Psychological Evaluations of Risk
A Structured Approach to Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management

[ A HILLARD HEINTZE EXECUTIVE PRIMER ]
Threat management is intertwined with threat assessment ... one without the other may prove only partially effective at reducing or preventing targeted violence.”

— "Making Prevention a Reality" FBI, February 2017
The strongest promise of violence prevention

Behavioral threat assessment and threat management are two distinct, but co-dependent disciplines. When applied as a joint force, they represent the most valuable prevention strategy in addressing the dynamic risk of targeted violence in the workplace.

Each relies on the diverse strengths of experts who take on specialized roles in an active collaboration centered on a subject of concern. It’s a process that often carries a sense of urgency as it moves from identification and investigation to assessment, intervention, mitigation and management.

A cadre of experts

A multifaceted threat assessment and management team acts as a systematic and structured blockade designed to interrupt a person on a potential pathway to violence. The model team brings credentials and experience across specialized backgrounds in threat assessment and management, forensic psychology, investigations, open-source intelligence and law enforcement.

The forensic clinical psychologist is one of the most uniquely qualified members of a behavioral risk advisory team. Psychological evaluations of risk are the domain of this highly specialized mental health professional. The outcomes of these interventions add an exponential ability to assess, intervene and manage an individual on the pathway to violence.

Using a combination of structured risk assessment instruments, professional experience and instinct gained through specialized violence risk education training, the forensic psychologist identifies a subject’s level of violence risk potential – a key factor in determining proper next steps.
Psychological evaluations of violence risk potential bring clearer, unbiased appraisals of behavioral concerns as an added layer of intervention to ensure that the right level of support is in place.
Assessing the behavioral risks of violence

A violence risk assessment thoroughly evaluates the reported actions, communications and specific circumstances that might suggest an individual is on a path to targeted violence. Objective, systematic and structured, the process centers on an analysis of the facts and evidence of concerning behavior to identify a level of risk potential based on the subject’s current known mental state at the time of the assessment.

Three types of psychological evaluations of risk

As a highly confidential component of a comprehensive threat identification, assessment and management process, violence risk evaluations take one of three forms of intervention:

- Indirect Threat Assessment
- Direct Violence Risk Evaluation
- Fitness for Duty Evaluation

Dynamic factors related to organizational concerns, the subject of concern and whether or not the subject is involved in or informed of the intervention determine the proper approach within a set of discreet or transparent options.

The outcomes of each of these structured interventions bring an added layer of assurance to human resources, security, legal personnel and others – including law enforcement – in properly addressing the demands and challenges of dynamic risk in the workplace.
An indirect threat assessment relies on facts gathered from multiple sources – relevant records, open source intelligence and collateral interviews with supervisors and others who act as primary sources of information on the subject of concern.
The Indirect Threat Assessment

Indirect threat assessments address multiple concerns across a client organization related to current, former or non-employees such as domestic partners, customers, vendors or others:

- Employee violates workplace violence prevention policy
- Employee exhibits concerning or aggressive behavior
- Non-employee poses a threat by showing disgruntled or potentially dangerous behavior

Process

Indirect threat assessments are based on an analysis of relevant records related to current and past behaviors exhibited by a person of concern – including findings from open source intelligence and social media reviews. Collateral interviews with current and former supervisors and others who act as primary sources of information are also central to the process. The subject is not directly involved in or notified of the intervention.

Additional sources of information may include findings emerging from an investigation into the background of the subject. This data is then applied to the Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk (WAVR-21, 3rd Edition), a 21-item coded instrument for the structured assessment of workplace targeted violence risk.

Outcome

The requesting organization will receive a report documenting the findings and case management strategies emerging from the indirect threat assessment. This report provides critical insights and recommendations based on assessment outcomes which identify the level of risk potential based on the subject’s current known mental state at the time of the assessment. These documented outcomes lead to better informed decision making in determining next steps.
A direct violence risk evaluation offers a clearer picture of violence risk drawn from an in-person interview with the subject of concern.
The Direct Violence Risk Evaluation

Current employees are typically referred for a direct violence risk evaluation if the client organization finds they have:

- Violated the workplace violence prevention policy
- Exhibited concerning or aggressive behavior
- Raised concerns that are reported by supervisors or others

Process

Direct violence risk evaluations involve an in-person interview with the subject along with discretionary psychological testing. Interview insights are then combined with an analysis of relevant records related to current and past behaviors exhibited by the person of concern – including findings from open source intelligence and social media reviews. In some cases, a background investigation may provide additional information. This data is then used to apply the Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk (WAVR-21, 3rd Edition) methodology.

If the assessor is made aware of past or current mental health evaluations or treatment, the subject will be asked to sign an authorization for release of information to permit requests for verbal feedback or evaluation and treatment progress notes from other providers. The subject must voluntarily allow this protected mental health information to be released and in most cases grants this permission.

Outcome

The requesting organization and the subject employee will receive a report documenting the findings and case management strategies emerging from the direct violence risk evaluation. This report provides critical insights and recommendations based on assessment outcomes which identify the level of violence risk potential based on the subject’s current known mental state at the time of the assessment. These documented outcomes lead to better informed decision making in establishing next steps.
Benefits of the direct violence risk evaluation

Captures direct subject input

Allows the subject to tell their version of the alleged behaviors to an independent, objective, third-party expert. In most cases, the referring organization can answer the “who, what, when, where and how” but not always the “why.” The latter is best addressed by the subject in an open discussion about the circumstances and alleged behaviors. Most subjects welcome this opportunity to communicate their version of the alleged events.
Supports a broader range of inquiry

The assessor is able to ask any questions during the course of the evaluation, as well as any specific questions that the client organization wants answered.

Brings self-awareness to the subject

The evaluation process often brings new awareness to the subject as to the cause and effect of their actions. Subjects often comment that they underestimated or were otherwise unaware of the potential short- and long-term consequences of their concerning behavior.

Generates predictive insights for better informed organizational next steps

The assessor is able to ask the subject a series of hypothetical questions. The subject’ answers can suggest or clarify insights into their potential reaction to various scenarios, such as:

- Returning to the same workgroup and environment
- Transferring to another workgroup, worksite or department
- Accepting the possibility of an exit or termination

When addressing any potential exit or termination, the goal is to get a sense of the subject’s perceived expectations. Are they anticipating a potential severance package? What are their short- and long-term plans? This information is critical when planning for post-evaluation next steps regardless of a decision to retain or terminate the subject employee.
When there are dual concerns, violence risk assessments can be combined with fitness for duty evaluations.
The Fitness for Duty Evaluation

Fitness for duty evaluations evaluate an employee’s ability to perform essential job requirements. Current employees are typically referred for a fitness for duty evaluation after they have:

- Raised concerns that are reported by supervisors or others
- Shown a decline in performance, attendance or behavior

Process

Fitness for duty evaluations include an in-person interview with the employee and the administration of a comprehensive psychological test battery. Attempts are also made to interview all known and relevant collateral sources which may provide helpful information and corroboration. Among the potential interviewees are current and past mental health professionals, physicians and/or managers.

The process also includes a review of records (e.g., ideally official criminal and civil history reports, incident and investigative reports, personnel records and other documents) including open source intelligence and social media reviews.

Outcome

The requesting organization and the subject employee will receive a report documenting the findings of the fitness for duty evaluation. The report will provide relevant treatment recommendations to address the employee’s limitations and any work-related restrictions and/or accommodations that could foster a safe return-to-work plan. These evaluations address the most appropriate options for both the employee and the employer.
Threat assessment is a systematic, fact-based method of investigation and examination that relies on the collection and analysis of multiple sources of information.
Typical records requested for review

When the subject is a current or former employee or contractor, records searches include the following:

- Resume, job description and salary
- Employee policies and procedures, particularly with respect to workplace violence prevention, harassment and misconduct
- Past and current performance evaluations
- Past and current disciplinary actions, including any appeals by the subject
- Past and current remediation efforts in response to any corrective action imposed (e.g., performance improvement plans)
- Incident and investigation reports (e.g., criminal and civil background, social media, surveillance and inappropriate or threatening correspondence and behaviors)
- Coworker and supervisor complaints
- Medical records (may not always be available or relevant)
- Open source intelligence and social media review
- Commendations or awards
- Any other records or materials that provide context for the concerning behaviors and situation

When the subject is a domestic partner, customer, vendor or other:

- All incident and investigation reports
- Criminal and civil background
- Open source intelligence and social media review
- Surveillance
- Inappropriate or threatening correspondence and behaviors
An Added Layer of Assurance

Engaging a threat advisor is a strategic partnership unlike other client-service relationships. You need to ensure that your confidential, potentially high-risk cases are in the hands of seasoned professionals qualified to properly address this complex, nuanced and time-sensitive challenge. We can help.

GET IN TOUCH

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