



FROM THE FRONT-LINE ASSOCIATE TO THE C-SUITE

Building Safety and Trust in the Retail Environment

Effective communication, interpersonal skills, and strategic planning are key.

While safety and crime issues continue to challenge retailers on a number of fronts, the need for engaged, committed team members dedicated to creating memorable customer experiences has never been more vital to success. Retail executives, loss prevention specialists, and crisis prevention experts share key areas of training, development, and support necessary for both enhancing safety and building a culture of trust and engagement.



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Against the backdrop of increasing concerns about safety and crime and the need for engaged, committed team members dedicated to creating memorable customer experiences, brick-and-mortar retailers are hitting an inflection point: We must make it easier for field leaders to communicate more effectively, seek input from their direct reports, and respond to retail associates in a way that they feel heard.

MOHR Retail has been gathering together retail executives, loss prevention specialists, and crisis prevention experts to talk about these business challenges and risks retailers are facing today. In October 2023, we convened a group of panelists for a webinar discussing best practices for [keeping retail associates and customers safe](#). The following February, we continued the conversation with a webinar focusing in on some of the key areas of training, development, and support necessary for enhancing safety and building a culture of trust.

Presenters and participants in both of these webinars have shared a number of thought-provoking lessons from their experiences as well as practical strategies for creating a safe and welcoming environment for retail associates, leaders, and customers alike.

What follows are highlights and key takeaways from February's webinar, which featured a dynamic trio of panelists:

- Susan Driscoll, President, Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI)
- Jennifer Kajzer, Senior Assets Protection Director East Coast, Target Corporation
- Tim Murfin, Senior Director Asset Protection Operations, Southeastern Grocers

Once again, many thanks to all of our panelists who have generously contributed their time, voices, and insights to this critical discussion.

Mary Beth Garcia, CEO
MOHR Retail



Key Trends

From theft, [organized retail crime](#), and safety issues to economic and political uncertainty, retailers are up against a number of [headwinds](#) today, particularly at the store level. At the same time, retail stores are projected to see their strongest pace of growth since the pandemic, with [The Economist](#) forecasting that brick-and-mortar stores will account for over 85% of total retail sales in 2024. To capitalize on this opportunity, retailers need to create environments where customers and frontline associates alike feel safe, supported, and heard.

We also know that personalization and enhanced in-store customer experiences are increasingly important to today's shoppers, and it takes [engaged, happy associates](#) to deliver the memorable experiences and superior service they expect. All of our panelists agree that it's imperative for retailers to focus on attracting, developing, and retaining people with a commitment to service excellence, and that leaders need to make sure the organizational culture provides a foundation of support and trust so they can be successful.

Key Insights and Takeaways

Creating a Culture of Trust: Measure and Invest in What Matters



"We have this strategy in the organization that we like to call boardroom to breakroom, and we really do live in an environment of trust. You have to have trust in order to get engagement, and safety is a core component to that."

— Tim Murfin, Senior Director Asset Protection Operations, Southeastern Grocers

Both Southeastern Grocers and Target have been recognized by *Forbes* as great places to work, and in both organizations, an emphasis on safety and trust have helped contribute to those designations.

Tim Murfin of Southeastern Grocers emphasizes that maintaining a safe place to work goes hand in hand with maintaining high trust and engagement among team members. The company has placed a priority on building and sustaining this culture by making it a key pillar of the organization's strategy. In other words, "putting people first" is more than a motto or words in a handbook; it's foundational to the way the Southeastern Grocers does business. Murfin says this people-first approach is central to his organization's



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goals and integrated into performance evaluations. Leaders are measured on how they show up and how effective they are in engaging their associates, creating trust, and fostering a safe place to work.

“We spend a great deal of time listening to our teams to ensure that they feel safe, not only in their stores but in their communities.”

– Jennifer Kajzer, Senior Assets Protection Director East Coast, Target Corporation

Retailers that are praised for being great places to work are very intentional about prioritizing these issues, both strategically and financially. Jennifer Kajzer notes that Target makes safety a priority for their teams, guests, and communities by investing in training as well as a strategy that supports public safety engagement and that leverages public policies, partnerships, and targeted advocacy.

Adds Murfin, “Policy is a baseline for trust, because it helps set that expectation with the associate on what is reasonable behavior in that specific part of the business, and then what to expect from the business if that’s violated. When you have the baseline of a policy, you can start building out procedure around that and then training as well.”

Equip Leaders with Tools and Strategies

Of course, policy is meaningless if it’s not enforced. Ultimately, it’s retail leaders who set the tone, and through their own actions and behaviors, they either foster or chip away at trust every day. It’s critical that retailers hold leaders accountable to taking necessary action as well as encouraging people to come to them with concerns.

Frontline associates typically are the first to become aware of a complex issue and have a better sense of what’s going on or where pockets of problems exist. They need to know their manager is going to listen to them and wants their input. If they don’t feel encouraged to speak up or if their concerns go ignored, situations can escalate, trust will be damaged, and everyone’s safety will be put at risk.



It's worth noting, safety isn't the only thing that can be compromised when trust breaks down. If leaders aren't open to hearing associates' concerns and suggestions, they could be missing out on all kinds of ideas that could enhance the shopping experience and increase customer loyalty.

For all of these reasons, retailers need to focus on developing and advancing the communication and interpersonal skills of their store leaders, assistants, and leads. Leaders need to understand how to listen and communicate effectively with diverse employees and customers so that they can earn their trust, learn about problems early on, and take appropriate steps to mitigate situations.

As Kajzer says, “Our interactions matter. They matter greatly with how we interact with each other as team members and with how we interact with our guests and vendors. And it's super important that we're aware of what that interaction looks like supporting our team members.”



She adds that the responsibility extends beyond the store leaders to the multiunit leaders as well. Leaders across the organization need to be equipped with the tools, skills, and strategies to keep situations from escalating and to keep associates safe, productive, and engaged.

De-escalation Is a Form of Service

Susan Driscoll of the Crisis Prevention Institute observes that today's high-stress world has had a significant impact on all of us. "People carry that stress into their shopping experiences. And similarly, workers are very stressed out. There's a lot that we all have to deal with, that we all have to carry."

CPI's training focuses on crisis intervention and de-escalation skills to help people recognize the early stages of a crisis, reduce challenging behavior, and prevent future incidents. The goal is for associates to understand that they play a vital role with their own self-regulation and their own ability to stay calm in the face of danger and to give them tools and skills to cope and thrive.

"Understanding that we both have these precipitating factors enables us to separate what's happening in the moment from all that other baggage, and to take what's happening in the moment purely at face value, and not to get agitated because it's happening."

— Susan Driscoll, President, Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI)

In retail in particular, Driscoll says, "What we're hearing is that de-escalation is actually a form of service. Managers of retail workers can see what happens when there is an agitated customer who's coming at an employee, and the employee unwittingly escalates the situation through their response. So we focus on training the associates to detach from the situation and really focus on what's happening and how to respond."

Empower Associates Through Ongoing Training

"We were entering a pretty volatile election season, and some of that social anxiety comes into the commerce space and in our stores. Now's the time to prepare. I would recommend that everybody take the time right now to reevaluate any procedures you've put in place and how you communicated with your associates when there were events in the past, and how you're going to communicate with your associates during those times in the future."

— Tim Murfin, Southeastern Grocers

Each person plays a vital role in de-escalating a situation through their own ability to remain composed in the face of danger. Driscoll advises retailers to ensure that crisis training includes instruction on how to cope, self-regulate, and stay calm. Associates need to recognize the fact that crisis situations are emotional, not rational, events and keep this in mind when it comes to how they respond to people at various stages of a crisis.

Kajzer says Target uses scenario-based training to give associates practice working through many different complex situations so they'll be prepared to deal with a variety of different encounters. Additionally, both Kajzer and Driscoll stress that retailers should make sure people understand



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they don't have to personally handle a situation if they're not comfortable doing so. Training should emphasize the importance of bringing in support when necessary.

"If they don't feel like they can handle the situation, we teach them that it's okay," Kajzer says. "Step away. Bring in someone else, whether that's asset protection or another leader, to assist them."

All of our panelists underscored the need for regular training and refreshers to ensure team members have the confidence and skills to handle complex situations productively and to reinforce the retailer's commitment to maintaining a high-trust, safe place to work. These emotional skills, aligned with a strong understanding of protocols, will create the best possible outcomes.

Murfin's organization relies on technology like the [Axonify](#) platform for regular push messaging, updates, reinforcement training, and microlearning that can be highly targeted where it's most needed and relevant while also sending a consistent message across the business.

Adds Driscoll, "You build culture by giving everyone a baseline and then giving the managers small activities, practices, or microlearning, especially during times when escalations are likely — for example, around the holiday or return season or going into the election. Think about how you can give people more reinforcement and practice and make it very relevant to a specific moment in time."

Don't Neglect the Human Side of Training



"Make sure that you're listening to your teams, your colleagues, your guests. What are they telling you about their experiences and your communities? You really need to understand how they feel and also align with key leaders in those communities and collaborate with them."

— Jennifer Kajzer, Target

By equipping your team members with the necessary foundational knowledge, behaviors, and strategies, you are setting them up for better outcomes. Invest in your store leaders and associates by developing their skills and their confidence to take productive action should a crisis situation arise.

Part of this involves celebrating successes along the way, Driscoll says. Make a point to highlight when a team member is successful and share it broadly, whether it's in bulletin boards or a district newsletter. Recognize the person by name and ensure they feel supported in their success. Not only will this encourage more of the productive behavior you want to see and create a more engaged associate, it will also help educate others on how to respond in similar situations.



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And if an associate fails to react in the most productive way during a tense situation, be patient with them. Self-regulation and staying calm don't always come naturally to everyone. Give team members grace as you work to integrate these skills into your protocols and responses.

Often, we get so caught up in processes and checking boxes that we forget the human side of training, especially crisis training. Retail training is more than just a line item on your to-do list. We have to bring empathy and kindness into the equation and remember that all team members are humans, with all the stresses, frustrations, and other challenges that entails on any given day. Your training will fall flat if you don't find the space and the patience to productively coach the whole person and educate on the "soft skills" that are needed in tandem with knowledge of protocols and processes.

As Driscoll says, "The biggest gift you can give someone is the confidence that when something happens, they know what to do."

It's a gift that will result in more highly engaged, highly committed associates who are able to focus on delivering your customers more of the personalized, memorable experiences and superior levels of service that are essential to your business's success.

ABOUT MOHR RETAIL



For more than 30 years, [MOHR Retail](#) has developed the critical people-to-people skills needed to create results in the retail industry—and we're just getting started. Through innovative classroom, online and virtual learning methods, as well as our ongoing national retail research projects, we continue to stay on top of the trends so we can fuel the success of specialty stores, chain stores, outlets, off price, department stores, spas, fitness centers and more. Nowhere does learning meet experience as it does in a MOHR Retail training program.

Learn more about [why retailers choose MOHR](#) and how [our interpersonal skills training](#) helps retailers stay ahead of disruption.