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WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: A CASE STUDY

By

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INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the problem of workplace violence. Because research into workplace violence is relatively new, there is not much research into managerial response to violent incidences. This paper helps to establish a template that may become a useful managerial tool to decrease the potential for future workplace violence that may lead to loss of life and unnecessary monetary loss. Managers are not necessarily equipped to develop appropriate measures to effectively deal with violent issues. Given the proper tool, managers can often work wonders. The paper focuses on homicide in the workplace, which has been the second leading cause of work related death. In particular, the focus is violence committed by employees or former employees and directed against fellow employees, supervisors and managers. The research and recommendations of several researchers are presented and used to establish workplace violence prevention plan strategies. Statistical data from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health is presented to put the problem in prospective. Theories on what causes or precipitates workplace violence are discussed to lay a foundation for ways to prevent violence in the workplace. Finally, a case study of the postal service Las Vegas valley area is presented to determine what plans were developed to address workplace violence and to relieve the fear of violence among the employees. I look into how seriously the threat of violence is taken and what actions are taken in the event of a violent incident to protect people and property. The purpose of the case study is not to assess effectiveness of plans or processes but to determine whether there is a plan that addresses elements of workplace violence. Since the Las Vegas Valley main post office administrative offices

have had at least one violent incident, did they develop any measures concerning violence prevention? And does it cost much if your organization had a violent incident? Depending on what preconceived opinion you may have, this paper could change your mind or at least get you looking and thinking more about this subject.

The paper will present work from several researchers in the Literature Review section and discuss (1) the extent of workplace violence, (2) the cost of workplace violence, and (3) two main factors that can be used to explain the causes of workplace violence. In the section on Preventing Workplace Violence, a basic workplace violence prevention plan is developed based on the most frequently occurring recommendations. The workplace violence prevention plan is then used to develop an interview instrument to collect information regarding the post office preparedness to deal with violent incidents. The Methodology section presents the information collection process and explains the setting in which the post office operates. Finally, the Findings and Analysis section explores the practices of the post office against the template presented as a basic workplace violence prevention plan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ugly face of workplace violence had not been prominently displayed in the public's eye until the mid 1980s. What we commonly had, in comparison to today's problems, was a disagreement that often involved no more than a short fist fight. (Kelleher, 1996; Simon, 1996)

To engage the subject of workplace violence we must be cognizant of the range of violence that this subject encompasses. The range of workplace violence includes fistfights, non-fatal stabbing, not-fatal shooting, homicide, psychological and sexual harassment and sabotage. (Simon, 1986) Add to this group rape. The focus will be homicide associated with the workplace. Further research revealed that the term "workplace homicide" was also subject to ambiguity. Kelleher (1992) made it clear that workplace homicide is a broad category with at least two subsets, occupational homicide and those homicides that happen internal to the organization. He described Occupational homicide as "often an act perpetrated during the commission of another crime, such as armed robbery" (Kelleher, 1997) which is prevalent in retail trades. My intent is to focus on the latter, the lethal employee, the employee who commits violent crimes within the workplace and against fellow or former employees. (Kelleher, 1992)

Why should we look at this subject when the number of people murdered at work consists of only five percent of those individuals murdered each year? (Cannon, Cannon, Florence, Speakman, & Williams, 1995) This next section really brings into focus some figures that may answer that question.

Extent of Workplace Violence

Not many things bring a subject into focus like numbers and this topic is no different. Kelleher (1997) uses data from the August 1993 National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) long-term study on fatal injuries to American workers. From 1980-1989, 63,589 workers died from injuries on the job. Of these, 14 percent were attributed to homicide, which was the leading cause of worker fatalities nationally at that time. (Cannon et al., 1995; Kelleher, 1997)

Kelleher (1997) noted that NIOSH used eleven occupational categorizations in its 1993 report to demonstrate the impact of worker death within easily defined career divisions. He found that NIOSH identified workplace homicide as a leading cause of death in six of the eleven occupational categories, despite the fact that vital information from the states of New York, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Nebraska was unavailable. (Kelleher, 1997) According to Kelleher (1997), had complete data been available at the time of the NIOSH report, it is possible that homicide would have been a primary cause of worker death in even more occupational categories than initially reported. He continued his observation with the following: occupations classified as Executive, Administrative or Managerial, Professional or Specialist, Transportation, Clerical, Service and Sales all indicated occupational homicide as a leading cause of worker death. In some classifications, such as Executive, Administrative or Managerial, Sales and Service, workplace homicide significantly was the predominate reason for work death. (Kelleher, 1997)

In addition to occupation, Kelleher (1997) examined geographical locations and found that homicide was either the foremost or secondary cause of workplace fatalities in thirteen states and Washington, D.C.   In the nation's capital, homicide was the leading cause of worker death, as it was in the states of Connecticut, Michigan, and South Carolina. In several populous states, such as California, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey, homicide was the second leading cause of death in the workplace. (Kelleher, 1997)

Kelleher's (1997) study shows that of all homicide victims identified during the survey period, 80 percent were male. Even though homicide was the leading cause of death for female workers, a male in the workplace was three times more likely to become a victim of homicide than a female (mainly because of the male dominated demography of the workplace in the decade studied). A worker in the age range of 25-44 years was more likely to be murdered at work than an employee in any other age group. Most victims of occupational homicide were slain with a firearm (80%). When ethnicity was considered, the homicide victims were most often white (75%), followed by blacks (19%), and other races (6%). (Kelleher, 1997)

In a similar interpretation in 1995 of its own study, the Law Enforcement Bulletin (published by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation) carried an article dealing with incidents of significant violence in the workplace. The research included a review of 89 incidents that occurred between May 1988 and May 1994, each of which involved a major occurrence of workplace violence (including homicide). This study revealed useful statistical information about the characteristics of workplace murders and their victims:

1. While the average age of perpetrators of non-workplace murders in America was typically under 30 years during the survey period, the average age of workplace murders in this study was 38.2 years. Only two of the perpetrators were under 25 years of age.

2. Of all workplace murderers, 97 percent were male.

3. In every incident, a firearm was used to commit the crime.

4. Of the perpetrators, 41 percent were current employees at the time they committed their crime, while 46 percent were former employees. The remaining 13 percent of the perpetrators were either domestic partners of an employee or clients of the victimized organization.

5. Of the organizations victimized by occupational homicide, 38 percent were governmental agencies of some type, most often federally related, with the U.S. Postal Service the most frequently victimized employer. This figure represented a disproportionately large percentage of all organizations victimized by workplace violence in that only 15 percent of the American workforce was employed by these agencies during the survey period.

6. The average number of fatalities for each incident was 2.5 with at east one individual murdered in 39 percent of the cases. This means that in well over one third of the incidents surveyed at least one employee was slain.

The profile of the perpetrator of workplace homicide implied by this data is of a male employee or ex-employee, at or approaching middle age, who is familiar and comfortable with firearms, intent on revenge, lethal in his intentions, and quite capable of murdering several individuals in the short course of this crime. (Kelleher, 1997)

In another study that used the NIOSH's National Traumatic Occupational Fatality data collected from 1980 through 1985 to investigate occupational homicide for women, of 950 female homicide victims, over seventy percent were employed in just four occupational groups: sales, clerical, service, and supervisors. (Nigro & Waugh, 1995)

Kelleher offers that the NIOSH report shows that regardless of profession, a worker is more likely to be murdered on the job than to be fatally injured by a fall, electrocution, or being struck by a falling object. Surprisingly, if a place of employment is an office without dangerous machinery and doesn't involve the use of a vehicle, an employee is more likely to be murdered at work than to be killed by any other cause. (Kelleher, 1996) The typical office employee represents a vast number of American workers who are currently at risk on the job. (Kelleher, 1996) This can best be illustrated by data collected during 1987- 1992 that showed that while public employees were eighteen percent of the workforce, they were represented in thirty percent of the incidents of workplace violence. The majority of those workers worked in an office setting. (Nigro & Waugh, 1996) In a job projection table (not presented here) Kelleher listed seventeen occupations that are expected to increase by 100,000 new jobs by the year 2000. Many of the new occupations are expected to be in an office work setting, the new arena for workplace violence. (Kelleher, 1996) Based on this information, the increase in new jobs may lead to a higher percentage of workplace fatalities. (Kelleher, 1997)

Cost of Workplace Violence

The cost of a violent event is not limited to the loss of life. The costs associated with incidents of workplace violence consist of both hidden and highly visible items, and the total cost can be very high. Every company with employees would be well advised to factor in cost from the following areas when trying to anticipate any cost associated with the aftermath of a violent event: additional security immediately following a violent event, building repair and clean up, business interruptions, loss of productivity caused by the loss of employees directly involved in an incident and those employees traumatized as a result of the event, salary continuation for those who are injured, loss of customers, early retirement or resignation of valued and knowledgeable employees, increase in workers compensation claims, increase in insurance premium rates, attorney fees, and long term counseling care for remaining employees.(Baron, 1993) For example, at the Elgar Corporation where Larry Hansel killed two people, they have an estimated cost of $400,000, the costs covered by insurance, and an estimated premium increase of $100,000 annually for worker compensation. At the time this information was compiled it was twelve months after the incident and the costs were still occurring. (Baron, 1993) The cost of violence to U.S. companies in 1992 was approximately $4.2 billion dollars in lost work and expenses. (Cannon et al., 1995)

Causes of Workplace Violence

From our current and past problems we look to influence future events. For managers and supervisors, this means taking a look at our own or someone else's history with a violent event in an attempt to be better prepared for our own possible future event. Of course the obvious signs and information about a person's past can lead us to an educated guess in regards to their potential for violence, but this is not true for a majority of workers. Not all troubled employees wear their lives on their sleeves. In a majority of case studies it is apparent that one needed to make inquires into minute details of a person's life on and off the job in order to predict the potential for a violent episode. (Baron, 1993) Even for the experts, judging by some case studies, it was years after an incident before they could really put the facts together so that they could develop a reason as to what sparked an event to happen in the first place. Even then the answer is not always possible. (Baron, 1993)

Workplace Factors

A goal of any one looking into workplace violence would more than likely be, to predictably discover what causes people to react violently. Finding exact causes would be a daunting task for anyone and is well beyond the scope of this paper. With that in mind, it would be helpful to identify work related factors that may very well contribute to a work environment that could lead to violent episodes. Kelleher (1996) list nine elements that directly impact the work environment: excessive workload, inadequate

time to complete the assigned task, poor supervision, uncertain organizational climate, insufficient authority to meet job responsibilities, unclear responsibilities or job functions, philosophical differences between the organization and employee, unexpected or significant change at work or at home, and unanswered or unresolved frustrations.

Psychological Processes

Other researchers have evaluated psychological processes that are driven by actions of the work environment and are just as important as the workplace factors. The factors of particular interest are frustration, revenge, and aggression. The role of frustration as a factor that can lead to violent behavior is a straightforward item. Events or frustrators that work to either intentionally or unintentionally block achievement of a goal will lead to frustration. Goals can run the gambit from getting a raise, getting promoted, to achieving stability in one's job in an effort to adequately support a family. It is the range of reaction or response to the frustrator that makes it interesting to look into. The range may be from mild disappointment to out right rage toward one or more targets. A target can be an object, other employees, or the company itself. (Spector, 1997)

Paul Spector developed a model of the cognitive processes and phases of frustration that a person may encounter when dealing with frustrators. The process begins when an individual appraises an event as a frustrator. Without this appraisal process, the event would be an ordinary event requiring no specific reaction. After an event is appraised as a frustrator, its next occurrence leads to experienced frustration. Experienced frustration is the affective reaction to the event. (Spector, 1997) The affect is a form of anger that

can range from minor irritation to rage. It is at this point where one might engage in antisocial behavior. How far up or down the range of reactions an individual act out depends on one of the following two elements: The fear of punishment or the perception of having lack of control in regards to what may happen to them. The individual whose response may be tempered by the fear of punishment will more than likely not act out in an aggressive manner because of the fear of losing one's job or other punishment. (Spector, 1997) The person in this category would operate at the lowest level of anger, irritation, and redirect their energy to resolving their problem in a non-violent manner. On the opposite end, we have people with a perception of little or no control over what can and does happen to them, their jobs and subsequently their lives. The people identified in this area may be predisposed to reacting violently because of their frustration. In my view, it is the latter that often rise to the point of a violent outburst because the individual sees no way around an obstacle.

The act of revenge does not necessarily have to end with an antisocial or violent outcome. Revenge could simply be withholding information. However, the focus is on the violent responses to environmental factors, and if we are to strive to effectively mitigate violent episodes it is a good idea to understand some important facts in regards to revenge. The framework for this point of view is adapted from previous research in organizational behavior, social psychology, and sociology. This research suggests that revenge cognitions and emotions follow a pattern of heating-up and cooling down. (Bies, Tripp & Kramer, 1997) In much the same manner as frustration, revenge begins with a precipitating event and this event sparks revenge cognitions and emotions.

These revenge cognitions and emotions can create a

heating-up process within the victim or observer, the

intensity and duration of which depends on a variety of

cognitive, motivational, and social process that influences

how the sparking event is construed. (Bies, et al., 1997)

If the heating-up process were to continue without relief, the individual would in a sense

blow or possibly experience a violent episode. The events that spark the heating-up

process can be anyone of the nine elements noted by Kelleher that negatively affect an

individual and that the individual perceives as a general wrong doing. The same is true

of the cooling-down process. An individual or someone connected with the individual

must find the means to properly cope or deal with the sparking event so that it is dealt

with in a socially acceptable manner.

When dealing with workplace violence one cannot overlook the role that aggression

plays in response to many organizational practices. Baron and Neuman (1997) noted that

a significant amount of research has been devoted to factors that cause, facilitate, or

exacerbate aggression or even prevent or reduce aggression but that may not have been

applied to the study of aggression in the workplace. As organizations battle to remain

competitive in the market, they resort to survival techniques that are often harmful to

employees. In an effort to get leaner and meaner, organizations resort to processes such

as reduction in force (RIF) where long time employees are sometimes forced out and the

remaining employees are left feeling apprehensive about their future with the

organization. After the RIF, the remaining workers must often pick up the remaining

work in an effort to increase efficiency. (Cannon et al., 1995) The sudden change in how

workers are treated often is a cause for alarm that the organization is no longer loyal to them. When applied inappropriately, the changes that organizations go through can foster a more aggressive workplace. This aggression is preceded by frustration, stress and emotional disturbances. Any of these can lead to a violent episode. (Baron & Neuman, 1997)

Putting Workplace Factors and Psychological Processes Together

In attempting to identify the cause or causes of violent workplace episodes, Kelleher (1996), Spector (1997), Baron & Neuman (1997), and Bies, et al (1997) all used factors that are related to some extent. The nine elements listed by Kelleher can be used to explain the factors driven by the work environment given by Spector, Baron & Neuman, and Bies, et al. Kelleher's nine elements go to the core of the problem when trying to devise strategies to mitigate workplace violence. The beauty of the use of frustration, revenge and aggression will come into play in the instance where you have a supervisor or manager that cannot for whatever reason understand or appreciate the value of Kelleher's elements first hand. Take for example a task driven supervisor who does not respond to complaints of excessive workload or inadequate time to complete assigned tasks, two of Kelleher's nine elements. Such a supervisor may very well relate to revenge and aggression since those actions have clear and present consequence that may force the supervisor to modify his method of dealing with personnel. I believe that the elements that affect the work environment and those that are driven by the work environment should always be looked at and discussed in tandem to ensure a complete

understanding of the workers and management perspective of the working environment as the problems are being reconciled. Altogether, the combined factors will examine a situation from different angles. In regards to the psychological factors, Cannon et al. (1995) states that the goal is for supervisors to recognize troubled employees and refer them to appropriate counseling. Beyond the human equation, and before the psychological problems, an equally important goal is to eliminate or reduce the environmental factors.

"The obvious, and best, methodology for avoiding the potentially lethal employee is to not employ him or her in the first place." (Kelleher, 1996) Before setting out to develop a workplace violence prevention plan, employers should avoid the following employer vulnerabilities that can predispose them and their organizations to violent episodes: 1) a belief that violence can't happen here, 2) an over reliance on psychologist and psychiatrists, 3) ineffective use of legal counsel, 4) over reliance on physical security matters, 5) failure to articulate a strong policy against violence, 6) inconsistent application of rules and policies, 7) unwillingness to use discipline against abusive employees, 8) inadequate incident documentation. (Kinney, 1995) The manager who goes into planning for workplace violence mitigation with any of these vulnerabilities will more than likely not succeed in properly planning for workplace violence prevention.

No two industries are alike and this analogy is equally true in regards to programs designed to mitigate workplace violence; the programs must match the industry. In a guide for agency planners published by the United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the personnel of OPM noted that as federal managers addressed the issues of workplace violence, they found that advice offered by the private sector was not compatible with federal regulations and that federal managers did not have the expertise to go it alone. (OPM, 1998) OPM did not specify which advice federal managers tried or divulge what the incompatibility was. In order to make a good attempt at addressing workplace violence in federal facilities, the OPM organized the Interagency Working Group on Violence in the Workplace to develop a comprehensive approach to

developing, analyzing, and responding to threats of violence in federal workplaces. (OPM, 1998) The guidance published by OPM follows the general guidance recommended by researchers: look for warning signs, train employees and supervisors, implement better pre-employment screening, employ better security measures, and use alternative dispute resolution as a preventive strategy. (OPM, 1998)

Organizations desiring to develop a workplace violence prevention plan need only to access the wealth of information made available by researchers. Cannon et. al. (1995) compiled a comprehensive listing of measures and recommendations one should consider when setting out to develop a workplace violence prevention plan. The list is separated according to responsibilities within a typical organization. (See appendix I) It's not important who takes on an item as long as it's done. Not all organizations will be able to use every recommendation, but should at least consider each. The plan should focus on those elements that fit the organization's profile.

Appendix I is a comprehensive listing of workplace violence prevention elements. The basic workplace violence prevention plan below shows the elements most noted by various researchers as being required in a plan. The post office violence prevention program will be compared to this plan.

Basic Elements of a Workplace Violence Prevention Plan

Employment Process (Kelleher, 1996)

- Pre-employment screening.
- Background checks.

Termination process (Kelleher, 1996)

- Know how to conduct termination.
- Know when to conduct termination.
- Have an appropriate place to terminate.

- Have the appropriate people in attendance.

Evaluate the work environment for stress causing elements (Kelleher, 1996)

- Address the problem towards a solution.

Intervention Program (Kelleher, 1997)

- Counseling program.
- Crisis management team.
- Zero tolerance policy for violence.
- Open communications.
- Threat of violence reporting system. (Braverman, 1999)

Education and Training (supervisor/employees) (Kelleher, 1996)

- Know signs of trouble
- How to report threats
- New policies (supervisors).
- Conflict resolution.
- Improve interpersonal skills.
- New policies (employees)

Security Measures (Kelleher, 1996)

- Evaluate current vulnerabilities

METHODOLOGY

Information Collection Process

    This is a case study of the Las Vegas Valley Postal Service. A semi-structured interview was used to collect information from key postal service management personnel. The person interviewed worked at the main post office administrative offices in the Las Vegas Valley as a Workplace Improvement Analyst. This analyst is a key individual who is charged with monitoring the measures employed to reduce the potential for future workplace violence and is highly commended by the local postmaster. The intent of this case study is not to determine to what degree the programs are successful but to determine if any programs exist and to what degree they (the programs) parallel the suggested basic elements of a workplace violence prevention plan presented in the literature review.

    Knowing how sensitive a subject this can be and especially at the post office, at the on-set of the interview I set parameters that I would observe. In addition to reminding the analyst that the interview could be terminated at their wish at any time, I also explained that my interest was not in soliciting details of any violent events involving this or any other postal station. I had read enough in my research. I explained that I had no intentions of gathering the information to later besmirch the post office. My purpose was to document the programs that they had in place that dealt with workplace violence. We then started an open discussion with the level of trust building as the conversation moved along. Every question was answered in detail.

Since the elements from the literature review formed what I believe are the basics of a workplace violence prevention plan, I used them to develop a questionnaire to use at the interview with the analyst. The questionnaire contains two questions used as lead-ins to permit the analyst to talk freely about the program without hard question/answer restrictions. After covering the programs from the lead-ins questions, I was then able to address the remaining questions not adequately covered. (see appendix II for the interview instrument). After assembling the information from the interview, additional information and clarification of facts were obtained through e-mail communication.

The Setting

Much has been written about workplace violence and its effect on the remaining employees and the business itself. The US postal service employs more than 700,000 people to accomplish its mission to deliver the nation's mail. Prior to 1970 the postal service ran a typical government operation in that it ran a deficit, was not expected to make a profit, and was subsidized by the taxpayers of the United States. (Cochran, 2000) Since 1970 and with the introduction of the Postal Reorganization Act, the postal service is a self-supporting agency, independently managed, and operates in a competitive market where it's no longer a true monopoly. Though independently managed, it is still under the scrutiny and criticism of two very tough and direct congressional subcommittees. The Postmaster General must report annually to the Senate International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Service subcommittee and the House subcommittee on the Postal Service and explain past, present, and future operations and problems.

The postal service is always under pressure to meet increasing mail volume at

affordable rates in an industry that is expanding and getting more competition. (Cochran,

2000) The rapid change in technology has been an asset and an adversary. While the

postal service uses better automation technology to keep postage rates low, private

industries such as banks use advancement in technology, duplex printing, in particular, to

reduce the weight of letters while sending out the same number of pieces. (Henderson,

2000) The same is true for the use of the Internet; the postal service uses the Internet to

reach more people and to add convenience like parcel tracking. (Cochran,

2000)(Henderson, 2000) Businesses use the Internet to reduce marketing cost by way of

reduced advertising postage charge. (Cochran, 2000)(Henderson, 2000)

Because of growth in mail volume, infrastructure, and numbers of personnel

employed, the postal service deals with at least six labor unions, four representing mail

operations, one representing nurses, and one representing the postal police. With the

increase in staff and increasing mail volume notwithstanding, the postal service is

managing to keep the cost of postage down. Given raising labor and fuel cost coupled

with the impact of inflation, this is not easily done. (Henderson, 2000)

With good news there's also bad news. For all its success, the postal service, like

other government agencies or private businesses has fallen victim to incidents of

workplace violence. The postal service is profiled here not because it has the higher

number of violent incidents nor because of the notoriety it received from the media. In

fact the federal agency with the most violent incidents is the Department of Veterans

Affairs. (Freeman, Fox, Burr, & Santasine, 1996) Outside the federal government,

residential care and nursing home facilities had the highest rates for assault in 1994.

(Keim, 1999) I selected the postal service because of its convenience, accessibility, and my curiosity as to what have they done about their piece of the workplace violence problem.

Whether deserved or not, the postal service has taken a pounding from the media. Over the last several years more than thirty postal employees lost their lives in eleven violent incidents in and around their workplace, postal stations. (Nigro & Waugh, 1996) One of these incidences occurred in Las Vegas, Nevada.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Government agencies, especially large ones, are not known for their willingness to change their mode of operation; Slow to change is how a bureaucracy is pictured. After all, this mode of operation has been working for years and everyone has adapted to its way of thinking. This mode of operation may have been that of postal stations in the past, but it is now meeting many challenges and having to change its way of operation to remain a self-supporting agency. The requirement to change extends to methods used to handle people and problems. The change is from an autocratic to a more humanistic management style. The issue at present is how is it handling a problem that is national in nature and very random? In particular how does it handle the workplace violence issue? The following analysis provides detailed answers. Table 1 presents a summary of the analysis.

Table 1
Summary of Analysis

Employment Process	
• Pre-employment screening	Exceeds recommendations
• Background checks	Meets recommendations
Termination Process	
• Know how to conduct termination	Yes, recommend providing limited job assistance
• Know when to conduct termination	Meets recommendations
• Have an appropriate place to terminate	Meets recommendations
• Have the appropriate people in attendance	Meets recommendations
Evaluate the work environment for stress causing elements	
• Address the problem towards a solution	Yes, however no employee feedback
Intervention Program	
• Counseling program	Exceeds recommendations
• Crisis management team	Meets recommendations
• Zero tolerance policy for violence	Meets recommendations
• Open communications	Meets recommendations
• Treat of violence reporting system	Exceeds recommendations
Education and Training (supervisor/employees)	
• Know signs of trouble	Meets recommendations
• How to report threats	Meets recommendations
• New policies (supervisors)	Meets recommendations
• Conflict resolution	Meets recommendations
• Improve interpersonal skills	Yes, recommend proactive versus reactive training
• New policies (employees)	Meets recommendations
Security Measures	
• Evaluate current vulnerabilities	Yes. However no local testing of security measures

<u>Employment Process</u>

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES: Interviewers should conduct interviews that allow an

evaluator to determine the true personality of applicants. Since personality characteristics

remain consistent over the lifetime of most healthy individuals, a pattern of behavior can

be discerned. Have a thorough background check conducted to evaluate past

employment history, criminal record, education, experience, training, military service,

credit history, and inquires regarding general character and reputation. The thorough

background check would lay the foundation for a complete review. (Kelleher, 1996)

POST OFFICE PRACTICE: The post office requires prospective employees to complete

its suitability requirement. This requirement consist of a medical examination, a drug

screening test, employment information verified, a check by local law enforcement, a five

year residency check (through the courts), fingerprint background check and be

interviewed.

EVALUATION: The post office pre-employment process exceeds the recommendations

by researchers. The drug screening, five year residency check, and medical examination

are added measures use to enhance the possibility of rejecting a potentially violence

prone individual. This section exceeds the recommended requirements.

<u>Termination Process</u>

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES: Human Resources personnel should be mindful that the termination process can be a dangerous undertaking. They should treat employees being terminated with respect, sensitivity, and dignity. Standards used to terminate employees should be applied equally. If possible avoid terminating when an employee is undergoing other stressful life situations such as divorce and death in the family. Make it a policy to have at least two members of management and in some cases a member of security present at the termination proceedings. Be ready for the proceedings, complete actions such as collecting keys, badges, parking permit, and company equipment. After the proceedings change passwords as necessary. Handle the process in a confidential manner and use multiple concurring opinions of members who are sensitive to the impact of terminations.

   When possible management should provide post employment and outplacement support after termination, this support may help relieve the emotions that are bound to be present during a termination. (Kelleher, 1996)

POST OFFICE PRACTICE: In the post office, when an individual is identified for termination, an investigative interview is performed by the supervisor of the person recommending the removal to determine if there is "just cause" to issue the removal. After he makes the "just cause" determination, a meeting is held to review his investigation, determine if anything was missed or if any department has information that

the immediate supervisor is not aware of. If the investigation validates the termination, an assessment is made to rate the potential (threat level) for in individual to react violently. Depending on the threat level, the termination proceedings would be conducted by Human Resources and may include officers from the postal inspector's office. Threat level assessment is detailed in the intervention evaluation section.

The amount of post employment support provided to an individual after termination varies with the person being terminated and the reason for the termination. Regardless of the reason, if a person is determined to be violent, it is unlikely that he/she would be allowed further access to the facility. However, if a person being terminated is considered non-threatening, use of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is authorized. The assistance offered is counseling for the family members and the employee.

EVALUATION: The Postal Service termination process is not entered into blindly. Unable to change the location in which to conduct a termination, the appropriate personnel will be invited during termination to ensure the safety of all meeting attendants. The Addition of the termination investigation should help to relieve some anxiety by giving a little assurance to the employee that personnel other than the immediate supervisor looked into the proceedings.

It is understandable that the post office would not provide outplacement support for disruptive and violent employees. But, in instances where employees are terminated through no fault of their own, the post office should provide limited job assistance functions in addition to counseling. The outplacement function would be a plus in

calming emotions associated with terminations. This section matches well with

recommendations.

<u>Evaluate the work environment</u>

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES: Solicit employee input; they are often in the best

position to provide valuable information because of daily contact with the work

environment. Cultivate this source of information; foster a climate that make employees

feel secure in offering suggestions, take all suggestion seriously and encourage input on a

continuous basis. Maintain employee interest by providing recognition of employee

participation and as well as giving credit for recommendations accepted. Employees

should feel as though they are a valued part of the company. (Kelleher, 1996)

POST OFFICE PRACTICE: The post office conducts a "Voice of the Employee" survey

every quarter. The Voice of the Employee survey results are intended to formulate policy

in the areas covered by the survey. Typical questions cover the employee opinion on

rating the USPS as a place to work, ability of management to communicate, value of

diversity in the workforce, quality of service, job safety, physical working conditions,

ideas and innovation, co-worker cooperation, recognition, training, accountability,

expectations, meeting goals, union and management labor climate, discrimination, and

sexual harassment.

EVALUATION: Conducting these surveys to identify workplace stressors is a

valuable tool. The frequency of the surveys provides the means to constantly query the

workforce for new ideas and complaints. However, employees are not afforded feedback

from the survey. This practice has the possibly of leaving them in the dark and may

make them apprehensive about completing future surveys. Employees like to know that

they have been heard. The surveys are now a cultural norm of the post office and should

be utilized as an additional means for two way communication between labor and

management.   The section matches well with recommendations.

Intervention Programs

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES: For a successful workplace violence prevention plan,

management should as a minimum address the following areas. Provide the means for

employees to maintain anonymity when reporting threats or filing complaints. Establish

a crisis response team to take charge during initial stages of crises. Establish a climate

where employees will know that seeking or being referred to medical and mental health

professional is non-punitive. Develop a plan of action to assess threats of violence to

accomplish the following goals: 1. Determine if someone is at risk to himself or others.

2. Determine the reason for the threatening or violent behavior. 3. Point toward a course

of action to resolve the problem. Develop and implement policies and procedures that

address violent behavior. Establish training programs to educate employees and

supervisors on policies against violence and how the reporting process work. (Kelleher,

1997; Braverman, 1999)

POST OFFICE PRACTICES: The post office established a local twenty-four hour

hotline that allows anonymity when reporting threats. All reported threats must be

evaluated by a threat assessment team and assigned a threat level within twenty-four

hours of the report. The threat level is determined by a threat assessment team using four

forms to collect information about the threat and threat maker. When the initial

assessment is complete, the team will have information from the initial intake of

information and a behavior risk profile of the person making the threat. This information

allows them to assign a risk or threat level. This threat level validates or invalidates the

report of threat.

The post office requires that all validated threats be investigated to a conclusion within

twenty-four hours after a threat assessment level is determined. The last form used by the

threat assessment team outlines the risk abatement plan to bring the process to

conclusion. Many resources are used when determining the proper abatement plan: a

review of personnel, medical, and disciplinary records as well as the input from the postal

inspection report.

The post office requirement is to complete the entire process (initial report of threat to

abatement plan) within forty-eight hours from receipt of threat.

A crisis response team provides for the care and support of victims and their families.

Victims in a crisis are not limited to personnel injured or killed. This includes anyone

feeling victimized by a violent incident. The crisis response team members are assigned

specific roles and responsibilities when dealing with a violent crisis and establish an

orderly return to normal operation. Homicide, assault, hostage taking and suicide are

examples of the crises they are trained to handle. Another important task for the team is

conducting debriefings as soon as possible after a violent incident. This information is used to evaluate the response and improve future responses.

The EAP continues to play an important function at the post office. The program has expanded over the years to include counseling for family members as well as being active in the violence prevention program. In this regard, current employees can be referred for counseling of a non-discipline nature if identified by fellow employees as displaying violent tendencies or actions. In an outreach role, the EAP addresses domestic abuse/violence through mailings to employee residences, in hopes that problems that can migrate to the workplace are addressed and resolved during their early stages.

Information sharing from within and outside of the postal service is accomplished whenever the information is available. They look for best practices from any sector to apply to the postal service. The University of Nevada at Las Vegas sponsor's a "Preventing Workplace Violence" seminar each spring and the local postal managers attend.

EVALUATION: An expanded counseling program at the Postal Service is a plus. The counseling covers many aspects. First, it is there to handle the needs of all employees at anytime, not just during a crisis. It's better to offer counseling now and hope that it averts a problem later. Second, fellow employees can report an individual that they believe is acting out of normal character and in a threatening manner. And third, the system offers counseling to employees that are violent or deemed so because of a threat assessment. Going beyond the bounds of the work place to address domestic violence shows a determination to not just wait for a problem to find the workplace.

The crisis response team deployment is right in line with recommendations from researchers experienced in the post violent incident workplace. The value in a positive reaction during and immediately following a crisis cannot be overstated, and a team dedicated to such a response is commendable.

Providing the means to allow employees to report problems or threats is an indispensable tool. The anonymity afforded by the local twenty-four hour hot line should allow more reports of threats since the person making the report will feel safe from retaliation. The events of September 11, 2001, caused a tremendous use of this tool to report any and everything. When dealing with reported threats, speed is of the essence in order to avoid escalation to a worst problem. The length of time set by the Postal Service to assess a threat to a conclusion is forty-eight hours. This amount of time fulfills the requirement for speed. The information collection worksheet used to conduct the assessment can be seen in appendix III. With this hot line method of receiving reports there is no need for a separate reporting systems that handles specific types of complaints. This is one-step reporting.

The Post office looking outside for best practices and other lessons learned speaks to the commitment the Post office has to improving the product of prevention. Changing to meet challenges is the name of the game.

The post office intervention plan matches well with recommendation. Looking to other sources for best practices is a plus that shows commitment to improvement.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICE: Change the current method of supervisor/employee interaction by training the entire workforce. Supervisors should be trained to change from an autocratic supervisory style. This style of supervision is most present in organizations that experienced high incidences of workplace violence. Enhance interpersonal skills for all employees to instill better understanding and to improve listening skills. Teach employees how to recognize and respond to threats. Provide conflict resolution training to encourage constructive means to deal with stressful situations. Educate the workforce on new policies dealing with workplace violence and to know the consequences of violating the zero tolerance policy. (Kelleher, 1996)

POST OFFICE PRACTICE: Consultants are used as needed to provide training to supervisors and employees on any topic deemed necessary. Example, if a complaint or threat is received from a particular office, a counselor is sent to that office to provide an educational stand-up talk as appropriate. The subjects are wide ranging and include conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, and how to spot violent tendencies. On a required basis all employees receive training about hostile work environment, under the heading of sexual harassment. Managers and supervisors must also attend a four-hour course on hostile work environments. Employees are given a series of stand up talks throughout the year approximately every month. The stand-ups last about fifteen minutes in length.   Mandatory information briefings are conducted weekly to cover subjects on

anything from changes in automation to safety to performance evaluations. Supervisors are required to provide the information to employees not in attendance.

Information regarding policies on violence and policies addressing sexual or any type of harassment are posted on bulletin boards located in well-known places and sent to all offices. The posting of information includes national policies and information of local interest.

EVALUATION: The multiple methods of information delivery used by the Postal Service enhance policy awareness. Posting policies in well known places and not keeping them tucked away and inaccessible except for management, helps to keep policies fresh in everyone's mind. Promoting a more educated and aware workforce with improved interpersonal skills can lead the Postal Service to a future workforce better able to resist the potential for violence.

The continued use of consultants to provide training as needed is well intentioned. The continued training can negate the potential for loss knowledge due to high turnover in personnel. However, since the emphasis is on prevention, it may be better to use proactive rather than reactive training. For instance, instead of scheduling the training in response to a problem, schedule the training on a recurring basis.

<u>Security Measures</u>

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES: Identify potential threats, vulnerabilities. Develop and implement a security plan. Educate the workforce on the security plan. (Kelleher, 1996)

POST OFFICE PRACTICE: In response to a prior violent incident the postal station made the following changes.   The traffic flow in facility parking lots was changed to a one-way flow through pattern. The postal station implemented a smart identification badge system that electronically allows access to controlled areas such as employee parking and parts of buildings. Access to the building is now restricted to only parts of the first floor for non-badge wearing unescorted visitors. All visitors to the administration section are required to check in at the personnel office before conducting business. Because of the new restrictions, a visitor cannot conduct business without a badge or an escort.

EVALUATION: The steps taken by the post office fulfils the recommendation to provide reasonable protection for the workforce and without hindering the customer.

   Security systems much like fire alarm systems should be periodically tested. All too often employees grow accustomed to the security environment and undermine their own security. For this reason, unannounced non-punitive security exercises to test employee's awareness and security system integrity should be conducted. The main focus of the test should be to keep everyone focused on security.

CONCLUSION

If the Las Vegas Valley Postal Service can be equated to the rest of the government or the private business, we should be relieved that workplace violence mitigation is doing well. However, one cannot generalize or conclude that incidents of workplace violence are being properly attended to throughout the United States or throughout the Postal Service using one case study.

The Las Vegas Valley Postal Service has made giant strides in the effort to reduce the potential for future workplace violence. The interest in violence prevention is evident from the highest level of management. My meeting with the postmaster and later my interview with personnel from the workplace improvement office lead me to believe that senior management at the postal station is committed to changes required to reduce the potential for violence and relieve employee fears of violence.

Programs and procedures put in place to reduce the potential for workplace violence parallel those recommendations suggested by various researchers. All elements of the basic structure needed to develop an effective workplace violence prevention plan were utilized in its plan. The security enhancements are designed with protection of the employee in mind as well as the one step threat reporting hotline that assures anonymity. The postal station has the necessary resources and the will to combat the potential for future workplace violence; specifically it conducts climate assessments, provides constant training, rotates personnel at the workplace improvement office to keep fresh people on board, and makes counseling available for all employees.

At the onset of this project, I had no reason to believe that the post office would change its policy to address workplace violence, change the mindset of how it handles people, or engage in intervention efforts. The agency was large had been around for a while and I expected them to dig-in and hold their ground against the media and everyone else looking their way. I have to admit that I was pleasantly surprised at the level of commitment displayed by the post office as it addresses workplace violence.

Recommendation

With an emphasis on violence prevention, the post office should offer limited outplacement service for employees terminated through no fault of their own. This practice if adopted may further reduce the potential for a violent event stemming from the termination process which is known to evoke emotional stress.

Currently there is no feedback to the employees who completed the Voice of the Employee survey. This practice keeps the employee in the dark and may make them apprehensive about completing surveys in earnest there by reducing the effectiveness of the surveys. This is from the principal that people like to know that they have been heard.

Security systems are only as effective as its weakest component. In most cases that is the human component. I recommend conducting periodic locally managed no-notice non-punitive checks to test employee awareness and response with the emphasis being, keeping the workforce security aware.

In spite of the above recommendation, I highly recommend that the postal service's Las Vegas valley program be evaluated by agencies or business interested in establishing an effective shield against workplace violence. There is no program that can guarantee a one hundred percent safe work environment, however, this program offers a good chance at achieving a safer work environment and peace of mind for employees.

Additional Research

I recommend additional research to assess employee satisfaction with the level of response that the Postal Service has provided to date to relieve their concern of workplace violence. Independent feedback can be a valuable tool to ensure workplace violence prevention programs continue to be successful. In addition, the success of this program in other postal districts should be studied to investigate the uniformity of success of the Postal Service's program.

Elements of Violence Prevention Strategies

Officer and directors

- Determine management style, encouraging empathetic management skills.
- Foster a supportive, harmonious work environment.
- Establish the company's position on violence.
- Promote a clear anti-violence corporate policy.
- Display strong commitment against violence including the establishment of a telephone hotline to report a suspicious situation.
- Develop and enforce standards of employment.
- Develop effective policies to protect employees from harassment.
- Establish reporting mechanisms through the company.
- Maintain effective grievance, security, and harassment policies.
- Provide effective security.
- Respond quickly to each incident of violence or harassment.
- Allow employees adequate control in how they do their work, and be supportive of employees.

Personnel Managers

- Closely examine hiring practices.
- Hire selectively or pre-screen applications for behavioral abnormality.
- Screen new employees: specifically check previous employment references.
- Avoid keeping employees on payroll if they are negligent with assigned responsibilities.
- Terminate with care.
- Establish termination policies and procedures.
- Address employee grievances when they arise.
- Offer employee assistance programs to help employees locate confidential counseling services for financial, legal, personal, or emotional problems.

Human resources specialist

- Analyze the work environment.
- Develop staff training program for personal safety as well as the safety of others.
- Develop incident reporting procedures.

- Train managers in interpersonal skills.
- Train supervisors to identify possible perpetrator and educate supervisors about prevention techniques.
- Train supervisors and employees in methods to resolve interpersonal conflicts.
- Train supervisor on how to recognize signs of a troubled employee.
- Train all supervisory personnel in communication and human relation skills.
- Promote harmony in work groups, and encourage teamwork and supportiveness among co-workers.
- Improve interpersonal relationships and effective prevention programs.
- Make sure all employees know that all threats, verbal and physical, will be reported to management.
- Provide personal counseling for laid-off/fired employees.

Loss prevention specialists

- Set up a contingency plan detailing how the company will respond during and after a violent occurrence.
- Increase security measures such as improved interior/exterior lighting, alarms around the premises, interior and exterior surveillance cameras, establishment of restricted areas, door control, and security guards.
- Cooperate with local police to patrol premises.
- Have employees move vehicles closer to the building if they are staying after usual work hours.
- Implement security program, such as self-defense training, and policies that protect employees. Provide employee safety education programs.
- Minimize cash on premises.
- Develop a violence prevention program.
- Adopt a threat of violence notification system.
- Establish a crisis management plan.
- Be courteous with customers and maintain eye contact.
- Establish a threat management team that reports directly to top management each time an incident occurs.
- Cashiers in retail establishments should remain within a bulletproof enclosure.
- Identify effective defense responsibilities;
    - Take responsibility for personal safety.
    - Take no unnecessary risk.
    - Seeks ways to avoid events that could become explosive.
    - Look critically at employment and workplace situations.
    - Recognize that there is a potential for violence.
    - Be prepared with a safety plan.
    - Assess the plan and evaluate each step of the plan.
    - Communicate information concerning violent acts or threats.

Key Personnel Interview
Lead In

1. Would you please give me an overview of the workplace violence program major features?

2. I'm sure that you are aware that researchers have recommended or suggested many strategies for mitigating workplace violence. I would like to see which ones you may have used.

Postal Service Key Personnel Interview
Primary topics

1. Does the postal service have an initial employment screening process that attempt to identify applicants with a violent background?

    Yes_____   No_____

    If yes, how does the process work?

    If no, why not?

2. Are policies against sexual harassment and other harassment posted throughout the facility?

    Yes_____   No_____

    If yes, Where?

    If no, why not?

3. Does the postal service have a conflict resolution program among employees?

    Yes_____   No____

    If yes, how does the program work?

    If no, why not?

4. Are there any changes in the grievance process as a result of concerns about workplace violence?

    Yes_____   No_____

    If yes, please explain the changes?

    If no, why not?

5. Does the postal service provide or encourage intervention-prevention programs?

    Yes_____   No_____

    If yes, how do they work?

    If no, why not?

6. Is there a program in place designed to provide early identification of current workers prone to violence?

       Yes_____   No_____

       If yes, how inclusive is the program?

       If no, why not?

7. Is there a workplace violence aftermath debriefing program?

       Yes_____   No_____

       If yes, who conducts the debriefing?   If no, why not?

8. Is there a plan to provide counseling in the event of a violent episode?

       Yes_____   No_____

       If yes, who is included in the plan?

       If no, why not?

9. Is there a program to assess workplace stressors?

       Yes_____   No_____

       If yes, how often is used?

       If no, why not?

10. Is there a system in place to deal with and eliminate workplace stressors?

       Yes_____   No_____

       If yes, how does this process work?

       If no, why not?

11. Is there a program to identify abusive supervisors and when appropriate, counsel, discipline, transfer, train, or terminate them?

       Yes_____   No_____

If yes, how does the reporting process work?

If no, why not?

12. Is there an education program designed to educate employees on how to recognize violent tendencies in themselves and others and where and how to seek help?

Yes_____   No____

If yes, is the program mandatory?

If no, why not?

13. Is there a central location or person that allow for anonymously reporting threatening behavior in the workplace?

Yes_____   No____

If yes, how it works?

If no, why not?

14. Is there a program to provide appropriate and supportive outplacement counseling for soon to be terminated employees?

Yes_____   No_____

If yes, how do you go about it?

If no, why not?

15. In light of the last publicized violent episode in or outside of the postal service, what changes have been made in regards to dealing with personnel issues?

Increased security?   Yes____   No____
                                                 If yes, how much?

                                                 If no, why not?
Change in counseling?   Yes____   No____
                                                 If yes, what are the changes?

                                                 If no, why not?
Increased workforce   Yes____   No____

If yes, how much change?

If no, why not?

Increased downward communication?   Yes____   No____

If yes, how was this done?

If no, why not?

16. Do you participate in information sharing with others inside/outside your industry regarding incidents of violence and best practice?

Yes____   No____

If yes, who and how often?

If no, why not?

17. Do you feel that any station in the valley is at risk for a violent episode?

Yes____   No_____

If yes, why do believe that?

If no, why don't you think so?

18. Are all new or modified programs for personnel communicated to the workers?

Yes_____   No_____

If yes, how are changes communicated?

If no, why not?

SEE ORIGINAL TEXT FOR APPENDIX III

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