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JANUARY 21, 2019

Navigating Risk in a World Full of Fear

Comprehensive Crisis Management Plans Are Needed Now More Than Ever[Like 0](#)[Tweet](#)[Email](#)[Print](#)

Planners who lack a system for managing meeting safety and security may be courting disaster because they remain vulnerable to a wide range of threats.

The need for a comprehensive crisis management plan is greater than ever. Recent trends in violence, including the shooting at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas in 2017, have increased awareness that it can happen at hotels and resorts.

While concerns about active shooters are growing, planners must be prepared for a wide variety of safety and security threats ranging from fights between attendees and tablecloth fires to natural disasters and bomb threats.

Yet, most planners don't have a plan.

Tyra Hilliard, CMP, attorney and assistant professor at the College of Coastal Georgia, wrote a PhD dissertation on why planners forego crisis management procedures. "What my research found was that the top reasons planners

lacked crisis management plans were because they lacked the time, money, support and knowledge to create one, or they were required to have a plan but weren't going to bother implementing it until they had to," says Hilliard.

“Our plans must be somewhat customizable to fit the variables that change meeting to meeting. There is no one-size-fits-all.” — Tyra Hilliard, CMP

She urges planners who don't have a plan to create one.

“I want planners to think incrementally about managing risk,” says Hilliard. “Do something, anything, then improve on it. If you can't afford to hire security professionals to assess and manage risk, don't decide to do nothing. Do what you can on your own, tweak it next time and add a little more each time. It's not an all-or-nothing proposition.”

While planners must be ready for all security or safety emergencies, certain types occur more frequently than others.

Common Threats

“Meetings face more small potential safety issues than something big like an active shooter,” says Alan Kleinfeld, CMP, director of emergency planning at Arrive Management Group, which specializes in security for meetings and conferences.

“Violent acts are increasing, but it's still more likely you'll have an attendee trip over an untaped cable than you will have a guy walk in with a gun,” he says. “The most commonly overlooked safety aspect is knowing when to call 9-1-1 and knowing where help is needed.”

Kleinfeld cites an example of an emergency he witnessed at a meeting he didn't plan that lacked a detailed crisis management plan.

“At a recent outdoor reception, a man collapsed, and the planning staff froze,” he says. “No one dialed 9-1-1. No one ran to get an AED (automated external defibrillator). When someone finally picked up the phone to get help, he didn't know the address of the venue, which meant emergency medical service didn't know where to go.

“When the ambulance got there, the path for them to park was blocked. All these small missteps can cost valuable minutes to get help to the person who needs it.”

Other planners also give examples of emergencies that can be problematic without a plan.

A fire alarm sounded while Heidi Foels, a producer for Bloomington, Minnesota-based metroConnections, an event and conference planning firm, was in a theater event packed with 1,000 attendees.

“The presenter ignored the alarm while attendees anxiously stirred in their seats,” says Foels. “As the support planner on the program, I immediately was on my phone with the venue manager asking for an update. The venue manager suggested that those who felt uncomfortable staying should go, and others should stay calm and wait for updates.”

Foels and her team promptly followed their plan to evacuate everyone and gave detailed instructions over the microphone on how to leave safely and where to go.

“The team made the decision because the presenter was not briefed on how to react and instruct the attendees in the event of such [a situation],” says Foels. “Chaos almost ensued. Our team provided as much guidance with crowd evacuation as we could, but the venue should have also had a plan in place where we could have reacted sooner and more knowledgeable than we ultimately did.”

Bombing and Inebriation

Catherine Chaulet, president of Washington, D.C.-based Global DMC Partners, cites two examples.

The first situation involved managing a corporate program during the Boston Marathon bombing. Immediately after the incident, officials locked down the entire city, including hotels and airports. Cellphone service was temporarily spotty. However, the communication and flexibility parts of Chaulet’s emergency contingency plan helped alleviate uncertainty among attendees.

According to Chaulet, “There were many times that we didn’t have updates on what was going on, but our plan was to send out communications to attendees’ emergency contacts every hour, even if there was no real update. The steady communication and flexibility that our team put in place helped ease the minds of attendees and their families so that they were not imagining things that were worse than they already were.”

The second incident involved a drunk attendee.

“I’ve experienced dangerous situations where an attendee has had too much alcohol,” says Chaulet. “They put themselves and others at risk if they become violent or sick. These situations can be managed well, but they can also become very disruptive or even violent. They can result in situations ranging from bringing people back to their rooms early to taking them to a hospital.”

Mike O’Rourke, founder of Washington-based Advance Operational Concepts, a global security consultancy, cites an example in which a large corporation headquartered in a conflict zone brought in his company as a security consultant.

“There was a terrorism threat, yet my client was planning a televised high-profile, black-tie event with hundreds of guests, including executives, celebrities and the international diplomatic community,” says O’Rourke.

“Diplomats had their own armed security teams, yet my client’s non-negotiable rule was they couldn’t bring weapons into the facility,” he continues. “To prevent these important guests from canceling, we arranged for their heads of security to inspect our security arrangements. Satisfied with that, diplomats attended without their own armed security, and the event was a success.”

Create a Comprehensive Plan

For the most part, planners can’t predict exactly what type of security and safety emergencies will occur or when they will happen. However, planners can create a comprehensive plan that includes prevention techniques and strategies for handling consequences.

But many planners have an inadequate crisis management plan or lack one altogether because they don’t have the time, budget and expertise.

Planners often focus on the details of meetings and providing a good attendee experience, while paying little attention to security.

According to Foels, “Some planners tend to forget this very important role of theirs. As planners, we need to be aware that attendees often lack the experience to recognize risks in unfamiliar settings and may not have the confidence to ask for advice if they feel unsafe.

“Perhaps some planners have never been to the venue or, on a greater scale, the city or state the meeting or event is in,” she continues. “Due to this, they feel uneasy about creating a crisis management plan. The best practice is to identify local resources available, have open discussions about these plans and walk through and review them once onsite.”

Greg Jenkins, partner, Bravo Productions, a Long Beach, California-based event planning company, offers the following advice: “Many planners feel that doing your own plan is too much work or too far out of their realm of expertise. Therefore, a detailed plan is never developed. Another reason is because they never think it could happen to them. How many times do we hear about tragic stories in the news, and those involved say, ‘I never thought something like that could happen to me.’”

But it can. That’s why it’s necessary to have a crisis management plan that does at least the following basics:

- Cover emergency response procedures, such as providing maps of the meeting site. Detail contact information for property and venue staff, hospitals, emergency services and law enforcement. Also have contacts for consulates of international attendees. Keep all contact information on hand at all times.
- Set up a chain of command and designate roles and duties for staffers. Know who will do what.
- Meet with the property’s staff to review onsite security plans. Know the capabilities of the property and staff to handle emergencies and provide related equipment. Does the venue staff have medical training and equipment?
- Know the emergency procedures of suppliers, transportation companies and offsite meeting venues.
- Include a communications strategy. Have email and phone contact information for attendees and their families, as well as meeting stakeholders and vendors.
- Create a guest “status check-in procedure” in the event of a crisis. Attendees can check-in via phone or email, or even gather at a certain location.
- Adapt plans for each meeting, and train staff to implement the procedures.

Do it Yourself?

Should planners create their own security plans, hire experts to do it or use a combination of both approaches?

According to Hilliard, “I’d say it’s fine for planners to put together their own plans rather than do without. But if they have the resources to use professionals to help put together plans and assess risk, that’s certainly a great option.

“The option planners take depends on the meeting,” she adds. “If it is a 200-person meeting at a downtown U.S. hotel, then planners can probably handle the planning with the help of the hotel’s security team. If it’s a 5,000-person meeting with attendees from many countries in a location known for terrorist activities, then by all means, use professional help.”

Foels also believes that planners can create their own safety and security management plans. "And, we should always be able to provide training and guidance to those who need help doing it," she adds.

"When you're in the role of a planner, attendees look to you for guidance in emergencies," Foels says. "Being knowledgeable on the location of hospitals, emergency routes and exits and more is your responsibility. Every team member's role should be identified up front, and we should ensure that crowd control is covered if a situation arises."

However, says Foels, "The key is knowing which other professionals or resources you need to pull in as part of your safety and security plan to make it the most comprehensive it can be."

Kleinfeld also believes it's crucial to use several resources. "Planners can do the plans on their own with applicable resources, such as online, print and colleagues," he says. "Having said that, planners who don't know where to begin or don't have the staff or hours to do it can certainly turn to someone with experience in safety planning. This doesn't mean you have to spend a ton of money. It could simply be a short-term project to get a security plan outline."

Teamwork is Key

Whether a security plan is self-made or created with experts, it can be strengthened through teamwork with partners.

According to Chaulet, "Teamwork is the essential element that is critical to creating a successful plan. From the host venue or hotel to the tour company to the entertainment to the DMC, each party will look at safety with their internal teams and from their own angle."

Planners can also use teamwork to help ensure they don't overlook property-specific security issues.

"By involving all the key vendors and working collaboratively, the group will identify all items that should be included in the plan that perhaps the planner didn't think about initially. There might be something the planner would miss without knowing the locality or culture well enough," Chaulet says.

A safety and security management system can be rendered ineffective if there are mistakes in its planning and execution.

Hilliard says that one of the most common mistakes planners make involves using off-the-shelf plans without customizing them for each meeting.

"The tricky thing about safety and security for meetings is that it's a moving target," she says. "Our plans must be somewhat customizable to fit the variables that change meeting to meeting. There is no one-size-fits-all. While safety and security for a typical business assumes the same physical plan in the same location, meetings are just the opposite. We may be in a different city or country or venue with a different program and participants each time."

Kleinfeld cites two other common mistakes. "For those who have a plan, the mistakes are not training team members and not revising the plan," he says. "Continue to review and revise existing plans as needed and stay in touch with partners such as hotels, venues and CVBs or other suppliers that have a role in the event."

Tailor Plans

Failing to cater emergency plans to attendee differences is another shortcoming. “We may loop all attendees into one category by creating a plan for everyone rather than individually,” says Foels. “Those with disabilities an/or age limitations will need plans adjusted for them.”

She also reminds planners to rehearse procedures and define roles for the staff at the property regarding safety and security.

“Practicing plans in real time upon arriving onsite at the venue is key, as the plan may have roadblocks that need to be worked out,” says Foels. “Planners sometimes don’t do their due diligence in talking with venues and other local resources in advance. Roles and responsibilities are not identified in advance.”

Security expert O’Rourke, who works regularly with corporate planners, says a common mistake is relying too much on a venue’s security plan.

“It’s the top mistake I see from the meeting and event planning sector,” he says. “Existing plans might be perfect for securing an empty facility or another organization’s meeting. But how do you know someone else’s plan is sufficient for your meeting?”

O’Rourke offers this advice to planners: “You must be boots-on-the-ground, walking the site in person and visualizing your event there.

“Visualize where attendees will enter, where credentials will be issued and where emergency exits are,” he says. “Think to yourself, ‘Attendees will enter over there. Credentials will be issued here.’ See where the emergency exits are. Test doors yourself. Know the most likely avenues of approach for accidental or deliberate unauthorized access.”

Communicate

Another no-no is failing to communicate with vendors.

“Planners think about needing to have a safety plan, but they don’t always allocate the time to discuss a plan with each vendor,” says Chaulet. “Make time to collaborate with vendors around safety issues.”

It’s also critical that planners learn from mistakes to constantly revise and improve security plans. Even if every meeting proceeds without a mishap, it’s wise to do a post-meeting review.

Jenkins suggests asking the following questions after each meeting:

- Were there deviations from the event security plan? If so, why?
- How did having security in place make the guests feel? What was the perception?
- Was there a comfort level with having security in place, or did attendees feel threatened or somewhat alarmed about it?
- Was there adequate security to handle an emergency if one had occurred?
- If security guards were used, were they in the right place? Did they stroll around? Were they courteous? Were they alert?

Once upon a time, meeting security involved little more than hiring a few guards to watch people.

However, the variety and nature of threats to meetings have multiplied immensely in recent years. These days, planners must prepare proactively to assess, prevent and manage the outcome of practically every emergency imaginable.

Planners don't have to do it alone. Teamwork is best and can involve vendors, hotel and venue staff, DMCs and security experts.

Plenty of help is available for planners without the time or inclination to create a crisis management plan, and those who lack one shouldn't tempt fate any longer. **C&IT**

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