

VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.
Psychologist**

- It affects every segment of society – no one is immune
- Violence is on the rise both in the home and in the workplace
- Violence in the workplace has always existed, but at nowhere near the extent that it has over the past 10 years or so
- It is estimated that 1 in 4 employees has been a victim of violence in the workplace
- This does not necessarily mean the victim of physical assault as violence can take many forms
 - ✓ Victims of harassment
 - ✓ Insult
 - ✓ Stalking
- Violence in the workplace has cost businesses approximately \$4.2 billion per year – a staggering amount
- The most common forms of violence are verbal threats and intimidation perpetrated by one employee against another
- Anytime there is an exchange of money, the risk of deadly assault increases

What types of events typically trigger workplace violence?

- Over the last decade, the event that most incites workplace violence is corporate restructuring and change which often results in layoffs, reduced hours and a scaled down workforce
- This stress, coupled with the burden of paying bills, trying to keep a family together and other financial woes, can overwhelm an employee's normal ability to cope with traditional job pressures and can sometimes result in violently acting out

Do employees who commit violent acts in the workplace commonly have a history of mental instability or do they just snap?

- They usually do not have a history of mental instability insofar as having been formally diagnosed or receiving counseling, but they do have a history of a variety of stressors that have occurred close to the time that the acting out took place – marital separation, job

restructuring, a pending layoff, reduced work schedule or a loss of a close family member

- Usually when someone snaps, there are multiple stressors at play
- When studying individuals who commit lethal acts in the workplace, it has been found that they harbored traits consistent with serious types of mental illnesses

What psychological effects can workplace violence have on employees?

- Effects can be virtually unnoticeable to life-altering
- Some employees will get over the trauma very quickly, other will never forget it
- Some employees will lose their appetites, be unable to sleep, have recurring nightmares or visions of what they witnessed, and start distancing themselves from co-workers and families
- Other may become withdrawn or begin displaying personality traits totally contrary to their normal selves
- Others will begin abusing substances like alcohol to block out what happened or to help them relax

How can employees help each other during this trying time?

- Employees need to foster a safe, supportive and accepting environment in which they can talk openly and cry if needed with one another
- They need to encourage one another to discuss openly what happened, to relive the event if they so choose and not to bottle up their feelings and fears

How can an organization protect itself against workplace violence?

- The best thing it can do is offer ongoing stress management courses and seminars
- The supervisor's role is also key in that if he/she sees that an employee is developing a pattern of difficult behaviors, they must intervene
- This can prevent a situation from escalating and dramatically reduce the incidence of violence
- The supervisor tends to also be aware and know their employees more than anyone else so if an employee starts deviating from everyday conducts that is normal, they must intervene
- The supervisor is the best barometer of measuring how his/her staff copes with and handles their daily duties and stress

- If a manager or supervisor is reading his/her staff well and intervenes immediately when inappropriate behaviors surface, there is a good chance he/she can defuse the situation before tragedy occurs

Employee versus employee which is best exemplified by a case wherein an employee attacks a supervisor. This accounts for 10% of all workplace homicides. Keep in mind that the term employees may also refer to temporaries and subcontractors who spend a significant amount of their workday in your workplace. This category also includes domestic violence. Employers are puzzled by this issue because nowhere in the employee selection process can this issue be addressed. Employers cannot even ask a potential employee questions about his or her private life.

Statistics

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reported that employees murdered over 100 bosses and co-workers in 1997. Furthermore, NIOSH reports that homicide, due to workplace violence, is the leading cause of death for women in the workplace and the second leading cause of death for men.

According to Northwestern National Life Insurance Company, 2,500 workers per 100,000 have been physically attacked on the job.

- 44% of workplace attacks were committed by customers or clients
- 24% by strangers
- 20% by co-workers
- 7% by bosses
- 3% by former employees

Death on the Job

Homicide is the leading cause of death for women in the workplace, and the second leading cause of death for men according to the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics, 1995.

Loss of Productivity

The U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (July 1994), states that those victimized due to assaults occurring in the workplace costs about a half million employees 1,751,100 days of work each year, an average of 3.5 days per crime. This missed work resulted in over \$55,000,000 in lost wages annually, not including days covered by sick and annual leave.

THE VIOLATOR CHARACTERISTICS

The profile of the workplace killer can be summed up in one grand run-on sentence. In well over 95% of the cases, the killer is a male, a socially-isolated loner, who is either a disgruntled employee, an angry client, a sexual harasser, an irate spouse or a jilted would-be lover of one of your employees. Occasionally, though, the killer has been a street criminal who has exploited a weakness in your physical security. In any event, he has taken the lives of many innocent employees. But the perpetrator is only a single piece of a larger puzzle. To assess responsibility for the overall problem of workplace violence, the focus must be taken off the perpetrator momentarily and turned back in the other direction.

Some employers have simply failed to address the workplace violence problem. Their negligence has not necessarily been purposeful. It has been due to a lack of awareness of the problem coupled with a preoccupation with everyday pressures. This has caused employers to ignore some of the most egregious organizational factors that have contributed to workplace violence. Some of those factors include:

- A weak or non-existent policy against all forms of violence in the workplace
- No mechanism for reporting violent or threatening behavior
- Failure to take immediate action against those who have threatened or committed acts of workplace violence
- No clearly defined rules of conduct
- Failure to educate managers, supervisors and employees in:
 - Workplace violence awareness
 - Early warning signs ("individual" and "organizational")

- Emergency procedures
- Hostage survival
- Workplace violence reporting and prevention measures
- Negligence in the hiring, training, supervision, discipline and retention of employees
- No in-house employee support systems
- Inadequate physical security
- Maintaining an atmosphere of intolerance or indignity
- And many more

There is even a lack of awareness as to the kinds of events that trigger workplace violence. Knowledge of them is crucial. Some of the obvious ones are employee disciplinary actions, layoffs and downsizing, but there are many more and precautions can be taken with each to minimize a violent outcome.

It's safe to say that over three-quarters of the cases of violence perpetrated by employees had clear warning signs. However, without awareness, warning signs go unnoticed. Awareness only comes with education.

Workplace violence has struck shopping malls, law offices, government buildings, insurance companies, computer firms, banks, airlines, restaurants, schools and even libraries. If you do not have occasion to work, patronize or visit any of these establishments, you are a rare person indeed, but if you or any of your loved ones do frequent such places, there is cause for concern.

Among the victims of workplace violence have been executives, managers, supervisors, employees, security personnel, customers, visitors and even family members of "targeted" individuals. There are graphic media accounts describing each.

Addressing Workplace Violence ...Is Everybody's Responsibility

- I. Emphasize, in the form of a stated policy from the highest level in your organization that workplace violence, in any form, and will not be tolerated.***

Without emphasis from the top of an organization, addressing workplace violence merely becomes a "voluntary" matter. Those prone to violence are essentially given the green light to operate.

- II. Formulate a representative team of employees to develop policies and for the awareness and prevention of workplace violence.***

People tend to claim ownership of ideas and concepts they helped to formulate. This empowerment of workers is also good assurance that they will participate in any efforts a CEO might employ to address the workplace violence threat. Recognizing and rewarding the contributions of employees will also go far to invite further participation.

- III. Educate employees on workplace violence awareness, early warning signs, emergency procedures and prevention.***

Ensure that those who train your employees are not only knowledgeable about the many facets of workplace violence but make sure that they are sufficiently experienced in crisis problem resolution. This will ensure that your employee's questions are answered!

- IV. Provide your employees with training sufficient to improve their "survivability" skills in the event of a serious incident of workplace violence.***

Each and every physical work setting is unique. Employees should be made aware of facilities that provide them with protection or escape in the event of emergency.

V. Develop policies for the proper hiring, training, supervision, discipline and retention of employees with an emphasis on workplace violence prevention.

More often than not, organizations have hired the people who later became workplace killers. There is probably more legal liability created here than any other single human resource area. Your human resource professionals can be your first line of defense in preventing workplace violence by means of appropriate personnel practices.

VI. Designate a management representative to take workplace violence complaints and to encourage employees to report all threats or incidents of workplace violence.

This person will ensure that employee awareness of workplace violence is kept at a high level. Furthermore, the management representation should identify training needs, oversee formal and informal reporting procedures and will act affirmatively at the first instance of workplace violence. He or she will also act in an advisory capacity keeping the organizations chief executive abreast of any trends or problems.

VII. Establish employee assistance and peer support programs and encourage employees to seek help when needed and to assist employees who have already experienced workplace violence.

Internal mechanisms such as this will address the emotional and psychological needs of employees who have been traumatized.

VIII. Employ conflict resolution to address problems between employees.

Conflict resolution provides employees with a fair, sensible and civilized means of resolving disputes.

IX. Take immediate action against all forms of workplace violence.

Taking immediate action at the first instance of workplace violence sends a message to potential rule violators in the organization that violence prevention policies have teeth in them and that there are

significant consequences for inappropriate behavior. By the same token, a positive message is sent to the remainder of the employees assuring them that their safety is your top concern.

X. Establish a working relationship with local law enforcement and prepare to assist them in the event of emergency.

Efforts made here may provide a life-saving edge to law enforcement in terms of timesavings in the event of a serious incident of workplace violence at your facility. Maps, building diagrams, escape routes and means of communication are among the items of concern to law enforcement when a catastrophic incident occurs.

XI. Employ legal remedies, which address the issues of workplace violence.

Everyone from the CEO to the human resource officer to the security staff should be aware of legal remedies such as temporary restraining orders and domestic restraining orders and know how to obtain such remedies on an emergency basis. Designated staff should be able to recognize the elements of certain crimes, short of physical violence, that might occur in the workplace.

XII. Assign a designated media relations officer responsible for the timely and proper dissemination of information.

In a nation where the "right to know" is valued and protected by law, it is important to know that the media will operate with your cooperation or despite it. If the media is not accommodated by virtue of timely information releases, they will go to sources which may be to your detriment. There is a price to be paid for poor media relations. Failings here may also hamper law enforcement efforts to resolve a critical incident at your place of business.

XIII. Employ the highest practical level of physical security in your workplace.

Your security staff is your first line of defense when an incident occurs. At the very least, they should be trained by knowledgeable

crisis trainers on how to respond to an in-progress emergency such as a hostage taking or a barricaded subject. They should not make the situation worse by virtue of their actions. If they are trained properly, they should possess sufficient knowledge, skills and abilities to stabilize the situation until law enforcement arrives.

"...And when you think you've done everything right, continue to evaluate your operation for improvement!..."

10 Facts Every Employer and Employee Should Know About Workplace Violence: It May Save Your Life!

Here are ten facts that may save your life!

1. THE STATISTICS

According to the FBI, Workplace violence is the number one growing homicide in the United States. There are an estimated 225,000 to 300,000 occurrences of violence per year.

A 1994 Justice Department study determined that nearly one million crimes of all types occurred in the workplace and that more than half goes unreported. Statistics clearly illustrate that Workplace violence is on the rise.

2. THE VICTIMS

Homicide is the third leading cause of occupational death for men and the number one cause of occupational death for women. Seventeen percent of all occupational deaths are work related; five or six homicides per month are directed against managers and employees; 80 percent of victims are males and 20 percent are female.

In 1992, the Bureau of Labor Statistic reported 43 percent of all women who died on the job were victims of violence, compared to 18 percent men. The age of the victims of occupational homicides occurred among workers between 25 to 44. But workers 65 and older had the highest rate of

occupational homicide.

The rates of occupation homicide among African American workers and other ethnic people were more than twice the rate for white workers.

3. THE CAUSES

There are many causes of WorkPlace violence that include economic, societal, psychological, and organizational.

The economic causes are an over-stressed population, downsizing or "rightsizing" of organizations, massive layoffs, growth of technology, recession, massive mergers, post modernism, and high unemployment.

It is the opinion of many people that the societal causes of Work-Place violence are many: a changing society, violence on television and in movies, music ("gansta rap" and heavy metal), violence as an accepted means of problem-solving, and the accessibility of handguns.

The physiological causes of WorkPlace violence are also the result of employees who have experienced emotional, physical, or sexual abuse from childhood. Employees may bring their "baggage" into the work place. The manager or supervisor assumes the parental role and the co-workers may resemble siblings.

The role that organizations play in WorkPlace violence include organizational culture, management style such as authoritarian or autocratic, polarization between employees and managers, lack of a forum to address grievances, threats or violence, creativity and new ideas being discouraged, and that empowered employees and a voice in the decision-making process are lacking.

5. THE PERPETRATORS

Many of the perpetrators are disgruntled employees who were terminated, fired or laid off. The employee experiences unfairness, injustice, or malice because of their employment status. A disgruntled employee may return to his or her former place of employment after being terminated and commit murder. 25 percent commit suicide after the violent act.

Some of the other perpetrators of Workplace violence are robbers, patients and residents in health care facilities, domestic partners, and clients and/or customers of public service workers.

Some of the similarities in many employees who committed acts of violence at work include:

- a history of violence, fascination with the military, or being a survivalist
- white males
- over the age of 35 years
- a loner or an extremist
- carries a grudge
- have difficulty accepting authority or reality a history of violence toward women
- may have substance abuse problems and/or mental-health problems

6. THE PREVENTION

A confidential background check on new employees must be conducted. It should include a check on the applicant's criminal, credit, employment history and driving records. Once an applicant is hired, it is imperative to note any dramatic change in behavior and take the proper steps toward intervention.

A "zero tolerance" of threats, intimidation, and any act of violence should be included in the mission statement and employee handbook of all organizations.

The implementation of a violence prevention program with a committee to investigate all threats or acts of violence is also imperative. A continuous forum for training and education, and an effective grievance process are critical components to preventing violence.

7. THE "RED FLAGS" AND WARNING SIGNS

If an employee displays a dramatic behavior or personality change and suddenly becomes hostile, it is vital for the supervisors and co-workers to find out why the change has occurred. A referral to the Employee

Assistance Program (EAP) or mental-health counseling may be necessary.

Employees who are chronically disgruntled, blame others for their problems, and perceive unfairness or injustice may become violent.

If an employee makes intimidating comments, threats, or allusions to violence against others in the company, an investigation should be conducted and the referrals to the EAP must be made.

8. THE THREAT

Managers, supervisors, and employees must take all threats seriously. Upper management should have written policy regarding the "chain of command" for reporting any and all threats of violence. It should also include what actions will be taken and at what level of management.

9. THE INVESTIGATION

A confidential investigation should be conducted by a Threat Assessment committee assuring anonymity for the employee who reported the threat. The committee should conduct an objective investigation and make the necessary recommendations. It may recommend the EAP, mental health counseling, or contact the local law enforcement agency.

10. RAMIFICATIONS OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

From the perspective of the witness/victim and their families, the ramifications of Workplace violence are devastating. The loss of human life (co-workers, friends, and supervisors) can never be replaced. The emotional trauma of being involved and witnessing an act of violence cannot be described in words. After violence has occurred, many valuable employees will never return to work.

The financial ramifications of violence in an organization may cause the entire business to close down, and valuable work time will be spent on painting and remodeling the work area. Worker's compensation claims, legal expenses and lawsuits will escalate.

Categories of Workplace Violence

Incidents of workplace violence may be categorized based on the primary identity and motivation of the perpetrator. Each category has unique characteristics. The categories, and their frequency, are:

- *Robbery Attempts 23.28%*
- *Personal/Domestic Disputes 20.34%*
- *Disgruntled Employees 19.61%*
- *Mentally Ill Persons 17.16%*
- *Disgruntled Customers/Clients 7.6%*
- *Abusive Supervisors 7.35%*
- *Disgruntled Students/Trainees 4.66%*

Settings for Workplace Violence

Incidents of workplace violence may occur anywhere. Certain work environments, however, appear to be at greater risk. In general, persons working in service-related fields are more likely to be victims of workplace violence than those in manufacturing or industrial settings. The settings for workplace violence can be summarized as follows:

- *Public and Government Facilities 17.2%*
- *Restaurants and Bars 14.6%*
- *Schools 14.6%*
- *Medical Facilities 9.6%*
- *Convenience Stores 8%*
- *Plants or Factories 7.6%*
- *Businesses 7%*
- *Offices 6.4%*
- *Retail Stores 6.4%*
- *Transportation Facilities 4.8%*
- *Media Facilities 2.4%*
- *Hotels and Motels 1.4%*

Violence and Harassment In The Workplace: The 6 Most Common Myths of Workplace Violence

Myth: *Workplace violence is a "guy thing," and women shouldn't worry about it.*

Reality: Homicide is the number-one cause of death for women at work. For non-fatal workplace attacks, women are more vulnerable than men to violence from acquaintances, friends, relatives, and current or former spouses or partners. Plus, two-thirds of all non-fatal workplace assaults occur in hospitals, nursing homes, residential care facilities, and other social-service locations where women comprise the vast majority of employees.

Myth: *The personal problems of managers and employees don't affect the workplace.*

Reality: Relatives, friends, and acquaintances are behind 49.4 percent of workplace attacks on women and 30.3 percent of workplace attacks on men. Homicide is the number-one cause of death for women at work, and of women who are killed at work; one out of five is at the hands of her current or former spouse or partner. When personal problems show up at work, everyone is at risk.

Myth: *Security guards and metal detectors prevent workplace violence*

Reality: Security guards, as well as metal detectors and other security hardware are helpful in preventing workplace violence from external sources that have no ongoing relationship with an organization. However, they are not helpful in preventing violence from internal sources such as current or former employees, employees' families, friends, and acquaintances, and others who are "familiar" to an organization.

Myth: *Demographic profiles are the most useful tool in predicting who will become violent at work.*

Reality: Demographic profiles are too generic to be useful in predicting who will become violent at work because they focus on gender, race, and age. To avoid generalizing or stereotyping, managers and coworkers must focus on observable behaviors instead.

Myth: *There is no way to predict workplace violence.*

Reality: Managers and coworkers can anticipate, assess, and even manage the risk of internal sources of workplace violence by identifying and addressing high-risk employee behaviors before they escalate into violence.

Myth: *Workplace violence cannot be prevented*

Reality: Workplace violence can be prevented if and when executives and managers are willing to adopt a system-oriented approach within their companies that includes early intervention for employees who exhibit high-risk behaviors.