



by Andrew Hofstetter

## Situational Awareness in 2020

**T**ribal gaming has grown significantly since the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) in 1988. Since then, many tribal casinos and resorts have become world class destinations for guests to relax, eat, game and unwind. What's known as 'situational awareness' is crucial to the Indian gaming industry as tribes protect and safeguard patrons, staff, business, community and tribal members from potential harm.

Situational awareness is the act of being aware of things that can be seen, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted (i.e. using senses), and recognizing when a threat is nearby. It is the process of looking for warning signs and being aware of your environment. Situational awareness is broken into three segments:

**1. Perceiving what happens around you:** Knowing your surroundings and what is happening around you.

**2. Comprehending & processing what is happening:** Understanding the warning signs of what your senses detect, and thinking about it in a manner that allows you to consider your options.

**3. Anticipating what is going to happen and responding to it:** Acknowledging the possibilities of what could happen, and acting on a plan without hesitation in an expedient manner that keeps you and as many others out of harm's way.

Having an action plan is paramount for patrons, staff, and tribes as critical incidents are likely to occur when least expected. Awareness is a deliberate choice and one that must be conditioned for. Once that choice has been made to pay attention, the part of the brain responsible for monitoring the senses, known as the reticular activating system, takes over. It switches filters on and off that help the subconscious pay attention. Situational awareness is a perishable skill that must be practiced repeatedly to remain second nature.

One of the basic tenets of awareness is 'baseline.' Whether someone is in a casino, hiking in the mountains, or at a concert venue, a baseline must be established based on the environment you are in. The general concept is that each environment has a specific baseline – what things look, sound, smell and feel like when there is no threat. It is important to note when the baseline changes or is broken. When this happens, senses are on a heightened alert. This is referred to as a concentric ring of disturbance, because it radiates out from the source. The baseline varies from environment to

environment. At a football stadium, the established baseline would be people cheering, yelling, talking and being generally animated as they support their team. A spike in the baseline would be body language that varies outside of the norm of a football setting, such as observing a nearby fight between several people. In this moment, all of the senses are used to understand what is happening and how best to react.

An aware person will notice things others may miss. Over time, this becomes almost a background activity, requiring little conscious thought. The threat in any given situation may be subtle. One may experience a feeling of uneasiness or discomfort without readily identifying the cause. Rather than ignore or dismiss this feeling of discomfort, situational awareness requires one to actively identify the source. Reading warning signs before something happens is key.

The following pillars of situational awareness include: observe, identify, communicate, plan and act.

- **Observe:** Be aware of your surroundings, don't be distracted, and look for potential red flags before something happens.
- **Identify potential threats:** Use your senses and training to identify potential threats. Ask yourself if what you are seeing is normal, out of place, could lead to injury, harm, loss of life, or loss of revenue? Does it pose an immediate threat?
- **Communicate:** Once you identify a threat, communicate the concern to a superior or a designated group of people prepared to address it such as security, law enforcement, a boss, emergency services, etc.
- **Plan:** Have a way to respond, such as an emergency action plan. This plan should outline who does what and the steps to mitigate risks or threats.
- **Act:** When you see a potential threat, you have a responsibility to act. Acting could mean communicating, calling or responding in an adequate manner or intervening in the form of action.

Since the Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999, the U.S. has unfortunately become used to hearing about active shooter events each year. However, in the range of potential threats, the following should also be included: human trafficking, violence in the workplace, medical emergencies, robbery, bomb threats, terrorism and other acts such

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as natural disasters. In the Indian gaming world, one has to also consider: cheats/scams; fraud; counterfeit money; counterfeit credit cards and checks; external and internal theft; risk and liability issues; health and safety issues; loss; damage; and unethical behavior. It is important to have quality training that identifies relevant issues and concerns. Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst, keeping the following in mind:

- Have an emergency action plan (EAP).
- Share that plan with those that need to know.
- Train on this plan regularly and include emergency services in your training.
- An EAP is a living document – revisit it often with necessary changes and updates.
- Include key players in the plan, such as: law enforcement, fire, paramedics/EMTs.
- Find ways to communicate a threat on a mass level, such as via a communication app or text message.
- An EAP is simply a piece of paper until someone acts on it, reads it, trains on it, and carries it out into action.
- Have a threat assessment conducted for your casino property. Identify vulnerable areas and solutions, including a course of action to act upon.

### Then 2020 Happened

So far, 2020 has seen the COVID-19 global health crisis; various wildfires around the U.S.; demonstrations that in some-cases turned into rioting, looting and acts of violence; and killer wasps, to name a few. It has been quite a year.

COVID-19 drastically changed the industry. In a great effort to protect the public, patrons, staff, community and tribal members, tribes closed their casinos and tribal operations in February and March. After the closures, tribes began the process of cleaning their facilities from top to bottom and developed new health and safety protocols and procedures to specifically address COVID-19 concerns. As the decision to reopen tribal casinos was made across much of Indian Country, robust and critical safety measures were put in place.

COVID-19 has brought situational awareness to a whole new level, requiring all stakeholders in Indian Country to focus on health and safety like never before. The Indian gaming industry is on a heightened state of alert. The proper communication and exchange of information from tribe to tribe is crucial in these unprecedented times. ♣

*Andrew Hofstetter, Tribal Government Affairs, BlueBird CPAs is a board member of the National Indian Casino Safety & Security Association. He is an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, OR and can be reached by calling (951) 923-8144 or email [ahofstetter@bluebirdcpas.com](mailto:ahofstetter@bluebirdcpas.com).*

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