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Workplace Violence: Astute Management Enhances Security

Trained Supervisors Can Spot Potential Problems, Defuse Them Before They Erupt

The news reports have a numbing familiarity.

- *A repairman in Honolulu enters his workplace and guns down his boss and six co-workers.*
- *A man walks into a shipyard in Seattle and opens fire on four workers, killing two.*

The workplace can be dangerous. Fatal assault is the second-largest cause of on-the-job deaths—and the leading cause among women—according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

The November 1999 workplace shootings follow other recent cases:

- *In August, in a suburb of Birmingham, Ala., a man shot two former co-workers and a third man to death at the company where he used to work.*
- *In July, a frustrated day trader killed nine and wounded 13 at two brokerage houses in Atlanta.*

According to the latest BLS report, 12 percent of the 6,026 on-the-job deaths in 1998 were homicides. Women were three times more likely than men to be murdered on the job. The toll mounts, fear grows and productivity suffers.

Companies can no longer afford to ignore the problem, thinking, "It can't happen here." Denial is not a strategy. Corporations must understand that training enhances security. Managers must be taught to spot and defuse problems before they explode. A knowledgeable manager is part of a company's security plan.

Practicing the Golden Rule

Workplace assaults have become so routine they no longer receive front-page coverage in newspapers. But companies must not lull themselves into thinking the problem is at a manageable level.

It can get worse.

If workplace violence is common in prosperous times, imagine what will happen when the economy sours. With a growing economy, a booming stock market and low unemployment, it is easy to forget that the business cycle will turn.

When the next recession comes, the stew of anger and resentment simmering in the workplace could boil over. Violence could escalate in the face of layoffs, pay cuts, a shrinking economic pie. And

the target of that violence will be managers and co-workers.

What can the corporate world do? Dr. Michael Mantell, a professor who studies workplace violence, urges companies to practice the Golden Rule of Management. Managers should treat employees as they would like to be treated.

Managers should be trained in interpersonal skills. They should learn how to employ and how to terminate, how to enforce standards and deadlines without arousing employee anger. If that anger erupts, managers should know how to handle it.

"'My way or the highway' won't work anymore," says Dr. Mantell. He points out that the last stop before the highway might be an armed encounter in the manager's office.

An armed assault gets attention, but workers face an array of lesser dangers. Workplace violence is defined as any act against an employee that creates a hostile work environment and negatively affects the employee, either physically or psychologically. These acts include all types of physical or verbal assaults, threats, coercion, intimidation and all forms of harassment. Each workday, according to a recent study by an independent research organization, 16,000 threats are made, 700 workers are attacked, and 43,000 are harassed.

If a threat is carried out, the costs to a negligent company can be astronomical. Increasingly, juries are holding employers responsible for harm to the victim. *The Lipman Report*, which has focused on aspects of workplace violence since 1979, has tracked the rising cost to employers of lawsuits alleging they failed to protect employees. Judgements in such cases average \$1.2 million and settlements average \$600,000, according to the latest figures. In California, a jury awarded \$5 million to the next of kin of a female employee killed at work by her jealous husband. In another West Coast case, a jury awarded \$5.5 million to the family of a female

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employee who was fatally stabbed after rejecting the romantic advances of a temporary worker at her office. A survey by the National Council on Compensation Insurance found that in 1995, employers spent \$126 million for medical and indemnity benefits for workplace crime-related claims.

Society's problems intrude

In contrast to employees of the 1950s, today's employees demonstrate less loyalty to the company. Some workers bring more outside baggage into the workplace. Some think the world owes them a living. People once shrugged off minor friction with co-workers or bosses. Now, resentment at perceived slights can light a fuse that one day explodes into aggression.

Companies often resist the idea of acting as a social service agency. But society's problems spill over into the office. Many workers grew up in broken families; many have seen their own marriages fail. Some know first-hand about domestic violence; others have suffered from drug or alcohol abuse.

Our culture is saturated with images of violence. Experts worry about children who grow up with high-body-count video games, music with brutal lyrics and movies that glamorize bloody, explosive confrontations. The result can be desensitized individuals who equate pulling the trigger and killing schoolmates with squeezing the joystick and mowing down video villains.

The news coverage often adds fuel to the fire. Reports of attacks at workplaces or schools provoke copycat responses. A disturbed individual sees nonstop broadcasts of a bloody outbreak. The perpetrator gains momentary fame; grievances are publicized. So another disgruntled individual watching the coverage may decide to follow suit.

We cannot wall off the workplace from society's ills. Therefore, companies must provide managers

with the skills to react with sensitivity and tact.

Profile of a ticking bomb

The accused shooter in the Honolulu attack fits the profile of a ticking bomb. The suspect was described as quiet and aloof. He collected guns. A few years ago, he kicked an elevator door and argued with a supervisor. He was required to undergo anger-management counseling. Recently, he had complained of job stress to a customer.

Dr. James Alan Fox, the Lipman Family Professor of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, fleshes out the psychological profile. In many cases, a worker who resorts to violence is a middle-aged man who has lost his job or is in peril of doing so. Such a person may externalize blame, finding fault elsewhere for his troubles. "His job is his life; it defines him as an individual," Dr. Fox says. "Without his work, he thinks his life is over." Rather than take it, he looks to get even with those he holds responsible: his boss, sometimes his co-workers. "He wants payback," Dr. Fox says. "This time, he will do the firing."

In the past, family or friends helped cushion the blow of a job loss. Dr. Fox notes that today, workers are often rootless, far from home. There's little sense of community. Support from relatives or neighbors is missing. When a job crisis comes, a worker has to look to his own resources. "You're on your own, buddy," is how Dr. Fox characterizes the modern predicament for many workers.

Screening and profiling can be useful tools in spotting potential trouble. But there's a risk, Dr. Fox warns. It can single workers out unfairly. Trying to identify problem workers can sometimes trigger the violence a company was trying to avoid.

Instead of an inventory of problem workers, Dr. Fox suggests that companies inventory the work site for stressful conditions. Is the workplace safe? Are long hours of overtime routine? Does criticism of poor performance drown out praise for success? Do workers feel appreciated? Do

they perceive management as fair and objective in its decisions and evaluations?

Identifying and eliminating problem conditions can pay off. Given a supportive work environment, productivity will rise and frustration can find an outlet in meaningful activity. And attempts to lower workplace stress benefit all workers, not just problem ones.

OSHA's guidelines

In addressing problem conditions, companies can consult guidelines for preventing workplace violence issued by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The guidelines, aimed at the high-risk industries of health care and social service, can be adapted by other industries.

The guidelines urge companies to:

Create a workplace violence prevention program. At a minimum the program should:

- Establish a zero-tolerance policy for threats. An eruption of workplace violence is often preceded by threats, harassment or other intimidating acts. A zero-tolerance policy should spell out how threats should be reported and investigated. All employees must sign a document stating that they understand the zero-tolerance policy and know the discipline process. Anyone who threatens or harasses a co-worker must expect appropriate discipline up to and including dismissal.
- Encourage all employees to report incidents promptly and ensure that no retaliation is taken against someone who reports a problem.
- Affirm the commitment of management to create a work environment that places as much emphasis on employee safety and health as on serving the client.

Perform a worksite analysis. Companies should take a common-sense look at the workplace to identify potential hazards. Train a threat management team to respond to actual or potential violence. The team should draw from the human resources, legal and security departments. The

team should investigate all threats and confrontations. They should review security measures and inspect the workplace for problems. Part of the worksite analysis should include worker surveys on the threat of violence and the need for security measures. The team should routinely inspect the workplace to ensure the violence prevention program is being carried out. Train supervisors in nonviolent conflict resolution and develop a protocol for dealing with threats including criteria for involving law enforcement officials.

Eliminate or minimize hazards. Once the worksite analysis has identified hazards, companies can use engineering controls or changes in administrative practices to address the problems. Engineering controls either remove the danger or create a barrier between the employee and the hazard. Such controls include metal detectors, new furniture arrangement, video monitoring, lighting and panic buttons. Administrative changes include establishing a relationship with police, using security officers, visitor passes and employee identification cards.

Offer post-incident response. No program can guarantee total protection. Companies should plan for treatment and counseling for victims of on-the-job violence and for co-workers who witness it. Employees victimized by workplace violence often feel fear, guilt and a sense of powerlessness. A strong follow-up program can help them cope. Employers can offer trauma-crisis counseling by certified professionals or refer victims to outside specialists. Peer-support groups are another option for helping workplace violence victims recover.

Provide training. Education ensures that employees can recognize potential hazards and know how to protect themselves according to established procedures. All employees should participate in the training, which should include study of the workplace violence prevention program. Employees should know the standard response plan for handling violent situations.

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They should be familiar with the location and operation of security devices such as an alarm system. Instruction should focus on risk factors that lead to on-the-job assaults.

Offer help. Ensure that troubled employees can discuss problems safely and confidentially. Establish an employee assistance program and let employees know that support is available.

Annual evaluation. A company should perform an annual evaluation of the workplace violence prevention program to determine its effectiveness. Employees should be surveyed before and after changes in security measures to evaluate their effectiveness in curbing workplace violence.

Raising managers' awareness

Following the OSHA guidelines can help create a safer work environment. But real security requires a new awareness on the part of management.

Companies cannot afford to ignore the threat of workplace violence. They can be held liable if they ignore threats or fail to take reasonable action. The company's image can suffer with the public. Lost profits, low morale and poor productivity add to the costs.

A company needs tactics to match the different stages in an employee's career. A company should:

- *Employ with care.* One way to reduce workplace violence is not to hire dangerous individuals in the first place. Conduct a comprehensive background and reference check on potential employees. Verify facts. Include drug testing and a psychological exam of conditional employees, if permissible. Careful screening is prudent and can help protect a company from later charges of negligence.
- *Manage with skill.* Insist that supervisors treat all employees with respect, providing feedback and encouragement. Make sure management is committed to a violence prevention

program. Identify workplace triggers, such as job loss or tense supervisor-employee relations. Take threats seriously. Managers with close ties to workers can head off problems.

- *Terminate with tact.* Those who fire employees should have counseling skills. Offer terminated employees the chance to defuse anger through an exit statement. When layoffs occur, a company should use discretion and sensitivity. Watch the timing. Some companies have cavalierly laid off workers before Christmas. Placement help should be provided.

Despite a company's precautions, workplace violence can still occur. Doing business in a free society involves certain risks that can be minimized but not eliminated.

There is much talk about stress in the workplace. Remember that stress can be both a cause and an effect of workplace violence. High levels of stress can produce violence in the workplace; a violent incident in turn will most certainly lead to stress among victims and onlookers, perhaps even to post-traumatic stress disorder. The costs, both material and moral, are too high to ignore.

The proactive company will strive to remove the conditions that nourish resentment and fuel violent outbursts. Such a company will realize that trained, knowledgeable managers strengthen security. These managers inspire trust. They handle workers with sensitivity and fairness. They are alert to potential problems. For a company serious about reducing workplace violence, an investment in management training will pay off in less stress, less violence and higher productivity. Training enhances security.



The Lipman Report Editors