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*The Organizational Model for
Workplace Security*

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Abstract

The definition of workplace violence is a “any act of harassment (including sexual harassment), intimidation, threat, rape or homicide that takes place at a victim’s place of employment.” When the statistics for workplace violence are looked at, it is easily understood why workplace security is rapidly becoming a problem for many organizations. The situation that provokes workplace violence does not necessarily have to start in the workplace or and the act of violence does not necessarily have to happen in the workplace for organizations to be concerned.

Many organizations are just learning that violence can occur anywhere at anytime and they must be prepared to cope with the situation. This means they must take a look at their preparedness and decide what they need to do to not only increase preparedness but also to understand what procedures they do day to day that might affect a potentially violent situation. Organizations need to ask tough questions as to their hiring procedures, termination procedures, and security procedures. In today’s society, this increases from the aspect of global terrorism and how well are they prepared for the potential of a terrorist attack.

Security in the workplace will continue to be a concern but by following specific procedures and processes the risk of a situation happening can be significantly reduced.

Keywords: workplace violence, workplace security, organizational security, domestic violence, spillover violence, workplace threats, violence prevention, employee violence

The Organizational Model for Workplace Security

Workplace violence is a growing concern in the United States and even in other countries. Workplace violence is any act of harassment (including sexual harassment), intimidation, threat, rape, assault or homicide that takes place at the victim's place of employment. Any act of destruction of property can also be considered an act of violence. According to the Department of Justice, homicide is the second leading cause of fatalities in the workplace and murder is the number one cause of death for females in the workplace. Each year, there are approximately 1.5 million physical assaults, more than seven million threats and more than twenty million cases of harassment in the workplace. These numbers may be low because of underreporting by organizations.

Types of workplace violence

There are three types of workplace violence:

- Type one – the violent situation originates in the workplace and the violence occurs in the workplace.
- Type two – the violent situation originates in the workplace but the violence occurs outside the workplace.
- Type three - the violent situation originates outside the workplace but the violence occurs in the workplace.

Organizational factors that may trigger workplace violence

There are several factors that may trigger violence in the workplace.

- Autocratic management - In this enlightened time, management has done several things to attempt to decrease autocratic management but the fact remains there are still autocratic managers. There are also management practices that employees still perceive to be autocratic when in fact they are not. Personality factors also enter into this factor when conflicts between employees and managers exist.
- Disciplinary action by management - Discipline in organizations is necessary at times. However, if an employee perceives the discipline is unjust or unfair, they may react in a negative manner.
- A negative appraisal – Evaluation of employees is a necessary function of management but often the evaluation is perceived to be unfair. Many times managers are not taught the proper manner in which to evaluate employees or to deliver the appraisal in a manner that will not be offensive to an employee even if it is a negative appraisal.
- Lack of support from an employee's superior or workgroup – Often employees feel as if they are an island in the workplace and the person they report to is not supportive of their efforts or results. Often this extends to an employee's workgroup when they isolate the employee from the group.
- Change – Change is a fact of life in organizations. However, change may be difficult for some employees and often the change is not handled well by

management. Employees often feel they are victims of change rather than change being beneficial for them.

- Downsizing – Organizations often feel the way to get costs back in line is to reduce the workplace. Downsizing, or rightsizing as it is sometimes called, is nothing more than termination of an employee or group of employees. Employees, particularly long-term employees, have difficulty facing the fact the organization is not loyal to them and will perceive the termination to be punishment.

Behavior “Typologies” of potentially violent employees

Although there are no characteristics common to all violent people there are certain traits and behaviors that are typical among perpetrators of workplace violence:

- They tend to be white males from 30 to 50 years of age. Other ethnic groups do commit workplace violence as do women but white males seem to be the dominant group.
- Hypersensitive to criticism. People who commit workplace violence do not take criticism well and they tend to respond negatively to it.
- Overvalues power and control. They want control of their own destiny and they tend to want to control every situation. Losing control of a situation may make them very angry to the point they cannot control themselves.
- May depend on symbols of power. Many workplace violence perpetrators collect guns or some other power symbol and will probably brag about the collection they have.
- They highly value their job. Often, they over identify with their job and if they are loners, the job becomes the single most important thing in their life. If the job is threatened or lost they become highly upset.
- A violent past. Most but not all workplace violence perpetrators have some violence in their past. Domestic violence or being cruel to animals are some of the ways this violence has been demonstrated.
- Believes his fate is in the hands of others. Workplace violence perpetrators feel they have no control over their lives and they want to get their revenge because others have controlled them.

The Cycle of violence

Before the perpetrator decides to commit the ultimate act, whatever it may be they go through the following cycle:

- The “trigger” event. There are usually several events that lead up to the violent act. The employee may complain about these events but does not act on any one of them but does allow them to accumulate. Then there is the final “trigger” event, the one that may put the employee over the edge.
- The reaction. After the final “trigger” event occurs, the employee will have certain kinds of thoughts that have been predisposed by his personality.
- The emotional response. The employee will react with anger, hate or blame.

- The behavior. Most employees will do nothing because they have the emotional stability to control their behavior. There are some who will react violently because they do not have the ability to control themselves.

The organizational model for reducing or preventing violence

Not all violence can or will be prevented. If we knew how to prevent violence, we would have done so in society long ago. There are no absolutes when it comes to violence but there are ways organizations can reduce and in some cases prevent a violent situation from happening:

- Review hiring procedures. Most employees are hired by interview which is probably the worst way to hire people. The interview should not be the sole method used to hire people. If it is the only method used, train the personnel being used for the interviewing the proper procedures and methods to conduct an effective interview. Never utilize low-paid, untrained personnel to interview prospective employees.
- Screen potential employees. When it is appropriate, testing should be done. Do a drug screen and do a background check. An interesting statistic is almost one in five potential employees lie about criminal records among other things.
- Review all layoff and termination procedures. Be sure all personnel who may have the authority to terminate employees are trained in the procedure. If employees are terminated, a policy on retraining or outplacement may be warranted.
- Create a crisis management team. All organizations should have a team of individuals including, the top manager, security manager, human resource manager, general counsel, maintenance personnel and other designated persons, to function as the crisis management team.
- The crisis management team will be responsible for creating a crisis management plan. This plan should include the responsibility capability of the organization to a violent situation; a plan to contain a violent situation; evacuation plans; plans for liaison with law enforcement; plans for the post-event.
- The crisis management team will also be responsible for creating a threat reporting system that includes a company policy on threats as well as a process for threat investigation.
- All managers and supervisors should be trained in how to de-escalate a potentially violent situation and they should know what their responsibilities are when a violent situation happens. They should have interpersonal relationship training in such things as conflict management, communication, change management, counseling/disciplining employees, addressing harassment of employees and performance appraisals.
- A process should be put in place for dealing with the threat of domestic violence in the workplace. All employees should be made aware of the signs of domestic violence and what should be done in reporting it. Victims of domestic violence should be made aware of the steps the organization will take to protect them and the steps they can take to protect themselves.

Conclusion

One of the first statements heard from people who have been involved in a workplace violence situation is “I didn’t think it would happen here.” Workplace violence can and will happen to any organization, none are immune. All organizations must take steps to prevent workplace violence situations from happening. Whether it is harassment or homicide, or anything in between, organizations are responsible for taking the appropriate steps to make sure it doesn’t happen.

Resources

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United States Department of Justice, WWW.USDOJ.gov

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