As I sat down last week and began to read some of the articles I have written over the years, I could not help but note two very common themes. First, I have a propensity to be very black-and-white in my approach to security and safety. Second, I tend to lean toward the commonsense way of accomplishing tasks or goals.

Look, I realize that talking about security and safety can be like watching a documentary on teeth whitening; it’s only compelling if you are really interested in how to get whiter teeth.

So you’re sitting at your desk reading this article on security, and you are about 20 seconds in and already thinking, “Yeah, right, this ought to be mind numbing.” Well let’s try and approach this subject with a simple example—an analogy, if you will. I am going to use what I call the “stoplight theory” to set the stage.

People from every walk of life—no matter who they are, no matter what title they may hold, no matter their deeds, no matter the level of their own self-worth—should all stop at stoplights. Why? Consequences, right? So then, why is it some folks drive right through them?

I travel from facility to facility, and I witness a lot of people running security-and-safety “stoplights.” Many of them are unfortunately in positions of leadership and do not understand that they are running the light. Most of these folks have the best of intentions, but honorable intentions are a lot like telling a little white lie. At the time, it seems like the right thing to do, but later they realize the very serious implications that are often connected with what they have done.

So how is it that every day we walk into our church or school or place of business and run right through that stoplight? Is it because we don’t see it? No, of course not. It is because we don’t want to deal with our fears or misunderstandings. Rather than meet them head-on with some good ol’-fashioned common sense, we gravitate toward the black hole of denial and complacency.

So what are we talking about here? We are talking about managing and maintaining the security and safety of the school or other facility where you work. It is, after all, everyone’s job on some level to assure that your workplace is safe. If a light were out in a stairwell and no one could see to walk, wouldn’t you make it a point to get it fixed? Sure you would. So why do we avoid issues such as domestic abuse, restraining orders, or student behavior that is abnormal and could affect us all?

We secure children who have peanut allergies at lunchtime, don’t we? Why? Because, for a little one with such a condition, accidentally ingesting peanut products could literally mean life or death. The divorce rate in this country is at about 50 percent; at any given time, in our school of 600 students, we have 25 to 30 active restraining orders in place that are directly connected to that divorce rate.

That, by comparison, is roughly the same number of students that have peanut allergies at our school, yet everyone recognizes the stoplight for peanuts but not the one for restraining orders. This is alarming but not necessarily surprising.

So how do we get to a point that we see the security-and-safety stoplight as clearly as we should? Sometimes it is as simple as listening to those who have an instrumental part in daily activities. Teachers, parents, and especially students witness and observe a plethora of issues; we just need to talk to them and listen to what they have to say.
I recently consulted for a business in Colorado that housed almost 2,500 employees on-site. As we spoke to the CEO and president of the company about their security concerns, we quickly realized that there was a serious disconnect between them and their employees. You see, as we were waiting to meet with leadership, we discreetly spoke with some of the folks who ran the front office. Their complaints differed from the bosses’ complaints by measurable and disturbing margins. The leaders did not see any of the items that were worrying the staff as concerns until they were told about them; in fact, they didn’t even know the problems were happening. They thought the issue was something else entirely.

The leaders were both taken aback and somewhat astonished. When we delved into the answers given by their staff, we began to see a common theme—and thus an epiphany of sorts took place. When the leaders were able to step into the shoes of the folks who see and hear everything around the water cooler, they quickly solved some of the problems. The dynamics they had been facing changed almost instantly.

Now, not every scenario you face will be that simple. We are in challenging times right now. The world is fairly unsettled, and this country is in a position that many have never witnessed before. Shock and awe are out the proverbial window. We are no longer surprised by much of anything. It is as if life has become very surreal for many, and we simply adjudicate the issues we face rather than solve them. Folks have little grasp on what should be done and even less on what they can do as individuals. Well, I say scale it all back to a level that you can handle on an individual and personal basis.

As we review our security and safety plans, we must adjust accordingly. As times change, so do the logistical pieces. One of the many definitions of insanity is doing the same thing, the same way, again and again, but expecting a different result. Acting that way simply doesn’t stand to reason. When you take a look at your plans and procedures, you must not be afraid. Security can be a daunting challenge.

We recently revised some procedures at our church and school, and it threw a few folks for a loop. They instantly challenged the need for such changes. Our retort was quite simple. We said to them: Every year at Christmastime, the minister preaches about the birth of Christ. We all know the story, yet he always preaches on it. Why? For one thing, it’s affirmation; most importantly, it is usually told with applicability to today’s needs and issues. My coworkers understood that analogy because they could relate to it personally.

We lay out a security plan and use it as a basis or foundation, but we also adjust for changing times. Stick with the core, but modify the plan as needed.

A good friend of mine recently wrote an article on reactive policing in today’s society and why it has become ineffective in these times. He says we can no longer operate in a reactive mode. We must be proactive as well as reactive if we want to be successful. I agree. Here at our school, we look at security and safety much the same way. If we go out and solicit for enrollment for our school but do so without a game plan, then we will certainly fail on many levels. By comparison, if we assume we have to do nothing and the enrollment will grow on its own, then we will fail here as well.

Almost every leader we counsel with has said that security scares people, especially in the Christian-school world. Security is scary because, more often than not, we make it that way. If you were to build a fortress around your facility and train everyone in Krav Maga and close-quarter combat, you would have parents and students running for the hills. But if you do nothing and open your doors to people from every walk of life without any checks and balances, then eventually you will have no children to educate. Obviously, balance is truly essential for success. Leaders must listen to subordinates and vice versa. An open door and a line of communication are absolute necessities if you want to have a fruitful and safe environment.

Training is also paramount to success. To have a plan and a list of procedures is great—as long as you are practicing them.
All too often, procedures are just that: procedures, a list of what-to-dos without a regular practice schedule. You don’t show your kids how to tie their shoes once and then walk away; learning takes time and effort.

Please answer the next three questions regarding your facility:

How many exits out of your building do you have?
I asked that question during the first staff training I gave at our venue; the average answer was 9. We have 33.

Where is the sheriff’s office in your county located?
We have 112 employees, but only 16 knew the answer.

Who is in charge in an emergency that requires you to leave the building? Who is in charge if that person isn’t there? What if they are both gone?

Now, our staff is composed of very intelligent people. We have folks with master’s degrees and doctorates on payroll. So how is it they didn’t know the answers to such simple questions? The sad but true answer: it wasn’t important to them.

My point is that tunnel vision and silos will be your momentum killer. If people—whatever their job title—only see what is right in front of them or what they have stored as important in their silos, you will be stopped in your tracks before you begin. You must have plans in place that any person can read and understand in mere moments. Then, you must train repeatedly in those plans; otherwise; they will not be accepted as important. Emergencies are not planned; they are planned for.

In a full lockdown within our school, our staff and students are required to be in place and locked down in 30 seconds or less. Just 18 months ago most of our staff thought we had about 9 exits. Preparation takes time and effort ... period.

This article is about planning and execution—not how to, but why you must. It is about recognizing the necessity of keeping your staff, students, and visitors safe and of working together to formulate realistic plans and exercises.

I have said this to our staff many times, and I will say it to you now: If we lose just one child, we have failed. Our doors would close permanently, because no parent will take children to a place where they are not safe, much less pay enrollment and tuition costs to a school that cannot keep them secure. Our doors would be shut!

If you are an administrator, security and safety start with you. Your staff will buy into what you are selling if they see how important it is to you—the old “they don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” adage. We are no longer immune to violence in our schools and churches. Security and safety must be everyone’s job.

Unfortunately, the standard example until now has been Columbine. In post-Columbine years, every school in this country changed because of what two young men accomplished—yes, I said accomplished. If they had failed, it would have been just another story about potential violence thwarted.

Instead, Columbine changed the very face of a nation and how it reacts to exigencies such as active shooters. But we are now 10 years removed, and the lessons learned since then should be a catalyst for our changing times and how we should operate now.

Don’t let fear or denial control your actions.
Don’t run that stoplight.

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