Preventing Violence in the Workplace: Threat Assessment and Prevention Strategies

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Abstract

Chauhan argues that since there is no quick fix to the resolution of complex problems associated with violence in the workplace, a multi-disciplinary approach is needed to analyze the causes of violence and to identify effective educational and training strategies to enhance the understanding of private and public sector managers in dealing with organizational violence. The purpose of this paper is to: (1) examine the sources or causes of organizational violence; (2) assess the threats and warning signs; (3) identify employer responsibilities; and (4) specify major violence prevention strategies and components of a violence management program.

Introduction

The increased occurrence of violence in the workplace is experienced by the public or private managers everyday. Although the bombing episode at the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma may represent an extreme or statically a rare form of violence, there are other forms of violence which occur in a large number placing the lives of millions of workers in danger. The magnitude of violence in the workplace poses a serious threat to the lives of American workers. Homicide is now the number one cause of death for United States women workers and the number three for all US workers. The workplace homicide is the fastest growing crime, and it is estimated that two million workplace assaults occur in the US each year. The number of workers harassed and threatened account for sixteen and six million respectively. The rate of assaults on supervisors has doubled, and the US Department of Justice reports that one out of every six crimes occur at the workplace (*Barrett, 1977, pp. 24-25*). Based on statistical evidence, OSHA has expressed specific concern for the safety and security of the worker in several service providers. These service providers include: medical care, mental health and psychiatric care,

alcoholic and drug treatment providers, law enforcement personnel, social welfare agencies, justice system personnel, and teaching, administrative, and support staff in schools where students have a history of violent behavior (*Barrett, 1977, p. 22*).

Violence in the workplace is one of the most complex and difficult problems confronting both private and public managers today. It is a recurring nightmare experienced by both private and public sector organizations (*Mantell with Albrecht, 1994, p. vii*). These organizations include hospitals, banks, government agencies, abortion clinics, manufacturing enterprises (e.g., Chrysler or General Motors), welfare agencies, law enforcement personnel, judicial offices, educational institutions (high schools and colleges), and psychological counseling facilities or offices. The recent statistics demonstrate that what was unheard of twenty-five years ago, violence in the workplace, is now one of the fastest growing crimes in the United States. In 1994, a study conducted by the US Department of Justice reported that approximately one million violent crimes occur in the workplace annually. Ten percent of those crimes involved offenders armed with handguns (*Bachman, 1994*). In 1993, the Northwestern National Life Insurance Company also reported that 2.2 million workers were physically attacked, 6.3 million were threatened, and 16.1 million were harassed.[1] The cost of workplace violence reported by the National Crime Victimization Survey was estimated at $4.2 billion (*Capozzoli and McVey, 1996, pp. 27-28*), primarily from civil suits, stress and injury claims, higher insurance premiums, and damage to personal, psychological, and physical assets of the victimized persons and organizations (*Bachman, 1994*). Similar conclusions were reached by the National Safe Workplace Institute in 1992 (*Mantell with Albrecht, 1994, p. ix*).

The problem of violence in the workplace was first highlighted by an episode at the US Postal Service office in the early 1990's where a disgruntled postal employee shot and killed his fellow employees. The workplace violence activities are not confined to the US Postal Service. They occur in every walk of work life. The most recent and serious episodes involve a sheriff's deputy who shot and killed his estranged wife and wounded a teacher's aide during an argument inside an elementary school office in Buffalo. An employee at the Connecticut State Lottery office on March 3, 1998, shot and killed his boss along with three other employees. A teacher supervising a graduation dance in Edinboro

(Pennsylvania) was killed by a gun shot wound, and a teenager in Jonesboro (Arkansas) killed several students and a teacher at the High School. On April 1, 1998, a newlywed husband in Port Jervis (New York) was charged with killing his bride on their wedding day, while in Fresno (California) on April 25, 1998, a woman and her husband shot and wounded each other during a marriage counseling session. There are thousands of such cases in every walk of life that can be documented. All these stories point to one fact: that the workplace is becoming increasingly dangerous and there is no place fully secured due to availability of guns. One eminent analyst of violence in the workplace characterizes the situation as an epidemic (*Mantell with Albrecht, 1994, p. ix*).

At the time of tragedy at the US Postal Service, the public reaction to workplace violence was mixed. Some people thought that it was an isolated incident committed by a crazy and disgruntled employee. Still, there were others who did not understand the gravity of the situation due to lack of information. The problem of violence is not confined to the post office. Violence occurs in all areas of organized activity. It is becoming a national problem adversely affecting work time, employee medical benefits, legal expenses, employee morale, turnover, productivity, and undermining the reputation and credibility of the employer. Because of changes in social attitudes, behaviors and economic needs, the separation between domestic and work spheres is also diminishing. The general social or economic problems often originating outside are producing violence in the workplace. In societal context, the workplace violence reflects the general conditions in society. The general social problems associated with poverty, drug use, family disintegration, out of wedlock births, declining moral values, and problematic economic conditions do contribute to increasing violence in the workplace. For instance, 14.5 percent of US population lives in poverty. About 30 percent of all births in the US are to unmarried mothers resulting in millions of children being raised in single parent households without full participation of the father in family affairs (*Myers, 1995, p. 3*).

Since there is no quick fix to the resolution of complex problems associated with violence in the workplace, a multi-disciplinary approach is needed to analyze the causes of violence and identify effective educational and training strategies to enhance the understanding of private and public sector managers in dealing with organizational violence. In order to promote prevention of violence in the workplace, we must understand the causes that contribute to increased violence. Therefore, the purpose of this

paper is to: (1) examine the sources or causes of organizational violence; (2) assess the threats and warning signs; (3) identify employer responsibilities; and (4) specify major violence prevention strategies and components of a violence management program.

Sources and Causes of Violence

In order to effectively deal with violence in the workplace, we must understand the underlying causes. Instead of reactive, we must follow an affirmative approach based on sound analysis of causes associated with violent behavior. There is already a significant body of literature produced in recent years which identifies the various cause of violence.[2] These causes may be grouped into three major categories:

Personal Causes

These are primarily associated with employee behavior, values, and socialization. They include state of physical/mental health, low self-esteem, personal habits, substance abuse, domestic disputes, personality conflicts, romantic obsession, personal values, interest in weapons, and negative social experiences.

Organization and Work Related Causes

These factors are related to the organizational structure, processes, leadership and supervisory style, job structure, task management, organizational culture and environment, lack of organizational justice, perceived inequities, mistreatment, biased reward and recognition systems, lack of effective dispute/conflict resolution skills, and personnel actions resulting into disagreements, discharges, discipline, down-sizing and terminations.

Societal Causes

These factors are related to perceived social and economic inequities, poverty, violence and crime in society, general socio-economic conditions, social disorganization and family disintegration, and the lack of economic and educational opportunities.

In most cases, the initiating causes are primarily job-related and include such personnel actions as disciplinary proceedings, reprimand, demotion, lay-off, and discharge for cause. The sources of violence are perpetrators who engage in abusive and violent behavior. They include: (1) strangers who are typically involved in the commission of a crime such as robbery, or have a grudge against the business; (2) current or past customers; (3) current or former co-workers who commit murders; (4) current or former co-workers who threaten or assault; (5) spouses or lovers involved in domestic disputes; and (6) romantically obsessed individuals who stalk employees (*Labig, 1995, p. 33*). The type of violent acts committed in the workplace involve arson, assault, harassment, homicide, robbery, vandalism, and forcible rape.

Threat Assessment and Warning Signs

Violent behavior or the actual act of violence in the workplace involves threats, intimidation, and verbal abuse. Threats of violence may be either lethal (homicides and physical assaults) or non-lethal involving teasing, angry outbursts, bullying, harassment, throwing or breaking objects, hitting, pushing, poking, slapping, grabbing, stalking, and sexual assault or rape. When such violent activities occur in the organization, threatened employees become concerned of their safety and security, and want to know what the agency or the organization is going to do to protect them, and what measures they can take to protect themselves. Since it is impossible to know with any degree of certainty when the threat is going to be carried out, the organization must take any threat seriously, and complete a thorough investigation. In order to solve this dilemma, organizations can establish and utilize the threat assessment program to conduct initial investigations, assess the risks, and make recommendations for managing the violent situation. Threat assessment investigations are different from criminal or administrative investigations because the threat assessment investigation is expected to provide guidance on managing the situation in a way that protects the employees (*OWR, U.S. Department of Justice, 1998, pp. 37-38*). There are some threat assessment resources available which public or private sector managers/supervisors can use in designing and implementing a threat assessment program. [3] The threat assessment program can be supervised by the Workplace Violence Management Team (WVMT).

The occurrence of violence in the workplace involves a cyclical or spiral process when the cognitive thought process in an individual's mind goes through a sequence--stress, reactive response, emotional response, and violent action. While going through this cognitive process, the individual displays a number of visual signs or body language which could provide some understanding of his/her violent state of mind. These visual or body signs include shouting, abusive language, clenching of teeth, raising of fist, twitching of lips, restless movements, sweating, shaking of head, and verbal threats. Managers can be trained to recognize these vital signs of potential violent behavior.

Additionally, a detailed analysis of two episodes involving US Postal employees at Royal Oak, Michigan, and Edmond, Oklahoma, suggest a variety of signs characterizing this violent behavior prior to the commissioning of actual acts of violence. S. Anthony Baron identifies several indicators of potential trouble. These indicators include attendance problems, impact on supervisor's time, decreased productivity, inconsistent work pattern, poor on-the-job relationships, concentration problems, safety issues, poor health and hygiene, unusual behavior, fascination with guns or other weapons, drug or alcohol abuse, continual excuses, depression, and the evidence of serious stress in employee's personal life (*1993, pp. 49-52*). Some of these symptoms can alert the supervisor or manager to consider some intervention strategies or options. One of the options that can be used is to advise the employee to seek help from the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Employer Responsibilities and Obligations

Alerting and averting may be considered as important tools in managing violence in the workplace, but they cannot be relied upon as fully effective in alleviating or minimizing the risk of organizational violence. Employers are not only responsible to protect the employees and the organization, but they are also legally liable for maintaining safe and secure work environment. The major legal responsibilities and obligations of the employer include:

Duty to Warn

Some state policies require mandatory disclosure to law enforcement officials when an individual poses a danger to others in the organization or agency. The duty to warn applies to physicians, social workers, nurses, psychologists,

or other developmental disability professionals (*Nicholetti and Flater, 1994, p. 25*).

Employee Safety and Security

The federal Occupation Safety and Health Act and its counterparts in states require employers to provide their employees with a workplace which is "free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to… employees" (*Labig, 1995, p. 62*). Employers are also required by OSHA regulations to prevent any injury and protect employees if violence erupts.

Negligent Hiring, Training, and Retention

An employer may be held liable if it fails to protect employees and customers for injuries caused by employees who the employer knows, or should know, pose a risk of potential harm to others. Many state courts have recognized that employers have a duty to investigate their applicant's background to prevent the risk of violent acts against other employees. Employer's are obligated to take reasonable care in managing the hiring, training, supervision, and retention processes.

Duty to Train Employees

Responding to increased workplace violence, the California legislature in 1993 enacted a law that obligates hospitals to conduct security and safety assessments. In 1988, the California Supreme Court also ruled that an implied contract may be inferred from the language in a company's policy manual or employee handbook (*Foley v. Interactive Data Corporation, 1988*).

Rights of Alleged Perpetrators

Employers are also obligated to protect the rights of alleged perpetrators in matters of privacy, defamation, discrimination, and interference with economic interests.

Violence Prevention and Intervention Strategies

As noted earlier, we may be able to conduct threat assessment, but there is no fully reliable mechanism or procedure that would allow accurate prediction of violent behavior, if and when it's going to occur. Often, in emergency situations such as acts of violence in the workplace, managers/supervisors are caught by surprise and unprepared to deal effectively with the violent situation. The most effective thing for the manager to do would be to take a pro-active stance and be prepared to provide a planned management response. The planned management response would require strategic planning and proper understanding of violence prevention or intervention strategies. There are three prevention strategies:

Risk Avoidance or Reduction

Risk avoidance measures may include safe hiring procedures, security measurements, drug testing (applicants), supervisory training, stream-lining of lay off or termination procedures, understanding dual career relationships and behavior modification.

Coping Strategy

Coping strategy may include such actions or measures as disciplining employees, hostage behavior training, handling of reported threats, dispute resolution training, interviewing, addressing personal problems, and coping with organizational change and culture.

Planning and Risk Management

Risk management strategy must focus on promoting strategic planning, workplace violence policy, violence management team, threat assessment and crisis management program, dispute resolution procedures, employee assistance programs, supportive and collaborative organizational culture, and the role of the WVMT.

Workplace Violence Management Plan

The issue is not which strategy the managers have to pick and chose. Taking the contingency factors into account, they must be well prepared to

take planned action in dealing with the problems and issues that surface during and the post violence stage. The emphasis should be on the development and implementation of a planned violence management program. An effective workplace violence management program must include the following components:

Organizational Commitment

No workplace violence control or management program is going to succeed unless it has the support of organizational leadership and commitment of resources needed to implement such a program.

Formulation and Adoption of a Workplace Violence Policy Statement

A workplace violence policy statement must clearly articulate that the organization is committed to maintain a work environment free from threats, intimidation, or violent acts. This policy statement must also indicate zero tolerance for all employee actions involving intimidation, threatening or hostile behavior, physical or verbal abuse, harassment, sabotage, vandalism, stalking, arson, physical or sexual assault, using and carrying weapons onto organizational property, or any other actions and behaviors considered to be inappropriate by the management.

Establishment of a Workplace Violence Management Team

The possibility of violent occurrences cannot be ignored. In order to administer the violence management program, a Workplace Violence Management Team (WVMT) consisting of highly trained professionals must be established to conduct threat assessment and engage in implementing the crisis prevention and planned management response program. The WVMT should have adequate authority and autonomy to discharge its responsibilities effectively.

Administrative Procedures

The workplace violence management program should ensure that the personnel policies and administrative procedures are established to address employee concerns and

are fair, well-communicated, and reflect the need to provide a workplace which is safe and productive.

Recruitment and Selection Process

The recruitment and selection procedures must be thorough, well-documented, and screen out potential problems before they occur and undermine employee safety, security, and organizational productivity. If employee actions turn violent, organizations and their managers can be sued for negligent hiring and retention. Full background checks or testing programs may help alleviate future problems.

Safety and Security Measures

The violence management program must address the issues and concerns aimed at protecting the employees and the organization. Security measures may require controlled facility access, and safety policies and procedures to keep outsiders out of the workplace. When the availability of resources is affected by the budget cuts or lack of revenue enhancement, security is still an imperative that may be examined to prevent workplace violence.

Employee Empowerment

Individual employees and their collective organization (union) should be involved in decisions that affect their work environment. Employee unions should be represented on the WVMT and should function as partners in the bilateral decision-making process. An empowered workforce cares about the organization, fellow employees, and helps the organization to flourish (*Trice, 1997, p. 10*).

Employee and Supervisory Training

Employee and supervisory training are vital for controlling workplace violence and implementing the violence management program. Training of employees and supervisors in workplace violence awareness and prevention will allow employees to contribute to the well-being of their co-workers as well as the entire organization. If violence occurs, an employee can identify potential problems and knows who to contact without any further delay. Training

programs may include hostage behavior training, dispute resolution training, safe hiring and termination techniques, positive discipline and coaching, and security procedures (*Capozzoli and McVey, 1996, pp. 103-122*).

Role of Employee Assistance Program

Since there is a strong relationship between job stress and workplace harassment and violence, employers can use Employee Assistance Program (EAP) as an intervention strategy to help employees in resolving their personal problems, coping with the job-related stress, and adjusting to organization culture and change (*Cartwright and Cooper, 1997, pp. 25-95*).

Dispute Resolution Procedures

The emerging evidence suggests that the employers having an effective grievance, harassment, and security programs reported lower rates of workplace violence. Employees can also be trained to develop problem solving skills. Alternative dispute resolution techniques or procedures can also be used to address employee concerns and job-related stress.

Organizational Recovery and Victim Support Management

Any threat or actual occurrence of violence in the workplace makes the employees and victims frightened and fearful. The traumatic experience may require medical help and counseling for the victim(s) and their families. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can be an important component to the success of an agency's workplace violence program. When violence occurs in the workplace, there is always evidence of physical damage or destruction of property. Any visible signs of violence (blood or broken structures) should be immediately repaired or corrected to speed the organizational recovery process. A Manager's Handbook: Handling Traumatic Events might be very useful for managers and supervisory personnel (*U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 1998, pp. 61 and 131*).

Conclusion

The occurrence and consequences of violence in the workplace have serious impact on employee safety, morale, and organizational productivity. The causes of violence are numerous and some of them are deeply rooted in our general social and organization culture. The human and material loss involving organizational violence inflicts a tremendous social as well as economic cost on society. Although there are some visible signs to assess potential threat of violence, the human capacity to design and implement procedures and practices to predict and effectively control violence in the workplace is limited. Proactively, what managers or supervisors both in the private and public sector can do is to plan and execute a carefully crafted violence management program. It will give the managers the necessary tools and institutional procedures for avoiding, coping, and managing the risk associated with the occurrence of violence in the workplace.

Notes

1. The Northwestern National Life Insurance Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in a study reported that one of four workers was harassed, threatened, or attacked on the job between July 1992 and July 1993. Nineteen percent of workers reported being harassed on the job; 7 percent reported threats of physical harm, and 3 percent reported being physically attacked. The effect of this proliferation of violence on the job is taking its toll: 88 percent of workers said that they were psychologically affected, 62 percent said their work life was disrupted, 23 percent were physically injured or sick, and only 7 percent reported no negative effect (Charles E. Labig, 1995. Preventing Violence in the Workplace, Amacon, American Management Association, New York, p. 3).

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3. See Treat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence, by Robert A. Fein, Bryan Vossekuil and Gwen A. Holden (1995). Their contributions were published as part of the NIJ Research Action Series, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

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