



**Safe Spaces:** Create safer workplaces through awareness and early support

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## INTRODUCTION

Cameras, key cards, and perimeter security; these are all important, but the protection you think you have can be built on a flawed premise: that danger only comes from the outside. The harder, more common problem is already inside.

Behavioral Threat Assessment (BTA) is a structured approach to identifying employees on a pathway toward workplace violence, and intervening early enough to change that trajectory.

## 1. THE INSIDER THREAT PROBLEM

### Why Physical Security Solves the Wrong Problem

A camera records what happened and a key log shows who was where, but neither can tell you that someone has been growing progressively more isolated, aggrieved, and fixated on a manager they believe destroyed their career.

An insider doesn't need to defeat your perimeter; they're already there. An employee, a contractor, or a vendor who knows your building layout. A former employee whose badge was never deactivated. These individuals navigate your security exactly as they always have, without triggering a single alert.

### The Signals Were Almost Always There

People who commit acts of targeted workplace violence almost never do so without warning<sup>1</sup>. A pattern of escalating grievance, or statements to coworkers that felt strange in retrospect. Sometimes even a change in demeanor that people noticed but didn't know what to do with.

When investigators reconstruct these incidents, the signals are almost always in the record. The tragedy isn't that warning signs didn't exist, but that no one had a system for recognizing them while there was still time to intervene.

~90%

of workplace attackers  
communicated intent  
beforehand

### The Legal Dimension

Courts apply a "knew or should have known" standard that maps directly onto what BTA teaches<sup>2</sup>. If warning signs were present and a reasonable employer would have recognized them, the absence of a program that was looking for them is itself the liability. (This is known legally as "constructive knowledge").

The question isn't whether you had cameras; it's whether you were looking at the right problem.

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## KEY LEGAL PRINCIPLES

Did the employer know (or should they have known) about the risk? Prior complaints, criminal history, and behavioral warning signs all count.

Was the harm foreseeable? Higher-risk roles carry a greater duty of care.

Did the employer take reasonable steps? A written policy isn't enough if it wasn't enforced.

## 2. MAKING A THREAT VS. BEING A THREAT

This is the foundational insight of behavioral threat assessment, and one that most organizations get backwards:

"Most people who commit workplace violence never make a direct threat first. Many people who do make threats never act on them"<sup>3</sup>.

### Why Your Threat Detection Program May Be Missing the Point

Most organizations build their safety programs around "did someone say something alarming." This creates two simultaneous failures:

- **False negatives:** Missing the person who never threatened but was on a path toward violence.
- **False positives:** Punishing or surveilling people who made a statement but had no real intent.

### What the Research Actually Shows

FBI research and studies through the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP) consistently find that attackers communicated their intent before acting, but rarely through direct threats to supervisors or HR. The communication was indirect: to coworkers, through writing, or online<sup>4</sup>.

The distinction that matters is threatening behavior versus making a threat; sounds similar, but are very different. Someone on a genuine pathway toward violence is more likely to show escalating grievance, research into weapons or targets, and social withdrawal, and not to issue a direct or explicit verbal warning.

## WHY PEOPLE MAKE THREATS WITHOUT ACTING

**Cathartic:** a pressure release valve with no real intent.

**Instrumental:** used to intimidate, control, or get attention.

**Impulsive:** said in anger and immediately regretted.

**A cry for intervention:** the person actually wants to be stopped or helped.

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## 3. WHAT TO WATCH FOR

No single indicator is conclusive. What matters is pattern, change from baseline, and accumulation.

### The Injustice Collector

One of the most significant profiles in threat assessment research is the “injustice collector”<sup>5</sup>. This is someone perpetually at the center of conflict across professional relationships, over time, in every direction. In their own accounting, they are never the problem. Every grievance is cataloged and returned to.

This matters because targeted workplace violence is almost always, at its root, an act of grievance<sup>6</sup>. When that grievance list begins to narrow and focus on a specific person or institution, that's a meaningful escalation signal.

### When Personal Life Enters the Picture

Personal stressors: end of a marriage, bankruptcy, serious loss, etc. They absolutely matter because they remove stabilizing anchors. Most people, even those with real workplace grievances, can be held back by the web of relationships and obligations they maintain outside work. When those start to disappear, the restraining forces may weaken.

HR professionals are often best positioned to see these intersections: benefits inquiries during a divorce, a garnishment appearing in payroll, a bereavement leave request. In isolation, none of it means anything. In context, it can mean quite a lot.

### Key Behavioral Indicators

- Cryptic or veiled comments: "You might want to take tomorrow off"
- Fascination with past workplace violence incidents
- Signs of paranoia, deepening depression, or social withdrawal
- Deterioration in personal grooming: signals a person who has stopped investing in the presentation of a future self
- Giving away possessions
- Escalating grievance that narrows to a specific target



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## Two Indicators That Change the Threshold

### Suicidal Ideation

Signals a person who has begun making peace with the idea that their life as it currently exists is over. The murder-suicide pattern appears in a significant percentage of workplace violence incidents.

### Weapons Acquisition

The abstract has started becoming concrete. Purchasing firearms or ammunition is preparation – not a warning that something might happen, but evidence that something is being planned.

When either is present, the threshold for convening the full threat assessment team – and contacting law enforcement – drops significantly. You don't need to be certain. You need to act.

## 4. THE PATHWAY TO VIOLENCE

Targeted workplace violence doesn't happen spontaneously. Researchers have identified a consistent sequence: grievance → ideation → research and planning → preparation → action<sup>7</sup>. The window between first stage and last can be days or years. But the sequence is remarkably consistent – and that consistency is what makes intervention possible.

### What Each Stage Looks Like

- 1. Grievance:** Where almost everyone starts. Most people never move further. What distinguishes those who do is a grievance that doesn't resolve, but deepens and becomes a defining narrative.
- 2. Ideation:** The thought first forms that "something needs to be done." Still abstract at this point, but also when leakage most commonly occurs. The person hasn't committed to anything yet, which paradoxically makes them more likely to express it indirectly.
- 3. Research & Planning:** The idea becomes an intention. The person starts looking into targets, methods, and access routes. This research leaves traces in conversations and in questions.
- 4. Preparation:** Acquiring what is needed: weapons, materials, access. The window for intervention is narrowing.
- 5. Action:** The window has closed. The only available response is emergency.

## WHERE HR RESOURCES ACTUALLY MATTER

Most organizations invest heavily in emergency response: active shooter training, lockdown procedures, but little in early detection. Those investments aren't wrong, but they're just optimized for the last stage of a process that had four earlier ones.

Early-stage intervention looks like an EAP referral, a conversation with a manager, a modified work arrangement. Low-drama, low-cost options that are only available when someone identified the situation early enough to use them.

The earlier you are in the pathway, the more you're doing prevention. The later you are, the more you're doing damage control.

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## 5. BUILDING THE PROGRAM

A prevention program doesn't need to be expensive; it needs to be consistent.

The most common reason organizations don't have a BTA program is the assumption that it's expensive or complex. Frameworks, training materials, and implementation guides are freely available from the FBI, SHRM, and ASIS International. The investment required is structural, not financial.

### The Four Core Components:

1. **A multidisciplinary team:** Minimum three members drawn from HR, legal, security, and management. Meets regularly and owns the process.
2. **A central reporting mechanism:** Has to be something employees can actually find and use. Anonymous reporting substantially increases both volume and quality of information that reaches the team.
3. **An established assessment framework:** Guides how the team evaluates information. Don't build your own; adopt one from an established source.
4. **Documentation:** Document everything. If it's not written down, it didn't happen, and definitely won't protect you in a courtroom.

### The Reporting Problem

Information about concerning behavior is almost never held by one person. A coworker noticed something odd in a conversation. A supervisor logged an HR complaint six weeks ago. A security guard mentioned something to a colleague but didn't write it up. Individually, none of this rises to the level of action, but together might form a clear picture.

Unfortunately, without a centralized collection point they may never find each other. Anonymous reporting is particularly valuable here because people who witness concerning behavior are often reluctant to attach their name to a report.

### Don't Stop at the Employee File

Public social media is a legitimate, frequently underused source of information. People who are leaking violent ideation at work tend to leak it online as well, and sometimes more openly. A documented review of publicly available profiles should be a standard part of any assessment, not an afterthought.

The word *documented* matters. You want a clear record that the review was conducted, what was found, and how it informed the team's assessment.

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## 6. HIGH-RISK TERMINATIONS

A significant share of workplace violence incidents occurs shortly after termination<sup>8</sup>. You must plan accordingly.

### The Moment of Highest Risk

The termination itself can be the triggering event. Research is consistent that a meaningful proportion of workplace violence incidents occur shortly after a separation or adverse employment action – when the final perceived injustice lands<sup>9</sup>.

This doesn't mean avoiding difficult termination decision; it means making them with the specific risk picture in front of you, because the standard protocol was designed for standard situations.

### When Standard Protocol May be the Wrong Tool

When an employee being terminated has exhibited multiple behaviors of concern, bringing that person back into the workplace for a confrontational in-person separation deserves serious reconsideration.

Remote notification, modified separation logistics, and processes designed to achieve separation without face-to-face confrontation are all legitimate risk management tools. Flexibility in process is not softness, it's judgment.



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## After the Badge Is Deactivated

The formal employment relationship ends. The risk assessment doesn't. Several tools are underused:

- **Extended EAP resources:** Someone in crisis with access to support is meaningfully different from someone in crisis without it.
- **Contingent severance:** Creates a concrete incentive for compliance and establishes documentation if that threshold is later crossed.
- **Continued monitoring:** Appropriate to the assessed risk level, for a defined post-separation period. The assumption that separation ends exposure is not supported by the research, nor by the courts.

### EMPLOYER ACTION CHECKLIST

- Form a multidisciplinary threat assessment team (HR, legal, security, management).
- Establish a central, anonymous reporting mechanism for behavioral concerns.
- Adopt an established assessment framework — don't build your own.
- Train supervisors on specific, recognizable behaviors of concern.
- Document every concern, assessment, and decision.
- Conduct open-source social media reviews as part of any formal assessment.
- Evaluate risk profile before any termination involving an employee with behaviors of concern.
- Depart from standard termination protocols when doing so reduces risk; document the rationale.
- Consider post-separation support (EAP, contingent severance) where appropriate.
- Maintain documented monitoring for an appropriate period after high-risk separations.



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