Fight, Flight, or Freeze?

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Does your organization have a well thought-out plan to address the risk of an active shooter on your premises? For many organizations, the default response is to implement a “lockdown,” or immediately freeze all activities and shelter in place while waiting for police and emergency assistance. In practice, this approach is straightforward and can be ordered without delay, but when the risk of staying put might compromise safety, is this truly the best course of action?

Every organization has unique considerations and factors that should be considered in planning for emergencies. At the Center we refer to these considerations as the “context” or “backdrop” for risk assessment and risk management planning. For example, an organization that relies on adult staff trained in CPR and emergency management in a secure group home or domestic violence shelter is likely to have a different view and different degree of readiness to handle an emergency compared to an organization that relies on teenage volunteers to oversee recreational activities. While having a simple go-to plan in the event of a violent incident sounds simple and therefore ideal, most situations are very complex, and no two are ever exactly alike. In response to this, and based on a review of past incidents, the experts at the ALICE Institute believes that a more nuanced approach is required. The ALICE Institute delivers training based on the five functions it believes are essential to managing an active shooter emergency: 1. alert, 2. lockdown, 3. inform, 4. counter and 5. evacuate.

How do these five functions differ from our fight, flight and freeze instincts?

- **Fight** – ALICE training encourages leaders in the midst of an active shooter event to “counter” rather than “fight.” Countering the circumstances instigated by a shooter involves taking control of the situation away from the shooter. “Counter” strategies include creating noise, distractions, and movement while distancing yourself from the shooter as much as possible. The ALICE Institute experts caution that “counter” is a last response for staff in a confined space with an active shooter.
- **Flight** – ALICE Training reminds leaders that evacuating any building where an active shooter is present should be a top priority. To “evacuate” staff, volunteers and clients safely you’ll need to have clear channels of communication, including the ability to “alert” personnel that an active shooter is on premises, and if possible, “inform” personnel about the location of the shooter.
- **Freeze** – ALICE Training notes that if and when a “lockdown” is the best course of action, personnel need to know proper barricade techniques. Placing furniture, such as tables and bookcases behind doors, may not create an effective barricade. Train your staff to secure furniture and items used to create a barricade with readily available resources, such as shoelaces and power chords. “Lockdown” is the right option if a shooter is very near your location, or if the shooter’s location in the building is unknown.

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