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Stress and violence in the workplace and on campus

A growing problem for business, industry and academia

Matthew L. Hunt, Aaron W. Hughey and Monica G. Burke

Abstract: *Levels of stress and violence at work have been increasing globally for the past few decades. Whether the setting is business and industry or a college campus, this disturbing trend affects a growing number of people, including those who do not work directly in these environments. In this paper the authors describe the relationship between stress and violence and offer recommendations as to how managers and administrators can reduce employee and student stress levels and help to prevent hostile behaviour from occurring in private companies, public agencies and institutions of higher education. Proactive strategies for preventing violent incidents are included together with suggestions on how to deal effectively with such incidents when they do arise.*

Keywords: *workplace stress; workplace violence; campus violence*

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Incidents of workplace violence seem to be increasing at an accelerated pace in both the public and private sectors (Bowie *et al*, 2011; Elliott and Jarrett, 1994; Musacco, 2009). Accounts of hostile and aggressive acts permeate the media, appearing seemingly constantly in newspapers and magazines (Chenier, 1998) as well as on radio and television broadcasts (Keim, 1999). Unfortunately, no setting seems to be immune to this epidemic; college campuses are as likely to experience aggressive acts as factories or the financial district (Spencer-Thomas and Bollinger, 2009; Chenier, 1998). Nobody, whether a production worker at the lowest level of the company, an executive at the top of the

organization, a faculty member preparing to give a lecture, or a student headed to class, expects to be severely injured or even killed while going about their daily routine (Kinney, 1995). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of leaders, managers, supervisors, administrators, support staff and counsellors to be aware of the potential for violence to occur in their immediate environments and to be prepared to deal with it adequately and appropriately (Lies, 2008).

Both companies and universities increasingly identify the potential for violence as one of the most important security threats they face (Fox and Burstein, 2010; Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006). In reality,

however, what constitutes a 'violent act' varies greatly – from offensive language to homicide (Hewitt, 2009). Chenier (1998) notes that violence usually, but not exclusively, entails physical assault and threats of assault toward another individual while at work or on campus. It can take various forms and include spitting, scratching, pinching, punching, slapping, rape, homicide, and kicking another person (Bowman and Zigmond, 2001; Lawoko *et al.*, 2004; Nigro and Waugh, 1996). 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).

Stress: a worldwide phenomenon

Stress obviously affects the bottom line for organizations, regardless of the particular occupational sector under consideration. As stress levels increase, staff burnout increases exponentially and productivity deteriorates (Dobson, 2010). Over the last half-century, the global community has experienced immense changes, including extended work hours (Dobson, 2010): longer working days often heighten the anxiety levels for those in such situations and can affect how effectively an individual is able to balance work obligations and family life (Paton, 2010). In the USA, it is estimated that a third of all college educated American males work in excess of 50 hours a week (Coffin, 2005). What is more, 60% of all American employees rush lunch meals and often take lunch at their desks, which ultimately leads to increased levels of work-related stress (Coffin, 2005). Similarly, a poll of 2,000 individuals by Mind, a mental health charity, found that more than a quarter of the population in the UK is working longer hours than was once the case and that half of those surveyed are not satisfied with their work–family life balance (Paton, 2010).

The UK workforce has elevated rates of anxiety and stress due to the current recession; as a result, the country has experienced an unprecedented increase in prescriptions for anti-depressants (Paton, 2010). But the phenomenon is not limited to the West or industrialized countries: for example, the Japanese have coined the term 'Karoshi', which means 'death from overwork'; and the Koreans use the word 'Gwarosa' to describe extended work schedules (Coffin, 2005). A Global Talent Management and Rewards survey of 1,176 employees worldwide found 50% of the respondents struggling to maintain balance in their lives (Dobson, 2010). Similarly, in a study which included 2,487 employees in Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand,

the United States of America, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, researchers found that work-related stress seems to be increasing internationally (Spector *et al.*, 2004). As the current generation continues to retire in record numbers from all employment and education sectors, younger, less-experienced workers are faced with enormous challenges.

When employees of the Dindigul District Central Cooperative Bank in India were surveyed, 45% indicated that stress had become a problem in their lives (Neelamegam and Asrafi, 2010). A survey of 1,769 people by Desjardins Financial Security in Canada found that individuals there are also exhibiting higher stress levels when compared to the past (Dobson, 2010). Further, employees in Canada, China, Malaysia and Pakistan indicated overall job stress, work overload, ambiguity, conflict, and resource inadequacy were positively related to employee burnout and turnover in all four countries (Jamal, 2010). According to a study conducted by Right Management, 65% of 2,000 executives cite employee morale and burnout as a barrier to reaching a competitive advantage in the global marketplace (Dobson, 2010). Neelamegam and Asrafi (2010) found that employees in India with zero to five years of service are experiencing much more stress than their more seasoned counterparts. Chenier (1998) suggests that as private companies, government agencies and campuses struggle to remain viable in an increasingly competitive global market, more stress is generated because people work harder and longer – and receive less in salary. To reach a competitive advantage in the global marketplace, business and academia must both strive to reduce stress in their respective environments.

Stress: definitions and implications

Stress is derived from the Latin word *stringere*, which means to draw tight and was used during the 17th century to describe hardship and affliction (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997). Levi (1981) states the term stress denotes a force that deforms the body. Stress can also be defined as a condition of physical, emotional or mental strain that can be a result of a real or fabricated threat (Crampton *et al.*, 1995). Lazarus (1966) notes that stress occurs when individuals perceive that the demands associated with a set of circumstances exceeds their perceived ability to manage them. Simply put, stress means a load, pressure, strain, or strong effort on an individual (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997; Levi, 1981).

Role ambiguity, role conflict, and the degree of responsibility for others are three major contributing factors to environmental stress (Cartwright and Cooper,

1997; DeFrank and Ivancevich, 1998; Spiers, 2003). Cartwright and Cooper (1997) suggest that role ambiguity arises when individuals do not have a clear picture of educational or work objectives, expectations of others or the scope of their individual responsibilities and expectations. Generally, role ambiguity is due to management or administrative failure to explain fully to employees or students what is expected of them (DeFrank and Ivancevich, 1998). Role conflict exists when an individual is torn by conflicting demands, such as doing things they do not want to do or doing things they do not consider part of their responsibilities (Spiers, 2003). Degree of responsibility for others is another contributor to stress; being accountable for other human beings is exceptionally stressful because it entails interacting with others on a regular basis, attending meetings, engaging in group projects and presentations and meeting strict deadlines (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997).

Both employees and students put a premium on deriving satisfaction and enhanced quality of life through their work or educational pursuits, but the reality is that the modern workplace and college campus are both sources of tension, anxiety, and frustration (Crampton *et al.*, 1995). Employees as well as students experience stress when they perform poorly, experience generational differences, have work ethic disagreements, have a conflict with a peer, faculty member or supervisor, are overworked, lack sufficient breaks, have to deal with unfamiliar technology, experience heightened levels of insecurity or personal expectations, or are excessively involved in mundane daily tasks (Avey *et al.*, 2009; Crampton *et al.*, 1995; Hinton, 2010; Roisin, 2004; Scott, 2001; Shapter, 2005; Spiers, 2003; Wright, 2007). In a survey of 490 managers, Roffey Park concluded that 60% of the respondents considered interpersonal politics as one of the greatest sources of the stress they experienced on a daily basis (Editorial, *Occupational Health*, 2007). It is interesting to consider that the number of books claiming to help individuals manage stress has increased significantly over the last few decades; many have become bestsellers (Kinman and Jones, 2005).

Stress can have a very unfavourable impact on any organization (Gyllensten *et al.*, 2005; Kinman and Jones, 2005). The costs associated with absenteeism, attrition, turnover, retraining and diminished performance are significant and can often be traced back to elevated stress levels (Clarke and Cooper, 2000; Crampton *et al.*, 1995; Spiers, 2003). Stress is also hazardous and can give rise to undesirable outcomes (Clarke and Cooper, 2000; Maki *et al.*, 2005). According to Lambert *et al.* (2003), a stressful environment becomes a breeding ground for behavioural health problems that can lead to

violence. Cartwright and Cooper (1997) suggest there are many effects of stress on bodily functions. An individual suffering from stress may have headaches, migraines, anxiety, declining sense of humour, dry mouth, lumps in throat, muscular tension and pain, hypertension, chest pains, coughs, asthma, ulcers, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, frequent urination, impotence, shortness of breath, menstrual disorders, weight gain or weight loss, and have trouble sleeping (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997; Hinton, 2010; MacDonald, 2006; Roisin, 2004).

Stress: causes and consequences

Cost-cutting measures including freezes on hiring staff and salaries, furloughs and layoffs, instituted due to the recent recession, have tended to exacerbate the stress levels in companies and on campuses worldwide (Dobson, 2010). Moreover, downsizing, dismissals, drug abuse, pay reductions, extended working hours, automation, interpersonal conflict, budgetary reductions, family problems, a sense of vulnerability pertaining to job security, low job satisfaction, cultural conflicts and domestic violence have all been linked to violence in the workplace and at institutions of higher education (Capozzoli and McVey, 1996; Chenier, 1998; Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006; Johnson and Indvik, 1994; McCune, 1994; Moore, 1997; Nigro and Waugh, 1996). Indeed, organizational climates permeated by stress induced by authoritarian administrators and managers, negative personalities and work overload are fairly common these days (Nigro and Waugh, 1996); unfortunately, this is exactly the type of environment that frequently precipitates violence (Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006). Employees, staff members and students often become frustrated and develop counterproductive perceptions of management and administration, and these views often set the stage for violence to occur (Paludi, 2008; Chenier, 1998).

The causes of environmental stress are multi-dimensional and, if not dealt with effectively, contribute to acts of violence (Hinton, 2010). In the USA alone it is estimated that 20 employees are murdered and 18,000 individuals are assaulted in their place of employment every week (Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006; Lipscomb *et al.*, 2002). Keim (1999) further suggests that these statistics do not include the numerous accounts of violence that are never reported. If all cases of violence were reported, it is estimated that the totals would increase by at least 50 percent (Keim, 1999). Lawoko *et al.* (2004) assert that virtually 100 percent of all workers will experience some form of job-related violence during the course of their career. Homicide is the second leading cause of death among

American workers (Chenier, 1998) and is, in fact, the fastest growing crime in the United States (Moore, 1997).

Hoobler and Swanberg (2006) report that men and women who work in government buildings experience higher rates of potential violence than do private sector employees. Additionally, murder and physical attacks on workers most frequently occur in health care, social service, retail and public sector occupations (Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006; Chenier, 1998). Nigro and Waugh (1996) suggest the reason the public sector is increasingly threatened by violence is a result of anti-government sentiment involving frustrated clients, terrorist groups with political motives and people who are angry with bureaucrats. Keim (1999) reports that 60% of violence occurs in the private sector and women comprise 60% of the victims of such acts. Women also report far more incidences of exposure to violence than men (Lawoko *et al*, 2004).

Stress prevention: a critical responsibility

As alluded to previously, the general consensus is that most individuals perceive they are under more stress today than a decade or two ago (Wright, 2007). Stress is inherently cost prohibitive for organizations and a significant source of health problems for both employees and students (Horan, 2002). Stress tends to be a defining characteristic of most contemporary organizations, regardless of the occupational sector (Lambert *et al*, 2003; Salmond and Ropis, 2005). Rather than focusing on how organizations can help individuals to cope better with stress, it might be more advantageous to approach the problem from the perspective of what can be done to reduce or eliminate known stressors (Cartwright and Cooper, 1994).

Corporate and institutional responses to stress have ranged from ignoring the problem to offering various kinds of stress management help (Horan, 2002). Some organizations still view stress as a personal problem and suggest it is up to the employee or the student to deal with the issue (Roisin, 2004). Increasingly, however, ignoring stress and/or pretending it is the individual's problem alone is not a viable option. Employers in business and industry as well as higher education are becoming more aware of the need to assess the risks posed by environmental stress and the potential for violence that it represents (Clarke and Cooper, 2000). Counselling and stress management training have both been demonstrated to reduce stress levels (Cartwright and Cooper, 1994; Crampton *et al*, 1995; Horan, 2002; Hurley, 2007; Spiers, 2003). Braham (1988), O'Donnell (1998) and Robbins (1993) suggest using techniques such as establishing goals, managing time more

efficiently, exercising, relaxing, developing a social support network and delegating to decrease stress (as cited by Crampton *et al*, 1995).

Stress can also be better managed if affected parties acknowledge what is going on, identify feelings, employ healthy stress reduction methods, tune into their body's responses, think reassuring thoughts, take deep breaths, concentrate on relaxing tense muscles, and not be afraid to ask for professional help when it would be beneficial (Shapter, 2005). Additionally, aromatherapy, guided imagery, massage, music therapy, meditation, stretching, and therapeutic touch can reduce stress (Hinton, 2010; Hurley, 2007; Shapter, 2005). Stress is also reduced when students and employees leave their desks or workstations to take a walk in the fresh air (MacDonald, 2006). Furthermore, time should always be made for socializing outside the office or classroom as personal support systems tend to reduce stress (MacDonald, 2006).

Preparing students for workplace stress

As previously noted, stress is a pervasive feature of academia just as it is in the more generic world of work (Paludi, 2008). It is also important to recognize that students face many challenges as they make the transition from lecture hall to the office or factory floor; that is, this can be a very anxiety-generating time in the life of a recent college graduate (Candy and Crebert, 1991; DiGiacomo and Adamson, 2001; Hettich, 2010). Starting a career often means moving to a new community, making new friends and managing living expenses while simultaneously establishing oneself as a productive employee in an organization (Polach, 2004). Moreover, this process often precipitates additional difficulties for recent graduates due to the inherent disparity that often exists between the skill sets acquired in college and those actually needed in the workplace (Candy and Crebert, 1991; DiGiacomo and Adamson, 2001). The adjustment necessary as the new employee reconciles what was learned in a formal educational setting with what is now being encountered in an actual place of employment can generate a great deal of anxiety (Stull and Sanders, 2003).

Students tend to leave college with an accumulation of theoretical knowledge; that is, foundational principles, hypothetical case studies, academic models and various skill sets that are somewhat abstract until tested in real-world situations (Brooks, 2009). One of the criticisms many employers often have of newly hired graduates is that the graduates tend to lack the ability to deal with the more intangible dimensions of the contemporary global workplace such as problem solving, decision making and team work (DiGiacomo

and Adamson, 2001). Candy and Crebert (1991) found that employers tend to view experiential education as superior to classroom learning and therefore increasingly seek to recruit graduates who are capable of problem-based learning, approach business scenarios from a cost- and time-efficient perspective and have the capability of expressing thoughts and ideas in a variety of modalities –instead of almost exclusively in written form. Indeed, entering the workforce with only ‘textbook’ knowledge and skills, coupled with little practical experience, can be overwhelming for newly hired graduates who are immediately expected to adapt seamlessly to new colleagues, routines, policies, and expectations (DiGiacomo and Adamson, 2001). Needless to say, this can be a very stressful and anxiety-producing process for both the graduates as well as the employing agency.

Business and industry, as well as academia, share a growing responsibility for preparing the next generation of workers and this obligation extends to the need to prepare students for the stressors they will inevitably encounter in their new jobs (Polach, 2004). To help ameliorate stress for newly hired graduates, organizations need to collaborate more purposefully with educational institutions in the provision of realistic strategies and techniques that will help newly hired graduates better understand and successfully negotiate the new environments in which they will soon find themselves (Candy and Crebert, 1991; Rainsbury *et al*, 2001). Ideally, stress management should be integrated into the curricula of all degree programmes (Olpin and Hesson, 2006). By providing students with the tools they will need to help them deal productively with the stress they will experience in moving from higher education to the contemporary workplace, colleges and universities will also be fulfilling better one of their key roles in shaping the future (Brooks, 2009). Moreover, they will also be helping to prevent the violence that can potentially erupt when the stress level reaches a critical point for both the individual as well as the organization (Davidson, 2010).

Violence prevention: a moral imperative

Organizational leaders, working in conjunction with mental health professionals, have an inherent ethical obligation to be prepared for violence at any time and in any environment (Paludi *et al*, 2006). If managers, administrators, faculty, support staff and helping professionals do not deal appropriately with the underlying causes and overt manifestations of violence, the outcome can be very adverse, on a number of levels (Kerr, 2010; Smith, 2002). It has been estimated that violent acts in the workplace or on campus cost

organizations \$202 billion annually, which includes millions of lost workdays and wages (Hoobler and 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 and Jarrett, 1994; Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006). Additionally, companies, agencies and institutions of higher education are often required to pay sizable jury awards to employees, families and other victims of violent acts (Elliott and Jarrett, 1994).

In addition to the more obvious financial burdens precipitated by acts of violence, these kinds of behaviours also significantly lower productivity and profitability, impede the educational process, and drastically reduce employee and student morale (Chenier, 1998; Elliott and Jarrett, 1994; Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006; Johnson and Indvik, 1994). They also impinge adversely upon the capacity to recruit and retain both students and staff members (Elliott and Jarrett, 1994). It is imperative that leaders recognize the deleterious effects that violence can have on their organizations and be prepared to implement strategies that can effectively counteract those manifestations (Lies, 2008).

In most cases, the warning signs that a stressed-out individual may be capable of engaging in violent behaviour are clearly present (Paludi *et al*, 2006). The research indicates that these include someone who exhibits irregular hours, shows signs of depression, exhibits hostility toward criticism, is financially burdened, has marital difficulties and demonstrates inferior performance either on the job or in the classroom (Chenier, 1998). According to Capozzoli and McVey (1996) there are three major types of perpetrators of violence: current employees or students, former employees or students and non students or employees (1996). In a majority of cases, particularly in the West, the person responsible for engaging in a violent act is typically a Caucasian male, 35 years or older, who has a history of violence, is a loner, blames others for mistakes, has low self-esteem and a perpetual list of complaints, owns an arsenal of weapons, has a history of aggression and is paranoid (Chenier, 1998; Elliott and Jarrett, 1994; McCune, 1994; Moore, 1997).

Since the global economy is increasingly driven by the service industries, people are exposed daily to many of the known risk factors for violence (Lies, 2008). These include: contact with the public, exchange of money, delivery of passengers, delivery of goods or services, mobile work stations (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 and Swanberg, 2006; Jenkins, 1998a; Knefel and Bryant, 2004; Lipscomb *et al.*, 2002). The conditions that can lead to hostility, aggression and acting out behaviour are fairly well understood (Musacco, 2009). As such, corporate management as well as collegiate administration share a heightened responsibility to take proactive, preventative measures whenever it is determined that the environment may be conducive to injurious acts (Jenkins, 1998b).

Policies, procedures and guidelines

It is essential for public and private sector organizations to be prepared to deal with potential violence by establishing policies and procedures, creating a crisis management/threat assessment team and developing something like an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and a Student Assistance Programme (SAP) for their employees and students (Chenier, 1998; Johnson and Indvik, 1994; Moore, 1997; Nigro and Waugh, 1996). Organizations must devise a realistic response plan to 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 either employees or students who make threats or show potential for violence (as cited by Nigro and Waugh, 1996). After guidelines have been put in place, it is imperative that they are communicated effectively and are readily visible throughout the organization, so that everyone involved knows exactly what they should do in the event of a violent act occurring (Johnson and Indvik, 1994).

Again, leaders have a moral as well as a legal obligation to provide a safe workplace and/or college campus (Smith, 2002). In the United States, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration Act mandates that companies provide a safe and secure environment for their employees (Bowman and Zigmond, 2001; Capozzoli and McVey, 1996; Chenier, 1998). However, despite heightened attention to security concerns in general (especially since 9/11), many organizations have been sluggish in implementing policies and programmes aimed at preventing violence (Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006; Nigro and Waugh, 1996). A recent study by the Society for Human Resource Management found that 40% of organizations had not established formal policies and procedures for responding to violence (Hoobler and Swanberg, 2006). Even though violent behaviour is an impious problem for managers and leaders, there are strategies that have

proved successful in combating it (Elliott and Jarrett, 1994). As a first line of defence, it is recommended that managers and administrators adhere to guidelines such as those established by the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration Act. Knowing, understanding and conscientiously enforcing these guidelines should decrease instances of violence, make employees and students feel more safe and secure and help keep litigation costs in check (Lies, 2008).

As noted previously, many individuals contend with acts of hostility, harassment, and intimidation by classmates or co-workers 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 behaviour, so organizations must use general strategies that tend to minimize the opportunities for such acts to occur (Walton, 1993). In the USA, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and the Department of Health and Human Services provide strategies for reducing the risk of violence. These include: (a) making high-risk areas visible to more people; (b) installing high-quality exterior lighting; (c) using 'drop safe' boxes to minimize the amount of cash 'on hand'; (d) carrying very small amounts of cash; (e) installing cameras throughout the organization; (f) if possible, increasing the number of staff on duty; (g) providing training in nonviolent response; (h) avoiding resistance during a robbery; (i) providing bullet-proof walls and barriers; (j) having police or security guards for monitoring the organization frequently; and (k) if possible, closing the organization late at night or very early in the morning (Nigro and Waugh, 1996). The majority of these recommendations can be integrated into the policies and procedures of most companies and campuses with minimal effort or expense (Bowman and Zigmond, 2001).

The case for being more proactive

The time for an organization to organize its response to hostility should be before a threat materializes, not after an act occurs (Johnson and Indvik, 1994). An active focus on prevention allows problems to be avoided and the potential liability to be reduced when violent behaviour occurs (Chenier, 1998). It has been suggested that many of these acts can be curtailed if organizations implement and adhere to the following practices: (a) gain as much information as possible, using background checks; (b) develop awareness and training programmes that will alert supervisors and faculty to the possibility of any violent behaviour occurring; and (c) educate everyone in the organization about violence (Chenier, 1998; Johnson and Indvik, 1994; Nigro and Waugh, 1996; Walton, 1993). The key to success seems to be an

effective and conscientious adherence to established and proven policies and procedures (Musacco, 2009).

It is imperative that leaders create and actively enforce a zero-tolerance policy toward violence and formally condemn any demonstration of verbal threatening or physical abuse (Awadalla and Roughton, 1998; Chenier, 1998; Namie, 2001; Nigro and Waugh, 1996; Ramsey, 2005). A zero-tolerance policy is the foundation for an organizational culture that rejects violence and encourages everyone to report all meaningful threats and violent acts (Nigro and Waugh, 1996). All new and current employees and students 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 individuals who jokingly make threats must be dealt with immediately (Chenier, 1998). By removing individuals who engage in, or allude to the fact that they might engage in, violence of any kind, leaders are formalizing a precedent that any expression of violence, potential or actual, intentional or unintentional, will not be tolerated (Chenier, 1998). It is also important for managers, administrators and faculty to serve as role models and mentors and be consistent in their personal adherence to the guidelines that have been developed to foster violence prevention (Johnson and Indvik, 1994).

In addition, leaders should strive to create a climate of open communication, so that victims of violence feel safe, secure and confident enough to report these incidences when they occur (Namie, 2001; Ramsey, 2005; Walton, 1993). Employees and students who are uncomfortable talking with managers, administrators or faculty members should be encouraged to speak with a counsellor or human resources professional; this can be facilitated either through the EAP or SAP (Ramsey, 2005). Mechanisms must be in place that ensure that the victims of 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 vital to listen to anyone who conveys any information about violent behaviour, even if the violence is only alleged (Walton, 1993).

Namie (2001) and Ramsey (2005) emphasize the importance of providing professional development opportunities centered on treating everyone with respect and nurturing a sense of community. During these sessions the connection between the humane treatment of everyone and the organization's overarching mission and goals must be clearly established (Musacco, 2009). Training should also focus on how to maintain a safe distance from someone who is being violent and familiarity with exit routes in the event of a hostile

episode (McCune, 1994). Progressive discipline is also important – that is, when lesser measures fail, more stringent action must be taken (Namie, 2001; Ramsey, 2005). These strategies seem to be effective at diminishing the likelihood that violence will significantly disrupt the overall organizational climate if and when it occurs (Smith, 2002).

Conclusions

Unfortunately, heightened stress and the potential for violence will probably continue to be a fact of life for the foreseeable future in business and industry and on college campuses (McCune, 1994). Rather than resigning themselves to an attitude of helplessness and impotence, however, it is incumbent on managers, administrators, human resources professionals, faculty, counsellors and students to do whatever it takes to curtail the level of anxiety in these environments, thereby reducing the probability that instances of violence will occur – and that their impact will be minimal when they do transpire (Paludi *et al*, 2006).

The phenomenon of organizational stress, despite its innate tendency to precipitate counterproductive events, still seems to be taken far too lightly by many in leadership roles (Wright, 2007). It is becoming clear, however, that it is in the best interests of the individual as well as the organization to discover ways to reduce stress and with it the probability of violence (Crampton *et al*, 1995).

The reality is that there are concrete steps that can be taken to deal effectively with stress and violence (Capozzoli and McVey, 1996). Considerable research has been conducted into ways to prevent hostile and abusive behaviour from poisoning human environments; at the same time, much remains to be accomplished (Lies, 2008). As is so often the case, heightened awareness is a necessary first step in dealing with the relevant issues and concerns, but real progress lies in our resolve and ability to move from awareness to action. It is the responsibility of everyone potentially affected by stress and violence to collaborate on the eradication of this problem and make the world a safer place in which to live, work and go to school, college or university.

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