

# 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.

*The Challenge: Leaders may be unsure how to manage an employee's concerning or suspicious behavior. How can insider threat professionals communicate risk to organizational leaders to ensure our message is received and understood?*

## 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."<sup>1</sup> Employees perceive risk based on their individual needs, values, and experiences, and also on the organizational culture and constraints in which they operate.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

## 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](mailto:dodhra.ThreatLab@mail.mil)

## 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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|    | <p><b>Slow things down.</b> 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.<sup>4</sup></p>   |
|    | <p><b>Listen, then listen more.</b> 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.<sup>5</sup></p> |
|    | <p><b>Avoid judgment.</b> 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.<sup>6</sup></p>           |
|  | <p><b>Show your work.</b> 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.<sup>7</sup></p>                   |
|  | <p><b>Prepare leaders for what comes next.</b> 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.</p>                     |

<sup>1</sup> Darker, C. (2013). Risk Perception. In: Gellman M.D., Turner J.R. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine*. Springer, New York, NY. Retrieved from [https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4419-1005-9\\_866](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4419-1005-9_866)

<sup>2</sup> Breakwell, G. M. (2014). *The Psychology of Risk*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Hance, B. J., Chess, C., & Sandman, P. M. (1990). *Industry Risk Communication Manual: Improving dialogue with communities*. Boca Raton, FL: Lewis Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> White, S. (personal communication, March, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Tulloch, J., & Lupton, D. (2003). *Risk and Everyday Life*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

<sup>6</sup> Lundgren, R. E. & McMakin, A. H. (2009). *Risk Communication: A Handbook for Communicating Environmental, Safety, and Health Risks*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.; Sandman, P. M. (1994). "Risk Communication" in R. A. Eblen, & W. R. Eblen, *Encyclopedia of the Environment* (pp. 620-623). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>7</sup> Lundgren & McMakin, 2009.