

TECHNICAL NOTE

Self-defense is not an emotional reaction. It is a conditioned and measured response to a threat.

Reading Our Environment Part III

What People Tell Us Unintentionally

by Don Adams

Assessing Individual Behaviors

If we are still alarmed and our senses still tell us that something's not right, we want to find the source of that discomfort. To do that, we continue to narrow our focus to the individuals that stand out. We use all the clues that we observed at higher levels to focus on specific segments at the individual level. If we didn't find anomalies at higher levels of observations, then there may be no need to continue our assessment...but if there is...

We look for leaders. A person or group of people that seem to have the attention of the crowd or at least are drawing attention to themselves. We also look for relationships between people. Who are the leaders? What is their relationship to the others in the crowd. Do people seem to be coming to and going away from a person or a specific collection of people?

We still scan the area but now we are looking for individual behaviors that might stand out, but what are we looking for. It's not an open question where we assess each person's behavior one by one. It's much easier than that. We are looking for behaviors that stand out. Much like the three questions we asked earlier about an area at large, we are focusing on what stands out. There are expected behaviors where we have an expectation of appropriate behaviors for the event.

At a football game we expect people's attention to be on the field. In this context, a reasonable amount of

positive yelling and screaming is appropriate, where it wouldn't be at a wedding. At a concert we expect people's attention to be directed at the stage, singing along or clapping, but not to be focused on another direction. At the airport or on a plane, we expect people to have a compliant demeanor, recognizing that we all need to be cooperative with each other as we are in a controlled or confined space with closed exits. We expect some will have a certain amount of stress in this situation, but when that stress seems excessive and out of place, we need to take note.

There is one behavior we expect and want to see, but 3 others that demand our attention. A behavior where people are comfortable with their company and surroundings is a sign that all is well and at least they haven't spotted anything that they feel that is alarming. Their focus is on their own sub-environments. However, there are three other behaviors that we want to identify that could signal trouble: Dominant, Submissive and Uncomfortable behaviors.

Dominant Behaviors are actions of intimidation. They are designed to take charge of someone by increasing their perceived presence and potential threat if they don't comply. They stand closer, speak louder or yell, make themselves larger through body movements and gestures for a more imposing presence. Their facial expressions reflect anger,

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irritation, intense eye contact and other threatening behaviors.

Submissive Behaviors are actions that are the opposite of the dominant behaviors. Instead of making themselves larger they make themselves smaller trying to be invisible or show deference to the dominating behavior. The behavior to look smaller is anything to take up less space: Hands drawn to the body or folded, ankles or legs crossed, shoulders lowered, leaning forward or other non-threatening signs. If this behavior is spotted look for the accompanying dominating behavior or vice versa.

Uncomfortable behavior is displayed as nervousness. The body is positioned for protection, knees together or arms crossed. Facial expression may show signs of fear or surprise. Eye contact will be avoided, have an increase in blink rate, or eyes may be darting back and forth. Fear may be reflected facially. Pay attention to their body position. Feet may be pointed toward the door for quick exit or even bouncing nervously. Body movements may be changing erratically or fidgety.

Reading a room isn't impossible and making reasonable assumptions based on the behaviors we see is prudent. It's a skill to be developed based on behaviors, not appearances. It's a process and conclusions are based on observations of multiple behaviors. The more behaviors we include, the more accurate we are.

Appearances Are Irrelevant, It's Behavior

The campaign of Bill Clinton liked to promote this [phrase, "It's the economy stupid." I would adapt that phrase without the word stupid to say, "It's not appearances. Its behavior!" that matters.

Our country has a history of shunning different groups of people at various times based on culture or appearance. In our assessment of a threat, it is purely based on behavior and not how someone looks.

There is a certain level of discomfort when someone ventures into an unfamiliar area. It's usually not based on anything overt, just our own perceptions. We might even call it fear. But what is that fear based on? Many times, it's based on news reports, social media, videos, circle of friends, etc...nothing we have observed personally.

As a personal observation, I have lived in almost every neighborhood imaginable at different times of the day and night. My conclusion from that experience is that there are no bad neighborhoods, only evil people. In those neighborhoods that we deem "bad" live a lot of good people and their families. Who wants the same things as everyone else: personal security and the ability to live free and enjoy life.

This three-part series on Reading Our Environment is a first level of self-defense for personal security and safety. The truth is that in a time of trouble or a personal conflict such as a robbery or an assault, no one is coming to save us. We are on our own and we have sole responsibility to make sure we are safe and secure. Sometimes, evil finds us, and we have to deal with it. That's why we train.