Assessing Individuals for Likelihood of Workplace Violence

By Bruce Blythe

There are no methods that can completely and accurately predict which specific employees are going to become violent in the workplace, and which ones will not. However, the guidelines in this article provide important and defensible considerations for assessing the *likelihood* of workplace violence. These recommendations will help the employer/organization determine the extent of "controls" to put in place to deal with a potentially violent situation.

10 Methods to Determine: Who is most likely to Become Violent?

1. **Only 36% of workplace assailants commit suicide**. **This means that 64% aren't suicidal enough to kill themselves following their violent acts**. Furthermore, most people who *are* suicidal are *not* homicidal, especially in the workplace. As a result, while the suicide paradigm is worthy of assessment consideration, it is not an accurate or unilateral predictor of intended workplace violence.

2. **Standardized psychological tests are not reliable or valid tools for predicting which persons will be violent**. The capability simply doesn't exist to pick the "needle out of the haystack" through psychological tests and fitness-for-duty exams. Tests like the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) can tell if someone is depressed, having bizarre thoughts, and trending toward sociopathic tendencies.

However, such tests will *not* predict who is going to become violent. For one thing, in most cases someone who is enraged enough to become violent in the workplace would *not* be willing to cooperate with a psychological/psychiatric exam. This means that other methods need to be incorporated.

3. **Assessment of potential violence needs to consider the psychological makeup and behavioral tendencies of the threatening person**. Questions about anger problems, sense of entitlement, depression, and/or suicide are important. Does the person engage in poor judgment, perseverate about violent methods to resolve a personal issue, or exhibit negative coping skills? Substance abuse is often correlated with violent offenders.

Paranoia, delusions, and bipolar disorder are commonly found among individuals who engaged in severe workplace violence. This is *not* to say that all people with mental health problems are violent – rather, that it *can* be a contributing factor. Isolation, non-communication, and social withdrawal are additional factors that correlate with workplace violence.

Certainly, a history of violence is the best predictor of future violence, especially if the person felt positively reinforced or empowered by previous acts of violence. This includes domestic violence. Has a sufficient criminal background check been conducted in a manner that is allowed by the organization? The more recent the acts of violence, the more pertinent it becomes. Do the harassment, bullying, threats, intimidation, verbal and/or physical abuse, sense of entitlement, insubordination, isolation and other potential prerequisites to serious workplace violence appear to be progressive or increasingly problematic?

4. **Assessment of potential violence should also include "context" and the evolving situation**. Typically, a good starting point is to understand that potentially violent and threatening individuals almost always feel unfairly treated. Are there job problems, especially insubordination? Does the individual overly identify with his/her job position? What is the perceived severity of unjust treatment? How long has the person endured the undesired situation?

Moreover, have there been serious losses in the individual's life, e.g., divorce, bankruptcy, loss (or anticipated loss) of job, serious health issues, etc.? What has the individual tried in order to resolve the provoking situation? What are the motives for justifying a potentially violent resolution? What could be changed in the environment to defuse potential violence?

5. **Threats and communications of violent intent/desires are often exhibited before workplace violence is perpetrated**. In addition to overt threats and communications of intent, it is important to talk with anyone who may have knowledge about an individual's comments, written content, or non-verbal actions that would indicate potential workplace violence. Bear in mind that informants may resist providing information about threatening behavior due to fear or a culture of never "turning in" a union buddy or co-worker.

Informants must first understand they are not being investigated. The interrogator must also explain *how* the information will be used, and *if* the

information provided will remain confidential or anonymous. Skilled interviewers, like former FBI agents, are capable of getting valuable information from informants, but it has to be conducted in a proper manner.

6. **Premeditated acts of violence in the workplace involve visualization of retribution by the potential perpetrator**. What thoughts of vengeance is the individual rehearsing in his/her mind? What plans does the individual have for carrying out the mental visualizations of retribution? How would the individual reasonably carry it out?

While the rest of us walk away mad and finally resolve perceived injustices through socially acceptable methods, an individual who is going to become violent in the workplace *plans* how they will carry out the retribution and *prepares* with the resources and knowledge necessary to commit the violent act. Stalking or target planning is not uncommon. Does the person have access to the targeted individual(s) and capability to utilize the

Speaking Up is Crucial

Beyond ensuring for safe facilities (lighting, secure entrances, alarms, surveillance cameras, etc.), the two most important preventive measures are: establishing procedures for preventing and responding to risks and routinely encouraging people to speak up when they have concerns about others' conduct and potential threats to safety.

Encouraging people to speak up about safety concerns cannot be overemphasized. I am reminded of a tragic murder-suicide that happened at the University of Washington in 2007. The female victim, an employee there, had expressed concerns to staff and friends that her ex-boyfriend was stalking her and had threatened her life, but none of those concerns were reported to human resources.

Following the incident, the vice president of HR stated in an interview that had the concerns been reported, any number of steps could have been taken to reduce the risks: changing the victim's phone number, relocating her office to another place on campus, increasing patrols and providing a security escort, etc.

So if people aren't talking about violence issues at your workplace, you still could have a problem. Don't kid yourself. It's time to encourage people to speak up. According to Allied Barton Security Services, "Creating a corporate culture that promotes, *'If you see something, say something'* can have lifesaving consequences." ■

intended weapon(s) of choice? Does the individual have a concealed weapon permit and/or registered weapons, especially assault rifles?

7. Communication is one of the best methods for assessing and defusing threatening individuals. Beyond the confidential responsibility of EAP, a threat assessment/defusing professional should be positioned as a "conduit of information." In this role, the intervening professional would serve to hear and understand the threatening individual's concerns and pass this information back to the employer. Once this alignment is properly established, a wealth of threat assessment information can be garnered and defusing strategies implemented.

8. When people talk about sensitive topics such as intended (or bluffed) workplace violence, the words they use become very important in threat assessment. Skilled linguistic analysts can determine with amazing accuracy:
- When the threatening individual is being deceptive;
- Where important information is being left out; and
- What additional inquiry is needed?

Linguistic analysis is an important tool for assessing workplace violence potential. If threats or concerning references to workplace violence are made, what are the *exact* words the individual used? Words spoken and written can be key indicators of intent.

9. Threat assessment should be balanced. What are the "red flag" indicators that signify likelihood for a violent response? Also, threat assessment should include the inhibitors that would indicate the individual will *not* be violent. By looking at both sides of the equation, i.e. red flags and inhibitors, a more accurate and defensible assessment of violence potential can be determined.

10. The final consideration pertains to people who know or have had contact with the threatening individual. A key indicator of intended workplace violence is to assess the "gut level feeling" about violent propensities from people familiar with the threatening individual. Do people in the workplace (or others) feel afraid or intimidated by the individual? Does the EA professional, management or employees have an intuitive sense that the individual is someone who could become violent in the workplace or elsewhere?

Following workplace violence shootings, it is interesting to hear co-workers and others who knew the perpetrator say, *"I just knew he/she was going to do something like this."* Listen to the intuitive voice that says: *"This seems like the needle-in-the-haystack person who is fully capable of perpetrating serious workplace violence."* As a rule, when this occurs, talk it over with at least one person that is deemed appropriate to help in a constructive manner.

Summary

I wish to help reduce a company's exposure to chaos and threat, by teaching them to analyze foreseeable risks and create a master plan for crisis response. These are lessons that until recently may have seemed merely interesting. Now they have become essential. (**Editor's note**: This is a brief excerpt from Bruce Blythe's book, *Blindsided*. See below for more information.)

Disclaimer

This article is not intended to be construed as legal advice, but is provided as an overview of good business practices. No written material can ever take the place of prudent judgment and decision-making. Remember that the ultimate decision in handling any threat of violence situation naturally rests with the management of the companies/organizations that retain the EAP. Utilize professionals with appropriate expertise to assist, when appropriate. ∎

*Bruce Blythe is an internationally acclaimed crisis management expert and author of "Blindsided: A Manager's Guide to Catastrophic Incidents in the Workplace." **Editor's note**: A version of this story, "Assessing Individuals for Workplace Violence Propensity" was published by the PAS Employee Assistance Program and is re-used with permission of the author.*

Brown Bagger HANDOUT
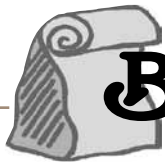
More about Workplace Violence

Workplace violence is violence or the threat of violence against workers. It can occur at or outside the workplace and can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide, one of the leading causes of job-related deaths. However it manifests itself, workplace violence is a growing concern for employers and employees nationwide.

Who is Vulnerable?

Some 2 million American workers are victims of workplace violence each year. Workplace violence can strike anywhere, and *no one is immune*. Some workers, however, are at increased risk. They include: those who exchange money with the public; deliver passengers, goods or services; or work alone or in small groups, during late night or early morning hours, in high-crime areas, or in community settings and homes where they have extensive contact with the public. This group includes health care and social service workers, probation officers, utility employees, letter carriers, retail workers, and taxi drivers.

What can Employers Do?

The best protection employers can offer is to establish a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence against (or by) their employees. The employer should establish a workplace violence prevention program or incorporate the information into an existing accident prevention program, employee handbook, or manual of standard operating procedures. The following is a summary of the types of areas a program or handbook should cover:

❖ Provide safety education for employees so they know what conduct is not acceptable, what to do if they witness or are subjected to workplace violence, and how to protect themselves.

❖ Secure the workplace. Where appropriate, install video surveillance, extra lighting, and alarm systems and minimize access by outsiders through identification badges, electronic keys, and guards.

❖ Provide drop safes to minimize the amount of cash on hand. Keep a minimal amount of cash in registers during evenings and late-night hours.

❖ Equip field staff with cell phones and hand-held alarms, and require them to prepare a daily work plan and keep a contact person informed of their location throughout the day.

❖ Instruct employees not to enter any location where they feel unsafe. Introduce a "buddy system" or provide police assistance in potentially dangerous situations or at night.

❖ Encourage employees to report and log all incidents and threats of workplace violence.

❖ Report violent incidents to the local police promptly.

❖ Inform victims of their legal right to prosecute perpetrators.

❖ Discuss the circumstances of the incident with staff members. Encourage employees to share information about ways to avoid similar situations in the future.

❖ Offer stress debriefing sessions and post-traumatic counseling services to help workers recover from a violent incident.

❖ Discuss any changes to the workplace violence prevention program that may be needed in regular employee meetings. ■

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration.