

Beyond the Horizons Consulting

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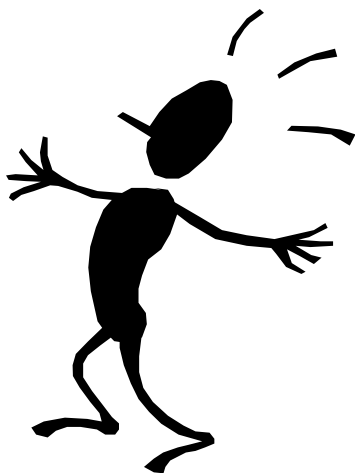
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Workplace Violence: Part I

This is the first article in a series about workplace violence. As you will learn, this is a timely topic as companies continue downsizing, outsourcing, and delaying raises to demonstrate their profitability to shareholders. In our introduction, Part I of the series, we define the term “workplace violence” and begin looking at the warning signs.

What is Workplace Violence?

In the same way that we are coming to understand the
Then again, the perpetrator of workplace violence does



many facets of violence in general, so too are we realizing that violence is not just a physical act that results in damage to persons or environment.

Violence is as much a threat of destructive behavior as it is the actual behavior itself. Both the threat and the act itself create an environment of extreme stress and could result in individuals’ suffering posttraumatic stress disorder.

not have to exercise power over others physically; s/he may be *verbally or emotionally violent*. Or the threat of violence may be conveyed through visual images or written material.

Why is Workplace Violence an Important Topic Today?

According to statistics, at least 50% of workplace homicides are directly connected to the perpetrator’s being laid off or terminated. *In fact, workplace homicide is the leading cause of on-the-job death for women.* Every workday, over 16,000 threats are made; over 700 workers are attacked; and 44,000 workers are harassed. All this constitutes a loss to American businesses of almost \$40 billion annually. (1)

Why is It Important to Know the Warning Signs of Violence in the Workplace?

Ours is a litigious society, and the lawsuits resulting from workplace violence and harassment are no less significant than those resulting from breaches of the law in other labor disputes. According to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act, employers are obligated to provide their employees with a place to work that is “free from recognized hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm to ... employees.” (2)

A few examples of unanticipated violence in the workplace will help convince the reader of the importance of being forewarned:

- ◆ The recent shooting by a coworker of six employees of the Postal Service in a California

(1) Workplace Violence Research Institute, 1999.

(2) OSHA

facility, followed by the deranged employee's shooting herself. This employee had been on medical disability involving mental health issues and had been living in western New Mexico prior to the incident.

- ◆ A homosexual employee was verbally harassed and continually threatened. He had gone to HR and lodged several complaints, which were dismissed. The employee subsequently hired legal counsel and won a court suit of approximately \$1 million against his former employer.
- ◆ A nationally known high-tech firm had a strict policy against violence in the workplace, which included zero tolerance for weapons in the workplace. Several people were seen exchanging guns in the parking lot before heading off to a shooting range. After being fired, these employees filed suit for damages and reinstatement. They were denied restitution because the company could back up its decision based on a strict anti-violence policy in the workplace.

Warning Signs of Violence in the Workplace

In order to protect themselves in today's supercharged atmosphere, companies need to know the warning signs of workplace violence. Here are some prominent ones:

- ◆ **An inflexible employee:** Someone who displays rigid thinking will easily become emotionally upset when there is a change in company policy, when s/he perceives favoritism toward another employee, or when s/he perceives unfair treatment.
- ◆ **Weapons:** Recently police in Albuquerque, NM, discovered a meth lab in a couple's home. They also found upwards of 20 different firearms of several types. The tipoff came from a coworker who had noticed occasional threats of violence. In talking with peers, this person realized that several coworkers were extremely afraid of the perpetrator, who presented as socially isolated. The company undertook a long overdue background investigation and discovered that the worker had several convictions for violent offenses. This particular story had a happy ending, in that the company was able to work with law enforcement to bring the perpetrator to justice.
- ◆ **SAD:** When an employee presents as **sullen, angry, or depressed**, it is time to pay attention. — to enlist the aid of supervisors and coworkers in taking an inventory of this person's behavior. This should be followed by an interview with the employee, the direct supervisor, and human resources personnel. Perhaps the employee will be directed to psychological testing or to the EAP (Employee Assistance Program).

- ◆ **Identification with a violent subculture:** This may be observed in a number of behavioral traits, such as how the employee decorates his cubicle, what kind of clothing he wears, what music he plays or talks about, and what activities of a violent or counter-culture nature he may mention.
- ◆ **Paranoia, or focus on monitoring another em-**



ployee's actions: An employee who is suspicious of others, fearing harm or betrayal, may create whole scenarios in his head about supervisors and coworkers, which may then lead to his acting out against certain persons. At the other end of the same spectrum is an employee who monitors a coworker's actions. This behavior may stem from the perpetrator's paranoia or it may be a signal that he will stalk or intimidate the other employee.

Next month we continue with further warning signs of workplace violence. We then begin looking at preventive education for both CEOs and managers.

Stay tuned to Beyond the Horizons Newsletters for timely information to solve your management challenges! Please feel free to write to us at

info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com

or to call us to schedule a free, complimentary coaching session or consultation for your business needs. Jean Eva will be pleased to schedule a special time to meet with you. Call her at (505) 466-4990.

Beyond the Horizons Consulting offers a variety of services for individuals, teams, and organizations.

- ◆ Individual coaching for managers is a process that begins by identifying your style, what you want to retain and strengthen, and what you want to modify. Objective assessments are part of the process, as are also a mutual give-and-take of creative problem solving and supportive guidance.
- ◆ We offer group seminars on identifying and dealing with stress in a relaxing and supportive environment.

- ◆ We also offer group seminars on teamwork, using the MBTI or DISC.
- ◆ Our conflict resolution services help opposing parties identify mutual purpose(s) and restore harmony to your workplace environment.
- ◆ It is our pleasure to tailor a seminar to your company's, department's, or team's needs!

Take a look at our May and June, 2005, Newsletters to see our new, serene home, a place we invite you to take advantage of!

Call us to schedule a complimentary consultation for yourself or your business!

Our helpful Office Administrator, Stan, will work with you to schedule a meeting time that fits your schedule.

**Stan and Jean Eva can be reached at
(505) 466-4990**