

Executive Protection Amid Evolving Threats

TAG's Three Lessons from the Frontlines

The full motive behind the tragic killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in midtown Manhattan last week remains unclear, but the nature of his death underscores the need for risk assessment and mitigation to remain paramount in business operations. Thompson did not carry the same high-profile name recognition as Apple's Tim Cook or Meta's Mark Zuckerberg. Yet, his killing was almost certainly premediated and highlights that any business leader—or their family—can draw ire or hostility and readily become a target.

Technology and the proliferation of real-time information via social media make it easier to track someone's pattern-of-life and uncover potential security vulnerabilities. These forces, among others, can embolden malicious actors to perpetrate attacks, especially against targets deemed "soft" and representative of a broader industry, entity, ideology, or group.

Firms have a duty-of-care to their employees, and especially those employees who have public-facing, higher-profile roles. These leaders are accessible and their movements can often be pieced together and anticipated through social media, press releases, or other public information. Geography matters, and risks to the same employee will evolve whether they are in Manhattan, Montevideo, or Manila.

Reflecting on this year's dynamic risk environment and the numerous assassinations and attempts in 2024, TAG founder and chairman Jack Devine notes:

"Command security alertness is critical. Security teams need to understand all their potential threats as well as any hostile groups or individuals including their intentions and their capabilities. They also need to prepare accordingly to ensure safe outcomes for business leaders and their families."

In the aftermath of Thompson's killing, and amid an ever-evolving global risk landscape, firms and individuals are reevaluating their security posture. Here are TAG's top three lessons, drawn from the rich and storied experience of our staff:

1. Persistent threat monitoring is the bedrock of sound protection operations.

Ongoing intelligence collection and analysis can reveal threats well before they manifest into a life- or business-alerting incident. To do this effectively requires a combination of persistent technological monitoring of open-source, deep-web, and dark-web sources paired with human intelligence reporting. Understanding what active threats exist, from which actors, and then validating their seriousness and capabilities is foundational to any protection operation and can inform mitigation strategies and planning.

2. Mitigation measures should reflect risk assessments and threat monitoring.

There are countless mitigation measures—from personal security details, to biometric entry systems, to armored vehicles—that can protect an individual, their family, and their property from myriad threats. These measures must accurately reflect the risk an individual faces and be sufficiently responsive to specific threats. Right-sizing this is critical. Too many mitigation measures can become arduous for the individual or family under protection, reflect an aura of inaccessibility that may be inconsistent with their desired profile, and prove expensive. Too few measures, however, can spell disaster. Each mitigation plan is unique, and requires a careful blending of tactical, strategic, and geopolitical insights.

3. Updated and regularly reviewed protocols and training can maximize positive outcomes.

A mantra is often repeated among intelligence and military professionals: slow is smooth, and smooth is fast. When an incident occurs, having the appropriate protocols and preparation can make all the difference. Protocols serve as a tried and tested fallback amid uncertainty, and it behooves executive protection teams to regularly review, update, and internalize protocols. Protocols must reflect the risk and be responsive to specific threats. Similarly, training—for both security teams and the persons under protection—can prove lifesaving. Regular training should be tailored to the circumstances and can maximize the likelihood of a positive outcome should an incident occur.

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