

Situational Awareness and Personal Safety: Knowing Your Surroundings

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Imagine for a moment you are driving to meet family or friends at a favorite restaurant near your home for a birthday celebration. While at a stop sign, a car bumps into you from behind. You glance into the rearview mirror and see two people occupying the driver and passenger side of the vehicle—there may be someone in the back seat, but you cannot be sure. You then exit the car to assess the damage. The other driver exits his car to meet you, and you are both relieved to discover minimal damage. While focused on exchanging insurance information, however, you hear commotion from the other car and realize another individual is rapidly approaching you. They are armed with a gun and tell you to hand over your wallet and car keys. You comply. The individual with the gun gets into your vehicle, the other driver returns to their car and both drive away.

The preceding example is an extreme, yet realistic, mental exercise when beginning to understand the importance of situational awareness. If this did happen to you, what would you do? How would you react? Could events have played out differently?

Developing a practice of educating oneself on environmental surroundings, known or unknown, is the best way to circumvent preventable threats to you or others.

“Knowledge is power,” so the saying goes, and it could not be more true than when considering situational awareness.

What is Situational Awareness?

At its core, situational awareness is about personal safety and keeping yourself safe at all times through preparation. Situational awareness can be understood as:

- A collection of skills needed to set limits in situations that make us uncomfortable or are possibly dangerous.
- An awareness of the environment and basic understanding of how to avoid potentially dangerous situations.
- Aspects of how we feel about ourselves (ex: self-esteem and confidence), how we relate to our bodies and how to trust our instincts.

Utilizing skills to set limits on a situation can include parking in a well-lit area or having the car keys out and ready when walking to a vehicle at night. By doing this, the situation has been controlled via increased visibility and access to the vehicle. Parking in the dark or fumbling for keys next to the vehicle could invite external threats.

Likewise, it is important to listen to the cues and instincts of your body. Turns of phrase like “I feel it in my bones” or “I have a gut feeling” are applicable here, a kind of “sixth sense” to let us know we may be in a dangerous situation. A physical sense of danger is sometimes enough to understand that something is wrong.

Ultimately, it is awareness that is key to understanding personal safety. Awareness allows for an individual to know not only his or her environment, but also his or her own capabilities and limitations. John Dean “Jeff” Cooper, a United States Marine, is responsible for Cooper’s Colors, a set of criteria by which to gauge the level of danger within a given scenario. Cooper’s Colors are:

- **White:** Unaware, unprepared and unconcerned. This is the normal state of mind when you are in the safety of your home, for instance.
- **Yellow:** Attentive but relaxed. This is the normal state of mind when out in public, such as when you are running errands or visiting the grocery store. While this keeps threats remote to your person, it facilitates a distance that allows you to notice the nice things in life without immediate cause for concern.
- **Orange:** Your focus becomes directed at a potential threat. Now you must start planning a strategy in case the potential threat become concrete and imminent. Ideally, you will avoid the situation altogether.
- **Red:** Imminent danger exists and immediate action is needed. You must make the decision to run, hide/take cover or fight.
- **Black:** You are actively applying an appropriate level of justifiable force—firearm, pepper spray or improvised weapon—to neutralize an imminent threat to life and limb. If you are actively being robbed or hurt, then you may need to comply with demands. *(It is crucial a firearm never be used unless you are extensively trained to ensure proficiency, familiar with state laws and prepared to kill someone to defend your own life.)*

Familiarity with Cooper’s Colors and their corresponding meanings can allow for a quick understanding of a potentially dangerous situation. Walking through the introductory mental exercise of the carjacking, the driver is initially at a “white” level of awareness while driving to the party—the neighborhood is familiar, as is the destination.

“Yellow” is a normal level for being on the road; awareness of other drivers raises attention to detail. Our driver does not reach “orange” until he is hit by the other car—a potential threat—and the need to exchange information makes interaction unavoidable. The situation intensifies to “red” with the appearance of a secondary threat and a weapon, and “black” is the resulting compliance with the assailants’ demands for a wallet and car keys.

Developing a Strong Sense of Situational Awareness

Developing situational awareness can be as simple as changing a few habits. The following are some practices to incorporate into everyday activities, no matter how familiar:

- **Awareness of Personal Space.** Five feet of space is the standard for a personal space “bubble”—close enough to interact with those around you, but not so close as to cause discomfort or apprehension. Extending awareness to a 25-foot radius will help identify other people in the area, open places or entrances and exits. Practice looking around your surroundings anytime you are in public, and rotate your head from side to side along with your eyes when exploring an area to ensure you have properly surveyed it.
- **Specifics to Watch For.** Someone’s hands and/or face are good indicators of their intent. This includes instances of hands being hidden from view, the downward cast or shifting of eyes, or inappropriate hand gestures or staring. It is during these times that listening to your body’s warning signs—your “gut” feeling—can prove beneficial.
- **Have a Plan.** Whatever you do, always know where you are going and how to get there. If a crisis occurs, do your best to think of all available options before making a decision. In our earlier mental exercise, the driver could have had the other car follow him to a public place, for instance, or the nearest police station, where they would then report the accident and exchange pertinent information.
- **Establish Good Habits.** Finally, it is paramount that good habits be built into daily activity. Some examples include describing people and places to yourself as you explore locations, identifying and familiarizing yourself with any and all exits, and keeping yourself on the alert, i.e. not paying sole attention to a smartphone or listening to loud music. Your senses are your guide to all situations and environments, and you must learn to rely on them to ensure physical safety and situational awareness.

Additional steps that can promote situational awareness and safety preparedness include:

- **Practicing Self Awareness on a Daily Basis.** Try recalling what a group of people were wearing when you were out in public, memorize license plates while in traffic or in a parking lot, and identify exits and know how to reach them in order to bolster your sense of attentiveness and recollection. You or a fellow employee might discern something is out of the ordinary if you are regularly conscious of the environment.
- **Taking Self-Defense Courses.** Self-defense is great exercise that will physically prepare in times of action, as well as build the self-confidence essential to

strengthening your own sense of awareness. It also can help identify physical capabilities, what you can and cannot easily do. If self-defense courses are not an option, consider carrying personal protection such as pepper spray or a Taser. If you choose to carry a firearm, the importance of proper training and the knowledge of firearm rules and regulations cannot be emphasized enough.

- **Other Common Sense Tips.** Robberies and assaults are crimes of opportunity; do not make yourself an obvious target! Learn to trust your instincts; if something does not “feel right,” there is likely something wrong. Choose safety over politeness; you can always apologize later. Finally, recognize your own personal triggers; be sensible about situations that may make you uncomfortable, and practice a stronger sense of situational awareness during these times.

An enhanced sense of your surroundings allows for better preparation should a crisis event unfold. No one can predict disaster, and situational awareness can be the determining factor between life and death. It is a smart way to cultivate safer practices in your everyday life.

How Situationally Aware People Create a Resilient Organization

As you develop situational awareness, you will become increasingly prepared should a sudden and threatening event unfold. In an organizational capacity, the more the workforce is prepared individually, the more the organization is prepared as a whole. Organizations should encourage situational awareness and provide training or development opportunities when available.

An incident of workplace violence highlights the importance of a situationally prepared workforce. If an active shooter enters a facility, employees who are situationally aware will know the layout of the workplace, the nearest exits and the tools available to them with which to protect themselves or contact help. Even knowing that an office door locks from the inside or that a desk can be moved to barricade an entrance is critical in such situations. Preparedness results in a clear head when panic descends, the difference between knowing and not knowing.

Organizations should not only have crisis management plans in place as protocol, but frequently train staff on what those plans are and how to execute them effectively. This can include tutorials and trainings in situational awareness. The resiliency of a workforce in the face of violence or other unforeseen dangers will see them through the threat and prepare them for the aftermath.

The FEI Difference

Situational awareness is important to an individual's sense of place and safety. However, it is easy to overlook—or even ignore—the vigilance necessary to be truly situationally aware. This is diluted further in an organizational capacity, where individuals are familiar with their environment and coworkers to the extent that Cooper's "white"-level awareness becomes the norm. Then, when a crisis emerges, a workforce is unprepared with a best course of action.

FEI Behavioral Health has a long and distinguished history of providing consultation and training within the realm of crisis management, and establishing situational awareness is an integral part of preparation. We are uniquely qualified to provide effective crisis management services based on the following strengths:

- Our customers include Fortune 500 companies and those that operate worldwide within the education, hospitality, aviation, financial, manufacturing, insurance, sports and entertainment industries. Government contracts include the U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime; the U.S. Senate; the U.S. House of Representatives; and the National Transportation Safety Board.
- A reputation for superior customer service and crisis management programs, as well as training individually tailored to customers' needs.
- The integration of crisis management, behavioral health and technological expertise critical to supporting an emergency response.
- Unparalleled experience in providing individual, group and organizational support services before, during and in the aftermath of an event.
- Extensive crisis response network of providers specifically trained in responding to mass disasters and experienced in responding to a range of crises, from those involving individual and small groups to organizations and communities.

Our training catalog includes a variety of topics touching on aspects of workforce resilience to help keep workforces productive before, during and after events of every scale, covering the entire spectrum of workplace disruption. FEI can provide training and ongoing consultation regarding:

- Situational Awareness
- Workplace Violence Prevention
- Crisis Intervention Strategies
- Regulatory/Operational Issues
- Table Top Exercises and Simulations
- Emergency Response Team Training
- Family Assistance/Peer Support Team Training
- Crisis Communication/Media Training

Recognizing and addressing both situational and behavioral needs lies at the heart of the services FEI provides its clients. Training is an invaluable tool when delivering the very best preparation services, and FEI can adapt current programs or create “clean-sheet” training designs in response to specific requirements—including the situational awareness of employees. These trainings can be developed for either direct or web-based delivery, and our development processes follow standard methodologies, from needs assessment to measuring and evaluating training effectiveness.

Also unique to FEI is our partnership with The Mandt System—the leading provider of verbal and nonverbal crisis prevention training—to offer specialized services that integrate trauma-informed care practices into workplace violence prevention.

Situational awareness includes the ability to read people and note irregular behavioral patterns, and FEI’s offering with Mandt can equip organizations with the skills to acknowledge and address potential workplace situations before they escalate into violent and avoidable crises. This training, with other supporting in-services, provides staff with the skills needed to understand the population, deal with stressful situations and determine the best course of action.

An aware and prepared workforce begins with the individual employee, and FEI strives to ensure that your organization is ready when a crisis erupts. Do not let a situation take you off-guard; training, understanding and experience is the answer.

FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees’ focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.