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issues

HUMAN CAPITAL



# WHEN THINGS GET UGLY

## WORKPLACE VIOLENCE REPORT

*A primer on workplace violence.*

By R.S. JAGDEV



**V**iolence in the workplace is the kind of subject we don't want to think about. We want to believe it happens only to other people. Most of the time we think that the victims of workplace violence are different from us, that their companies are on some different psychological or physical plane from ours. If we really begin to think about the possibility of serious violence where we work, we become tense, anxious and intensely uncomfortable. It is actually frightening to realize that we are so vulnerable to the whims and rages of others. These thoughts create the same reaction in us that we may have when we hear about carjackings. They happen only in places where we do not live, and to other people.

Workplace violence is not well understood or researched for two reasons. First, it is a fairly recent phenomenon and has occurred in relatively low numbers overall, so sufficient statistical information is not available to permit definitive conclusions about causes, predictions, or solutions. Second, many companies that have experienced workplace violence remain involved in the related litigation for up to a decade after the event. This situation makes them unwilling to share much information about what happened and thus limits how much companies can learn from one another.

The successful companies recognize that secure working environments make good business sense economically, socially, and morally. They dedicate human resources and safety resources to reduce hazards to employees and to respond to major and minor emergencies.

From time to time, however, cultural conditions create or alter threats to employee safety to the degree that additional guidance for the application of those resources becomes necessary. HR and security managers must always be assured of the accuracy and effectiveness of that guidance. Sadly, treatment of workplace violence has not fostered assurance. Rather, media treatment of workplace violence tends towards the dramatic, and clouds the really important issues facing members of the contemporary business community. This is why refocusing is in order.

Competent security professionals will explain that originally workplace violence identified physical misbehaviour, ranging from heated arguments to homicide, occurring between coworkers at their place of employment. Recent published reports on workplace violence have attracted attention to this cultural condition wanting at immediate and appropriate response. However, media focus on recent isolated outrages

within that context has inspired expansion of the phenomenon to an unwieldy proportion. A sensible approach to controlling workplace violence calls for its redefinition and consideration of security measures related to prevention of, and response to, physical conflicts at places of employment.

As a first step, a return to the original concept of workplace violence as that occurring between coworkers at work (intra-company) is in order. The broader definition fostered by the media coverage of extrinsic physical threats to employees, including irate customers and clients, should be considered in the context of everyday crime. This may not necessarily be within the spectrum of issues considered by security practitioners looking to prevent violence in the workplace.

Response to crime is a 'hard' security issue because little opportunity is available for resolving the problem with proactive counselling or management intervention. Prevention and response must take the form of physical preparation (good lighting, controlled access, ID badges, combination

### THE KILLING TYPE

#### Box 1

According to Larry Chavez, senior hostage negotiator, "85 percent of workplace shooting cases have clear warning signs." When the guy in the next cubicle fits the following description, Chavez says, it's time to watch out.

- ❖ Male, over the age of 35, with a significant amount of time on the job.
- ❖ A loner; usually eats by himself.
- ❖ Chronically disgruntled, with disdain for authority and contempt for the boss.
- ❖ Strongly identifies with his job; what he does is who he is.
- ❖ Never admits responsibility; externalizes blame.
- ❖ Views any change as a personal affront.
- ❖ Holds grudges, makes mountains out of molehills.
- ❖ Makes threats of violence, either specific or veiled, 30 or even 40 people with these characteristics.
- ❖ May have suffered a trauma that leaves him feeling completely helpless.
- ❖ Frequently intimidates or harasses others.
- ❖ Abuses alcohol or drugs.
- ❖ Feels that nobody listens to him and that no one is on his side.
- ❖ Recently had problems outside work, such as divorce or debt.
- ❖ Owns or has access to a weapon

Many people have a number of these traits. That makes pinpointing a potential killer very difficult. If you're wrong, you could find yourself in legal trouble "Be very careful," warns Theodore Feldmann, M.D. of the University of Louisville school of medicine. "In any large workplace, you can probably identify 20.



locks, video cameras and monitors, or even executive protection), and of appropriate forceful reaction (restraint, investigation, and arrest by security and law enforcement personnel). Of course 'hard' security efforts crossover to prevention and response to workplace violence with the nature of controlling devices and security staff monitoring.

We can properly describe workplace violence as a 'soft' involvement such as thorough background checks prior to employment, separation of individuals with strong personality conflicts, counselling, and strong management involvement immediately following complaints or other indications. Business-related conflict between employees and clients or customers can be considered 'soft' as a security issue, because it too is somewhat proactively manageable through proper employee training with respect to handling complaints and business disputes.

Now, with a focused definition of workplace

### BULLET-PROOFING YOUR WORKPLACE

#### Box 2

Managers and co-workers face a predicament when dealing with a potentially volatile employees. They can hear the fuse sizzling and see occasional sparks, but no one knows how long the fuse is or what kind of explosive it's attached to. According to the experts, though, you can and should take some precautions:

Never strip anyone of his dignity. "A person can be supervised, disciplined, and even fired with dignity," says Larry Chavez, senior hostage negotiator for the Sacramento Police Department. Resist the egotistical urge to be authoritative.

Educate yourself. Ask your company's personnel department to organize a workplace violence seminar. Just as cases of sexual harassment can be decreased through greater employee awareness, so can incidents of on-the-job violence.

Do careful background checks. "Nearly one-third of resumes are outright false," says Chavez. Some companies go so far as to hire private detectives to conduct thorough background checks of prospective employees. Others make it clear that any lies, whether told during an interview or printed on a resume, are grounds for immediate dismissal when uncovered.

Don't ignore the warning signs. Use the checklist in "The Killing Type," opposite. If some-one fits the profile, seek professional assistance. Don't think that, "it can't happen here."

Listen. According to Theodore Feldmann, M.D., of the University of Louisville school of medicine, employees should be involved in decision-making managers should ask troublesome workers about problems, and an employee ombudsman should be available to hear grievances and ensure fair hearings.

Have zero tolerance. The atmosphere at work should be similar to that of an airport: watchful and intolerant of threats. Any mention of weapon, violence, or revenge, even in jest, should be taken seriously and addressed swiftly.

Demand the highest practical level of protection. Depending on the situation, this may mean uniformed security for everyday surveillance or the presence of local law enforcement at termination meetings that could become violent. Think twice before arming yourself. "Unless you're trained to use a weapon, it'll be of little use," says Chavez. "And it could escalate a difficult situation."

violence, HR managers and directors of security can thoroughly and reasonably address the issue from a knowledgeable point of view. Workplace violence is any physical assault, menacing behavior or verbal abuse occurring in the work setting between co-workers are current or former employees, supervisors, or managers. Workplace may be any location either permanent or temporary, where employees perform work-related duties within the limits of company buildings and perimeter, parking lots, and field locations. If we include client offices, homes, and travelling to and from work assignments, we enter the context of total crime and accident prevention and establish impossible expectations.

Within this context we can reasonably profile offenders remembering that violence is a process as well as an act. It is the product of the interaction among three factors: the individual, a stimulus or triggering mechanism, and a setting. Generally the means to remedy workplace violence begins with establishment of company policies and procedures based on a survey of past experiences and existing company cultural conditions. HR and security departments must work together with management to adopt threat management and response plans for appropriately dealing with all degrees of misbehavior. Intensified HR pre-employment screening helps identify and exclude individuals who may add to the problem.

The adoption of a zero-tolerance policy, meaning simply that no threat or indication of violent behavior will be ignored, is a good starting point for employer education and training of the issue. Awareness is the key to any employee-related security issue, and reporting of all incidents of violence must be assured. Preventive measures can include a no-weapons policy, drug and alcohol testing, and alternative dispute resolution programs. Implementing additional 'hard' and 'soft' security measures derived from threat identification, response plans, and a focus of intracompany circumstances complement the effort.

This mere outline of workplace violence remedies should convince even those who would underestimate the issue that we must concentrate our efforts in structured, manageable context to effectively treat the social maladies we face. We can cure more than one malady at a time if we clearly identify their component. (HC)

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