RESEARCH NOTE

Abstract

The Threat Lab, operating under The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC), a division within the Office of People Analytics, created a prototype job aid to help supervisors identify concerning behaviors, institutional resources to address concerning behaviors, and employee-oriented resources for supervisors to share with employees.

the **ThreatLab**
Integrating Research Into Practice

PERSEREC founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the Department of Defense (DoD) Counter-Insider Threat Program Director's vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space. Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

Building a Supervisor Guide to Concerning Conduct

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Introduction

As our understanding of insider threat grows, the need to get to the "left of boom" (i.e., intervene with a troubled employee before they perform a destructive act) in the insider threat space has only become more apparent. Investigators and researchers consistently identify missed opportunities for taking action after the occurrence of destructive acts. Had organizations been able to identify concerning behaviors beforehand, they may have been able to take action and divert an employee from a destructive path.

Supervisors are often the first to recognize concerning behavior in their employees and thus are their organization's first line of defense against insider threats. They also have knowledge of, and access to, institutional resources that can both help employees and protect the organization. When properly supported, trained, and resourced, supervisors can have a powerful positive influence on an organization's safety and employee well-being.

However, supervisors need help. DoD is a complex organization with myriad rules governing employee relations, performance management, personnel security, and reporting behaviors of concern. While DoD offers training and provides information on reporting requirements for insider threat behaviors, research indicates that supervisors are in need of additional resources to help them proactively identify and address employee behaviors of concern (Nelson, Beneda, McGrath, & Youpa, 2019). Insider threat response is not just about finding and reporting concerning behavior but also about giving supervisors the resources they need to address these behaviors and help maintain employee wellness.

Prior Research on Reporting Behaviors

In addition to managing the workflow of an organization, supervisors have many employee-reporting responsibilities. Reports are often the basis on which an organization takes action. Reporting helps leadership understand the scope of an issue and decide what

resources are required to address it. Without consistent reporting, it would not be possible for leadership to make informed decisions. Despite, or perhaps because of, the large number of policies, procedures, and memoranda on reportable behavior (e.g., Memorandum 00608-17, DSD, 2017; DoDM 2500.02, 2017; OCMO Administrative Instruction 8; ISC Workplace Violence Guide), researchers have found that supervisors remain uncertain about reporting protocols. This uncertainty can lead to supervisor underreporting.

In the first phase of this project, to better understand the factors that contribute to supervisor underreporting, we reviewed and assessed research on individual and organizational factors linked to reporting and underreporting behaviors of concern (Nelson, et al., 2019). We also interviewed subject matter experts (SMEs) to better understand barriers to reporting, strategies to overcome these barriers, and tools to assist with the reporting process. We found that supervisors often are unsure of the specific processes and requirements for reporting and that current training practices do not adequately address how to handle behaviors of concern effectively.

In the second phase, building on the foundation of the first study, we developed the Supervisor PAR (prevention assistance response) Acknowledgment (SPA) tool (Nelson, McGrath, Van Vechten, Beneda, & Ho, in press). The SPA tool is an acknowledgement form that describes supervisor reporting responsibilities and cites relevant policies. It was designed to help supervisors understand their responsibilities for reporting behaviors of concern and providing beneficial resources to employees. We then interviewed DoD supervisors to find out if they thought the tool was useful. Although they found the tool to be useful, they did not think it went far enough to help them understand their reporting responsibilities and identify potential behaviors of concern. The findings of the second phase of this research indicate that supervisors need more help understanding and recognizing reporting requirements before the tool can be used effectively. Supervisors, further, would like to have one central location (i.e., website, application [app], book, etc.) that houses all relevant resources to recognize and respond to concerning behaviors.

Project Objectives

Building on the findings from phases one and two, in the current research—phase three—we are developing a browser-based app to promote supervisor reporting. The app is designed to educate supervisors about their reporting responsibilities and to ultimately improve reporting. It will help supervisors:

- Identify and understand concerning behaviors,
- Educate supervisors about resources available to them, and
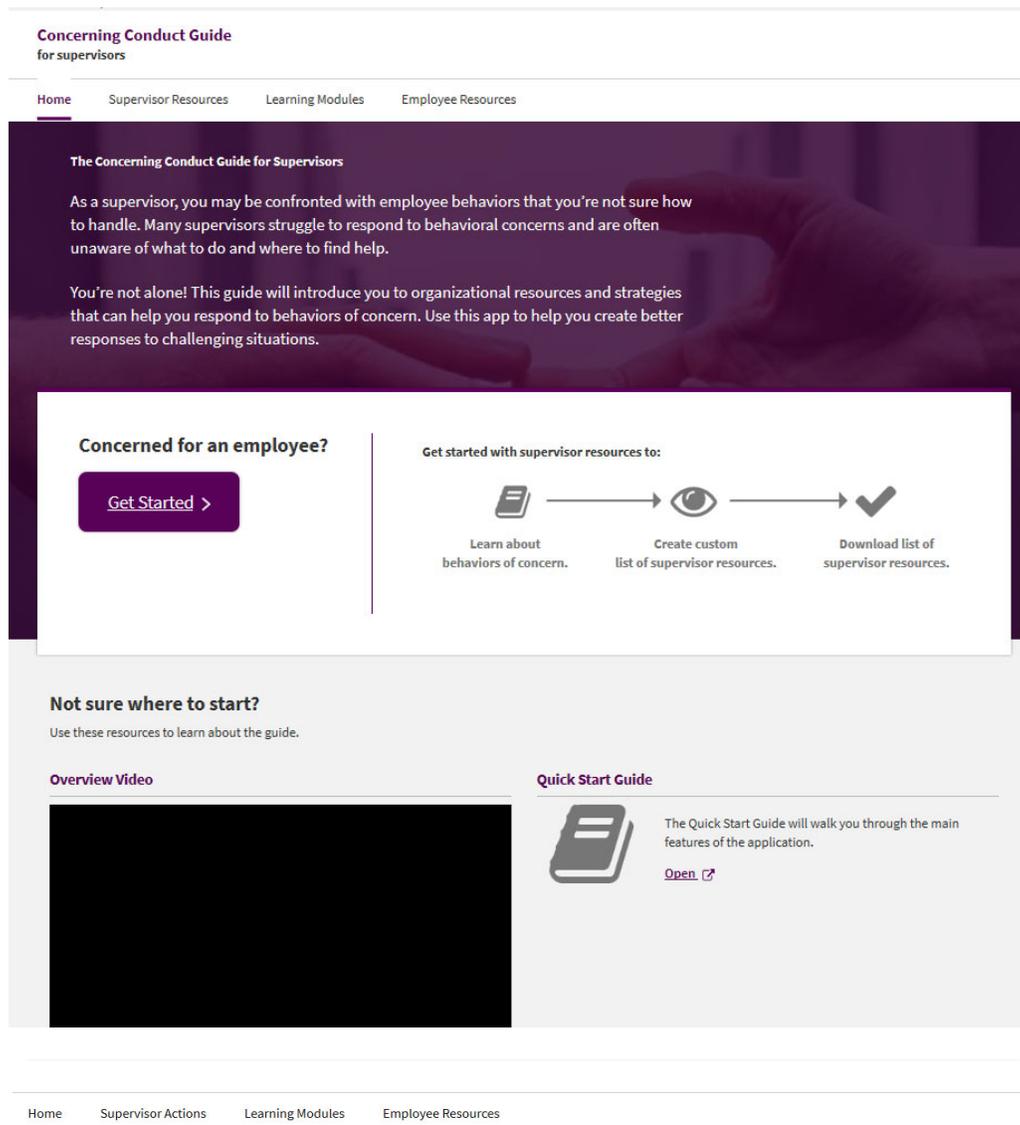- Provide assistance to employees.

Prototype Job Aid

The app is intended for use across the DoD civilian supervisor population and provides supervisors with information to identify behaviors of concern as well as resources to address those behaviors. We designed it to be a user-friendly tool that brings together multiple sources of information useful to supervisors.

Application Design Choices

The online application for the supervisor app was designed to be easily accessible and user friendly. For example, navigation options like tabs at the top of the page direct users to the Home page, Supervisor Resources, Learning Modules, and Employee Resources.

Figure 1: Screenshot of App Landing Page

On the homepage (see Figure 1), descriptive text accompanies options to assist users in navigating the app. Learning modules include process maps and graphics that display information in a digestible format to keep the reader's eye moving through the text. These graphics break up the text and keep content visually interesting.

In addition to reading about Supervisor Resources, Learning Modules, and Employee Resources, supervisors can create a Resource Plan at any time. To create a Resource Plan, supervisors view the Behavior Cards to learn more about concerning behaviors and identify those they are witnessing with an employee. The app then generates a Resource Plan by identifying Supervisor Resources relevant to the selected behaviors.

Because of the complexity of information management and personally identifiable information (PII), we intentionally designed this app to be an informational app only. Even the functionality features to create and save a plan do not allow for the entering of any PII into the app. Selections may be saved in a browser's cookies, but no other information is saved during a session. Users, however, can print a PDF copy of each plan.

We began by creating the most vital part of the app, called the core content, and then built the rest of the app's content to supplement it. The app's core content falls into three categories: (1) behaviors of concern that are displayed as "cards," (2) a list of institutional resources that supervisors can engage to address behaviors of concern, and (3) a list of employee resources that supervisors can recommend to employees.

The app also includes an animated short video and four learning modules. The animated short video walks users through first witnessing a behavior of concern and then showing them how to log on and navigate through the app. The learning modules help supervisors understand the background and contextual factors involved in identifying and addressing behaviors of concern.

The first module is the Getting Started Guide, an introductory learning module designed to familiarize first-time users with the app and its intended use. The Getting Started Guide is a downloadable set of instructions that come with screenshots of each page, graphics highlighting important features, and text on how users can interact with the features. Given bandwidth and connectivity are not always guaranteed, we wanted to ensure users had access to a lightweight alternative instruction tool they could easily print out and save for future reference.

Behaviors of Concern

The core content of the app addresses 18 behaviors of concern that supervisors may observe and that should be addressed, listed in Figure 2. These behaviors were adapted from current policies that address supervisor reporting obligations (e.g., Memorandum 00608-17, DSD, 2017; DoDM 2500.02, 2017; SEAD-4; SEAD-3). Behaviors of concern encompass a variety of areas: workplace violence, mental health, performance, counter-intelligence, and workplace conduct among others, as these are covered by one or more DoD policies. SMEs helped curate the final list of behaviors.

Figure 2: Behaviors of Concern

Threats of violence	Harassment	Intimidation	Bullying	Conflicts with coworkers
Fixation on violence	Suicidal ideation, substance abuse	Abrupt behavior changes	Fixation on weapons	Violent behavior toward others or property
Stalking, disregard for rules, policies, or standard operating procedures (SOPs)	Disruptive behavior	Poor performance	Delusional or paranoid behavior	Abrupt change in appearance
	Financial concerns	Misuse of government property	Frequent unexcused absences	

As a supplement to this section, we created a learning module, *A Guide to Concerning Behavior*. This module outlines the various behaviors of concern that supervisors may encounter in the workplace, highlights the relationship between concerning employee behaviors and workplace safety, and discusses the importance of management intervention. This module introduces research on the critical pathway, a multifaceted pathway that an individual may go through that leads them to commit a hostile act (Shaw & Sellers, 2015). Four components, one of which is concerning behaviors, play a vital role in the pathway, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Critical Pathway

PERSONAL PREDISPOSITIONS
– Medical/Psychiatric Conditions
– Personality or Social Skills Issues
– Previous Rule Violations
– Social Network Risks

+

STRESSORS
– Personal
– Professional
– Financial

+

CONCERNING BEHAVIORS
– Interpersonal – Personnel
– Technical – Mental Health
– Security – Social Network
– Financial – Travel

+

POOR ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSE
– Inattention
– No Risk Assessment Process
– Inadequate Investigation
– Summary Dismissal or Other Actions that Escalate Risk

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HOSTILE ACT

Adapted from Shaw, E., Sellers, L., Application of the Critical-Path Method to Evaluate Insider Risks, *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol 59, No. 2

As mentioned previously, supervisors are often the first line of defense for organizations and their employees. When employees display concerning behaviors in the workplace, it is most often up to the supervisor to engage with the employee and institutional resources to address and correct those behaviors. The behavior may continue and potentially escalate if little or nothing is done. This poses a risk to the organization and can result in an employee engaging in destructive acts (e.g., bullying, intimidation, lack of concern for security policies, misuse of government property) or, in some cases, acts of workplace violence (e.g., mass shootings), negatively affecting the productivity, safety, and

well-being of the workforce. This module helps supervisors understand their critical role in diverting a troubled employee from a potentially destructive path.

Supervisor Resources

As part of the core content there is a dedicated page that provides supervisors with courses of action and engagement options, which are displayed in Figure 4 below. These are institutional resources that can assist supervisors in handling behaviors of concern. The section is intended to inform supervisors of each resource's general process in addressing employees' behavior. Resources and actions were identified from current policies and procedures, as well as from SMEs from offices representing these institutional resources, such as Human Resources Labor Management and Employee Relations, the Office of the Ombudsman, and the Prevention Assistance and Response program.
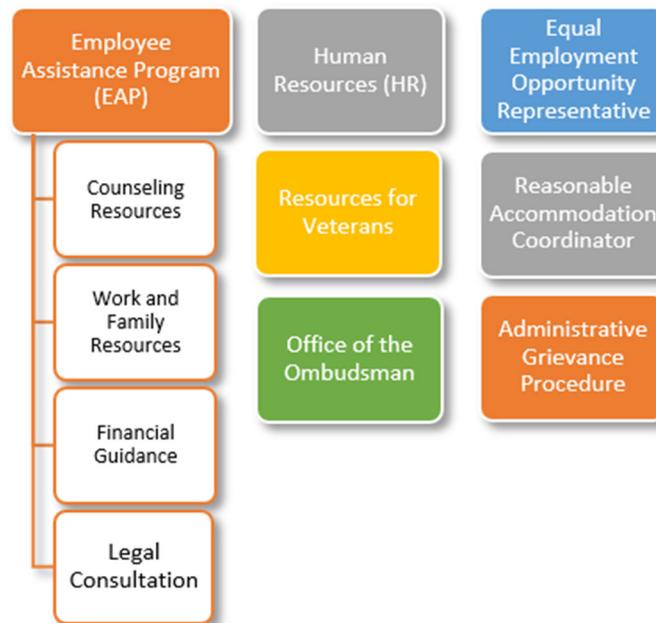
Figure 4: Supervisor Resources

As a supplement to this section, we created the Supervisor Resources learning module, describing the first steps a supervisor can take when concerned about an employee's behavior. The module reinforces the idea that documenting concerning employee behaviors and communicating with the employee are necessary first steps to respond to most behaviors of concern. This module also identifies specific employees or departments that a supervisor can engage for support and advice as shown in Figure 4. It also provides information about supervisor reporting obligation policies. By learning what the rules are, supervisors can take appropriate actions to make the workplace safer and protect themselves, their employees, and their organization.

Employee Resources

The employee resources page provides employee-relevant resources, shown in Figure 5 below. Supervisors can share these resources with their employees as appropriate. There are many counseling, legal, and conflict-resolution resources that employees can confidentially access on their own, and supervisors can play a role in referring them to the resources that could help. Resources were included based on their direct relation to fostering employee wellness. Resources were identified from current policies and procedures, as well as from SME input collected for the Supervisor Resources. The list of employee resources largely mirrored the Supervisor Resources section. Should the supervisor choose to refer the employee, it provides information the supervisor could use to sell an employee on the value of the resource.

Figure 5: Employee Resources

Finally, we created a learning module to supplement the Employee Resources section, *Employee and Organizational Wellness.* This module familiarizes supervisors with a variety of wellness resources and the processes for engaging them. These resources can help supervisors overcome barriers to working with employees on behaviors of concern. Barriers include fear of harming the employee, not knowing how to take action and what the outcome of inaction will be, not understanding the personnel management process, and fearing retaliation.

Supervisors provide a support system for the employees they manage. They are in a unique position to support an employee in need because they have direct insight into their work roles and responsibilities. They are better able to understand the employee's perspective on workload and stressors and direct them to helpful resources. Taking action early is one way supervisors can promote both organizational and employee wellness. Personal predispositions and stressors often combine to produce behaviors of concern in employees. Accessing these resources can empower employees to take control of their issues and deal with them productively.

Project Approach

To create this application, we used a multi-faceted, iterative approach. First, we created a design document that listed the objectives, intended design, intended content and specifications for the app. The design document was revised several times to incorporate feedback from project members and the client. Once the design document was finalized, the team then created each section of the core content, learning modules and videos. These individual components were then sent to both SMEs and supervisors.

Subject Matter Expert Interviews

We interviewed a mix of insider threat and human resources professionals to ensure that the app included a blend of resources, strategies, and possible team members that supervisors could

reasonably expect to be available through their organization. To recruit SMEs, we leveraged the Threat Lab's network of experts, professionals, and practitioners. We also connected with the same SMEs who participated in the second phase. Eight SMEs provided information for product development and reviewed app content. These SMEs reviewed researcher-produced content for clarity and accuracy and we solicited them for additional content that could be included in the learning modules. SMEs were contacted via email and interviews were conducted via phone. We took notes during the interviews and sent them to interviewees to confirm they had accurately recorded their thoughts. Where needed, the research team contacted SMEs for follow-up interviews as the project developed.

User Testing

This application went through a thorough user testing process involving DoD supervisors who served as SMEs in phase two research. These were the same SMEs who found deficiencies in their organizational processes around supervisor reporting and identifying behaviors of concern. In total, we conducted user testing with six DoD supervisors in virtual sessions. We set up virtual sessions via ZoomGov where participants were asked to share their screens so we could follow along with user action as they accomplished tasks.

The SMEs provided their feedback on the app and its design in one live session per SME. Users were asked to accomplish several tasks, including responding to a sample scenario of an employee's behavior of concern. They were asked to navigate through the app to find resources and generate resource plans. Overall, users reported that the tool is useful for a supervisor dealing with an employee who displays concerning behavior. We logged user-reported issues regarding navigation, clarity, and design, and addressed them as part of a change log for the next iteration of the app design.

Future Directions

As the largest Federal agency, DoD is too big and diverse for a single application to cover all existing information about behaviors of concern and supervisor reporting requirements. But there are DoD-wide resources that supervisors should be aware of, and an application, such as this one, that ties these resources together can help supervisors overcome obstacles to maintaining a productive and safe workplace. This application is not intended to replace or countermand any organizational policies. Its purpose is to point supervisors in the right direction and provide value-added coaching on why concerning behaviors are important to identify, address, and report.

Although this application meets many of the recommendations from phase one and phase two research and received positive feedback from user testers, further work is required. Calibrating an app that can be applied uniformly across DoD and still provide meaningful advice is challenging. Further research is required on whether this application can be adapted to particular components or if it needs to remain at the DoD enterprise level.

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