence increases in a society, the more members of that society fear loss of that affluence

Consultant guru Allen Weiss has coined the term, "Unsatiating," an inability to be satisfied with progress, to describe why people are so willing to believe that we live in grim times.

Weiss uses the example of crime rates to explain what he means. Crime rates are down. This leads to the realization that the number of incidents of crime can be reduced. This in turn leads to an expectation that crime can be eliminated, a goal that, while laudable, is clearly unrealistic. The result is that we are unsatisfied because crime has not been eliminated completely and this translates into the perception that crime is out of control. It is a view that is neither rational nor supported by the facts.

Unrealistic expectations

Unsatiated becomes evident when we consider perceived risk. One of the myths that we have led the public to believe is that they can be made completely safe. The result is that when an incident occurs, whether a school shooting or a lone wolf terrorist attack, people see it as a *personal* threat and fear increases. This perceived risk is considerably at odds with the actual risk when you consider the statistics: the chance of dying in a terrorist attack worldwide is 1 in 9.3 million, the chance of a student dying in a school shooting is 1 in 7.8 million. Compare this to the risk of dying in a road accident – 1 in 8,000.

The simple fact is that we cannot eliminate all risk. Prior to becoming an emergency manager, I worked in the security field, much of it dealing with physical security and guard forces. In our planning we were taught to design systems with four objectives:

1. *Deter* – the goal of deterrence was to keep honest people honest. Think in terms of a chain link fence around a piece of property. The fence keeps most people out and sends a message that the area is restricted. However, fences can be cut or climbed by a determined intruder within a matter of seconds.
2. *Detect* – assuming the first line of defense has been breached, the next objective is to detect the intrusion. This is where alarms come into play. Note that alarms merely signal the presence of an intruder; they do not actually stop them.
3. *Delay* – the third objective in a security system is to delay the intruder long enough to allow for an effective response. This generally involves additional barriers such as reinforced doors and mantraps.

4. *Respond* – the final objective is response by security personnel and/or police. Depending on the nature of the attack, this can escalate to the use of lethal force.

Note the underlying assumption at each level of defense: a determined intruder will penetrate that level. If the intruder does not fear capture or death, they are almost impossible to stop. This was particularly true in executive protection; we accepted the fact that if someone wanted the target badly enough, they would more than likely succeed.

Yet the message that we continually send, despite all evidence to the contrary, is that we can secure the public against all risk. We ignore the evidence that a person acting alone and prepared to die in the commission of an act is both difficult to detect and difficult to stop. This is why each new outrage heightens our fear and leads us to believe we are under attack.

Seeking sanity

There are, of course, prudent precautions we can take to secure potential targets. The problem is to know when these security measures become too extreme to be either effective or acceptable to the public. Security is always a balancing act between extremes of unrestricted access and total lockdown.

But what we really need is to change our message. We need to place risk in perspective and recognize that risk is a fact of everyday life. We accept a measure of risk every time we enter a car, engage in a sport, or even take a bath because we know our chance of injury or death is slight. We are educated about the risk. We need to develop the same attitude towards unprovoked attacks. Accepting risk does not mean being complacent. But it does mean a reduction in fear. 