At the RHA annual conference in July, I will give a presentation posing my favorite open-ended risk management question, “What Could Go Wrong?” This article addresses one answer, which is that the resort’s emergency plan may assume quick and decisive thinking by staff and guests that is rather unlikely. Here’s why.

I have long been annoyed by the admonition to "See Something, Say Something." There is ample evidence across time and demographics that most people do neither. See, for example, Amanda Ripley's very readable book about people's "disaster personalities," or my article about the inapplicability of common active shooter training to live events.

Everyone who has ever attended a recreational event has observed that people who are impaired by alcohol, drugs, or the excitement of the moment are slow to perceive and react to anything unexpected. The same is true for people basting in a poolside resort chaise while they enjoy a cool drink and a break from the daily grind – they’re not paying attention to their surroundings either. When I talk about the sort of situational awareness on which many emergency plans are based, I show an image of a unicorn.
"Yeah, That Looks Fine"

Consider just a couple of recent examples of the awareness people actually have in an emergency. A DJ working Pulse nightclub's outdoor patio when shooting broke out in 2016 told reporters, "I heard shots, so I lower the volume of the music to hear better because I wasn't sure of what I just heard. I thought it was firecrackers, then I realized that someone is shooting at people in the club." In April, 2018, a man sitting at a café outside YouTube's headquarters observed, "It was a surprise, because you don't really expect something like that. I heard some pops, I obviously thought it was balloons, but then I thought that doesn't make sense, not today. Then I heard more shots and that's when everyone started scrambling for the door."

In the resort context, it's not just guests who suffer from "confirmation bias," by which everyone's brain tries to fit unfamiliar things into familiar boxes in order to keep us from pursuing shiny objects all day long. Even (presumably) sober hotel staff and event professionals engaged in their daily tasks walk past errors and hazards all the time. At the annual meeting in July, I will amuse you with some of my many pictures of rooms set up with blocked emergency exits. Not only were the rooms set up wrong by hotel and convention center staff, but smart people who came to hear me talk about safety in public accommodations walked in, sat down, and neither saw something nor said something. I don't think they were all outliers.

Long before I encountered the term “situational awareness,” here is what got me thinking about the concept. It is a souvenir mug that was stacked in a lovely pyramid for all of us to take during a third year law school competition. First, even with me telling you there’s something here, see how long it takes you to find it. Then, consider how many different people had the opportunity to spot the error, but instead blithely concluded, “Yeah, that looks fine.”

Once you find the problem, it’s obvious, right? But a bunch of people, including the competition organizers and my fellow student advocacy champions from around the U.S., all missed it in the moment.

What explains this?

It has to do with situational awareness, but not the way we usually think about it. I believe that situational awareness is not something we all have that makes us notice
strange things in ordinary situations. If anything, that is precisely the awareness most people lack.

We filter out things that don't fit what we expect to see - this is how we get through our days. Everyone has something called a reticular activating system that allows our brains to deal with the two million bits of information we receive each day by simply ignoring most of it. People are not "situationally aware," as we usually use the term, because we'd all be paralyzed by sensory overload.

**Situational Awareness Reconfigured**

There is a different way, however, in which the term "situational awareness" does make sense. And, satisfyingly for people who take seriously the common law duty to behave reasonably under one’s circumstances, it turns out that our awareness depends significantly on context. Check this out.

When concertgoers are standing in a general admission area as a band strikes its first chords, we know where their awareness is focused - front of house, center, on stage. As this picture reminds us, even the guest services people can hardly help facing towards the action. For a sporting event, everyone looks at the field; for a corporate event, we anticipate the MC taking the stage. In each situation, the crowd's awareness of what's
happening at front of house center is fantastic. And entirely foreseeable. Because event professionals put in a lot of work to make that the focus of everyone's attention.

Now we're getting somewhere. In the context of a large event held at a resort conference center or even a small poolside concert, we know where most guests are looking and to what they are listening. Therefore, a reasonable operations professional can work with that to help communicate with those patrons and move them in an emergency. Here are a few common procedures.

- **Bring up the house lights, kill the effects.** This is both to help people see their way towards an exit and to change their experience so they know that whatever is about to happen IS NOT part of the show.

- **Communicate from the stage.** Everyone is looking towards the attraction anyway, so get the first messaging out from there, either by playing pre-recorded messages on video or by replacing the artist with a resort safety professional or public safety official with a mic.

- **Don't count on the talent to help move the crowd.** Their manager's job is to get the talent out of harm's way and back on the bus, and they have never practiced your safety messages anyway. Emergency operations are for venue and event operations people.

- **Lead by example.** In one of life's happy coincidences, the resort staff's urgent desire to get out of an emergency situation matches perfectly with the fact that the best way to move a crowd is to LEAD THEM. Rather than standing in the middle of a crowd pointing towards an exit, highly-visible uniformed staff should head towards the exits, gesturing for guests to follow them out. I know I trust someone a lot more if they're already doing the thing they say I should do.

It is important to accommodate people as they actually behave, not as we think they ought to behave. People who come to a resort will generally focus on their event and miss nearly everything else. This is what we intend to happen - if guests couldn't relax and leave their usual concerns behind for a few hours, then we'd all have to find something else to do for a living.
Even though we are presented with frequent reminders that people lack a helpful baseline of awareness in every situation, at least we know where their awareness is focused in our situation, when they visit a property to relax and have a good time.

This kind of situational awareness is not a unicorn - it's reasonably foreseeable, because the resort creates the event experience to ensure that awareness. They can use it not only to entertain their guests, but also to help keep them safe.

#  #

Steven A. Adelman is the head of Adelman Law Group, PLLC in Scottsdale, Arizona and Vice President of an international trade association, the Event Safety Alliance. His law practice focuses on risk management and litigation regarding safety and security at live events throughout North America, and he serves as an expert witness in crowd-related lawsuits. Steve Adelman is widely recognized as an authority on live event safety and security. He writes the monthly “Adelman on Venues” newsletter, he teaches “Risk Management in Venues” at Arizona State University’s Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law, and he frequently appears in national and local media for analysis of safety and security incidents at public accommodations. Steve Adelman graduated from Boston College Law School in 1994. He can be reached at sadelman@adelmanlawgroup.com.