

Workplace Violence: Assisting Employees & Managers

Gerald Lewis, Ph.D.

Any work environment should provide a high level of safety and security. However, accomplishing this goal requires that professionals from all “walks of life” work together to communicate accurate information, to contain and direct anxiety and apprehension, and to offer a proactive and highly visible resource (like an EAP) to the entire organization. There is no guarantee of 100% prevention, but a great deal can be done to enhance safety and protection.

Definitions

One of the difficult aspects of dealing with workplace hostility is that terms and phrases are used rather generically with only a superficial understanding of the concepts. Four different definitions should be used when dealing with workplace violence: Nuisance, Conflict, Hostility, and Violence. It is essential to have a basic understanding of each as they represent different levels of intent.

- > **Nuisance** — This type of behavior may be defined as, “*annoying and offensive to others but does not have any direct malicious intent to a specific individual or group.*” Examples include offensive gestures, swearing, off-color jokes, and graffiti. While such behavior may be bothersome and disgusting, it is more a reflection of immaturity or poor socialization skills than of violence.
- > **Conflict** — This refers to the normal disagreements that take place in all interpersonal relationships. Whether personal, political, or professional in nature, conflicts may be heated and intense, but do not result in permanent damage to the relationship. However, if conflict continues unabated, it may damage the relationship and open the door to the next level.
- > **Hostility** — This refers to, “*acts that are non-physical but are directed at an individual or group with the intent of inflicting some type of emotional harm.*” Examples include harassment, discrimination, stalking, verbal threats, and acts of intimidation. The defining characteristic is that there is no bodily contact or destruction of property.
- > **Violence** — However, “*violence involves the*

display of physical force against a person or property with the intention to do personal injury or destruction to property.”

While no hostile act should be tolerated, there must be delineation of different types of behavior, rather than lumping them under one label. Each type represents a different intent, level of control, level of legal/criminal involvement, and potential disciplinary outcome. Space does not permit a complete discussion, but it’s possible to see the distinctions between different types of behavior and different circumstances:

- Writing racial or sexual epithets in the men’s room that are not directed to any specific individual is not the same thing as making a direct slur against a specific employee.
- As offensive as yelling and swearing at another person may be, it demonstrates a different level of control than physical assault. Is the behavior overt or is it passive-aggressive in nature? Does the person yell and scream and then leave the workplace? — or does he/she remain and continue to intimidate others?
- Is an incident a “conflict” between two colleagues who had a previously positive relationship but has now escalated into a heated exchange? — or is the incident between two people with minimal tolerance for each other that has reached a breaking point?

Behaviors must be viewed within a multi-faceted context that includes social, psychological, and cultural factors.

‘At-Risk’ versus ‘Toxic’

To understand workplace hostility, one must also differentiate between the “at-risk” workplace and the “toxic” workplace. An “at-risk” organization is one that is vulnerable to hostile or violent activities perpetrated from outside the organization. Examples of these workplaces include convenience stores, liquor stores, and others. Characteristics of these work settings are described later in this article, and in the “handout” section.

On the other hand, a “toxic” workplace is one that is vulnerable to hostility and violence generated from within. (Characteristics of these work settings are also described later.) It could be argued that a certain level of dysfunction should be expected in any organization.

However, certain workplaces are more vulnerable to an increase in “toxicity” and thus an increase in potential for a wide range of negative and inappropriate reactions that may include hostility and violence. Most of these events are gradual shifts and changes that may not be acutely noted, but rather experienced as a gradual downturn in employee productivity and morale.

Policies and Procedures

As stated in this month’s cover article in *Employee Assistance Report*, most workplace policies are vaguely worded, vaguely understood, and are usually only brought up when an employee “breaches” a given area.

Consequently, adherence to behavioral expectations — not just descriptions of skills and training — needs to be included as an essential function of *any* job description. (This month’s “handout” section presents a list of behavioral expectations that may be posted in the workplace.)

Organizations often tolerate a wide range of behavior as a result of it being considered separate and distinct from one’s job description and performance. As workplaces become increasingly diverse, and stressful, there is a need to have clear guidelines regarding behavioral expectations.

In addition, including behavioral expectations in a job description would necessitate that supervisors discuss these matters with their employees as part of the regular review process. In other words, it keeps the “humanistic” qualifications of the job description on par with “technological” qualifications.

Conflict with ADA?

Some might ask, if this is included as part of a job description, how does it impact the *Americans with Disabilities Act*? Space does not permit discussing ADA policies at length, but it would seem that including behavioral expectations as part of a job description would actually simplify matters as to what is and isn’t a “reasonable accommodation.” For example, someone suffering from bipolar may be moody and irritable, but it certainly isn’t a “reasonable” accommodation to tolerate emotional outbursts, hostile behavior, etc. In this

case, reasonable accommodations might include flex-time, or a different workspace to lessen stimulation and distraction.

Need for Management Training

The following example demonstrates the need for management training in these matters. Bob was a worker with “spotty” performance as he often came in late or called in sick. On two occasions, he was discovered sleeping in a storage closet. In more than one instance, he became angry and verbally abusive with a co-worker when he was confronted about not “carrying his load.” Co-workers avoided him at lunch break — so he ate his lunch in his car and often came back in with the smell of alcohol on his breath.

Bob’s supervisor was relatively new to the job, having been promoted about a year earlier. He had tried to joke and cajole Bob to try to get him “on track.” The significant issue was that the supervisor and everyone else were afraid of Bob, as he was a large man with a history of arrests for assault and battery, and other disruptive incidents. The unspoken rule was to tolerate Bob and try to avoid making an issue of his job performance problems. The hope was that he’d move on to another job.

Instead, Bob’s behavior worsened as a result of his third wife leaving him. His drinking and absenteeism increased, and he was involved in a car accident with a Breathalyzer test that confirmed a high level of alcohol. The anger and frustration that had been building from years of tolerating his behavior surfaced intensely and workers were calling for his termination. However, it was determined that Bob could not be fired because:

- 1) The incident occurred on his own time and away from work;
- 2) He was innocent until proven guilty;
- 3) Were he to be convicted and lose his driver’s license, he didn’t need a license to do his job; and
- 4) None of his job performance difficulties had been documented.

Bob returned to work and was the butt of comments and jokes that resulted in Bob and another employee getting into a physical altercation. It was decided that if Bob was disciplined, the other worker would have to receive the same “medicine.” By the next day, the entire department was dysfunctional, and “crisis management” was in operation. One can only speculate what might have happened if:

- 1) Bob’s supervisor had dealt with the tardiness and absenteeism;
- 2) Bob had been confronted about the odor of

alcohol on his breath and other job performance concerns;

- 3) The company had an EAP;
- 4) Drug and alcohol policies were strictly enforced;
- 5) The “fear factor” of employees had been better managed by HR;
- 6) The new supervisor had received supportive training about his new role; and
- 7) Other co-workers had gone to HR or other management with their concerns.

Remarkably, an organization often will provide training for a new computer program, while the value of training supervisors about the daunting task of managing a diverse workforce is not deemed a valuable use of time and resources. Furthermore, even devoting a few hours a year is often of little value, as the presenter will focus on the “warning” signs of potentially violent workers. This often gives the impression that the supervisor should be able to diagnose which employee is about to “go off.” If even mental health professionals are limited in their capacity to determine risk, how is a supervisor supposed to be able to make such a determination? (Frequently cited risk factors are listed in the following section.)

What, then, are some more effective strategies? Space limits discussion, but a few proactive ways to diffuse problems before they escalate include coaching, mentoring, and holding informal monthly lunch meetings where supervisors, employees, and the EAP, can meet to discuss work issues, and offer feedback and suggestions.

Characteristics of “at-risk” workers include:

- History of trauma, abuse, or neglect;
- Current alcohol and/or other substance abuse;
- Mental illness and/or suicidal tendencies;
- History of violent behavior;
- Impulsive/compulsive behaviors (i.e. over-eating, smoking, drinking);
- Gambling;
- “Womanizing”;
- Familiarity with and/or ownership of weapons;
- Feels victimized by the system; and
- Difficulty with authority figures.

Socioeconomic factors to consider include:

- Lower IQ;
- Lower formal education;
- Unstable living situation; and
- Significant financial problems.

Often, this is not information that is available to the workplace and only comes to light after a clinical evaluation.

Signs and symptoms of an “at-risk” worker include:

- Absenteeism and/or tardiness;
- Significant and consistent decrease in job performance;
- Conflicts with co-workers;
- Change in personal hygiene;
- Evidence of physical difficulties (i.e. slurred speech, dizziness, etc.);
- Discussion of serious personal/family problems; and
- Smell of alcohol.

These are behaviors that are observable and should be addressed by supervisors.

Characteristics of an “at-risk” workplace include:

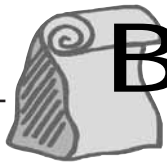
- Retail business with cash on hand;
- Public access;
- Operates during evenings, nights, and holidays;
- Has no, or limited security;
- Has a small number of customers at any given time;
- Is in an isolated location or near a highway; and
- Handles products that are valued on the street or are easily fenced.

This vulnerability is usually addressed through security measures. (Characteristics of a “toxic” workplace and factors that may increase toxicity are addressed in the “handout” section.)

Summary

It is not a simple task to define and diagnose issues related to workplace violence. It is a complex undertaking that requires devoting attention to areas such as: job performance and behavioral expectations; workplace culture and dynamics; development and implementation of policies and procedures; improved training of supervisor; and early intervention with employees considered “at-risk.” *“One cannot truly predict nor prevent violence. ...however, one can improve safety and increase protection.”* ■

Gerald Lewis, Ph.D., is an expert and international consultant in the area(s) of critical incident stress management (CISM), trauma in the workplace, workplace violence, and organizational crisis management. He also provides litigation consultation/expert testimony. For more information, email glewis@geraldlewis.com or visit www.geraldlewis.com. This article is excerpted from the final draft of a chapter titled, “Violence at Work: Causes and Protection” included in “Workplace Psychopathology: Recognition and Adaptation,” edited by Thomas, J. and Hersen, M. (published in 2004).



Brown Bagger HANDOUT

Behavioral Expectations:

The 10 Commandments of the Workplace

The following applies to all employees at all levels:

- 1) Thou shalt speak in a normal tone of voice (no yelling, raised volume, or sarcasm).
- 2) Thou shalt refrain from using profane or vulgar language.
- 3) Thou shalt maintain courteous personal space and body language.
- 4) Thou shalt work effectively with others to facilitate the completion of duties and responsibilities.
- 5) Thou shalt maintain a suitable dress code as designated by your department head or manager. This may include clothing, make-up, jewelry, tattoos, etc.
- 6) Thou shalt maintain good personal hygiene.
- 7) Thou shalt maintain care and cleanliness of the workspace and equipment.
- 8) Thou shalt report to work on time and abide by your specific work schedule.
- 9) Thou shalt abide by all company policies (i.e. smoking, sexual harassment, drug and alcohol, etc).
- 10) Thou shalt maintain courtesy and cooperation even in the face of discourtesy.

...Characteristics of a 'toxic' workplace include:

- Authoritarian management;
- Poor communication;
- Arbitrary/inconsistent decisions;
- Favoritism;
- Increased work demands; and
- Minimal management training.

...Events that may increase toxicity in the workplace include:

- Layoffs, downsizing, mergers — or rapid growth in an organization;
- Significant increase in work demands;
- Demographic changes in workforce (i.e. gender, ethnicity, etc.);
- Strikes or prolonged labor disputes;
- Negative media coverage;
- Individual termination for disciplinary reasons; and
- Restraining order against an employee by an employee.

Source: Gerald Lewis, Ph.D., email glewis@geraldlewis.com or visit www.geraldlewis.com.