Understanding the Role of Behavioral Scientists in Insider Threat Programs

The Big Picture

The National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) issued its Insider Threat Program Maturity Framework in 2018 to help federal agencies advance their Insider Threat Programs beyond the Minimum Standards. One of the 19 Maturity Framework Elements (ME) is to employ behavioral science methods to help identify indicators of potential insider threats (ME15). Specifically, ME15 calls on federal agencies to "identify internal or external sources of behavioral sciences expertise to incorporate personal and environmental factors in threat identification, assessment, and response."[1] The behavioral sciences, however, include several academic disciplines and a variety of skill sets. With limited funds, how can an Insider Threat Program ensure it hires the behavioral scientists it needs?

> *The Challenge: The behavioral sciences encompass a diverse set of disciplines, each with its own skill sets and areas of expertise. How can an Insider Threat Program ensure it hires the right behavioral scientist?*

Finding the Right Behavioral Scientist

The insider threat is a human problem, and because of this, behavioral scientists are well-suited to help organizations deter, prevent, detect, and mitigate concerning behavior. Behavioral scientists can enrich an Insider Threat Program in a number of ways, but behavioral scientists are not all the same. An organization must decide what it wants a behavioral scientist *to do*, before it can determine what kind of behavioral scientist *to select*. For example, many clinical psychologists are trained in research methods, but comparatively few researchers are trained in clinical psychology. What follows is a brief overview of two of the most common behavioral science services leveraged by Insider Threat Programs: research and consultation.[2] This information is intended to help organizations operate within ethical and legal boundaries as they mature their Insider Threat Programs.

About this Series

The Threat Lab White Paper Series is intended to provide empirically-informed, operationally-relevant best practices to Insider Threat Program Hubs. White Papers are collaboratively authored by members of the Psychosocial Risk & Insider Management Experts (PRIME) Panel, an advisory entity assembled to assist The Threat Lab, based on issues suggested by stakeholders.

PRIME
Psychosocial Risk & Insider Management Experts

About The Threat Lab

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) established The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the DoD Insider Threat Program Director's vision to integrate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space.

For more information or to suggest a topic for a future White Paper, please email **dodhra.ThreatLab@mail.mil**

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[1] Retrieved from https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/nittf/20181024_NITTF_MaturityFramework_web.pdf
[2] Myers, C., & Trent, A. (2019). *Operational psychology in insider threat.* In M. Staal and S. Harvey (Eds.), *Operational Psychology: A New Field to Support National Security and Public Safety.* Westpoint, CT: Praeger.

Behavioral Science Research

Most behavioral scientists have been trained in the scientific method and are capable of designing and executing research programs on behalf of Insider Threat Programs. While people from multiple disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, criminology, and statistics) may qualify for these roles, it is important to remember that different researchers are skilled at different research methods.[3]

Qualitative Research Methods focus on narrative data. Researchers who use these methods may, for example, design interviews and focus groups to gather information from individuals, and then categorize, sort, and analyze the data from transcripts to explain why or how something happened. Qualitative researchers use their interpersonal skills to provide detailed information about small groups of people.

Quantitative Research Methods focus on numeric data. Researchers who use these methods may, for example, design surveys to gather information from individuals, and then analyze the aggregated numbers in order to explain what happened, where and when it happened, and who was involved. Quantitative researchers use their statistical skills to provide general information about large groups of people.

Behavioral Science Consultation

Behavioral scientists also may provide case consultation services to help Insider Threat Program analysts, investigators, and other personnel understand and contextualize concerning behavior. They also may recommend mitigation strategies and help organizations enact behaviorally appropriate action plans. Behavioral scientists who provide these consultations should have specific training and demonstrated competence in risk assessment and threat management, and, depending on the case, experience in counterintelligence and/or law enforcement.

> *It is important to note that only a specific subset of behavioral scientists is trained and licensed to consult on an individual's mental health status, and people without the appropriate credentials should not provide or be asked to provide this service.*

If an Insider Threat Program is interested in this type of service, it should ensure that the behavioral scientist has the appropriate clinical training and holds an active, unencumbered license to practice in a U.S. state or territory. National security psychologists, who are also known as operational psychologists, often occupy these roles for Insider Threat Programs with the resources to include these valuable skills.

Communication is Key

When behavioral scientists' skills are matched correctly with organizational needs, they can serve as force multipliers for Insider Threat Programs. For example, they can help Insider Threat Programs identify behavioral trends, remediate workforce training gaps, and mitigate concerning behavior exhibited by individuals. For their part, behavioral scientists must be able to communicate clearly and concisely with non-scientific audiences, particularly with those organizational leaders who are responsible for risk-based decisions. In fact, everyone charged with understanding potential threats must have strong risk and crisis communication skills to ensure that complicated cases are resolved fairly and efficiently.

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[3] Briggs, L. (2019, April). *Social Science Perspectives and Countering Insider Threat.* Presented at the 4th annual meeting of the Insider Threat Behavioral & Technical Working Group, Phoenix, AZ.