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Workplace Violence: Impact and Prevention

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Abstract

Workplace violence has been increasing in the United States for the past several decades. It affects everyone, not just those who have direct experience with it in employment situations. The authors describe the extent of the problem and provide recommendations regarding how managers and helping professionals can help prevent violent and abusive behavior from occurring in the workplace. They also describe proven strategies for effectively dealing with these kinds of incidents when they do materialize.

It has been widely reported that incidents of workplace violence are increasing at a rapid pace in both the public and private sectors in the United States (Elliott & Jarrett, 1994; Musacco, 2009;). Stories of hostility and aggression can be found on a daily basis in our newspapers, on the radio and television, and even in our homes (Chenier, 1998; Keim, 1999). Unfortunately, our places of employment are not immune to this epidemic (Chenier, 1998). No employee, whether he or she is a production worker at the lowest level of the company or an executive at the top of the organization expects to go to work and be killed or severely injured there (Kinney, 1995). It is the responsibility of leaders, administrators, support staff and especially counselors to continually be aware of the potential for violence to occur in their employment settings and to be prepared to adequately deal with it (Lies, 2008).

The Extent of the Problem

According to the Department of Justice, an average of 20 employees are murdered and 18,000 individuals are assaulted in the workplace each week in the United States (Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006; Lipscomb, Silverstein, Slavin, Cody, & Jenkins, 2002). Keim (1999) further suggests that these statistics do not include the numerous accounts of workplace violence that are never reported. If all cases of workplace violence were reported, it is estimated that the totals would increase by at least 50 percent (Keim, 1999). Lawoko, Soares, and Nolan (2004) assert that virtually 100 percent of all workers will experience some form of workplace violence during the course of their career. The Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that homicide as the second leading cause of death to American workers (Chenier, 1998) and is, in fact, the fastest growing crime in the United States (Moore, 1997). Organizational leaders, working in conjunction with mental health professionals, have an inherent obligation to be prepared for workplace violence at any time (Paludi, Nydegger & Paludi, Jr., 2006).

Hoobler and Swanberg (2006) report that men and women who work in government buildings experience higher rates of workplace violence than do private sector employees. Additionally, murder and physical attacks to workers most frequently occur in health care, social service, retail, and public sector occupations (Chenier, 1998). Although public sector employees were only 16 percent of the United States Labor force, they were the victims of 37 percent of the workplace violence cases during 1992-1996 (Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006). Nigro and Waugh (1996) suggest the reason the public sector is increasingly threatened by workplace violence is a result of anti-government violence involving frustrated clients, terrorist groups with political motives, and people who are angry with bureaucrats. The 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City and numerous postal service murders are examples of anti-government violence (Nigro & Waugh, 1996). Keim (1999) suggest 60 percent of workplace violence occurs in the private sector. The Bureau of Labor Statistics also reported that women constituted 60 percent of the victims of workplace violence (Keim, 1999). Women also report far more incidences of exposure to workplace violence than men (Lawoko, Soares, & Nolan, 2004).

Definitions and Causes

American companies have identified workplace violence as one of the most important security threats they currently face (Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006). In reality, what constitutes a "violent act" ranges from offensive language to homicide (Hewitt, 2009). Chenier (1998) noted that workplace violence primarily, but not exclusively, entails physical assault and threats of assault toward another individual while at work or on duty (Chenier, 1998). It can take various forms and include spitting, scratching, pinching, punching, slapping, rape, homicide, and kicking another person while at work (Bowman & Zigmond, 2001; Lawoko, Soares, & Nolan, 2004; Nigro & Waugh, 1996) Moreover, workplace violence can be rendered as any intentional confrontation that may increase in intensity and threaten the safety of any employee, have an impact on any employee's physical and/or psychological well-being, or cause physical damage to personnel or company property (Wolf, 1998).

An organizational climate characterized by job stress from authoritarian managers, negative personalities, and work overload is not uncommon (Nigro & Waugh, 1996); unfortunately, this is exactly the type of organizational climate frequently causes workplace violence (Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006). Chenier (1998) suggested that as companies struggle to remain viable in an increasingly competitive global market, more stress is generated because people work harder, longer, and receive less compensation. Employees often become frustrated and develop negative views of management, which can lead to workplace violence (Chenier, 1998). Further, downsizing, firings, drug abuse, pay reductions, extended working hours, automation, interpersonal conflict, budgetary reductions, family problems, sense of vulnerability pertaining to job security, low job satisfaction, cultural conflicts, and domestic violence have been attributed to workplace violence (Capozzoli & McVey, 1996; Chenier, 1998; Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006; Johnson & Indvik, 1994; McCune, 1994; Moore, 1997; Nigro & Waugh, 1996).

Consequential Impact

If managers, support staff and helping professionals do not appropriately deal with workplace violence issues, the results can be very detrimental on a number of levels (Smith, 2002). It has been estimated that workplace violence costs organizations $202 billion annually, which includes millions of lost workdays and wages (Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006). Costs to employers include restoring property, theft, extending psychological care for employees, compensation benefits, heightening security, legal expenses, medical expenses, and repairing a tattered public image (Chenier, 1998; Elliott & Jarrett, 1994; Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006). Additionally, companies are often required to pay sizable jury awards to employees, families, and other victims of workplace violence (Elliott & Jarrett, 1994).

In addition to the more obvious financial burdens on organizations precipitated by acts of workplace violence, this type of detrimental behavior also significantly lowers productivity and overall profitability (Chenier, 1998; Elliott & Jarrett, 1994; Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006; Johnson & Indvik, 1994). It also adversely affects a company's capacity to recruit and retain good employees (Elliott & Jarrett, 1994). Johnson and Indvik (1994) found that workplace violence decreases employee confidence and overall morale. It is imperative that leaders recognize the deleterious effects that workplace violence can have on their employees and be prepared to implement strategies that can effectively address those effects (Lies, 2008).

Warning Signals and Risk Factors

In most cases, the warning signs that an employee may be capable of engaging in violent behavior are clearly present (Paludi, Nydegger, & Paludi, Jr., 2006). The research indicates that these include an employee who exhibits irregular hours, depression, hostility toward criticism, being financially burdened, marital difficulties, and inferior job performance (Chenier, 1998). According to Capozzoli and McVey (1996), there are three categories of perpetrators of workplace violence. The perpetrators are employees, former employees, and nonemployees (1996). The Federal Bureau of Investigations and the National Safe Workplace Institute report that the perpetrator profile is typically a Caucasian male, 35 years or older who has a history of violence, is a loner, blames others for mistakes, has a record of labor-management disputes, poor self-esteem, owns an arsenal of weapons, has a history of aggression, and is paranoid (Chenier, 1998; Elliott & Jarrett, 1994; McCune, 1994; Moore, 1997).

Moreover, since the economy is increasingly driven by the service industries, the workforce is exposed daily to the many of the known risk factors for workplace violence (Lies, 2008). These additional risk factors include: contact with public, exchange of money,

delivery of passengers, delivery of goods or services, mobile workplaces (police officers and taxi drivers), working with unstable or volatile persons, working alone or in small numbers, working night shifts or during early morning hours, working in high-crime areas, guarding valuable property or possessions, and working in community-based settings (Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006; Jenkins, 1998; Knefel & Bryant, 2004; Lipscomb, Silverstein, Slavin, Cody, & Jenkins, 2002). It is evident that the conditions that can lead to workplace hostility, aggression and acting out behavior are fairly well understood (Musacco, 2009). Therefore, management has a heightened responsibility to take proactive, preventative measures whenever it is determined that the environment is conducive to these detrimental acts (Jenkins, 1998).

Policies, Procedures and Guidelines

It is essential for public and private sector organizations to be prepared to deal with workplace violence by establishing policies and procedures, creating a crisis management team/threat assessment team, and developing an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for their employees (Chenier, 1998; Johnson & Indvik, 1994; Moore, 1997; Nigro & Waugh, 1996). Organizations simply must devise a realistic response plan to workplace violence and practice that plan on a consistent basis (Moore, 1997). Walton (1993) and Stuart (1992) suggest that policies and procedures should focus on facilitating the identification and careful handling of employees who make threats or show potential for workplace violence [as cited by Nigro & Waugh, 1996]. After guidelines have been put in place, it is imperative that they be communicated effectively and readily visible throughout the organization so that all employees know exactly what they should do in the event that a violent act occurs (Johnson & Indvik, 1994).

Managers and leaders have both a legal as well as a moral obligation to provide a safe workplace (Smith, 2002). In fact, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration Act mandates that companies provide a safe and secure environment for their employees (Bowman & Zigmond, 2001; Capozzoli & McVey, 1996; Chenier, 1998). Yet despite heightened attention to security concerns in general (especially since 9/11), many organizations have been sluggish to implement policies and programs aimed at preventing workplace violence (Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006; Nigro & Waugh, 1996). Along these lines, a recent study by the Society for Human Resource Management found that 40 percent of organizations have not established formal policies and procedures for responding to workplace violence (Hoobler & Swanberg, 2006). Even though workplace violence is an impious problem for managers and leaders, there are strategies that have been proven successful at combating workplace violence (Elliott & Jarrett, 1994). As a first line of defense, it is recommended that managers and other human resources professionals adhere to the guidelines established by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration Act. Knowing, understanding, and conscientiously enforcing these guidelines should decrease the instances of workplace violence, make employees feel more safe and secure, and help keep litigation costs in check (Lies, 2008).

As noted previously, there are a lot of employees who contend with acts of hostility, harassment, and intimidation by other employees, supervisors, and customers on a daily basis (Chenier, 1998). As yet there is no litmus test that can precisely predict an individual's potential to engage in violent behavior, so organizations must utilize general strategies that tend to minimize the opportunities that such acts might occur (Walton, 1993). The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and the United States Department of Health and Human Services provide remedies for risk reduction of workplace violence which include: a) making high-risk areas visible to more people, b) install high-quality exterior lighting, c) use drop safe boxes to minimize cash on hand, d) carry very small amounts of cash, e) install cameras throughout the organization, f) if possible, increase the number of staff on duty, g) provide training in nonviolent response, h) avoid resistance during a robbery, i) provide bullet-proof walls and barriers, j) have police or security guards monitor organization frequently, and k) if possible, close organization late at night or very early in the morning (Nigro & Waugh, 1996). The majority of these recommendations can be integrated into the policies and procedures of most companies with minimal effort or expense (Bowman & Zigmond, 2001).

Prevention and Zero Tolerance

The time for an organization to organize its response to workplace violence should be before a threat materializes, not after violence occurs (Johnson & Indvik, 1994). An active focus on prevention allows problems to be avoided and employers to reduce their potential liability when workplace violence occurs (Chenier, 1998). It has been suggested that many of these acts

can be curtailed if companies implement and adhere to the follow practices: a) gain as much information as possible pertaining to potential new hires via background checks, b) develop awareness and training programs that will alert managers of any violent behavior, and c) educate employees about workplace violence (Chenier, 1998; Johnson & Indvik, 1994; Nigro & Waugh, 1996; Walton, 1993). The key to success seems to be effective and conscientious adherence to establish policies and procedures such as these (Musacco, 2009).

It is imperative that management create and actively enforce a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence and formally condemn any demonstration of verbal threatening or physical violence (Awadalla & Roughton, 1998; Chenier, 1998; Namie, 2001; Nigro & Waugh, 1996; Ramsey, 2005). A zero-tolerance policy is the foundation for an organizational culture that rejects workplace violence and encourages employees to report all meaningful threats and acts of violence (Nigro & Waugh, 1996). All new and current employees must be required to read and sign an acknowledgement that they have read the zero-tolerance policy (Walton, 1993). It is important to note that, under a zero tolerance policy, even employees who jokingly make threats must be terminated immediately (Chenier, 1998). By terminating employees who engage in, or allude to the fact that they might engage in, violence of any kind, companies will be able to establish the precedence that any expression of violence, potential or actual, intentional or unintentional, will not be tolerated (Chenier, 1998). It is also very important for managers and other individuals in the organization who often serve as role models and mentors be consistent in their adherence to the guidelines that have been developed with respect to workplace violence (Johnson & Indvik, 1994).

Professional Development

Managers and other organizational leaders should strive to create a climate of open communication, so that victims of workplace violence feel safe, secure and confident enough to report these incidences when they occur (Namie, 2001; Ramsey, 2005; Walton, 1993). Employees who are uncomfortable talking with management should be encouraged to speak with a counselor or human resources professional; this can be facilitated either through the company's EAP or through other avenues (Ramsey, 2005). The important consideration is that management should have mechanisms in place that ensure that the victims of workplace violence have an opportunity to report and process their experience, with the confidence that something will be done as a result of their coming forward (Namie, 2001; Ramsey, 2005). It is very important to listen to any employee who presents information about workplace violence, even if it is only alleged (Walton, 1993).

Namie (2001) and Ramsey (2005) add that managers should offer professional development opportunities centered on treating supervisors and co-workers equally with respect and nurturing respect and a sense of community among all employees. During these sessions, the connection between a company's humane treatment of all employees and the organization's overarching mission and goals must be clearly established (Musacco, 2009). Moreover, training should also focus on how to keep space between themselves and the individual who is being violent and familiarity with exit routes in the event of workplace violence (McCune, 1994). Progressive discipline is also important; i.e., when lesser measures fail, measures that are more stringent must be taken (Namie, 2001; Ramsey, 2005). These strategies seem to be effective at diminishing the likelihood that workplace violence will significantly disrupt the overall organizational climate if and when it occurs (Smith, 2002).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, workplace violence will probably continue to be a fact of life for the foreseeable future (McCune, 1994). Rather than resigning themselves to an attitude of helplessness and impotence, however, it is incumbent on managers, human recourses professionals, and counselors to do whatever it takes to minimize the probability that instances of workplace violence will occur – and that its impact will be minimal when they do occur (Paludi, Nydegger & Paludi, Jr., 2006). The reality is that there are concrete steps that can be taken to effectively deal with the problem (Capozzoli & McVey, 1996). A lot of research has been done of ways to prevent hostile and abusive behavior from poisoning work environments; at the same time, a lot remains to be accomplished in this area (lies, 2008). It is the responsibility of everyone potentially affected by workplace violence to collaborate on the eradication of his problem and make the world a safer place to live and work.

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