

Paying Attention Could Make All the Difference

BY JIM WILLIS

Have you ever considered how similar your role as a damage prevention specialist is to that of a scout? By scout, I'm thinking less Boy Scout and more Daniel Boone/Kit Carson. Your job is to identify obstacles and mark hazards (i.e. pathfinding) for those who will come later. Historically, this has also been the role of a scout. Like the scouts of old, you often work alone in unfamiliar surroundings that can conceal unexpected threats and dangers. To stay safe on the job, you need the situational awareness skills and vigilance of a scout.

Cable/line locating and marking, inspections, and route patrolling can place you in vulnerable situations. To stay safe, you need to employ keen situational awareness skills on a daily basis. The problem is, how does one maintain a high level of situational awareness while still getting the job done? The short answer: through honed skills and practice.

Violence is regularly visited on workers in the utility sector, particularly those working alone. The most common form of violence against these workers is robbery. One only needs to do a quick Google search to see the scale of the problem.

When it comes to improving one's situational awareness skills, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that situational awareness is a learnable skill and doing so can be a rewarding experience. The bad news is that this does require concerted effort and time on your part to master. However, this should not come as too much of a surprise, as many of the most important and fulfilling skills require effort and discipline.

The most important security concept for you to understand is that you have to take responsibility for your own security. Not the company, not the community, and not the police, but you and you alone. The second key concept is that situational awareness is the building block on which effective personal security rests.

In reality, most attackers have poor tactical skills and employ sloppy concealment techniques. This

can make their intentions easier to spot for someone paying attention. Sadly, most people have no situational awareness skills and those who do seldom employ them as part of their daily routine, so these obvious signs go unnoticed. To be effective, situational awareness must be diligently put into practice every day. But remember, effective situational awareness is the subtle art of paying close attention, not an overt display of exaggerated actions; you're not looking to draw attention to yourself.

Effective situational awareness focuses on context. Context looks at factors such as environment, setting, and demeanor to identify threats and take steps to neutralize or mitigate them as potential problems. Dangerous situations are seldom identified by one glaringly obvious sign or indicator. That one, conspicuous sign that clearly points to something bad about to happen usually appears at the start of the attack and it's too late to take preventive action. More often, several subtle clues will appear that, when taken in context, indicate that trouble is brewing. There is a litany of pre-attack indicators that can help identify potential threats. This is where situational awareness comes into play. By paying attention to what is going on around you, you're able to identify these pre-attack indicators and quickly surmise their meaning.

Of the indicators that point to possible trouble, the one that is most often misunderstood is a person with a sidearm (pistol). The fact you encounter someone with a holstered firearm isn't necessarily a cause for alarm. There are many reasons people carry firearms in public; off-duty police officers, plainclothes officers, guards, concealed carry license holders, citizens opting to legally open carry, etc. The fact that you see a holstered weapon typically implies the person is not a threat. Usually, if someone is planning the belligerent use of a firearm they will keep the weapon hidden until they're ready to act. However, someone brandishing a firearm is a real cause for concern and should take your full attention. Again, taking all factors into context can help you quickly deduce the presence of a true threat.

ENVIRONMENT: This is the social setting and physical space that you are in at any given time. It's important to understand the environment and use it as a foundation for other situational awareness inputs. Every environment is different and will have unique characteristics. For example, the environment near a local garage will be different from the environment near a family restaurant, and both will be different from the environment around a back-street bar. Each community will have its own typical population, pace, language, and code of conduct, and all of them may impact the context.

SETTING: The setting is the changeable elements within the environment at a specific moment in time. This includes variables such as what, where, when, and how many, along with dozens of other significant inputs. Remember, seldom does one element define a situation. It's important to consider all available information when assessing a situation.

DEMEANOR: A person's demeanor broadcasts a tremendous amount of information to those paying attention. How someone acts in relation to other factors can be one of the most telling signs of trouble.

It's important that you apply context to the situation by considering all available indicators before coming to a conclusion. Remember that there is a myriad of indicators that take different forms and that can have different meanings. And all indicators should be considered in the context of the environment, setting, and demeanor. Realize that the setting plays a key role in context. For example, a person with a visible sidearm at a diner near a gun range may not be particularly noteworthy, but an individual standing next to your vehicle and watching your every move is. What a person is doing is sometimes as important as what they may be carrying; and looked at separately, the two facts can appear innocuous, hence the need for context.



Putting Situational Awareness into Practice

I often have people say, "I practice situational awareness, all day, every day." In reality, this isn't possible. To do so would interfere with getting your job done, or anything else for that matter. Let me explain. When you enter a restaurant, you may select a seat that allows easy observation and scan the room for anything that may be a concern, but the minute you pick up the menu, you are no longer fully aware of the surroundings. On the job, you need to focus on the task, but the moment you begin to concentrate on work, your situational awareness fades and can disappear completely. But you are there to do the job, which means you must focus on work. So how do you deal with this conundrum? You need to establish a baseline of awareness and stage your work area to maintain that baseline or alert you to any changes before starting the task at hand, whether the task is locating cable or ordering a burger.

The elements involved with staging the area can include dozens of differing things. In a restaurant setting, it may include identifying exits, choosing to sit in a position of advantage, and setting aside

distractions such as cell phones or headsets. On the job, it may be parking in a manner that limits unobserved approach, identifying paths of quick escape, and completing a zonal assessment scan of things and people that may be of concern before turning your attention to the job.

Improving your situational awareness skills depends entirely on you. You begin to improve your situational awareness the moment you decide to take a proactive step in paying attention. The next step should be to find training that can hone your skills. Situational awareness training can be a lifesaver. And good training can help you become more effective at your craft and will provide insights into subtle ways to increase awareness and assess situations. But choose your training wisely. Shy away from overly aggressive trainers or those without a good understanding of the subject and the profession where it will be applied.

Finding the right training program can be challenging. When you start looking, you'll find that almost everyone from law enforcement to ex-military to martial arts practitioners and everyone in

between claim security expertise. And many will have capabilities. However, the majority of the training offered will be more tactical in nature than work related, which is great if you're a SWAT officer, but not that useful when you're locating cable. Your training should focus on skills to benefit your personal and work life. Look for a training organization whose primary clients are utilities. **DP**

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