

Workplace Conflict and Violence: Identification and Prevention

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At 11:14 am on **Boxing Day December 26, 2000**, police received over forty 911 calls from individuals adjacent to Edgewater Technology, an internet company in Wakefield Massachusetts. On investigation police **found seven employees dead and a heavily armed employee sitting inside the front door waiting for them**. All victims had been murdered in less than eight minutes. The suspect, Michael McDermott, a 42-year-old Edgewater employee, was arraigned in Malden District Court on seven counts of first-degree murder. **His targets were primarily staff from the Human Resources and Accounting Departments.**

After these incidents, everyone asks why it happened and didn't anybody see it coming. **Can you and your organization be prepared for the unthinkable?**

Prepared: yes, prevent: hopefully, always: never. You can, however, reduce the odds of a critical incident occurring by creating a positive work environment, which does not tolerate violence and provides the programs necessary to intervene and assist troubled staff before something happens. It is prudent, however, to have the resources ready for implementation should "the unthinkable" happen.

Unfortunately, the Edgewater incident is not unique and is only one of many similar incidents that take place in the US, Canada and around the world in any given year. They occur in schools, restaurants, churches, manufacturing firms, bus garages and company offices and rate as a serious workplace hazard. Healthcare and retail are most susceptible sectors with fast food restaurants and all night retail operations having the highest number of critical incidents. The situation has become so acute that the U.N.'s **International Labour Organization has stated that violence in the workplace will be the biggest challenge facing both employers and employees in the new millennium**. Over one million violent incidents occur annually in the Canada and the US combined and over 1,000 people are killed as a result of conflict in or around the workplace. Violence has both human and financial costs.

Costs of Conflict and Violence

In human terms, American and Canadian police and security personnel have identified workplace violence as the fastest growing category of crime. US statistics reveal that **homicide is the leading cause of death of women in the workplace and two of three employees do not feel secure on the job**. More frightening is that few companies have structured plans to deal with conflict and potentially violent incidents in the workplace.

In financial terms, health premiums, Workers Compensation rates, wages paid for workers off the job and overtime to cover lost production all impact the corporate bottom line. A spokesperson for the Great American Insurance Co. stated, "the cost of violence on the job has gone through the roof" and adds "up to a bottom line of 36 billion dollars (US) annually". There are significant losses in productivity and retraining expenses when employees leave due to conflicts. Arbitration and court costs can also accumulate where incidents evolve from problems within the company. Finally, from a legal perspective, the Canada Labour Code as well as many provincial and state labour codes and OH&S statutes contain enforceable rights and responsibilities to protect workers from workplace violence.

Stay Alert

What are the imminent incident indicators? What programs can be implemented to reduce conflict and how can your organization be prepared?

All conflict in the workplace does not involve physical assault. Everyday confrontations have potential to escalate. On average, **supervisors and managers spend 30% to 40% of their time on conflict related matters** ranging from staff not talking to each other and dysfunctional work teams to personal issues like job stress and home life problems. Most serious incidents result from an accumulation of stress, which initially manifests itself in subtle ways. People do not tend to just "wig out" They often give signals that something is happening to them. Some companies use a "buddy system" to casually monitor each other's general well being and to work in concert if an incident happens.

Usually there is an observable pre incident movement toward irritability and aggression. Recognize the warning signs.

Early Warnings

- Intimidation, threatens or bullying other staff (often a history of incidents)
- Cannot accept criticism or discipline
- Accepts no responsibility for actions and blames others for their problems
- Harassment or stalking of other staff
- Rigid adherence to their own rules and denigration others
- Fascination with weapons or acts of extreme violence
- Continuous griping about management and a large number of grievances
- Exhibits low self-esteem, extreme depression or sense of hopelessness

- Records Lateness or increased sick time without apparent cause, monitors or maintains unauthorized files on other worker's habits or behaviors
- History of abuse

Impending Signs

*At this stage immediate action needs to be taken. The typical profile of violent/homicidal individuals is a white middle class male loner with a feeling that their careers have peaked and that there is nothing left for them or that others are responsible for their lack of advancement.

- Expressions of paranoia / someone or thing is out to get them
- Expresses irrational ideas or beliefs
- Exhibits angry unprovoked outbursts
- Inordinate fascination with weapons and their affect on people
- Starts giving away personal items to staff
- Stops discussing the future and gives impression there is no tomorrow
- Inability to accept *any* criticism or negative comments
- Keeps talking to coworkers about a plan or action that will make things right or resolve a perceived problem.
- Continuously talking about a family problem or financial duress that cannot go on

It is important that as a manager or coworker you recognize changes in behavior and seek advise from professionals if the problem is serious. What can an employer do to ensure a safe and productive workplace?

Creating Safe and Productive Workplaces

The first step is to **conduct a vulnerability audit**. This is an assessment of your organization's susceptibility to threats both internal and external and can be perform by your company or by an outside firm of experts. The audit should cover both the physical and procedural aspects of your business. Make it an integral part of your risk management strategy.

Physically, the assessment should examine the general neighbourhood, parking areas, bus stops, the building perimeter, entry and exit points as well as potential areas inside the structure where security and safety might be an issue. There are a lot

of purchasable options out there so determine what level of security you are comfortable with before ordering everything out of the catalogue. ID cards, "panic" alarms, crime prevention posters and visible random security sweeps are inexpensive means of reducing a threat.

In terms of policies and procedures, you need to involve you staff. **Create a Threat Assessment Team.** Hold meetings and get their thoughts. Poll employees and ask them if they have had any past experiences at the workplace and what they believe are practical ways of making themselves feel safer. Basic safety issues, harassment and employee assistance programs can be covered. Anti violence policies must be developed and written in plain language and clearly communicated to all staff. Encourage reporting all of suspicious or unacceptable behavior and have a company wide policy of non-violence. Policies need to be reviewed frequently and updated every six months. You must also have a plan for" the unthinkable".

Create a Critical Incident Stress Management Team who knows what to do during and after a serious incident. The team may consist of human resource staff, peer councilors, employees, an outside mental health professional and a security expert or local law enforcement resource person. Everyone should know who the on site people are and be able to alert any of them immediately. The team's role includes prevention, incident management, destressing and debriefing functions. Members must be trained to perform the tasks assigned to them. Live exercises several times a year are useful to debug the system. These sessions can be done in conjunction will your annual fire drill, which of course everyone does. Right. The key is training!

The level and extent of training required is determined in part by your organization's size and potential for threat. Factors such as client volume, times of operation, availability of cash or valuables and the inherent stress levels of the jobs on site all contribute to the level of threat and the resultant level of preparedness needed.

Training and prevention take place on three levels: personal, corporate and external.

In terms of personal preparedness, classes on self-defense, crime awareness, conflict management and employee wellness are desirable. These programs build personal confidence and create motivated safety conscious staff. Workers should acquaint themselves with the firm's position on unacceptable behavior and know the critical incident action plan. At the corporate level there must be a culture of non-violence with policies and practices that are consistent and applied equally. Pre employment screening can detect individuals with an apparent disposition toward violence or instability. Employee assistance programs must be available and utilized with discretion and confidentiality. Supervisors and managers can contribute to a positive work environment by being respectful and genuinely interested in the well being of their staff. Everyone should fell free to discuss issues and receive an empathetic ear. Companies need to review their policies and practices frequently especially if there is a change in the operation of the business.

Across Canada and the US, public and private sector employers are seeking conflict management and violence prevention training programs. Most provincial governments and the Government of Canada have extensive employee assistance initiatives but still require more conflict management skills training. The US private sector, with its tradition of self-reliance, has been slower to respond with notable exceptions. Polaroid promotes an excellent early intervention program and the Bank of America has a preemptive random mail and phone out system that gives employees the opportunity to speak out without doing so on the job. Even the much maligned US Postal Service, from which the term “going postal” was unfortunately derived, has an excellent program where in one year they conducted 2,773 eight hour courses for workers on reducing violence and employee wellness.

Finally, external, communication. Advertise your non-violence and wellness policies in the media and in marketing. When clients enter your premises, strategically place posters or notices letting folks know that the staff have been trained in crime prevention and detection and that measures have been taken to ensure the safety of workers and customers. Ask your local police service for more information in this area. Police will also advise you about commercial other crimes specific to your locale and business.

Workplace violence and its prevention are increasingly important issues that need to be addressed by employers. Every employer must review its specific circumstances and take action otherwise, relatively small incidents may spiral into major disasters

My final words are those of James Carse who stated that, **“To be prepared against surprise is to be trained; but to be prepared for surprise is to be educated.” Be prepared. Reduce your potential liability. Get the training.**

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