Personnel Management and INFOSEC

Part 6. Ongoing Management: Changes in Behavior

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In this series, we are reviewing some of the implications of personnel management for information security.

Any kind of unusual behavior can pique the curiosity of a manager. Even more important from a security management standpoint, any consistent change in behavior should stimulate interest. Is Miss Punctual suddenly late—day after day? Did Mr Casual start showing up regularly in hand-tailored suits? Why is Miss Charming snarling obscenities at her staff these days? What accounts for Charles' working overtime every day all of a sudden—in the absence of any known special project? Is Yosuf, that paragon of perfection, now producing obvious errors in simple reports? How is it that the formerly complaisant Waclav is now a demanding and bitter complainer?

Any radical change in personality should elicit concern, too. If the normally relaxed head accountant now has beads of sweat on her forehead whenever you discuss the audit trails, perhaps it's time to look into her work more closely. Mr Bubbly is now a morose whisky-swilling sourpuss: why? The formerly grim Schultz now waltzes through the office with a perpetual smile on his face. What happened? Or what is happening?

All of these changes alert you to the possibility of subterranean changes in the lives of your employees. Although these changes do indeed affect the security of your organization, they also concern managers as human beings who can help other human beings. Mood swings, irritability, depression, euphoria—these can be signs of psychological stress. Is your employee becoming alcoholic? a drug addict? abused at home? going through financial difficulties? having trouble with teenagers? falling in love with a colleague? Of course you can't help everyone, but at least you can express your concern and support in a sensitive and gentle way. Such discussions should take place in private and without alarming the subject or exciting other employees. If you feel out of your depth, by all means involve your human resources or personnel department. They will either have a psychologist or trained counselor on staff or be able to provide appropriate help in some other way such as an Employee Crisis Line.

There are sad cases in which employees have shown signs of stress but been ignored, with disastrous consequences: suicides, murders, theft, and sabotage. Be alert to the indicators and take action quickly.

With so much of our organizations' financial affairs controlled by information systems, it is not surprising that sudden wealth may be a clue that someone is committing a computer crime. A participant in the Information Systems Security Course reported that an accounting clerk at a U.S. government agency in Washington, D.C. was arrested for massive embezzlement. The tipoff? He arrived at work one day in a Porsche sports car and boasted of the expensive real estate he was buying in a wealthy area of the Capital region.

Not all thieves are that stupid. A healthy curiosity is perfectly justified if you see an employee sporting unusually expensive clothes, driving a sleek car after years with a rust-bucket, and chatting pleasantly about the latest trip to Acapulco when their salary doesn't appear to explain such expenditures. On the other hand, being a nosy Parker who butts into people's private lives will win
you no friends. It's a real bind but ignoring the issue doesn't make it disappear.

The other kind of change -- towards the negative -- may also indicate trouble. Why is your system manager looking both dejected and threadbare these days? Is he in the throes of a personal debt crisis? in the grip of a blackmailer? beset with a family medical emergency? a compulsive gambler on a losing streak? Again, on humane grounds alone you would want to know what's up in order to help. As a manager concerned with security, you have to investigate. In these days of explosive rage and ready access to weapons, ignoring employees with a dark cloud hovering over their heads may even be irresponsible and dangerous.

The manager's job is a tough one: you must walk the thin line between laissez-faire uninvolvement (and risk lifelong regrets or even prosecution for dereliction of duty) and overt interference in the private affairs of your staff (and risk embarrassment and prosecution for harassment).

Written policies will help you; so will a strong and ongoing working relationship with your human resources staff. Making it clear to all employees that managers are available for support and expected to investigate unusual behavior will also help avoid misunderstandings.

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