Communicating Insider Threat Risk to Organizational Leaders

The Big Picture

Insider threat professionals are often contacted for assistance when an organizational leader experiences concern, stress, or fear related to an employee’s behavior. For leaders, this situation may be the only time they experience unsettling or suspicious behavior at work, and it may cause anxiety as they work to find a solution. As members of the insider threat team, we must understand how people perceive risk and react to unfamiliar circumstances so that we can maximize the value of our assessment and mitigation recommendations. After all, at the end of the day, organizational leaders will own the action plan.

Risk Perception

Risk perceptions are “beliefs about a potential harm or the possibility of a loss. It is a subjective judgment that people make about the characteristics and severity of a risk.”¹ Employees perceive risk based on their individual needs, values, and experiences, and also on the organizational culture and constraints in which they operate.² Therefore, when an employee makes a statement that alludes to violence, people may assess the risk in very different ways even though everyone heard the same words.

Risk perceptions may complicate an insider threat professional’s ability to gather data from witnesses and then sort through what may be contradictory results. These perceptions are complicated further by anxiety, especially among leaders accustomed to being in control. This anxiety may significantly affect leaders’ ability and willingness to make decisions and listen to specialized observations and recommendations.³
Principles to Guide Communication

Insider threat professionals must step into an organizational leader’s shoes, and understand the situation as an emotional and uncertain experience. To do this, we should leverage basic risk and crisis communications principles.

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<th><strong>Slow things down.</strong> When there is no evidence of imminent or immediate harm, slow down the decision-making process. This creates more time to evaluate options or bring in other specialists to improve the decision-making process.</th>
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<td><strong>Listen, then listen more.</strong> Avoid problem-solving early in the process. Instead, let witnesses and leaders tell their story without interruption. Then, ask clarifying questions and listen to the answers. This approach reduces anxiety and builds trust, which in turn improves communication and increases the effectiveness of our message.</td>
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<td><strong>Avoid judgment.</strong> Avoid judgmental statements and comments about how the leader could have avoided the present situation if only he/she had made better decisions in the past. Instead, meet people where they are now. Offer advice and guidance based upon the current circumstances and where the leader wants to go in the future.</td>
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<td><strong>Show your work.</strong> Discuss the facts of the incident—the ones you have and the ones you do not—and how they contributed to your assessment and recommendations. Also, educate leaders about the threat assessment process. Like active listening, a fact-based approach builds trust, which in turn will move the team forward.</td>
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<td><strong>Prepare leaders for what comes next.</strong> Identify specific red flag actions and statements that signal an ongoing or re-emergent concern. These red flags may happen in the future, and although every situation is unique, they may indicate a potential threat. Leaders should know the red flags and be prepared to act if they appear.</td>
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