

The next one will be a bombing

Another terrorist attack using a gun has occurred in Australia. While effort has been put into responding to “active shooters’ and other armed attacks (see comments on Active Shooter Guidelines on this website) we are not prepared for the highly probable and much more devastating attack using a bomb.

IEDs have been a preferred weapon for domestic and international terrorists in Australia since the late eighteenth century. Government sources indicate that 45% of significant Australian terrorist incidents over the last 12 years involved bomb making material, hoax bombs or the threat to use bombs.

Bombs cause a large amount of damage and casualties for little investment in material, they can be introduced into or near the site in any number of ways and they generate huge media attention. They are the ideal tool for “propaganda of the deed” to use an old Anarchist phrase.

Australia is one of the largest users of explosives in the world so as well as internet information on making explosives and bombs, the mining, rural, pyrotechnic, entertainment, law enforcement and military, construction, and manufacturing industries have both access to explosives and people trained in their use. These are assets that can be utilised by those wishing to cause harm. Due to good intelligence, good community liaison, strengthened security and luck we have managed to avoid the atrocity although there have been some close calls.

The probability is that bomb will be used in an attack by any individual or group with a point to make through violence. We should not be surprised when it happens but we will be.

The responsibility for initial bomb incident management rests not with the police but with managers - and the burden will get heavier. After the bombing happens, unattended items will be reported in numbers well beyond the capabilities of bomb squads to investigate. It is probable that emergency services will require managers to conduct more in depth assessment of the item before they will respond.

History suggests there will likely be a significant increase in bomb threats as copycats seek self-aggrandisement in the wake of a real bombing. Managers will need to decide if the threat relates to a bomb on site or the threatener is just trying to cause disruption.

There is also a real possibility that others, having seen the effect of a bombing, will be motivated put into practice their own plans to use IEDs to support their goals. In this case managers must know how to respond quickly, effectively and safely to what is believed to be a bomb.

Unfortunately many if not most emergency procedures do not provide adequate guidance on how to assess and respond to the different types of bomb incidents. Evacuating when unnecessary will result in roughly half a day’s disruption to business. Not evacuating when a hazard exists will probably result in death. Evacuating because it is “better to be safe than sorry” is not a valid argument, closing down the site and possibly the neighbours because a threat was received and not properly evaluated will expose the business to claims of incompetence. Moving thousands of people down fire escapes and across traffic is not a safe thing to do – unless they are being moved away from a hazard.

There are four types of bomb incidents that managers will face, in order of likelihood they are: unattended items, bomb threats, an actual bomb on site, and post-blast. There are simple skills that managers can use to assess and respond thereby reducing disruption if there is no hazard and minimising or preventing loss of life if there is a bomb.

The following may be of value when considering bomb incidents:

Bomb threat. The question is: “Is it feasible for the person to have done what they claim?” A manager, knowing their security posture and measures, having the ability to search the threatened area, able to access surveillance and access control records and to interview witnesses and staff should be able to answer the question with a high degree of certainty. Why someone would send a warning about a bomb on the site is the subject of other articles.

Unattended items. An item that has been left unattended can only be one of three things: rubbish, lost or abandoned (even for a short time), or potentially hazardous. In the majority of cases the item will be rubbish or lost/abandoned in which case it should be disposed of or treated as lost property. If considered hazardous, evacuate and call the emergency services. A simple and effective process for assessing unattended items can be implemented that supports making decisions not to evacuate - unless it is necessary.

Bomb: If a manager thinks there is a bomb on site then evacuation away from the area is the appropriate response, often a lot further than some emergency plans indicate. Sheltering behind something solid and not made of glass is also a good idea. The Business Continuity/Resilience plan also comes into play so business can continue.

Post Blast. In the worst case, the bomb explodes without warning. Depending on the size of the IED, its location and the time of detonation, people will probably be dead or severely injured, the site will be damaged and business will be heavily disrupted. Post blast response will rely on the business’ media management, business continuity/resilience, HR support and related plans as well as insurance, legal and commitment to the ongoing investigations and inquiries.

Managers are the front line when dealing with bomb incidents, having to make the initial, crucial decisions. Understanding the issues, identifying options, practicing the skills, and having effective procedures will protect the business and the people. We will still be surprised by the bombing but we can be prepared.

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