

Security Profiling and Intuition

By Michael Fickes

Suppose a casually dressed young man, a stranger, walks into your lobby. While he mostly seems nonchalant, his body language hints at nervousness – his arms swing a bit too far, he walks a little too fast. No one has to tell you to approach the young man and say, “May I help you?” while studying his demeanor, body language, and answers. Drawing on similar past experiences, your intuition tells you to investigate and determine whether or not he has a legitimate purpose.

Pattern recognition and predictive profiling are security methods that fine-tune natural instincts with logic and reasoning. Security officers, receptionists, business managers, and custodial workers can benefit from this training.

Recognize Patterns to Dispel Security Situations

Pattern recognition is more than just a gut feeling – it prompts an officer to draw on that initial response to explore a situation in more detail.

“It’s your intuition, built up through repeated experiences, that you have unconsciously linked together to form a pattern. A pattern is a set of cues that usually chunk together so that if you see a few of the cues, you can expect to find the others,” writes Gary Klein in his book, *The Power of Intuition: How to Use Your Gut Feelings to Make Better Decisions at Work*. Klein is chairman of Klein Associates, a company that trains professionals to improve intuitive decision-making.

Michael Dorn, executive director of Safe Havens International, consults on preK-12 security. One of Safe Havens’ services is to train educators and security personnel in what Dorn calls pattern recognition, a concept similar to Klein’s definition of intuition.

“We train clients to recognize and respond when a person or situation doesn’t seem right,” says Dorn. “For instance, one of our training officers once noticed that students in line to board a bus to go home after school didn’t seem to want to get on the bus. They were just milling around. He decided to ask why.”

“He approached on his bicycle, noticing that one of the students was a gang member. He asked why no one would board the bus. All the kids knew why. ‘Those three guys across the street are in a rival gang,’ said one student. ‘We’re afraid they’re going to shoot at the bus as it drives by,’ said another.” “The officer swung his bicycle past the three gang members, noticed a gun in one man’s pocket and called the police, who responded and took the man in for questioning. That’s pattern recognition – paying attention, sensing, and not ignoring those little alarms that go off in your head,” says Dorn.

Predictive Profiling for Office Building Security

“Predictive profiling deals with behavior, situations and objects – any indicator that correlates to an adversarial method of operation (MO),” says Anna Polishuk, business development manager for Chameleon Associates, a security consulting firm. “It builds on knowledge of the adversary’s MO for a particular protected environment.”

“We attach what we call suspicion indicators to each MO,” Polishuk continues. “A security officer should look for these indicators in people, things, or situations. Once an indicator is identified, the next step is to refute it, usually through questioning.”

Suspicion indicators in a building setting might include:

- Unattended bags
- A person asking too many questions
- Someone trying to befriend an employee or security officer
- A person claiming to be a vendor who isn’t dressed appropriately or doesn’t have the right tools
- An individual claiming to be going to a job interview but isn’t dressed appropriately
- A traveler carrying an obviously empty (light weight) suitcase

In short, a suspicion indicator makes you suspicious. “Not everything abnormal is suspicious,” says Polishuk. “A suspicion indicator has to correlate with a relevant MO.”

A nervous, inappropriately dressed young man walking hurriedly through a building lobby correlates with a laptop thief – as well as an anxious son who has come to tell his father that he just wrecked the car. The idea is to make sure that the worse MO – stealing laptops – is not true.

Chameleon Associates calls it refuting the suspicion with security questioning. A trained security officer will keep up a friendly conversation while looking for hesitations, inconsistencies, and body language that express discomfort.

“Questioning should focus on three levels: a person’s identity, time and place, and the mission,” Polishuk says. “Is this person who he says he is? Why is she here? Why is she here now?”

Predictive profiling and pattern recognition can prevent escalation, deter criminal activities, and keep occupants safe.

“We tell our clients that this is a force multiplier,” says Polishuk. “Train security officers as well as the rest of the property management team. If the custodians and receptionists understand the possible threats and the suspicion indicators, you could have a couple hundred people helping to keep watch.”



Since 1995, Mike Fickes has contributed over 200 security articles to publications covering hotel, industrial, office, retail, critical infrastructure, and education. His interests include security management, policies, strategies, and technologies.