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Situational awareness and the decision-making cycle

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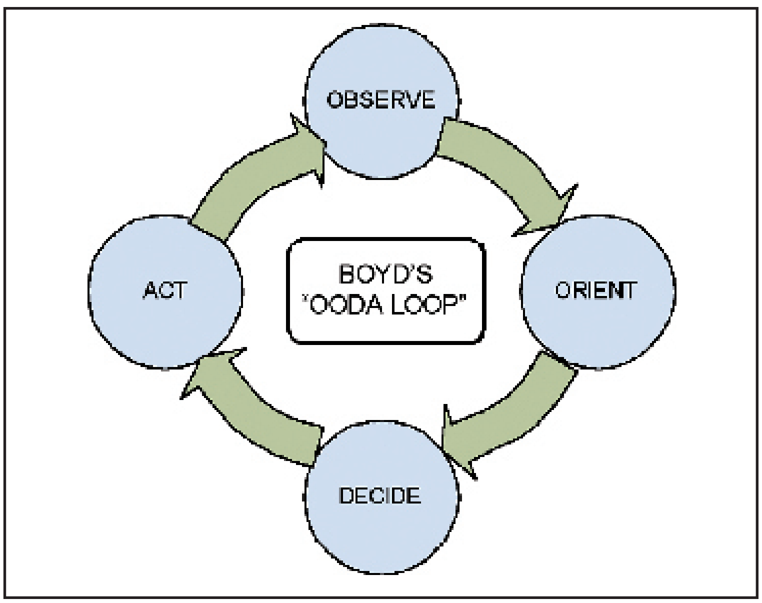

"Situational awareness." You've all heard of it. A term that is thrown around by security consultants more often than Tom Brady throws a touchdown pass to Randy Moss. But what does situational awareness really mean? Calculating the minutes until lunch break? Remembering where you parked your car? Knowing the balance in your checkbook?

At its most elementary level, situational awareness means just that; what is occurring in the immediate "space" around you. But, as is the case with a finely crafted and perfectly executed touchdown pass, there is much more to it.

The genesis of the term "situational awareness" is attributed to the military and, more specifically, fighter pilots, their actions, and the airspace around them. The "OODA Loop," a concept originated by military strategist Col. John Boyd of the United States Air Force, involved the decision making cycle. It consists of four overlapping and interacting processes: Observation, orientation, decision and action.

Boyd's premise was that fighter pilots who were able to complete this cycle more quickly than their opposition were more likely to prevail in combat. In fact, if we think about it, we unwittingly use the OODA Loop in our day-to-day activities, whether we are at work, trying to decipher which emails to answer and which to delete; while we are shopping, trying to decide which items and brands will give us the best bargain; or whether we are trying to figure out plans for the upcoming weekend. Incidentally, the OODA Loop is not static; it is a continuum and cycles at different speeds at different times and for different people.

So how does this concept apply to preparedness planning and incident response in commercial hi-rise planning?

First, we need to understand that this concept is valuable and that today, especially with the challenges which exist responding to all-hazards incidents, timely and accurate decision-making is becoming increasingly important for a positive outcome during an emergency. In fact, there are two distinct levels of situational awareness within the hi-rise community during an incident. The first is the tactical level, which is that situational awareness of the building staff and building tenants. At this level, decision-making is often made quickly and under duress. The second (and often overlooked) is the operational level. In the hi-rise community, this is situational awareness at the corporate (or in some cases, portfolio) level. It is at this level that decisions are (or should be) being made regarding the "next steps," i.e. implementing corporate-level crisis management and, perhaps, business continuity plans. The challenge becomes ensuring that these two levels of situational awareness are in synch with each other during an incident. The more we can practice and rehearse this important informational lash-up prior to an emergency, the better the likelihood of mutual situational understanding.

Second, we need to understand that situational awareness is not the sole province of the building staff. Too often there is an incorrect assumption that the building staff knows first and gains the initial situational awareness during an incident. This interesting (but not uncommon) phenomenon became apparent yet once again during the July 2007 steam pipe explosion in New York City. When the explosion occurred, many tenants in hi-rise building offices which bounded the impact area saw or felt the explosion immediately. It was these building tenants, not the building staffs, which had gained the first knowledge of the incident. The result? The tenants began deciphering their immediate situation and responding (in most cases evacuating) before the building staff has had the opportunity to gain its situational awareness. In essence, the tenants had entered the OODA Loop first, and their OODA Loop cycle was operating much more quickly than the building staff's. Is this phenomenon preventable? Probably not, as there are many more tenants in buildings than there are building staff and the likelihood of them discovering an incident first, therefore, is higher.

So what can be done? First, we need to acknowledge that challenges associated with situational awareness and decision-making harmonization during an incident are great and that building staffs, as much as we'd like them to be, are not omnipresent. As we see time and again, it is often the tenants who gain the first understanding of an incident. Second, we must continue to train building staffs to make timely and accurate announcements (which are our "Achilles Heel" of building response procedures); not just make announcements to "stand by for further instructions." Third, we must coach tenants to understand the complexities of this phenomenon and to help them comprehend their options (evacuate, relocate, shelter) in an emergency, independent of and in the absence of receiving instructions from the building. The days of rote responses to emergencies (i.e. evacuate immediately using the stairwells, do not use the elevators, etc. etc. etc.) are over. Tenant expectations are, rightly so, much higher these days and they want to know the "why" behind the "what." Fourth, we must conduct joint tenant-building staff "lessons learned" reviews following incidents. Too often following an incident, we do not take the time to perform a non-threatening, thoughtful review of what occurred, what decisions were made, why they were made, and what can be done better in the future. And finally, and most importantly, we must continue to practice, practice, practice.

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