

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE – CAN WE DO MORE TO PREVENT IT?

By

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Foremost on the mind of every human resource executive is keeping the organization afloat in the face of vigorous and unrelenting challenges - all this while adrift in a sea of uncertainties over the economy, outside scrutiny and a multitude of internal issues. It's the internal issues, more specifically the *people* problems that can occasionally go awry. Workplace violence sits on the extreme end of the scale of people problems. Although rare, a single fatal incident of workplace violence subjects innocent people to unimaginable horror, exposes the host organization to nation-wide attention of the most negative nature, and leaves it reeling in an aftermath of legal problems that can endure for years. Many such incidents have occurred across the country.

On December 26, 2000, Michael McDermott, a 46-year-old software engineer at Edgewater Technologies, seeking revenge for a recent IRS wage garnishment, used an AK-47, an awesome weapon of war, to take the lives of seven innocent employees.

Five weeks later, a terminated employee entered his former workplace in Melrose Park, Illinois and systematically shot nine employees, killing five before shooting himself.

On July 8, 2003, an employee of a defense contractor in Meridian, Mississippi shot fourteen fellow employees, killing six before taking his own life.

More recently, on July 2, 2004, an angry employee at a Kansas City meat packing plant shot eight fellow employees, killing five, before committing suicide.

Following every incident, the powerful engine of the media rumbled to life to expose millions of viewers to real-time images of the bloody aftermath. This no doubt hampered every organization's return to normality.

Internal violence has always been a workplace security issue, but concern for workplace security peaked in the days following September 11, 2001. People began to fear the foreign terrorist threat to the exclusion of threats that were more real. Fatal incidents of workplace violence, on the other hand, continued unaffected by those catastrophic events. In fact, since that fateful day, a total of 88 fatal incidents of workplace violence have occurred across America resulting in the deaths of 144 people and the wounding of 98 more – not at the hands of foreign terrorists, but at the hands of people we hired, nurtured and trusted with a key to the office. Current employees were 43.6% of the killers while 22.5% were former employees. Domestic violence accounted for 21.4% of the fatalities while violence from clients accounted for the balance of 12.5%.

This ought to send a message that workplace violence must be addressed. This is supported by a 2002 survey of corporate security professionals who identified workplace violence as the "...greatest single security threat facing organizations – above international terrorism..."

So what are organizations doing about it? First the good news - thankfully, some in the human resource profession have taken the issue seriously and have made some strides in dealing with the problem through the establishment of policy and the application of sound employee acquisition practices. As a result, many organizations are beginning to screen applicants with violence prevention in mind.

Now the bad news – there is a woeful lack of violence prevention awareness where it is needed the most – among managers and first-line supervisors. These people are the eyes and ears of every organization. They see every person within their area of responsibility every single day and are more likely than anyone else to observe a potentially violent situation in its earliest stages. But according to a 1999 survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, only 35% of organizations train managers and supervisors to identify the warning signs of violent behavior.

It is not enough to have an anti-violence policy on the wall and an employee manual on the shelf that purports to address the problem. While

basic workplace violence awareness training would suffice for employees, managers and first-line supervisors should be provided formal instruction in basic threat assessment and the identification of the warning signs of impending violence. They must be instructed in proper documentation and reporting techniques and to recognize and eliminate organizational risk factors that have led to violence in other organizations. They must also be instructed in defusing hostile employees so as to prevent an angry outburst from escalating into violence.

No organization can afford to maintain a climate of negligence where lives of innocent people hang in the balance. In 1999, a jury awarded \$7.9 million dollars to the families of two men killed in a workplace violence incident in North Carolina. According to the attorney for the family, "...This man was a ticking time bomb and the management knew it, yet they did nothing to protect their employees..." (Associated Press, May 5, 1999).

Nearly all fatal workplace violence incidents have been followed by lawsuits brought by the aggrieved families of the victims. In the period of fact-finding that follows, organizations are legally

compelled to provide information to the parties bringing suit. Managers and supervisors closest to the tragedy are often called to attest to their lack of awareness of violence prevention issues while management officials have been required to testify, under oath, as to their organization's failure to prevent the tragedy. As a result, many organizations have agreed to secret multi-million dollar settlements rather than to make a public admission of negligence. No human resource executive would relish having to take the witness stand to defend such a failure.

The cost of a single fatal incident of workplace violence far exceeds the minor cost of the training that may have prevented it. With this in mind, it is possible to establish a safe and peaceful work environment by training those who need it the most. Once achieved, employees are free to be productive, knowing that their safety and security matters to you. Managers and supervisors, thankful for your commitment, are transformed into valuable problem-solvers, part of the solution to workplace violence and not part of the problem. A violence-free workplace is in the forecast of those who commit to it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larry J. Chavez, B.A., M.P.A., is a nationally recognized expert on workplace violence and crisis communication. Through his *Workplace Violence 101* traveling workshop, he specializes in training managers, supervisors and employees to deal with, and prevent, violence within their organizations. A retired 31-year law enforcement veteran and former senior hostage negotiator, he has authored many articles on workplace violence and has been called upon for his expertise by such media organizations as the Wall Street Journal, ABC News, Fox News, MSNBC and the Christian Science Monitor. In 1999, he honored an invitation to make a presentation before the United Nations World Health Organization Symposium on Violence and Health on the subject of *Workplace Violence, The American Experience*.

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