

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE
Practical Ways to Prevent Incidents
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In America, violence is on the upsurge and companies across the country are not immune to the phenomenon. Workplaces across the nation are being targeted by laid-off employees, over stressed workers, and angry customers. Incidents in offices and on corporate campuses, traditionally considered to be invulnerable as targets of violence, have increased as violence has moved from the streets to the workplace.

In 1994, Northwestern National Life Insurance Company (NWNL) conducted a study on violence in the workplace. The results showed that:

- **Violence affects one in four employees**
- **In 1993, more than 2 million people were attacked on the job**
- **In the same year, 6 million people were threatened with violence on the job**
- **And, 16 million people were harassed resulting in injury, illness or emotional distress**
- **Attackers were identified as customers (44%), strangers (24%), co-workers (20%), bosses (7%) and former employees (3%)**

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), **15 murders occur each week in the workplace**. This figure makes murder the third largest cause of death on the job in the United States. **(And, for women, murder is the number one cause of death at work.)** In 1992, NIOSH reported more than 750 workplace homicides; 75% of which involved firearms.

Besides murder, workplace violence takes numerous forms. Beatings, injuries, rapes, psychological trauma, shootings, stabbings, suicides, attempted suicides, mental health problems, destruction of property, and theft that involves violence are all part of the spectrum of violent work site activities.

Apart from the cost of pain, suffering, and loss of life, violence in the workplace has a resounding short term and long-range economic impact on businesses. It disrupts worker productivity and revenues are adversely affected. And, it costs companies millions of dollars in rising health care costs, legal liabilities for death, injuries, and traumatic stress, and increased workers' compensation fees. ***For example, the National Safe Workplace Institute in Chicago estimated that employers paid \$4.2 billion in lost work and legal expenses due to workplace violence in 1992.***

CAUSES OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

According to experts, there are many reasons associated with the increase in workplace violence. The economic climate, job stress, drug abuse, multiculturalism, and layoffs are but a few contributors.

Since the booming 1980's, the economic climate turned harsh. A recession was followed by a slow recovery. Merger and acquisition activity decreased the number of available jobs and increased competition for those jobs. Fewer job openings for baby boomers, a large portion of today's workforce, intensified normal job stress. Unemployment, driven by a profusion of layoffs, has risen. For those who are employed, the promotion ladder is crippled, raises are restricted, and benefits dwindled. This chain of events has resulted in increased stress and anxiety, possible precursors to fierce reactions.

Even though there has been legislation to prevent workplace discrimination, cultural diversity is another contributor to workplace violence. The racial and ethnic prejudices of individuals are still brought to work. Changing demographics, e.g., the increase in the number of female workers, has contributed to jealousy in work settings and the potential for violence.

It is well known that alcohol and substance abuse flame violent behavior in some people. Although employers have done much to prevent work site abuses, the situation cannot be escaped and remains a threat in America's organizations.

The myth of "cradle to grave" employment with one company is a thing of the past. Our business climate is in constant flux while layoffs and downsizing are commonplace. Jobs are not guaranteed anymore and employees know this. They worry about survival in a company. For the average employee who views work as merely one part of their life, facing a layoff is traumatic. Their home, car, savings, and child's college education fund are jeopardized. ***There are those employees who derive their total***

sense of identity and self-esteem from their job. The workplace becomes the center of their universe. When faced with a layoff, their self-esteem and sense of purpose are diminished, the trauma is very severe, and the possibility of a violent reaction is triggered.

All of these reasons are potential sources of violence creating tragic outcomes. Acts of violence against current or former employers, managers, supervisors or co-workers can explode from built up and unventilated stress. The pressures of today's job climate may prompt an already traumatized employee or former employee to commit an act of rage. Peggy Lawless, NWNL's research director, stated that, "Factors contributing to violence in the workplace are continuing to increase, especially stress and layoffs."

WORKPLACE FACTORS LINKED TO VIOLENCE

There are different factors that can lead to incidents of violence. Personality conflicts between an employee and their direct supervisor, layoffs, mergers and acquisitions, firings or being passed over for promotion can induce violent acts.

Stress and burnout are not unusual in today's work environment. *Many employees feel powerless when faced with continuous changes in their organization.* They may be asking, "Who is in charge of what?" and, be faced with role ambiguity and unclear expectations about their tasks. While changes continue, employees experience less influence, buck up against bureaucratic decision-making and face extreme work overload.

The culture or climate of the company may be a link to workplace violence. Employees sometimes feel powerless within the structure of their company. Senior management may be viewed as insensitive, especially if there is little opportunity for communication between senior management and employees. *Employees want to have a voice in their organization and are frustrated if the company is rigid and unreceptive to their ideas and concerns.*

Furthermore, the organization's culture may be reflected in a department's culture. For example, if a manager shows little confidence in his or her staff, does not accept their ideas, is unclear in setting responsibilities, or does not acknowledge their direct reports' contributions, personality conflicts may arise.

With the increase in workplace violence, much research has been done on the subject. Violent workplace behavior has been found to be linked to different causal factors such

as stress, organizational changes, and layoffs.

In the following pages warning signals of violent behavior, a profile of the violent employee, eight steps for prevention, and check lists for action plans are provided to help a company cope with threats to workplace safety.

PREDICTORS OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOR

Employers need to be acutely aware of warning signals if and when they appear in the workplace. Experts agree that there are actions or conditions that predict violent behavior. Some of these warning signs are:

- Overt threats of violence, e.g., verbally describing what the potentially violent person plans to do
- Changes in habits
- Threatening actions, e.g., intimidating others
- Alcohol and substance dependence
- Expressing unusual or bizarre thoughts
- A fixation with weapons or showing off or brandishing a weapon
- A romantic obsession
- Emotional depression

Moreover, experts advise that the violent or about to be violent employee usually gives some hints that s/he is about to do something. They also agree that there is a profile of the typical perpetrator of violent actions in the work environment.

According to the National Safe Workplace Institute of Chicago, most violent employees possess a majority, although not all, of these characteristics:

- Male
- 35 years or older
- Has lost his job or perceives he will soon lose his job
- Has been terminated in an insensitive manner

- Self esteem is linked to his job
- Is withdrawn and a loner
- Has difficulty in accepting authority
- Tends to blame others for problems
- Possible substance abuse history
- History of depression or paranoia
- Talks about his or others= past history of violence
- Has a history of problems relating to people, e.g., conflicts
- May be in the midst of a private crisis, e.g., a divorce or death of a family member
- Continuously violates company policies and rules
- Threatens employees or supervisors
- Fascinated with weapons; owns a weapon
- History of violence or encounters with violence; possible military history
- Employer has an authoritarian management style

Researchers have asked perpetrators of violence what compelled them to become violent. ***They report that it was not necessarily a demotion or being laid off. Rather, they cite the way they were demoted, laid off or terminated, that is, the dehumanizing way the activity was carried out.*** Psychologist Thomas Harpley, with the National Trauma Services in San Diego, stated that for individuals who are terminated and then turn violent, ***"Their life is their job. When their job is in jeopardy, their life is in jeopardy."***

VIOLENCE PREVENTION

The Occupational Health and Safety Act (OSHA) of 1970 requires employers to provide safe and healthful working conditions. Therefore, it is in an organization's best legal interest to take measures to prevent violence. Roy Blitzer and Steven Knight of Zenger-Miller, Inc. and Gary Freitas of Behavioral Health Associates have developed an eight-step violence prevention plan. It does not require the complete restructuring of a company. Rather, the plan is especially useful because it can help management improve already existing crisis prevention measures.

The plan's steps are:

1. Make prevention a top priority.
2. Review physical security.
3. Assess which employees are at high risk for violence (using warning signals list).
4. Establish written policies and procedures.
5. Train all supervisors to recognize the warning signs of potentially violent employees.
6. Develop policies for hiring and firing.
7. Develop programs to help former employees, e.g., EAP and severance packages.
8. Plan to deal with the media.

Next are action check lists that cover the operational details of this eight-step prevention program so a company can proactively cope with violence in the workplace.

Action Plan Check Lists

Following are extensive checklists for an integrated violence prevention program. They include a wide ranging menu of elements to chose from. They can be used in full or part according to specific needs. It is important to integrate the elements chosen into a proactive plan, train all supervisors, and enforce the company=s crisis prevent plan.

Company Culture

- Adopt a zero-tolerance policy for violence in the workplace
- Develop a written policy that prohibits violence, threats of violence and intimidation by employees by coworkers or any other persons doing business with the company
- Make it clear that policy violators will face discipline up to and including termination

- Encourage open and frequent communication between employees, managers, and senior executive staff
- Give employees adequate control over their work
- Develop a company-wide harassment policy

Selection Process (including permanent, part-time and contract employees) Note: Research shows substantial controversy concerning selection processes. Some employers use psychological tests to screen out potentially violent applicants. Some researchers argue that the predictive value of such tests have not been validated. Furthermore, the Americans With Disability Act (ADA) disallows the use of pre-offer medical screening.

- Investigate the applicant's arrest and conviction record, credit reports, and character references in accordance with the laws of your State
- Set up a pre-employment screening system to identify potential behavioral problems; conduct competency tests; use behavior-based interviewing
- Conduct drug testing
- Contract with an outside firm to conduct background checks
- Carefully construct an application form to trace applicant's work history

Performance Evaluation Process

- Ensure that performance evaluation is tied to critical job components
- Train managers and supervisors in evaluation skills
- Train managers and supervisors in feedback skills

Termination Process

- Establish and use guidelines
- Consider using an outplacement firm for terminations due to layoffs

- Conduct terminations by personnel trained in termination procedures
- Ensure that process is not humiliating or disrespectful to terminated employee
- Check guidelines with labor attorney; consult with an outplacement firm on proper termination procedures
- Require that badges, parking passes, keys, etc. be returned
- Use an enhanced severance package to soften the blow of a layoff
- Provide laid off employees assistance in their job search
- Provide career and personal counseling for laid off employees
- Provide advance notice to employees about layoffs due to downsizing
- Conduct exit interviews; use exit interviews to identify potentially violent responses to layoffs
- Keep track of terminated employees

Customer Focus

- Stress customer service; resolve customer complaints
- Keep track of customers who are inveterate complainers

Physical Property

- Improve and upgrade internal and external lighting
- Provide panic buttons or squawk boxes in enclosed parking garages
- Provide an escort service to the parking lot after hours
- Control access to the company by laid off and former employees

Communication

- Take all threats and hate comments seriously
- Establish internal procedures to handle grievances (check with in-house counsel and psychologists to be sure the rules are legally and psychologically sound)
- Ensure that all employees are informed of the availability of the grievance procedures
- Provide ID badges for all employees and visitors, including contract employees
- Insist that all staff report suspicious individuals or activities
- Promptly deal with all allegations of harassment
- Promptly deal with all employee conflicts

Employee Assistant Program (EAP)

- Establish an EAP program to provide counseling and referral help to employees with personal, family, marital, and financial problems
- Offer confidential psychological counseling to frustrated or troubled employees

Training

- Train all supervisors to recognize the signs of a troubled employee and to detect early warning signals that may lead to violence
- Train managers to be neutral and non-personal in informing employees of a termination or layoff
- Educate all supervisors on how to diffuse aggressive behavior from co-workers or customers

Crisis Plan

- Establish a crisis management or threat assessment team with personnel from

human resources, medical, EAP, security, and legal departments to design an integrated crisis management plan

- Ensure that the crisis plan includes how to report an incident, to whom reports should be made (e.g., law enforcement), how to maintain the safety of unaffected employees, and how to deal with the media
- Train all supervisors in what to do in the event of a violent incident
- Provide escape routes, emergency telephone numbers and self-defense information
- Provide on-scene counseling immediately following a violent incident
- File copies of the crisis plan in the CEO's, Human Resource, EAP, and Security offices

Post-Crisis Plan

- Be aware that there are three stages following a violent incident:
 - Shock, disbelief, and denial;
 - A cataclysm of emotions; and
 - Reconstruction of equilibrium.
 - Develop a two-pronged post-crisis plan focused on the immediate post-crisis period and long-term evaluation process
 - Provide counseling to employees who feel they have been affected by the violent incident
 - In assessing the incident, ask, "What was done right?" "What was done wrong?" and "How can we improve our procedures should a similar incident occur in the future?"
- T Establish a post-incident analysis process to mitigate future liability

Summary

It is critical that organizations establish preventative tools to mitigate a potentially

violent incident, especially when there are terminations, layoffs and plant closings. Contingency plans to handle potential violence should be developed. The lack of a formal crisis prevention plan, training to deal with violent situations, and a threat assessment team can leave your organization vulnerable to significant litigation.

With the ever-increasing frequency of violence in the workplace, it cannot be ignored. It can and does happen on a regular basis. After an employee killed three co-workers at a bank in Bethesda, MD, A.L. Weide, Vice Present of Human Resources warned, **"It can happen to you. My greatest hope is that it won't; my greatest fear is that it will."**

There are real and hidden costs to workplace violence, neither of which can be precisely predicted. The best defense, however, is to recognize potential problems as early as possible and thereby avoid the psychological and monetary expense of workplace violence. This can be achieved through planning, training, and enforcement of an integrated crisis management plan.

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