

Pushing Left of Flash – The Art and Science of Early Risk Assessment

Robert Graves

“*How can we anticipate and mitigate crimes, attacks, or betrayals by bad actors?*” This is the perennial question faced by security professionals. The contributions of the discipline of behavioral threat assessment have been invaluable in enabling the disruption and diversion of those preparing to commit acts of targeted violence. Behavioral threat assessment has been most effective in interrupting the “flash-to-bang” cycle – that is, the time between the first overt action or broadcast of intent, and the commission of the bad act itself. Keeping people safe means doing even better. Combining operational art with behavioral science, it is possible to begin risk assessment even earlier in the operational cycle, to get “left of flash.”

With an understanding of the origins of grievance and how betrayal, corruption, or violence may grow from them, or be exploited by others, security professionals have an opportunity to anticipate and mitigate those bad acts. If we detect risks and threats early enough, we can employ administrative, clinical, or criminal justice means to disrupt them.

Rarely is someone “born bad”— the stereotypical clinical psychopath is largely an artifact of popular fiction. Occasionally, a person is born into a culture of villainy, such as a family-based criminal enterprise. In most cases, a person’s turn down the road of violence, corruption, or betrayal of trust is the result of a confluence of events and influences in their lives. That turn



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begins where grievance and ideation intersect with a key facet of a person's identity. Progress down that road comes as a person is then pushed or pulled by an agent of influence, and ultimately presented with a choice: to exercise their human agency and respond morally and ethically to challenges they face, or to choose villainy.

At the Crossroads

Most of us travel our whole lives on the road of accepted social norms and behaviors. Some among us, however, will find themselves at a crossroads with the path to villainy. That path, in turn, may lead to radicalization and violence, corruption and crime, or an "insider threat" and betrayal of trust. Like the well-recognized pathway observed in targeted violence, it begins with a grievance—a real or perceived insult to some fundamental human need. Whether you subscribe to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs or another model, we all recognize there are needs common to all people, ranging from the physical (food, water, shelter) to the emotional (companionship, respect, love) to the spiritual (faith, sense of identity). The pain point—that is, the need that is perceived as being under threat—is specific to each individual. It may be something as existential as the threat of loss of an income or a home. It might be something more emotional, yet still existential, such as the loss of a pair-bond partner. Proceeding along the spectrum of needs, the pain point may be a sense of isolation or alienation from the person's group or tribe.

A particularly perilous grievance can be the perception of loss or denial of status as relates

to membership within a community that represents a key dimension of the person's identity. An insult or injustice, real or perceived, against such a community can also be a powerful pain point for an individual—for example, the sense that one's ethnic, religious, or gender group is being discriminated against or displaced.

Moreover, part of our human tendency to organize into bands, groups, and tribes is the need to establish ourselves within the hierarchy of the communities with which we identify. The position an individual holds in a given hierarchy reflects the value the group places on that person and can determine the person's ability, real or perceived, to meet other needs, from finding food and shelter to successfully competing for a pair-bond partner. There are prestige economies within all communities, from criminal "families" to academia to bowling leagues. As people strive for success and position within their communities, failure to attain greater success or loss of status can engender a sense of disrespect and humiliation. This is a particularly powerful pain point and can be a substantial source of grievance.

Whatever the insult or pain point, the natural human response is to look for remedy, which can lead to that next step on the path to villainy: grievance-focused ideation. Everyone ideates on their grievances, looking for an explanation, a solution, and in many cases, someone to blame. For most of us, this ideation is part of our process for finding a healthy resolution to the grievance. The person most vulnerable to becoming a threat to others, in contrast, may seize on an external focus for the grievance. They may blame a person or group as having either deliberately or negligently caused the harm. Here we may see the earliest signs of emotional leakage or broadcasting, indicating that a grievance has begun to turn malignant. This can also be our best (and sometimes only) opportunity to divert or re-direct that sense of grievance into something more constructive. Failing that, our potential villain may begin to rationalize that some affirmative act on their part is, in fact, not only justified but necessary for redress of the grievance. That rationalization can lead to the belief that action against the person or entity blamed is the best or only logical recourse.

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That action may come in the form of theft, fraud, or an effort to impose reputational harm. It may also be in the form of acting out in a kinetic, even violent, manner.

Most of us are socialized to believe that it is wrong to cause harm to or use violence against another person except in the most extraordinary, and largely defensive, circumstances. This belief is usually built into the moral foundations of our identity by religious, legal, and social norms. To move someone off those norms requires a radicalizing or corrupting influence—an idea, movement, or person—to leverage some portion of that person’s identity to justify and accept, if not demand, action, violent or otherwise.

The Challenge of Balancing Identities and Loyalties

Human identity is multi-faceted. If you make a list of nouns to describe yourself (“I am a _____”), consistently at the front and center of your sense of self will be a set of identifiers. These are in constant competition for primacy, depending largely on situational factors. Some social psychologists argue that we possess a number of “selves,” each manifesting itself depending on context (Markus & Nurius, 1986). At work, we may be defined by our profession or tasks. At home, we may define ourselves first and foremost as a partner or parent. With friends, we may be defined by our common experiences. Within a religious community, we may define ourselves by our piety. When different aspects of our identity come into conflict with each other, the tension can be stressful. When satisfying one of those dimensions of self requires subordination or denial of another, loyalties can become divided, and some people may find villainy beckoning.

The tipping point to action comes when a person engaged in grievance-focused ideation is presented with a solution that both validates a core aspect of their identity while relieving the internal conflict between identities. Invariably, that solution is identification with, and membership in, a new affinity group that endorses the grievance. Whether this person will continue down the path and graduate to acts of violence or other harm will depend on where this new self-identification comes out in the competition for primacy in the person’s sense of self. If this new tribe conflicts with another—and stronger—aspect of the person’s identity, then the aggrieved person may choose a moral or ethical path and may never become more than a sympathizer to the cause. If, on the other hand, the new ideology or identity, and its associated embrace of a particular course of action, are compatible with, or stronger than, other core aspects of the person’s identity, that person

may choose the road to radicalization, corruption, or betrayal. If the new ideology or identity aligns with and validates other core facets of the individual's identity, then the person may not merely be vulnerable to calls to action, but may enthusiastically wade into the fray, viewing such action as required for the realization of their true identity.

How well a person can frame-switch between competing or conflicting facets of their identity is a good indicator of their ability to resist the more extreme demands of any facet, including demands that are in conflict with another facet of their identity. Those who are not able to frame-switch with fluency may find themselves forced to make a choice as to which aspect of their identity they will serve, making them vulnerable to radicalization, corruption, or betraying trust.

For insight into the mechanics of balancing competing identities and potentially divided loyalties, and as a means of better understanding who might be more vulnerable to those challenges, it is illuminating to look at studies of bicultural integration. People who move between cultures may find their ability to successfully operate in one or both of those cultures stressed in much the same way that an aggrieved person may find themselves stressed when attempting to balance the various elements of their identity.

Work on bicultural integration has shown that the Five Factor Model for measuring personality traits can provide useful indicators of a person's ability to frame-switch between divided and divergent identity needs (Benet-Martinez, 2005). A low degree of openness, correlating to rigidity of thought and being closed to new experiences, may be characteristic of individuals who are more likely to compartmentalize the conflicting aspects of their identities rather than balance them. A high degree of neuroticism, correlating to feelings of

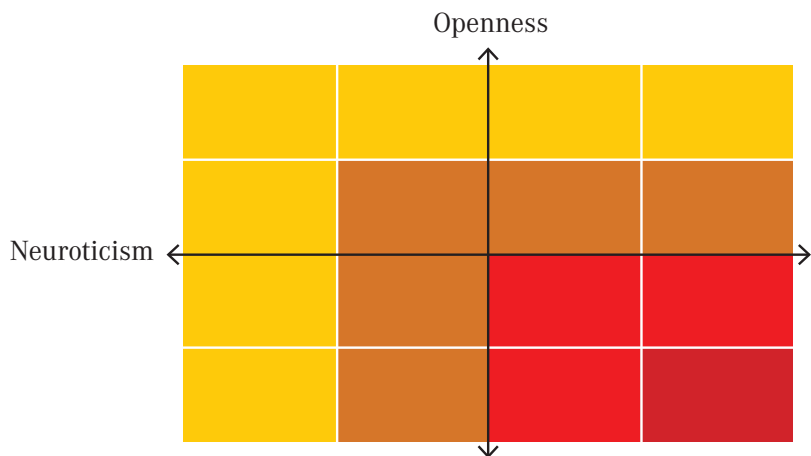
Patriot commits espionage on behalf of perennial adversary

Carsten Linke, a German Army veteran, arrested in December 2022, was accused of espionage on behalf of Russia. Linke, who at the time was director of technical reconnaissance for Germany's Federal Intelligence Service, had confided to colleagues his concerns that Germany was deteriorating and was openly disdainful of its center-left government. Outside of work, he was in contact with a member of the far-right populist political party "Alternative for Germany," (AfD) and appeared to have subscribed to a YouTube channel suspected to be linked to the far-right "Reichsbürger" scene, which was the source of a coup plot disrupted in 2022. The German populist far-right has been openly enamored of Russia and its leader, Vladimir Putin (Solomon, et al, 2023).

Linke's grievance was a perceived threat to his tribe, the Germany he had served as a soldier and intelligence officer. He found endorsement for his grievance in AfD and the populist far-right of German politics, to which he appears to have affiliated covertly. His involvement with a new tribe, one with pro-Russian sympathies, put Linke in a position to betray the trust of his colleagues and transfer his loyalty to an adversary, Russia.

vulnerability and anxiety, may be found in individuals having difficulty facing competing demands for their loyalty. A combination of the two (low openness and high neuroticism) may be characteristic of an individual who is unable to frame-switch, instead feeling an imperative to go all-in with one facet of their identity, rather than balancing competing forces. (Figure 1)

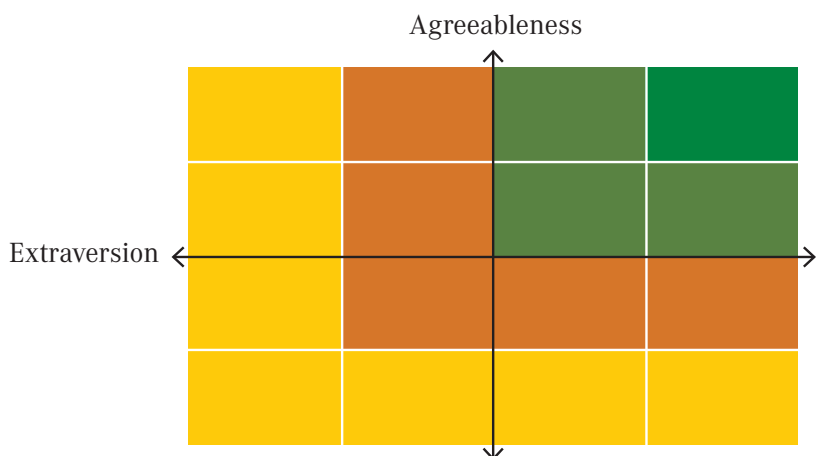
FIGURE 1. Openness and neuroticism



Conversely, other Five Factor Model personality traits play an offsetting role. People with high degrees of agreeableness and extraversion appear more fluent in frame-switching. Those who are more agreeable are generally less likely to experience conflict. The extraverted generally have greater interpersonal resources and are likely more adaptable to their circumstances. (Figure 2)

It is noteworthy that the fifth factor, conscientiousness (the predictor of success in so many domains) does not appear to have bearing on a person's ability to frame-switch and balance competing demands of identity or loyalty (Benet-Martinez, 2005). Low conscientiousness, manifesting as low self-control, however, comes into play as it correlates to an increased risk of criminality (Tharsini et al., 2021).

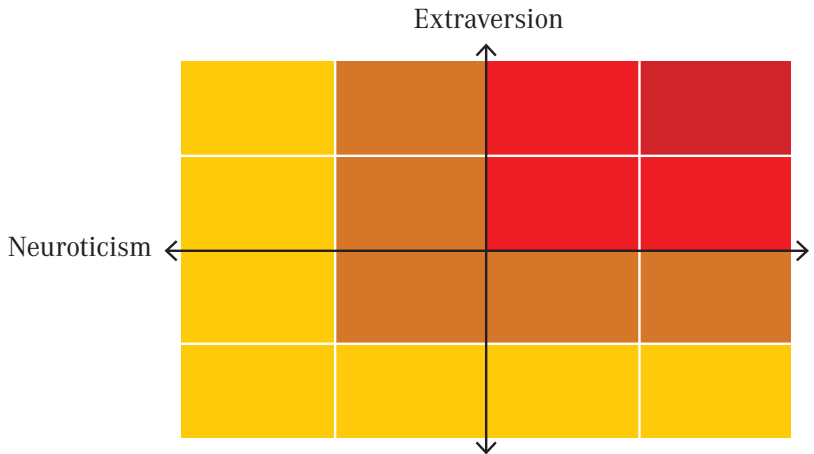
FIGURE 2. Agreeableness and extraversion



Other research suggests that the

confluence of high extraversion and high neuroticism may make a person susceptible to inducements to otherwise unacceptable behavior. Studies of persons in high-risk work exhibiting this combination of traits showed they were particularly susceptible to criminally risk-taking behavior (Girodo, 1991). In combination with traits suggesting difficulty in balancing competing loyalties or identities, a tendency towards societally unacceptable risk-taking can be an exacerbating risk factor for radicalization, corruption, or betrayal of trust. (Figure 3)

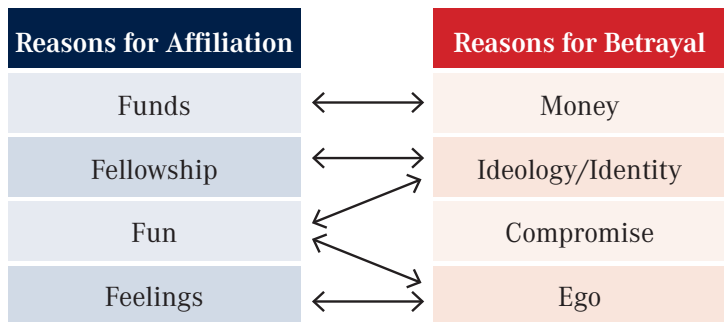
FIGURE 3. Extraversion and neuroticism



The Allure of a Group

A validation of the grievance and framework for blame, by itself, is likely insufficient to entice a person to villainy, violent or otherwise. Affiliating with a group and its purpose requires something more. The four principal reasons people affiliate with any type of group are funds, fellowship, fun, and feelings (Reed, 2015). For a person to join an extremist organization, a criminal enterprise, or other clandestine relationship, however structured or unstructured it might be, some combination of these must be present. The reasons an individual may affiliate with a group generally align with the classic paradigm of the reasons the person might betray: “MICE,” or Money, Ideology, Compromise, or Ego (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Reasons for affiliation and betrayal



Funds. It is doubtful anyone joins an affinity group simply to get rich. However, a person amenable to the group's message may see the group or its message as a means for obtaining or protecting critical resources to meet those existential human needs discussed earlier, or to otherwise ensure safety for themselves or others to whom they may feel a sense of responsibility or obligation. This can be a powerful incentive or rationalization for a change in allegiance. This aligns directly with "Money" under the MICE paradigm.

Fellowship. Friends and allies can be powerful influencers toward a person adopting or aligning with the *raison d'être* of a new affinity group. There is a maxim among those who recruit and handle spies that no one betrays the trust of others out of friendship with their handler, but friendship makes it easier. Similarly, a sense of camaraderie with like-minded persons goes a long way in ushering an individual down the path of radicalization, corruption, or betrayal. The sense of belonging to a group, especially a group built around a similar outlook, is an elemental human need. Two key messages of predators, corruptors, recruiters, and radicalizers alike are, "I like you," and "I am like you" (more on this later). Finding fellowship with the like-minded helps to meet the need to belong to a group, especially among those whose grievances include a sense of alienation or exclusion. This aligns with the "Ideology," or more broadly "Identity," component of MICE.

Fun. For some people, the activities of an extremist group, criminal enterprise, or other clandestine relationship may be particularly exciting. The emotional intensity an individual associates with a given person, group, or activity can be intoxicating and addictive. When we are part of something so special that it must be kept secret, the emotional connection becomes more intense, elevating the sense of adventure. When physically demanding activity is added to the mix, along with an element of danger, the adventure, and the resulting sense of fun, increases. The clandestine nature of the contacts and any "crash-bang" of training for actions, the association with a new tribe, especially a clandestine one, can have a powerful effect, not unlike falling in love or using mood-altering drugs. The drive to obtain and maintain that heightened emotional state contributes to the allure and escalation of the affiliation. "Fun," may align with either "Ideology," or "Ego," or both.

Feelings. Potentially the most powerful of the four reasons for affiliating with any group, the sense that one is part of something larger than oneself is often its own reward. When the affiliation not only addresses the individual's sense of personal grievance, but also gives them a perceived sense of purpose or empowerment to address the grievance on behalf of

their tribe, the sense of self-righteousness and greater mission can combine into missionary zeal. Add this to the individual's belief that their zealotry earns them respect and status in this new peer group, and the probability of radicalization, corruption, or betrayal, and action, increases substantially. This directly aligns with MICE's "Ego," component.

The Push-Pull of Influence

Once a vulnerable person finds themselves at the point where villainy beckons, external influence is sometimes needed to either push or pull the person across the line. In the past, this push-pull often came in the form of in-person introduction and recruitment into a movement or group, relationship building, and a "pitch." In the modern era, the pervasiveness of digital platforms allows recruiters to expand their reach, using mass communications to reach and cultivate many more potential recruits to their cause. Many times, the recruiter may never have direct, much less in-person, contact with the recruit. In fact, the recruiter may never know the recruit. Nevertheless, the principles of the recruitment remain the same.

Modern technology makes it far easier for the recruiter to reach potential recruits than in the past. In the 1990s, we first saw widespread radicalization efforts through mass media tools. Unmarked tape cassettes of sermons by radical imams were passed hand-to-hand (like drug deals) in souks around the Islamic world. In the US, shortwave radio broadcasts and cassette tapes drove recruitment for militias and other domestic extremist groups. In the 21st century, we have seen radical Islamist groups publish slick on-line magazines to propagate their messages and tactical instruction, while we see domestic extremists building their reach via the proliferation of dark-web chatrooms, grievance and ideology-focused messaging, and social media apps. Anyone with a grievance, looking to assign blame, and wanting redress, can find a digital platform with an ideological framework to suit their needs.

A psychopath manipulates their target using four key lines of messaging (Babiak and Hare, 2005). A recruiter, radicalizer, or corruptor, like other predators, uses similar messaging. Whether in-person or through on-line contacts, those messages are:

"I like you." We all want to be appreciated within our group. The desire to be appreciated is exploited with two distinct messages. The first message is that the group is special, and membership in it is desirable and only open to those who bring value to the group. This usually requires building a sense of value for the group that competes with existing affiliations and loyalties.

If membership in the group is hard to achieve, then it becomes more valuable to the potential recruit. If interaction with the recruiter is rare, then any engagement becomes of higher value. The second message is the hook – telling the recruit that they are liked. With exclusivity of membership and scarcity of interaction, the message of “I (or we) like you,” helps to develop affinity for the recruiter or group.

“I am like you.” The message of “you, me, same, same,” is foundational to rapport building in personal relationships. It applies as well in radicalization and recruitment into extremist movements or other anti-social enterprises. Again, the human drive towards grouping with like-minded persons, those with whom we share common interests, or with whom we can make common cause, builds affinity for the new group in a potential recruit. This strengthens the bonds with the extremist movement or group and better enables it to compete with any countervailing affinity group for the recruit’s loyalty.

“I am your perfect partner.” Effectively convincing a potential recruit that

Recruitment to White Supremacy and Redemption

Christian Picciolini, the son of Italian immigrants to the US, had been bullied as a child and often felt abandoned by his parents, who worked 14-hour days, seven days a week, as small business owners. Picciolini was 14 years old, standing in an alley smoking marijuana, when he was first approached by the leader of a neo-Nazi group. In a single conversation, that extremist recruited Picciolini:



He knew that I was searching for three very important things: a sense of identity, a community, and a purpose.

By the age of 16, Picciolini had become the leader of the group after a series of arrests and criminal charges sent the group’s leadership to prison or into hiding. By the age of 19, Picciolini acquired a new sense of identity, that of husband, and at 21, father, both of which conflicted with his role as leader of a neo-Nazi gang. By 22, his marriage had fallen apart and Picciolini questioned his hatred of immigrants, Jews, and LGBTQ persons. As a result, he began distancing himself from the group and spent the next 25 years working to regain a normal life and helping others leave extremist groups behind (Lipman, 2020).

Picciolini’s sense of grievance was abstract yet existential. He felt abused by the world and abandoned by those he would expect to protect him. Recognizing Picciolini’s alienation, the neo-Nazi leader and recruiter offered him the sense of identity and community he needed (“Friends”), as well as a sense of purpose (“Feelings”). Over time, Picciolini acquired a competing sense of identity as a husband and father. When those came into conflict with his affiliation with the group, “husband” and “father” proved to have the greater importance for him. When his marriage failed, he withdrew from the neo-Nazi gang to reintegrate into society and help others.

the recruiter, movement, or group perfectly fills the gap in the recruit's life is the tipping point in building the relationship. Once this has been achieved, the potential recruit fully accepts and identifies with the extremist group, giving their loyalty to that group primacy over other competing identity affinities.

“You can trust me.” At the core of all human relationships is trust. At the point where the recruit has been effectively radicalized or otherwise corrupted, they have come to believe that the recruiter, leadership, and movement are who they say they are and are invested in the recruit's well-being and success. The recruiter builds this trust by demonstrating consistency of ideology and purpose, by modeling sincerity and integrity in interactions with the recruit, and by demonstrating concern for the recruit's safety. This latter concern is most directly demonstrated through measures to ensure the clandestine nature of the relationship to keep it hidden from law enforcement or others who would seek to disrupt it.

Recognizing the Early Steps on the Path to Villainy

Viktor Cherkashin, the Soviet-era KGB officer who famously handled two high-level spies within the US government, summed up the role of the recruiter as being to find those who want to be recruited, then to listen (Cherkashin, 2005). Whatever our role in addressing radicalization, corruption, or betrayal of trust, it is key that we also listen. We should listen with the ear of the recruiter, firstly to recognize when an individual is vulnerable to or looking to be recruited and, secondly, to recognize when an individual may be hearing what they need to assign blame and to shift loyalties to groups or ideologies that may lead to kinetic or other adverse outcomes.

It may be possible to identify those most vulnerable to radicalization or inducements to betray trust, or to recognize when those are in progress. Whether we are talking about so-called self-radicalization via social media and on-line platforms or “in real life” recruitment via in-person interactions, the indicators are the same.

The earliest observable indicator of risk would be a mix of observable personality traits— including low openness to experience, neuroticism, and extraversion—that can be leveraged to create stress and competition with counterbalancing facets of the person's identity and to induce risk-taking. The appearance of low “Openness,” potentially manifesting as an aversion to change or a lack of curiosity about new things, in combination with high “Neuroticism,” which may appear as anxiousness, irritability, or vulnerability to stress, would suggest the individual may not be able to effectively balance competing demands

on their sense of self and may be more susceptible to a push or pull towards radicalization or betrayal. This may be offset somewhat if the individual manifests high “Agreeableness,” often displayed as trust, straightforwardness, or compliance, along with high “Extraversion,” such as sociability and positive engagement with others. Persons with these traits would be less likely to experience personal conflict and would have better social resources to manage any conflicts that arise. The appearance of high “Extraversion,” in the form of excitement-seeking, interacting with high “Neuroticism,” may indicate a propensity for socially unacceptable, even criminal, risk-taking behavior. The presence of low “Conscientiousness,” in the form of low self-control, would increase the risk associated with other negative traits.

The next risk factor likely to be observable would be a perceptible sense of grievance that has alienated the person from their traditional group or tribe. Statements suggesting alienation, disaffection, or a sense of betrayal may creep into casual conversation or, as is increasingly common, appear in postings on the individual’s social media accounts. Another sign of alienation would be the individual’s withdrawal from their customary level of participation in work and social activities. This may also be accompanied signs of self-medication, such as changes in the use of alcohol (from teetotaler or social-drinker to binge-drinker), off-label use of mood-altering medications, or use of illegal drugs. This risk would be particularly high if the alienation is accompanied by a sense of status loss, humiliation, or disrespect.

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As the grievance deepens, an at-risk person would next likely demonstrate a need to assign blame for the grievance to someone other than themselves.”

As the grievance deepens, an at-risk person would next likely demonstrate a need to assign blame for the grievance to someone other than themselves. When this is accompanied by a sense that a kinetic, potentially violent, or otherwise illegal act is the best or only redress for the insult, the individual has embarked upon the well-known pathway to violence. Overt public or social media statements assigning that blame may develop slowly over time or appear along with the statements of grievance. These may grow in intensity over time, from, “...someone needs to do something...,” to “...I need to do something...”

The shift from the third-party imperative to first person ideation would likely also be accompanied by emotional “leakage” suggesting that a key facet of

the person's identity may be increasingly aligned with an ideological or philosophical framework that supports violent action or other socially unacceptable means of addressing the grievance. These would likely appear as statements or posts on social media that are empathetic to this new ideology. Over time the degree of visible empathy or intensity of identification with a new affiliation would likely increase; the sudden disappearance of such statements from conversation or posts could indicate the person's affiliation with the ideology or group had entered a covert phase.

These indicators should not be taken as guarantees of radicalization, corruption, or vulnerability. They can be used, however, to elevate an individual in the risk assessment process. They should be used in the broader inquiry and assessment effort to identify people at risk of traveling the path to villainy, and to divert them if possible. Whether the means of diversion is administrative, clinical, or judicial, when grievance, identity, and influence intersect and there is vulnerability to radicalization, corruption, or betrayal, there is a potential to off-ramp the person from a destructive path that can lead to violence and more.

A Way Forward

Combining operational art with behavioral science, we can better meet our responsibilities for keeping people safe. To push the risk assessment process "left of flash," security professionals should partner with behavioral science experts, especially clinical psychologists with forensic or operational specializations. Forensic and operational psychologists bring an array of tools to this effort, from psychometrics for gauging personality and temperament, such as the NEO-PI-R for Five Factor Model assessments, to more specialized structured professional judgement tools to evaluate risk of violence and radicalization. Security professionals bring their operational experience as investigators of a broad variety of crimes and threats. Many will also bring additional perspective as recruiters themselves, having experience inducing people to betray the trust of the criminal enterprises and extremist groups to which they belong.

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The combination of those unique capabilities, working in partnership, may be used as part of an organizational personnel reliability or suitability program, or a trusted workforce program. In this way, these tools may be integrated into hiring processes as part of pre-employment suitability screenings. In most instances, a review of available personal history either provided by the applicant or through formal background investigations may be sufficient to identify candidates requiring more detailed or formal screening before a hiring decision is made. Similar processes may be applied if an employee is referred for review or intervention through the organizational workplace violence prevention or counter-insider threat programs. Organizations with staff in high-risk and high-trust positions may require a more structured program of formal psychometric testing and interviews, both before hiring and at periodic intervals, in order to meet their responsibilities to stakeholders.

No amount of foreknowledge can eradicate all risk or pre-empt all crime. At the same time, an understanding of the path to villainy can help to identify when a person may be at the crossroads of grievance, identity, and influence and may be confronting the choice between right and wrong, good and evil, loyalty and betrayal, or law and criminality. We can recognize when someone is at risk of turning down that path, creating the potential to divert that person to an off-ramp from the path to villainy—even, perhaps, an off-ramp that leads our potential bad actor to a productive path. ✓

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