What We Have Here… Is A Failure To Communicate

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By Paul Penzone

I stood at the counter of a popular store inside one of the busiest malls in the nation. The clerk was polite, friendly, and attentive as she rang up my purchase when our small talk was rudely interrupted with a blaring noise.

The sound was obvious and very familiar. I noticed the clerk never broke stride; her attention never diverted from the register as she continued to ring up my purchase. I looked around the store, and into the busy common area of the mall. It seemed as though I was the only person concerned that the fire alarm had been triggered, ringing uninterrupted.

My curiosity got the best of me, so I had to ask: “Is that the fire alarm?”

She looked up briefly. “I think so.”

Me: “Should we do something?”
Her: “No, it’s probably just a false alarm.”
Me: “How would we know the difference? What if there was an active shooter in the mall? Would the alert be the same?”
Her: “Gosh, I don’t know. Those are great questions.”
Great questions, but still no answers.

After finishing the purchase, the alarm still at full blast, I walked out of the mall confirming my long time concern. We invest in and organize sophisticated security programs. People, technology, plans, and protocols are all very important and effective. But, if we fail to communicate, we just plain fail.
There are many factors as to why this occurs: the “cry wolf” syndrome, sensory overload, and numbness to threats as we selectively assume the best instead of the worst. Ultimately, the most basic of skills is the most important. Clear and concise communication is the most fundamental aspect of safety/security response.

When preparing response plans for any environment, make sure your communication platform is clear, concise, and demand the appropriate response. Whether a false alarm, a drill, or the real deal, at some point, training could make the difference between life and death.

Communication should be the impetus for an appropriate response. Everyone has a different role; therefore you must consider each stakeholder as a link in the communication chain. When creating a communication plan, there are multiple factors to consider:

**Invest in a notification system that includes varied and distinct audible alerts.**
Fire alerts should differ considerably from an alert for a violent act.

**Invest in a redundant system, including a visual alert system**
Strobe lights, LED “tickers”, or other options should be coordinated for each audible alert.

**Incorporate the second, most dominant language in your community.**
Public address announcements should include a second language when appropriate.

**Script the response.**
Table top each potential event, then script the short, succinct verbal alert or visual message. Use digital recordings with pre-created messages for each specific event. Train employees through different scenarios to establish sound judgment and confidence.

**Ensure that each alert is specific and unique from other alerts to avoid confusion.**

**Stakeholders are ultimately responsible for the facilitation of safety.**
Train all employees in the appropriate response options for each alert.
Know your role.
Everyone must understand and take ownership over their role in the response.

Conduct drills, audits and reviews to establish best practices for your environment.
Filtered and coordinated feedback will help address shortcomings.
Require and reward for full, successful participation.

In over two decades of law enforcement and private security experience, I can say with full confidence that communication is the most powerful and effective resource to mitigate the threat of violence. If you wait until an event to figure it out, you are too late.

As the director of program development for ABM, Penzone is responsible for developing programs that will enhance the skill set and services provided by the company on behalf of its clients. His distinct skill set is the culmination of experience in law enforcement, multi-jurisdictional investigations, program development, and operations. Penzone spent 21 years with the Phoenix Police Department, retiring as a sergeant in 2009. During his career, he worked in training, gang enforcement, street crimes, narcotics, and as a Federal Task Force Agent with the DEA.