Corporate Counseling Associates

Healthy Organizations Mitigate the Risk of Violence

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If recent signs are to be believed, the recession has bottomed out. It appears that we are on the path towards recovery. However, a long gaze across the American business landscape reveals thousands of companies stripped down to the barest of resources, riding out the economic storm. Within each of those businesses is a worker population struggling to do more with less, managing embattled personal finances, and clinging to their jobs in a decimated market and often stretched to the limits because their job demands skyrocketed.

Workplace violence is a year-round threat, but the current recession has triggered a wave of high profile employee incidents. Office suicides, shooting sprees and assaults have become headline news throughout 2009. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports that about two million employees suffer from workplace violence each year and incidents can take place either at or outside the workplace. While murder is not the only form of workplace violence, it's the most extreme example and therefore gets the most attention.

In an August 2009 workplace fatality census, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 517 workplace homicides occurred in 2008, an 18 percent drop from 2007 totals but still high. However, workplace suicides rose to 251 in 2008, a 28 percent spike from 2007 and the highest number ever reported by the fatality census.

Organizations are scrambling to reduce the threat, but many fail to address the larger issues that contribute to workplace violence: how healthy is their overall work culture? Do employees have the resources they need? Can we comply with Occupational Safety and Health administration's General Duty clause?

These questions are critical. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines a *healthy organization* as "one whose culture, climate and practices create an environment that promotes employee health and safety as well as organizational effectiveness." Such a system provides employees with the tools to solve group conflicts maturely, a culture that prevents the release of harmful psychosocial elements, and a set of management practices that nurtures quality and management excellence in line with business strategy and customer needs.

The resource question is equally important to preventing harmful incidents. Lack of resources is a catalyst that drives the employee with a propensity to be violent over the edge. The sad reality is that people who are desperate in these times (and are ill-equipped emotionally and/or cognitively) may resort to desperate measures. Support systems are a practical means by which organizations can mitigate risk. If support systems aren't in place, violent acts are an ever-present threat.

Crisis Planning: Taking Precautions

Companies that fail to engage in crisis planning are putting their organizations at risk. Corporate Counseling Associates (CCA) suggests several ways to reduce the threat of violence in the workplace:

1. Communicate a zero tolerance policy & develop ongoing employee communications to reinforce the message. The policy should express the company's efforts to provide a safe environment and include a list of unacceptable conduct. It should include the clear definition of a threat and of the need to report dangerous situations. The final element is a description of how problems will be handled. Communication vehicles should include newsletters, email, intranet sites, posters, or brochures to help build awareness.

2. Set up company procedures for reporting incidents of violence. Make sure employees are clear on how to report violence, and that they understand their reports will be taken seriously. It's important to differentiate healthy conflict from aggressive intimidation and violent behavior.

3. Create a Threat of Violence (TOV) Team, involving members of the following departments: Health Services, Human Resources, Security, EAP, Legal, Facilities Management, Corporate Affairs, and Public Relations. A cross functional team allows stakeholders across the company to discuss workplace violence, raise awareness, create a zero tolerance company policy, and plan how to communicate that policy (i.e., employee manual or handbook, posters, email communication, new employee orientations, and trainings for employees and managers). The TOV Team can identify potential threats, assess the danger or harm that may result from a threat, and recommend an appropriate risk reduction response.

4. Establish organizational mechanisms to prevent violence. Workplace violence prevention is multi-faceted, ongoing and includes items and actions from many places within an organization:

   - Education and Training – HR professionals need to educate senior management and all supervisors regarding their roles, responsibilities and liabilities for workplace violence. Assess the current state of readiness to manage an incident of violence.
   - Environment and culture – Written policies regarding the rights and value of all employees. Foster a culture that promotes diversity, inclusion, training and respect for others. Reinforce the policies with action, role models, frequent communication. Secure employee involvement and participation.
   - Hiring and background screenings – ensure due diligence in the recruiting and hiring process, including references and background checks.
   - Use of employee assistance programs (EAPs), wellness programs and other resources to support the workforce. Regularly gage and assess stress levels, offer

trainings, workshops and counseling to deal with stress. Promote and use EAPs regularly and strategically.

- Effective performance management – such processes can identify problem employees. Managers need to be adequately trained in evaluating and communicating performance issues with employees.
- Security – Make sure security is adequate, appropriate, and can respond quickly to incidents.
- Effective problem resolution – establish an employee complaint process and system to support grievance handling.

5. Constantly monitor and identify "weak spots" in management practices and/or development programs. Conflict mismanagement is a key contributor to violent confrontations.

6. Educate senior management on the warning signs and symptoms of violence-prone individuals, and the environmental pressures that can trigger incidents. Examples include: layoffs/restructuring, changes in schedules, reporting, and responsibilities, furloughs and salary reductions, changes in leadership, increased workloads with fewer resources, and a climate of change and uncertainty.

8. Train the TOV team to ensure a disciplined execution of strategy. Training should include awareness and general knowledge of what constitutes a threat of violence, familiarity with company policy, and protocols for handling threats and responding to incidents. Such training should take place before a company begins to publicize its policy and programs. The TOV team should have a list of resources and contact information – including EAP, security, medical, and local law enforcement resources.

9. Learn how to de-escalate aggression and improve conflict management skills. Conflict resolution workshops can cover the identification of early warning signals, practical interventions, verbal and non-verbal techniques, substance abuse assessment and more.

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10. Run crisis scenario simulations. The best preparation is rehearsal: confidence can be acquired through repetition and role-playing. Comfort and confidence aids a team's ability to diffuse a potentially volatile situation.

Typical Warning Signs

Workplace violence may seem like a random, unforeseeable event, but experts say that is not the case at all. Many agree that people who eventually commit workplace violence almost always broadcast their intentions before the incident. The key is making sure management and the entire organization "sees" the warning signs.

Warning signs of potential workplace violence include:

- decreased productivity and/or sudden changes in behavior
- substance abuse
- frequent conflicts with customers, co-workers, or supervisors
- uncharacteristic problems with tardiness and attendance
- withdrawal from one's circle of friends
- harassing, belligerent, bullying or other inappropriate and aggressive behavior,
- spike in litigation that is interpersonal in nature
- theft or sabotage of employer or co-worker property,
- ongoing threats, actual or veiled
- carrying a gun to work or flashing it to co-workers,
- statements indicating desperation (about family, financial, and other personal problems) to the point of contemplating suicide
- visible fascination with incidents of workplace violence, or statements indicating approval of the use of violence to resolve a problem

If an employee feels afraid of a co-worker, even if the employee can't easily explain why, that's also a warning sign employers shouldn't ignore. This kind of uneasiness has been noted before some incidents occurred. Failure to take this kind of warning seriously can result in legal liability if a violent episode occurs – the legal benchmark being "what did you know, and when did you know it." OSHA's General Duty Clause is very clear on the responsibility to create a safe and healthy work environment.

When Violence Erupts

Employee fears and stress can be eased by quick, clear, honest and frequent communications.

Despite your best efforts, your company may have to deal with the aftermath of a violent episode. Having a well-structured plan in place that addresses the concerns of employees and the public alike not only reassures employees and preserves your public reputation, but can also result in positive lessons from a negative event. These lessons, once integrated into existing policies and procedures, may prevent or diminish future acts of workplace violence.

CCA recommends:

- Clearly define roles and responsibilities for all TOV team members so they can work together during the crucial moments and days after an incident. This includes a range of details from ensuring the physical safety of employees to coordinating local resources such as security and police.
- Organize communication vehicles for employees that can be quickly activated during and after a violent episode. Employee fears and stress can be eased by quick, clear, honest, and frequent communications. Employees should receive ongoing updates of the situation.

- Prepare proactive and reactive messages for external audiences such as the news media and the community. The goal is to protect your brand and company reputation—quick and frequent communications with the "outside world" are critical. A company should recap all its steps to diffuse the situation, keep employees safe, offer help and aid to the victims, and continue moving forward to "recover" from the event.

Healthy Organizations Reduce Risk and Engage Employees

An organization's true character is typically revealed in bad times. The most important characteristics of a healthy organization are high levels of employee engagement, the ability to discriminate between "useful" and "destructive" conflict, the presence of mechanisms to resolve group conflicts and management practices that inspire a sense of working toward a shared vision. It is also important that a sense of equity be present and that a learning-orientation be instilled into the corporate culture. These management components breed a "resilient" culture so that the organization can withstand the hits that a recession or any traumatic event delivers.

About Corporate Counseling Associates

CCA manages critical people issues that place organizations at risk. In business for 25 years with over 250 top-tier accounts, CCA brings a full-time staff of industrial and organizational psychologists, clinical social workers/psychologists and counseling professionals to solve human capital-based business problems. CCA's integrated human capital consulting service offerings are: EAP & Work/Life, Learning & Development, and Coaching & Organizational Consulting. For more information, call (212) 686-6827 or visit www.corporatecounseling.com.

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