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EXAMINING CAUSES AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Violence in the workplace affects every sector and industry in the United States, and it can take on many forms, from verbal threats to front page workplace shooting events – and everything in between. In fact, the issue is so prevalent that death by homicide is the fourth leading cause of workplace deaths.

The impact of workplace violence on employers goes beyond the immediate concern for the safety and welfare of employees. Aside from the expected direct financial costs of increased security, insurance, and legal fees, there are indirect costs that impact the bottom line. Workplaces with employees who experience or witness workplace violence tend to have new obstacles to productivity, including lower morale, absenteeism, labor-management conflict, and increased turnover.

This paper will show that violence can be predicted to a point, and prevention is then a matter of understanding those characteristics that lead to violence and addressing them before the cycle reaches a peak that ends in bloodshed. There is no single method of prevention that is reliably successful, and there is no single circumstance in which prevention methods should be used. Instead, a program of violence prevention would include activities that permeate all levels of the organization, instilling something akin to an organizational culture that is focused on prevention of aggression and violence.

Violence in the workplace affects every sector and industry in the United States, and it can take on many forms. While frequently quoted statistics count only those incidents in which days away from work or death results, the numbers increase significantly when considering less dramatic situations. Fistfights, an employee slapping a colleague, a manager shouting at a subordinate to the point where that person is backed into a corner – while perhaps not considered in statistics, these are frequently occurring examples of violent behavior. However, both employers and employees alike are most alarmed by more serious incidents - those that make the headlines. Consider these recent events:

- November 6, 2009: CNN reported that a former employee of Reynolds, Smith & Hills, shot and killed one and wounded five in Orlando – two years after he was fired.
- January 7, 2010: CNN reported that an employee of ABB Inc., a transformer manufacturing company in St. Louis, shot and killed himself and three co-workers.
- January 12, 2010: CNN reported that a disgruntled ex-employee of a Penske truck rental business shot and killed two and wounded three of his former co-workers in suburban Atlanta.

- February 12, 2010: USA Today reported that a professor at the University of Alabama shot and killed three of her peers.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) report on fatal occupational injuries by event or exposure, in 2008 (the most recent year for which data is available), approximately 16% (794 out of 5,071) of all workplace deaths in the United States were a result of assaults and violent acts. Of these, 517 were homicides - 413 of which were shootings. This makes death by homicide the fourth leading cause of workplace deaths in the United States. In a separate BLS report on nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses requiring days away from work (2008), the number of assaults and violent acts by a person resulting in days away from work (but not death) was 16,330 in 2008, the vast majority (15,930) occurring in the service industries. Of these, 10,680 were in education and health services. These figures include all instances in which an employee becomes a victim while working, including incidents in which a customer/client, estranged spouse or partner, or third party is the perpetrator, such as a late night convenience store robbery. In a study workplace violence, Sygnatur and Toscano (2000) found that

in the period studied (1992 - 1998), approximately 67% of workplace homicides were committed by people with no legitimate connection to the company (e.g., during a robbery), 15% were committed by current or former employees, 11% by family members and acquaintances, and 8% by customers. This paper will examine the causes of only those incidents workplace violence in which the perpetrator is another employee or former employee. Additionally it will focus on strategies that can prevent such events.

How are business affected by workplace violence? What is the impact to the bottom line? In short, why should business managers care about workplace violence? In his book *Violence at Work*, Joseph Kinney lists the consequences of even a single violent episode. He states that the physical harm, such as death or injury, is only the beginning. Employees who survive an incident of violence experience psychological harm that can be equally traumatic, potentially leading to survivor guilt, suicide and substance abuse. Employees in these situations often require utilization of mental health services, suicide prevention services, and substance abuse prevention and treatment. Workplaces with employees who experience or witness workplace violence tend to have new obstacles to productivity, including lower morale, absenteeism, labor-management conflict, and increased turnover. Management resources are diverted from profit-making activities to the tasks involved in responding to the crisis and any resulting litigation. Other direct costs include repair of any property damage and/or property theft, costs related to litigation, and increased costs for security, workers' compensation, and personnel related expenses around employment and training (Kinney, 1995).

In two research studies, one by Rogers and Kelloway (1997) and another by Schat and Kelloway (2000), the impact to employees who have either experienced a violent incident or witnessed a violent incident is a sense of fear, which results in physical manifestations such as sleep disturbances and gastrointestinal issues, as well as psychological consequences, including depression and anxiety. These manifestations and consequences were found to be most prevalent in workers who experienced violence by current or

former coworkers (as opposed to violence by customers or persons unrelated to the organization) in a third study by LeBlanc and Kelloway (2002). Physical and psychological manifestations of fear have been shown to impact productivity, which causes general decline for the organization at large. Schat and Kelloway review all of the research showing these effects, as follows:

Several studies have demonstrated that workplace violence is associated with negative work attitudes, including job dissatisfaction (Budd, Arvey, & Lawless, 1996), affective commitment (Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 2001; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002), turnover intentions (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Rogers & Kelloway, 1997), and work behaviors, including increased job neglect (Barling et al., 2001; Schat & Kelloway, 2000) and decreased job performance (Barling et al., 2001) and productivity (Budd et al., 1996). In several of the studies cited above (e.g., Rogers & Kelloway, 1997; Schat & Kelloway, 2000), the work-related outcomes of workplace violence (e.g., turnover intentions, neglect) were indirect, mediated through fear of future workplace violence and emotional well-being (2003: 111).

Glomb examined the impact of workplace aggression on those who remain after witnessing or being the victim of an incident. Results of her research indicate that,

... if aggressive incidents have an influence on reported job outcomes such as job satisfaction, performance, and job related stress, the effect is generally negative. Although some respondents reported positive outcomes (e.g., "cleared the air" or clarified issues) and many reported no change, the negative outcomes of job satisfaction, performance, and stress outweigh the positive outcomes by a substantial margin. In addition, the incidents also had a negative influence on reported withdrawal behaviors (e.g., taking a break, leaving early, and having turnover intentions) (2002: 27).

In her interviews with study respondents, some of the following comments were made:

I was upset enough after the meeting with management that I went home. I just said, 'To hell with it I'm going to the house. I'm too aggravated to stay here.' The rest of the day I was useless. [Now] I don't talk to him at all unless I have to.

I got emotional and went outside. Came in about an hour and a half later. I was still very upset, I was mad as hell. . . I was pissed.

So it got the point where I said, 'I need to go somewhere else, I can't work here like this' (Glomb, 2002: 28).

It stands to reason that incidents of violence would result in even more severe negative reactions and outcomes.

Kinney outlines the most substantial reasons for a workplace violence prevention program, beginning with the potential legal ramifications of a violent incident. He states, "Case law has established that an employer must respond to threats in a reasonable and prudent fashion. Doctrines of foreseeability, negligent security, hiring, supervision, etc., have potential application" (Kinney, 1995: 56). There are regulatory implications for employers as well. The Occupational Safety and Health Act contains a general duty clause that states that an employer must provide workers with, "employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees..." (OSHA 1970: 5a) This regulatory requirement requires employers to prevent any reasonably foreseen hazards, and workplace violence incidents can result in OSHA citations for the employer. Finally, basic business needs compel an employer to avoid violent incidents, as substandard working conditions lead to turnover and inhibit high quality candidates from applying. As mentioned earlier, those that remain are likely to be less productive. All of these will lead to a decline in a company's profits (Kinney, 1995).

So what is management to do? Can violence by employees be predicted and therefore prevented? There are arguments on both sides, which indicate that prediction is, at best, an imprecise science. On April 2, 2010, experts gathered at Columbia University to discuss violence on school campuses, which has many similarities to workplace violence. Edward Mulvey, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, is skeptical about prediction. He stated,

Rare events, by their nature, are not going to be very predictable," and went on to say that any methods of prediction will have false positives, while neglecting to identify actual perpetrators. He states it is an inexact science, resulting in "wasted institutional resources spent on targeted interventions and stigmatization of, or other negative impacts on, those...targeted (Inside Higher Ed., April 2008).

Despite the indefinite nature of prediction, the disastrous consequences of an incident of

workplace violence require that we persist in continually refining our prevention strategy. The human resources department of an organization is in the best position to develop a workplace violence prevention strategy, as all of the processes needed (e.g., understanding the behavior and motivation of workers and providing a coordinated approach to addressing through employee based activities) reside in the human resources function, particularly training. Prevention of workplace violence by current or former employees requires a two-pronged approach. First, environmental factors that contribute to violent behavior must be addressed through human resource strategies focused on the workplace as a whole. Second, human resource professionals must identify and implement strategies that prevent individuals pre-disposed to violent behavior from entering the workplace, as well as recognize and act upon those indications that a worker already employed could be moving towards a violent outburst.

HYPOTHESIS OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Hypothesis I.

Certain personal situations and traits predispose employees to have stronger feelings of anger with their current or former coworkers. These include addictions such as drug and alcohol abuse, marital and family issues, conflict in the workplace (e.g. jealousy or competition among co-workers), and/or existing personality traits (e.g. short temper, inability to deal with high stress levels). Anger can result in violent outbursts in the workplace.

Hypothesis II.

Mitigating factors can diffuse the anger that leads to violence, such as positive work environment and support (e.g. employee assistance programs and open door policies) and strength of emotional stability and self-control. Lack of these mitigating factors can result in a situation where anger turns to violence.

Hypothesis III.

There are steps that can be taken throughout the staffing process and over the course of the

employment cycle to intervene and prevent violent outbursts. In order to ensure these steps are taken, the human resources function must do the following:

- a. develop a comprehensive program of services and
- b. train staff and management to execute appropriately

RECIPE FOR VIOLENCE

What causes a worker to become violent? Research points to a variety of elements, some specific to the culture outside the workplace, others particular to the work environment, as well as a variety of issues related directly to the individual. These combine to form a perfect storm of intersecting factors that can set the stage for a violent episode.

Social and Cultural

Outside of the culture in the workplace, there are societal influences that predispose employees to react constructively or violently to workplace stress. Kinney notes three control processes that appear to provide the overall societal conditions known to discourage violent behavior. First, he states that an economic system that creates full or close to full employment is less likely to have excessive violent behavior. Specifically, he says, “Because productive activity is regularly rewarded in such a system, peaceful behavior is habitual among the individuals who are part of it” (Kinney, 195: 25). He goes on to say that societies with legal systems that focus their emphasis on crime prevention, rapidly apprehend criminals, and ensure that punishment is swiftly administered find less of an issue with violent behavior in the workplace. Finally, he points out that a culture that does not embrace violence, but instead sets expectations of “good” or peaceful, conforming behavior is less likely to have a great number of workplace violence incidents. When considering these, the high level of violent behavior in the U.S. workplace is more easily understood. Kinney points out that the U.S. has a very high level of permanently unemployed and so-called “working poor” (near minimum wage) residents. Recent economic developments have exacerbated this problem. He states that the U.S. has a criminal justice system which is inefficient compared to

those of other countries, and the U.S. gun control laws are relatively lax when compared to those of peers. The impact of early experiences with aggression on later aggressive behavior has been studied at length (e.g., Bandura 1973), and it has been shown that there is a link between the two. American popular culture has a reputation for glamorizing violence in various areas of entertainment, including television, movies, and video games. (Kinney, 1995)

Some facets of the influence of society on workplace aggression and violence were studied in greater detail by Aquino and Lamertz (2004). They were able to show that contextual factors such as societal influences are related to workplace aggression. Dietz, Robinson, Folger, Baron, and Schulz (2003) did a related study, in which they determined that the level of violence in the community surrounding a plant can predict the level of violence in that workplace.

HR professionals are in the difficult position of working against societal norms to create a safe environment in the workplace, free of violent behavior. It is important to keep this challenge in mind when creating a company wide strategy, as HR is not trying to influence behavior in a neutral environment – instead, HR strategies must correct behavior learned outside the workplace before moving forward in encouraging more positive behaviors.

Characteristics of the Individual

While there is no profile of an individual at risk for a violent outburst, there are certain risk factors that are linked to higher levels of aggression, including personal situations and pre-existing traits that predispose a person to be more easily angered. Addictions such as drug and alcohol abuse, marital and family issues, conflict in the workplace (e.g. jealousy or competition among co-workers) and/or existing personality traits (e.g. short temper, inability to deal with high stress levels) can lead to higher levels of anger for workers (Kinney, 1995).

Greenberg and Barling (1999) explored the relationship between alcohol consumption and aggression against coworkers and subordinates. They determined that alcohol is related to workplace aggression in situations where employees believe that their organization’s

procedures are unfair and/or when they are experiencing job insecurity. Under these circumstances, greater alcohol consumption is related to greater levels of aggression. However, the study showed that when employees believe the organization's procedures to be impartial, there is no relationship between alcohol consumption and aggression, and when employees are confident in their job security, there is no relationship between alcohol consumption and aggression. Jockin, Arvey, and McGue (2001) found a relationship between alcohol abuse and workplace aggression in situations where employees believe they are being victimized at work. McFarlin, Fals-Stewart, Major, and Justice (2001) showed a connection between the number of days of alcohol use and the number of days of heavy drinking and aggression in the work place. In addition, alcohol has been linked to general violence in a number of studies, including one by Lipsey, Wilson, Cohen, and Derzon (1997).

Studies by Douglas and Martinko (2001) and Inness, Barling, and Turner (2005) have indicated a connection between a history of aggression and future aggression against supervisors. However, a separate study did not find a connection between a history of aggression and future aggression against subordinates Greenberg and Barling (1999). In a 2009 study by Barling, Dupre, and Kelloway, an overview is given on the research around correlations between personality traits and aggressive behavior. Studies completed by Dill, Anderson, Anderson, and Deuser (1997) and Spielberger (1991), have shown that there are individuals who are more inclined to respond to perceived provocation with aggressive behavior. Other analysis indicate significant correlation between trait anger, which is defined by Spielberger as "the disposition to perceive a wide range of situations as annoying or frustrating, and the tendency to respond to such situations with more frequent elevations in state anger" (1991: 1), and workplace aggression, including research completed by Douglas and Martinko (2001), Glomb and Liao (2003), Hepworth and Towler (2004), Hershcovis and Barling (2007), and Parkins, Fishbein, and Ritchey (2006). A connection between personalities that are aggressive or hostile and aggression in the workplace have been located, and according to studies by Douglas and Martinko (2001) and

Hepworth and Towler (2004), workplace aggression can be predicted by personal attitudes that consider revenge an appropriate solution to a conflict. Barling also notes, "One of the most consistent predictors of the enactment of aggression is perceived provocation. Closely aligned to this is the cognitive appraisal of, or causal reasoning about the precipitating interpersonal event (Bing et al., 2007, Martinko et al., 2002). Several studies reveal a relationship between perceptions of hostile intent and aggression (e.g., Douglas & Martinko, 2001, Epps & Kendall, 1995)." (Barling, 2009:676) Most telling is an assertion Barling (1996) made indicating that violent behavior is demonstrated in a very consistent manner over time. This was further supported in a follow-up study by Greenberg and Barling (1999), which confirms that a significant indicator of future aggressive behavior is a history of aggressive behavior.

Work Environment

Research has shown a clear link between stress and aggression, whether it is stress caused by factors in the workplace or in an employee's home life. In their study of the relationships between work stressors and aggression, Chen and Spector (1992) draw the conclusion that the experience of work stressors is directly related to aggressive behaviors such as sabotage, interpersonal aggression, and hostility. In addition, they state that within the frustration/aggression model, work stressors can prevent an employee from accomplishing goals, which leads to frustration, and can then lead to aggressive behavior. Glomb states, "A variety of antecedents of workplace aggression have been proposed in the literature. Among the proposed antecedents are organizational and job variables, such as organizational justice (Barling, 1996; Baron & Newman, 1996, 1998; Baron et al., 1999; Folger & Baron, 1996; Folger, Robinson, Dietz, McLean Parks, & Baron, 1998; Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Neuman & Baron, 1997b), and beliefs regarding outcomes of aggression (Bandura, 1973; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996)." (Glomb, 2002: 23).

Human resources has a responsibility to limit stress caused directly by people, situations, and other factors in the workplace. It is in this area that HR has particular expertise in behavior and

motivation, along with an understanding of the impact that poorly planned role responsibilities can have on an employee's well-being. Examples of role-related stressors found in the workplace can include job overload, in which the demands of the position exceed the ability or the capacity of the employee. Alternatively, lack of challenge, not enough work, and boredom can be equally as stressful. Role ambiguity, in which there is a lack of clarity around role responsibilities and the employee is uncertain which tasks s/he is responsible for is considered a stressor, as is role conflict, often known as work/life balance, in which there is a direct conflict between the two roles one employee is expected to fulfill (i.e., good parenting versus good employee) (Kinney, 1995). These role related stresses are shown to be linked to both workplace bullying and workplace aggression in studies by Einarsen, Raknes, and Matthiesen (1994), Bedeian, Armenakis, and Curran (1980), and Chen and Spector (1992). Good HR planning can minimize these stressors, creating an environment of greater productivity and reduced pressure. Through a partnership with managers, human resources can design jobs that have clear, unambiguous roles, and they can strive to create positions that strike a balance between responsibilities and personal obligations. Training managers to continuously observe employees for signs of job overload, work that does not challenge an employee enough, ambiguity, and conflict, HR can facilitate a number of benefits to the company, not the least of which is taking a critical piece of the cycle of aggression away, thereby removing some threat of violent outbursts.

However, workplace stress is not only caused by role-related issues. Kinney (1995) notes the characteristics of "sick" workplaces, those that place a higher than average amount of stress on employees, organization-wide, which include chronic labor/management disputes, frequent grievances filed by employees, an extraordinary number of injury claims (especially psychological/occupational stress), understaffing and/or excessive demands for overtime, a high number of stressed personnel, and/or an authoritarian management approach. The FBI (2002) has a similar list of organization-wide stressors, which includes those already listed in addition to frustrations arising from poorly defined job tasks and responsibilities, downsizing or

reorganization, poor management styles (e.g., arbitrary or unexplained orders; over-monitoring; corrections or reprimands in front of other employees, inconsistent discipline, inadequate security or a poorly trained, poorly motivated security force and/or a lack of employee counseling. Both have shown that organizations with highly stressed employees, as demonstrated by the characteristics listed above, are at a greater risk for aggressive behavior. Through a coordinated HR strategy, these stressors can be minimized, thereby creating a safer and more productive workplace. Management must be trained in creating an environment that does not facilitate conditions friendly to violent outbursts, for example through training to monitor and mitigate stress levels.

Glomb (2002) explores the antecedents of workplace aggression, specifically seeking to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1a. What are the organizational, job-related, and personal variables related to the occurrence of workplace aggression?

Research Question 1b. Do job stress and organizational injustice influence the occurrence of workplace aggression?

Glomb approached her research by interviewing seventy-four representatives of a particular manufacturing plant, made up of what the plant's human resources department deemed to be a representative sample. These included 82% male, 96% Caucasian, and 76% non-management, with average tenure of 11 years, 2 months. For the most part, Glomb found that the interviewees attributed aggressive behavior to a combination of factors, rather than a single cause. Job stress, in this case defined by volume and pace of work rather than role related issues such as role ambiguity and role overload, was often cited as a contributing factor to aggressive incidents. Some comments made during interviews included the following:

He was really stressed out, and a lot of times it resulted in anger.

We were having lots of problems there, and when you have problems, people just get irate. Things were crazy at the time."

I was in on a Saturday. . . under pressure, under time constraints to get a job done the following Monday (Glomb, 2002: 26).

Another significant factor that was frequently cited as contributing to aggressive incidents was organizational injustice. An example of an interviewee's statement on this subject includes:

I was trying to get out of the department I'm in. And I put in for a different department. And the person in charge of that [department] picked out somebody else which. . . was very unqualified, well, compared to myself. I had more years here, attendance is much better, my quality of work is much better. And it just turned out to be they were closer friends. And you can't beat that, it's too hard to beat. For a guy who was sleeping on the job, coming in late, calling in sick, it's. . . to have him picked over me. . . it was a real low blow" (Glomb, 2002: 26-27).

Glomb goes on to show that conflicts occurring between coworkers on the job often resulted in aggressive behavior. An example was given by an interviewee in the following statement:

He was sitting around doing nothing, so I told him to start working. He took it the wrong way. He probably thought I was trying to be his boss or whatever. So he started saying things to me, something vulgar. I didn't care for it, so . . . I think we started pushing each other. We were pushing each other around and crap, and I think I hit him. And he kicked my legs from out under me (2002: 27).

Table one, from Glomb's (2002) study, shows her results in greater detail.

TABLE 1

Proportion and Percentage of Respondents Reporting Antecedents of the Aggressive Encounter From Interview Data		
Broad category/Specific categories	Proportion of respondents	%
Job stress (stressful or hectic day)	28/31	90
Frustration	37/49	76
Frustration with another person	33/37	89
Frustration with job situation	4/37	11
Perceived injustice	19/49	39
Unjust behavior of others	17/19	89
Unjust policies and procedures	7/19	37
Perceived threat	24/49	49
Personal threat (e.g., to self-esteem)	12/24	50
Competition	6/24	25
Power struggle	13/24	54
Sabotage of work	4/24	17
Job-related conflicts	39/49	80
Person not doing job/pulling weight	25/39	64
Conflict over work procedures/habits	24/39	62
Authority conflicts	16/39	41
Union issue conflicts	3/39	8
Individual factors	34/49	69
Hostile personality/quick temper	24/34	71
Perception that anger can be useful	21/34	62
Interpersonal conflicts (e.g., personality clash)	23/49	47
<i>Percentages may not total 100, because multiple antecedents within one category were reported.</i>		

Managers can also be trained to mediate in small conflicts that, if left unresolved, could lead to larger issues. In a technique known as Managers as Mediators, supervisory personnel bring together employees in conflict and assist them in settling their dispute through negotiation or bargaining. While not quite the impartial third party that one usually thinks of in mediation, managers can provide a positive environment within which to settle disagreements, where the focus remains on mutually beneficial outcomes. In their book

Mediation and Negotiation, Huber and Huber (1999) point out that "since mediation skills are applicable to many aspects of management – consultation, strategic planning, and team building – a manager's training in this area can significantly enhance the productivity of the work environment" (Huber, 1999: 486).

Downsizing and layoffs present a challenging set of circumstances for human resources professionals attempting to prevent a violent incident. Impacted employees can find themselves

in what they perceive to be crisis situations – situations in which they have lost everything – and as a result, they can turn destructive feelings back onto their employers. There are specific practices that can ease the transition for employees affected by position elimination to minimize the risk of a violent incident. These include providing early warning when possible so employees can plan, offering universal severance packages, avoiding inconsistency in lay-off policies, providing compensation and benefits for as long as possible, identifying at-risk employees and providing mental health services, and establishing effective outplacement. (Kinney, 1995) The underlying theme here is one which has been proven through research – it is not the layoff that prompts violent response, it is the manner in which the layoff is handled. Employees who perceive that they were treated fairly and respectfully are far less likely to instigate a violent incident. Barling, Dupre, and Kelloway state,

If layoffs are not conducted appropriately, feelings of injustice and anger probably emerge (e.g., Catalano et al. 1997, Folger 1993, Vinokur et al. 1996), which are more likely to predict aggression than are the layoffs specifically (Brockner, 2006). Overall, therefore, there is no support for the notion that layoffs per se are associated with workplace aggression; indeed, it is more likely that most layoffs are not accompanied by workplace aggression, dispelling the myth that layoffs are a major predictor of workplace aggression. In contrast, the perceived fairness with which layoffs are implemented is critical, supporting the role of perceived injustice in workplace aggression (Barling, Dupre, & Kelloway, 2009: 681).

Once the reduction in force has been put into motion, manager training serves the critical function of ensuring that the front line is prepared to recognize warning signs when observed, and act upon them as needed.

The caution to ensure equitable and respectful handling of position eliminations carries over to the handling of all processes that occur during the course of employment, including performance evaluations and corrective action. LeBlanc and Barling define interpersonal justice as “the perception that employees are treated with politeness, dignity, and respect by authorities during the enactment of organizational procedures (e.g., performance evaluations)” (LeBlanc & Barling, 2004:10). They note that in a study by Inness and Barling (2002), a link was found

between aggression by employees towards supervisors, as well as the organization as a whole, and employees’ views that they had been treated unfairly. Another link was found between aggression against supervisors and employees’ sense that they are being micro-managed, excessively monitored, and subject to intense control and scrutiny (Day & Hamblin, 1964; Dupre & Barling, 2002). Greenberg and Barling (1999) noted that surveillance of employee behavior, such as requiring time cards to be punched, is linked to aggressive behavior against supervisors by those being supervised.

The Incivility Spiral, the Cycle of Violence, and Aggression in Work Groups

The idea of violence as an escalating cycle or a series of events that increase in intensity is shown throughout research on violence and aggressive behavior. Kinney discusses the typical sequence seen in perpetrators of workplace violence directed at employers:

1. Individual suffers trauma (actual or perceived) which creates extreme tension or anxiety.
 - a. Single major event (layoff or termination)
 - b. Cumulative minor events
2. Individual perceives that problems are essentially unsolvable.
3. Individual projects all responsibility onto the situation.
4. Individual’s frame of reference becomes increasingly egocentric.
5. Self-preservation and self-protection gradually become sole objectives.
6. Violent act perceived as only way out.
7. Violent act is attempted or committed.

The key point made throughout the text is that “at any point in this evolution, intervention is possible, and violence precluded, but only if adequate levels of awareness and insight pre-exist, so that the warning signs flashed by the at-risk individual are recognized and responded to appropriately” (Kinney, 1995: 23-24).

Glomb (2002) explores the pattern of escalation in aggressive behavior as well. In her interviews, she attempts answer the following research question: “Does the pattern of aggressive behaviors within an incident suggest an escalatory pattern?” She states,

The escalation hypothesis assumes that behaviors are ordered in terms of severity and that within one incident, behaviors will occur in an orderly fashion progressing from less to more severe. For example,

yelling and angry gestures would likely occur before physical assault. If the escalation hypothesis does not hold, then one would not move through the behaviors in any ordered way.” Her research supports the pattern of escalation, in that “Comparing these proportions with the .34 overall average proportion of respondents engaging in aggressive behavior enactment across all behaviors, these data suggest that the behaviors do not occur randomly but rather have a pattern that indicates a progression of aggression within a particular incident (Glomb 2002:31).

In another a survey of two-hundred-seventeen employees, Glomb and Liao studied the effect working with aggressive co-workers has on an individual’s level of aggression. This speaks to the impact environmental factors and patterns of escalating aggressive behavior have on subsequent violent episodes. Upon completion of the study, they concluded that the data support “a social exchange or reciprocal process as a determinant of individual aggression... being the target of aggression is related to engaging in aggression, thus providing support for a social exchange or reciprocity effect” (Glomb & Liao, 2003: 493) They echo Kinney in suggesting that managers intercede in the cycle of aggressive and/or violent behavior, when they say,

Managers may take preventative action by altering the social information disseminated by communicating strong behavior-outcome contingencies (for instance, having and enforcing a zero- tolerance approach, and communicating serious consequences for aggressive employees), eliminating aggressive role models, and intervening when aggressive behavior is likely to be reciprocated or to escalate (Glomb & Liao, 2003: 493).

They go on to state that additional strides can be made against employing those prone to violence by putting in place selection processes designed to screen out candidates with aggressive tendencies, and they further suggest that training in conflict management and coping mechanisms to alleviate stress and better handle anger and frustration could offer additional benefit in reducing overall organizational issues with aggression and violence. As a final thought, they offer, “Given that the explanations for aggression are dynamic, the solutions are likely to be dynamic as well and will work collectively over time to reduce aggression” (Glomb & Liao, 2003: 494). It is here that the human resources function has a responsibility to train front line management on recognizing the warning signs in question, in order

to ensure that the best possible use is made of the limited opportunities provided to stop the cycle towards a violent outcome.

While there has been quite a bit of research into causes of major workplace violence incidents, less attention has been paid to the role that smaller and less noticeable negative behavior plays can play in dramatic eruptions of hostility. According to a theory put forth by Andersson and Pearson (1999), rude comments, thoughtless acts, and negative gestures can start as minor problems and escalate into major aggressive events. They point out that researchers have shown incivilities to be highly correlated with crime, progressing in an upward-spiraling process to increasingly serious levels (Goldstein, 1994; Taylor & Gottfredson, 1986). Rather than a spontaneous act, Andersson and Pearson suggest that in the workplace, violence is more often the culmination of escalating patterns of negative interaction between individuals.

Andersson and Pearson define incivility as follows:

Workplace incivility involves acting with disregard for others in the workplace, in violation of workplace norms for respect... What is considered to be uncivil in one organization may not be universally considered uncivil, yet we can still hold a common understanding of workplace incivility as behavior that disrupts mutual respect in the workplace... Workplace incivility is low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of the workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others (Andersson & Pearson, 1999: 455).

They go on to show how an incivility can beget a retaliatory incivility, which is then reciprocated and quickly escalates into a spiral of aggressive behavior.

We have argued that workplace incivility can spiral, beginning with one party’s perception of an incivility, and reciprocation with a counter-incivility, which can potentially escalate to an exchange of coercive actions when one party reaches a tipping point (i.e. perceives an identity threat). Further, we have argued that involved parties with a hot temperament and an organizational climate of informality may facilitate the formation and escalation of such spirals and that these spirals may spawn secondary spirals, which can permeate an organization... Our perspective is unique in that it not only defines a behavior that may be a precursor to aggression but also proposes that the various forms of mistreatment in organizations are

related, as part of one system. The conceptualization of an incivility spiral as a system is important in bridging the gap between the behavior of individual participants in the spiral and the behavior of the organization as a whole (Andersson & Pearson, 1999: 466).

The incivility spiral can end at any time by the exiting of either party from the escalating aggression. It is here that management is key – with proper training, supervisory personnel can step in and mediate smaller issues before they reach a tipping point. Human Resources has a role here as well, in examining organizational policies and procedures that fail to inhibit uncivil behavior. These can be adjusted and management can be trained to administer in such a way as to ensure a culture of civility permeates the business at large. The article suggests that organizations with a goal of curtailing incivility must address acts of interpersonal rudeness swiftly and justly. Further, there can be no tolerance for managers who create a norm of incivility through poor treatment of those they manage. Ensuring that management is diligent in setting an example of civil behavior can be a vital part of creating a culture of civility.

Mitigating Factors

There are mitigating factors that can diffuse the anger that leads to violence. Such factors include a positive work environment and support for troubled employees (e.g. employee assistance programs and open door policies), as well as strength of emotional stability and self-control. Kinney suggests that there are characteristics and circumstances that have potential to offset the stress that could lead to a violent outburst, including a secure family life, being somewhat future-oriented, possessing stable finances (e.g. good credit rating, savings, reasonable debt load), being drug & alcohol-free, having community ties, outside interests, and hobbies, sports, church involvement, friendships, solid work history, no real pattern of criminal conduct and a steady personality. (Kinney, 1995) There has been some research done to back these theories, including a study by Schat and Kelloway (2003) where they show that social support can be a moderator on the link between stressors and stress and strain outcomes. They point to a study by Barling, MacEwen, and Pratt (1988) in which empirical data demonstrates that people rate social support

as serving as emotional support in stressful situations.

Support can be either informational, defined by House in a 1981 article as “providing a person with information that the person can use in coping with personal and environmental problems” or instrumental, which House defines as providing direct help or assistance. In electing to diffuse anger through informational support, an organization might provide formal training and design complete communication plans that relate options available to employees for handling any number of stressors, including both those that occur inside and outside the workplace. Schat and Kelloway believed that both types of support are effective in reducing the kind of stress that leads to workplace violence. They noted a study by Cohen and Wills (1985), in which it was shown that social support is positively associated with employee health, work attitudes, and behavior. They examined the idea that “instrumental and informational support from within one’s organization act as buffers of the negative consequences of workplace aggression and violence” (Schat & Kelloway, 2003: 113). While both informational and instrumental support were shown to have clear benefits in offsetting violent behavior, Schat and Kelloway state,

The strongest and most consistent buffering effects were found for instrumental support, which interacted with the three workplace violence dimensions to predict emotional well-being, somatic health, and affect. Informational support was found to be a significant moderator of the relationship between the workplace violence dimensions and emotional wellbeing (Schat & Kelloway, 2003: 116).

The learning points from this research for managers and human resources professionals is that both informational and instrumental support programs should be in place in order to mitigate the effects of violent behavior in the workplace.

STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTION OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

In his analysis of multiple studies on aggression and violence in the workplace, Barling makes this unequivocal statement.

Workplace aggression is predictable. Despite lingering fears that workplace aggression is largely unpredictable (and the result of disgruntled employees), the data tend to suggest otherwise.

Specifically, numerous studies now show that, like aggression in general, perceived provocation is a significant predictor of workplace aggression, and that this effect may be buffered (or exacerbated) by specific individual difference variables (Barling 2009: 685).

Something that can be predicted can be prevented. While all of the pieces to the prevention puzzle have not yet been perfected, there are specific actions that organizations, led by their human resources partners, can take to minimize the risk of a violent outburst. In fact, according to the same Barling study, the very act of taking steps to prevent workplace aggression and violence is a preventative measure in itself. He states that research has shown, “the perception that the organization will take some action against workplace aggression (or sexual harassment) may well be a significant factor in reducing workplace aggression” (Barling 2009: 685).

Training

Aside from those training opportunities already mentioned, there is a place for formal training programs specific to workplace violence. These modules offer employees the opportunity to understand the company’s commitment to workplace violence prevention, the prevention methods in place, and each employee’s role in ensuring a safe work environment. The FBI recommends that every organization’s regular training plan include a review of the workplace violence prevention policy, including reporting requirements, and a discussion of risk factors that can cause or contribute to threats and violence, such as those discussed earlier in this paper. They go on to suggest that a key method of preventing an incident is ensuring that managers are aware of the early warning signs of an employee’s involvement in a pattern of escalating aggressive or violent behavior. Research shows that certain pre-incident indicators can be present in situations before an incident of violence. All management must be trained to identify these pre-incident indicators, and to step in and alert appropriate parties when they arise in order to prevent an incident of violence. The FBI (2002) lists the following risk factors that frequently appear before a violent incident: personality conflicts (between coworkers or between worker and supervisor), a mishandled termination or other disciplinary

action, an employee bringing weapons onto a work site, drug or alcohol use on the job, a grudge over a real or imagined grievance, personal circumstances (e.g. breakup of a marriage or romantic relationship, other family conflicts, financial or legal problems, emotional disturbance), increasing belligerence, ominous, specific threats, hypersensitivity to criticism, recent acquisition of or fascination with weapons, apparent obsession with a supervisor or coworker or employee grievance, preoccupation with violent themes, interest in recently publicized violent events, outbursts of anger, extreme disorganization, noticeable changes in behavior, and/or homicidal/suicidal comments or threats.

Training specific to conflict resolution, mediation, and diffusion of volatile situations and aggressive behavior are helpful in an overall training regimen, as is providing information on diversity in order to minimize conflict due to racial and ethnic differences. Once action plans are developed, all employees should be well versed in both the plan itself, as well as the physical actions necessary to carry out plans, such as how to operate alarm systems, which numbers to call in an emergency, and where to obtain first aid and other medical equipment. Removing uncertainty and demonstrating a focus on prevention of violence can, as mentioned earlier, can have a preventative impact on violence and aggression in the workplace.

OSHA lists a similar training schedule for employee training and education, in order to ensure safe working conditions, and goes on to state that specific training is needed for managers and supervisors, who

... should take additional training to enable them to recognize a potentially hazardous situation or to make any necessary changes in the physical plant, patient care treatment program, staffing policy and procedures. Managers and supervisors should also be trained to ensure that employees are not placed in assignments that compromise safety and in methods and procedures which will reduce the security hazards. They should be trained to behave compassionately towards co-workers when an incident does occur. They need to ensure that employees follow safe work practices and receive appropriate training to enable them to do this. They should reinforce the employer’s Workplace Violence Prevention Program, promote safety and security, and ensure employees receive additional training as the need arises. (US Department of Labor Website)

The Handbook of Workplace Violence (Kelloway, Barling, & Hurrell, 2006) notes that the development of training programs geared towards those at risk to commit a violent or aggressive act, for example training that would give tools for managing emotions and behaviors tendencies that are known to be related to aggressive behavior at work, would be a valuable addition to the current educational offerings. This less-studied method of approach has logical benefits. The person best able to prevent violent behavior is the person committing the violent act. By addressing the issue at the source, there is a reduced need for managers and other organization representatives to predict behavior, as the basis of the behavior would reside within someone who could self-identify. Further study is needed in this area to determine the best method of application for highest effectiveness; however it is a promising next step in the study of violence prevention.

Staffing

While there is no reliable profile of a perpetrator of workplace violence, previously cited research has shown specific indicators that reveal a greater tendency towards violent behavior. Employees of the staffing function are a company's first line of defense in preventing those workers with a greater propensity for violence from ever being provided the opportunity. Staffing professional must be trained to use techniques proven effective in screening out those applicants with a predisposition for violent behavior. One method to accomplish this is reviewing all available records before making a hiring decision, including criminal background checks, credit and financial reports, military discharge information, motor vehicle records, and education records. (Kinney, 1995) As part of an overall strategy for training in the prevention of workplace violence, staffing professionals can learn to appropriately use these records in order to identify red flags in candidate backgrounds. Other red flags are often uncovered in the recruiting and selection process, including long, unexplained time gaps on employment record, confusing or unclear job histories, extensive use of personal references when substantial employment history exists, an inability to provide references that can verify employment, and unexplained reasons for moving

long geographical distances or out-of-state. (Kinney, 1995) Careful exploration of these unusual situations can provide the opportunity to uncover a history of aggressive or violent behavior before a candidate is ever allowed to set foot in an organization.

Additional tools available to the staffing function include interviews, which provide an excellent opportunity to better understand whether a candidate has any of the characteristics previously described as often found in employees who struggle to manage stress and frustration. Appropriate interview techniques are an important part of the selection process when considering for workplace violence prevention. These, too, must be trained in order to be best utilized by staffing professionals. Effective questions can include some or all of the following:

- In what ways are you hard to get along with or aggressive with others?
- How do you deal with disappointments?
- How do you express anger or hostility?
- How do you deal with difficult people?
- How did you feel about your managers or supervisors where you previously worked?
- What do you do when you disagree with another person?
- What kinds of situations or circumstances frustrate or anger you? (Kinney, 1995: 131)

While replies to these questions do not definitively identify a future aggressive employee, a trained interviewer can recognize responses that should lead to further exploration. Other effective methods of screening applicants early on include providing multiple interviewers to speak with the candidate, then gathering feedback from each and acting on it as appropriate. Creating internship programs gives both employer and employee the opportunity to understand each other's expectations, as well as fit with the organization, culture, and job. Both parties can use the preview time to determine whether the stressors specific to the position and the organization will be an excessive strain on a given employee. (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) Finally, careful follow up on references can yield a wealth of information – particularly when contacting less recent associates with less incentive to move a problem employee out of their own company (Neuman & Baron, 1997).

Staffing professionals have the first opportunity to put all available information

together, including records, application information, and interview responses, to understand whether a potential employee has the anchors known to prevent a worker from selecting violence as a course of action, and whether a potential employee has the most telling indicator of future violent behavior – a history of violence. Through proper training, staffing can remove obvious threats from consideration.

Employee Support

Employers often have support systems in place to address a variety of concerns, including issues leading to workplace violence. However these tend to be underutilized for several reasons. In some cases, employees are not aware of them at all, in others, employees are aware but do not understand the function, and frequently employees are concerned about their confidentiality in approaching any of the supports for assistance. For example, Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) have expertise in dealing with the very issues that lead to aggression spilling over into workplace settings, however research shows that in many cases, employee use of such programs is minimal. In a majority of companies, participation does not exceed 2% of the population (Kinney, 1995).

Aside from providing tools and techniques during one on one counseling, EAPs can play other roles in violence prevention. For example, they can assist with training supervisors and managers on issues of employee reliability, identifying abusive supervisors and managers, helping high-risk individuals cope with job loss, showing how internal stressors contribute to aggression and violence, establishing strategies to contain domestic violence spillover, participating in violence prevention/intervention teams, assisting in managing relationships with outside service providers, and conducting critical incident stress debriefings (Kinney, 1995). However, the array of services is rarely known to front line management. Further, the policies around confidentiality are unclear and lack widespread trust. While EAPs only report individual calls in aggregate without identifying the person, employees may fear reprisal if their concerns are reported back to their managers. Believing that the EAP releases information will prevent employees from seeking assistance early on in the cycle of

aggression, thereby eliminating an opportunity to disrupt the cycle and prevent a violent incident.

As part of an overall human resources strategy to use training as a workplace violence prevention tool, attention must be paid to training managers at all levels in the supports offered by the organization and how best to use them. For example, a manager trained in the functions of an Employee Assistance Program is better able to proactively offer it as a support for employees experiencing any of the issues mentioned earlier as risk factors.

Disciplinary Action and Terminations

The conversation about termination of employment must start with the following understanding, as explained by McElhaney in his book *Aggression in the Workplace*:

No amount of severance or monetary consideration can compensate for the feelings of inadequacy that adults feel when they are suddenly without a job. Even if there is some relief, and even if there is a separation package, the need for meaningful activity is secondary only to the need for survival – and the loss of work may threaten both. At some point down the road, even those who appear to accept the termination with relatively little reaction may ultimately experience feelings of resentment, when their self-worth and emotional stability become threatened by an extended period of unemployment (2004: 124).

Bearing this point in mind is the foundation for all termination activity. Through attention to the terminated employee's frame of mind, management can be trained to handle a termination with maximum sensitivity and respect, the very minimum requirements in an attempt to avoid violent termination-related behavior. It is interesting to note that employers spend quite a bit of effort to encourage company loyalty, often promoting a sense of family, and supporting workplace friendships. While these relationships might benefit the company during an employee's tenure, at the point of termination, employers find that there is a downside to this loyalty. Those employees with a significant emotional investment in the company feel the job loss more deeply than those struggling only with the expected identity and financial implications of termination. It is here that managers are especially needed, to assist in identification of employees that have such an investment, as these may be more traumatized by

the job loss – and possibly in a position to move through the cycle of violence.

More often, managers find themselves fearful of a termination because of the aggressive or bullying nature of an employee. McElhaney (2004) suggests that there are steps that can be taken in completing such a termination that will raise the odds in favor of a positive outcome. First, he reminds employers that the termination conversation is a final opportunity for effective communication with an employee. As such, management should plan such a conversation carefully, in order to ensure all possible steps are taken to ensure a successful interaction. Second, in the case of an involuntary termination, separation from the company should be complete and final, outside of specific methods of communication for the employee's questions on final pay and benefits. This method of communication should be agreed upon during the termination discussion, and management should avoid allowing themselves to be pulled into endless subsequent conversations that serve the employee's purpose of holding on to the relationship a little longer, and generally result in revisiting and reviving old conflicts.

In some situations, contractual agreements for employees causing concern can provide enough motivation to ensure an employee discards any plans for aggression and violence. Providing compensation in the form of severance payments, extended insurance, and/or outplacement assistance upon the employee's agreement not to approach any member of the company or company premises once the termination is complete can be successful under some circumstances. McElhaney (2004) reminds employers to think long-term. As shown early on in this paper, some incidents of workplace violence can take place months or years after a termination. He points out that proper planning can be achieved with focus on the items the employee considers most essential. This, in addition to ensuring the termination process itself is conducive to easing inclinations towards reprisal, can result in mitigation of the risk. Managers are also encouraged to consider external support services in appropriate cases. Separated employees might benefit from mental health counseling, community support services, and outplacement help, and in some situations,

management would be well advised to include discussion of these (and offer of payment for these, if appropriate) in order to ensure the employee's orderly transition to his or her next job.

Finally, and it can't be repeated enough, members of management and others present at a termination meeting must above all else be fair and respectful. Regardless of any bad history between them, all temptation to continue performance discussions and point out an employee's shortcomings must be avoided. Once the termination decision is made, the organization has no further interest in the employee's performance, and no good can come of continuing this sort of discussion. McElhaney (2004) points out that despite any previous workplace issues, employees who feel they were treated with dignity by those presenting the termination notification are far less likely to attempt to even the score than employees whose last impression was of being treated disrespectfully and offensively.

CONCLUSION

Workplace violence is an issue that impacts those that commit the violent acts, those that are the victims of the violent acts, and all who witness the incident and/or are involved in working through the aftermath to restore employees to former levels of well-being and productivity. The factors that combine to cause the perfect storm that results in a violent outburst range from societal and cultural issues to individual characteristics to the work environment itself. Aggressive behavior can be contagious, and those living or working in an atmosphere of incivility, aggression, and violence are most likely to then perpetrate a violent act.

Research has shown that violence can be predicted to a point, and prevention is then a matter of understanding those characteristics that lead to violence and addressing them before the cycle reaches a peak that ends in bloodshed. There is no single method of prevention that is reliably successful, and there is no single circumstance in which prevention methods should be used. Instead, a program of violence prevention would include activities that permeate all levels of the organization, instilling something akin to an organizational culture that is focused

on prevention of aggression and violence. The human resources function is in the optimal position to create and execute such a program, given its expertise in motivation, organizational behavior, and managing change. A comprehensive plan might include working with staffing early on to prevent those with a history of violence or particular traits associated with aggression from entering the organization. Training would then include information on intervening in conflict, handling ones on aggressive tendencies, and managing for a positive work environment. Support systems can be put in place and employees can be educated on how to best utilize them, and finally, management can learn to end the employment relationship in a way that protects each employee's dignity – often the final and most important factor in preventing future violent incidents.

Information on workplace violence prediction and prevention is continuously studied and frequently updated. While there is currently no perfect solution, careful attention to the issue, in itself a method of prevention, can serve to minimize violent outbursts. Ensuring a safe work environment is good business.

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