

Introduction

Aggression and Violence at Work

Is it really that bad?

When I first became involved in this field, I carried a presumption that much of the publicity about the increased violence and danger in our society (and in our workplace in particular) was at least to some degree a product of media attention. I assumed that like many of our social “maladies of the day,” the proverbial grain of truth lay buried under a great deal of media-driven sensationalism. After all, hardly a week goes by that we are not subjected to some tragic account of the “disgruntled” employee who has decided to randomly inflict a horrific toll in his or her workplace—a toll that takes the lives of some and forever changes the lives of others.

On the other hand, it has been equally clear that considering that we are an otherwise civilized, stable, and affluent society, we have always been a comparatively violent one. That is hardly in doubt, and is well documented. The United States has one of the highest reported homicide rates in the industrialized world, a rate 10 times higher than England and 25 times higher than Spain. And based on my and others’ subjective experiences, our culture appears to be becoming increasingly contentious and less “well-

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mannered,” for lack of a better term.

The reasons for this level of violence are much debated and unfortunately so dependent on one’s political, philosophical, or religious agenda, that it is difficult to maintain a reasonable discourse on the subject. Here we will take the coward’s way out and not even attempt to address the question of the root causes of American violence. That is another book, and a subject that—when all is said and done—may only serve to get in our way.

Even with those assumptions, I still initially presumed that much of the actual aggression that occurred in the workplace more than likely simply consisted of the byproducts of the common conflicts that are always part and parcel of human relationships—in addition perhaps to a few well-publicized incidents at the post office.

However, after years of working as a consulting psychologist in the general area of threat assessment and what we have come to term “critical incident management,” I am continually and increasingly astounded by the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, and I have come to the conclusion that it is not over-sensationalized. In fact, I believe that this phenomenon is essentially *under-reported*.

On a regular basis, my colleagues and I are privy to events that are *alarming* in terms of their potential for disastrous results—events that have the potential for explosive consequences if left unmanaged. Perhaps many of them would have resolved themselves without harm, but the costs of inaction, given the possible consequences, can be overwhelming.

The tip of the proverbial iceberg

When consulting with a company regarding a particular individual or issue, we will initially interview supervisors, human resources representatives, and other members of management, as part of the investigative or planning process. More often than not, we will discover in this process, *other* events and *other* individuals that have created a very serious (sometimes unspoken) level of concern for some of the organization’s managers, but have somehow not yet risen to a critical level, sufficient to trigger an

active response. By the end of the day, we often find ourselves discussing these *other* employees instead of the subject of the original referral, because they had come to actually represent an even greater level of concern.

These may be employees who have always raised a manager's anxiety, but decisions were postponed or avoided because managers either were unaware that there were available options, or perhaps preferred the delusion of "safety" that delay and avoidance offer. The discussion itself breaks through that rather normal pattern of denial, and when the tips of these icebergs are explored, we often find a situation with all the ingredients of a potentially explosive situation—a fuse waiting to be lit.

We will likewise sometimes interview the peers and coworkers of the subject employee, for the purpose of gaining additional information. In the course of these interviews, we will uncover *yet again* other employees of concern who had not come to the attention of anyone in management. These employees will inform us in no uncertain terms that while our designated employee may certainly be a problem, there are *others* who produce an even *greater* degree of fear among their coworkers. These are often individuals whom many in the workforce—even the toughest "machos" on the line—have learned to avoid, for fear of the possible consequences. Remarkably, these individuals may have been engaging in threatening behaviors for years without coming to the attention of management—even their immediate supervisors.

Finally, when we present our training workshops on the issue of workplace violence, there is inevitably a waiting group of administrative, human resources, and/or security managers after the presentation, anxious to discuss ongoing incidents of concern, sometimes with an urgent request for consultation that "can't wait."

This rather consistent pattern underscores not only the prevalence of the problem, but also the relative lack of known options. The result is that little or no action has been taken to address cases that were literally waiting in the wings, postponed for fear of the possible consequences. These managers have often

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Further, a threat exists within a broader, situational context that needs to be similarly understood, in order for the risks to be adequately managed.

Making vs. posing a threat

Certainly, not all people who make threats carry them out. In fact, it is safe to say that most people who make threats do *not* actually carry them out. Conversely, not all who commit a violent act warn us first. While we are interested in any kind of threatening statement, we are far more interested in hearing about individuals who—for whatever reason—*pose* a threat, as opposed to just those individuals who *make* a threat. In other words, whether someone actually said something or did something that has been determined as a “threat” is less important than if others perceive the person as a threat.

We have responded to many reported threats, in which subsequent investigations have revealed that those who work with this individual have long experienced a vague, indefinable dread or anxiety in their interactions with the subject. They have felt threatened, even without specific identifiable reason. It is often conceivable that they were acting on some sort of cumulative data that may not have been entirely conscious.

If a company receives these kinds of reports, it certainly does not confirm that the individual is indeed dangerous, or even suggest that the organization should respond in any particular manner. In fact, these feelings and reports may be entirely unfounded and/or based on other agendas or prejudices. However, the organization should investigate and arrive at a decision as to whether any kind of action is necessary, as opposed to automatically dismissing them as perhaps groundless or not worthy of review.

The Threat Response Team

The first thing that has to happen when someone reports a potentially threatening set of circumstances is to make certain that this information is quickly and effectively routed to the

individual or individuals within the company who are responsible for the company's response. This will be generally spelled out by the company's policy.

Preferably, one individual or a team is responsible for coordinating and planning the company's response to a perceived threat. Almost all of the experts in this field have concurred that the establishment of a "threat response team" (or "risk management team" or "crisis response team") is the most effective vehicle to coordinate and plan this process.

This process truly works better through a multi-disciplinary approach. Utilization of a trained *team* allows for a "meeting of the minds" in which different individuals with different roles within the organization can each analyze the problem from their operational perspective, and can be available to challenge each other's ideas and proposals. We have been involved in many situations in which we have arrived at a relatively well-considered response plan only to discover through a question or insight of one of the team members that we had overlooked a critical variable that would have adversely affected the outcome. This process simply works better when it is a team effort, and generally an interdisciplinary one. These team members will serve as the company's specialists, and should be trained accordingly.

The organization's response team would be ideally responsible for coordinating all aspects of the company's workplace violence program. This would include:

1. Reviewing the organization's policy.
2. Developing a Threat Response Plan.
3. Ensuring that employees, particularly critical personnel, are aware of their respective responsibilities.
4. Establishing and maintaining an effective reporting process.
5. Investigating reported incidents.
6. Managing incidents when and after they occur.
7. Overseeing the company's overall prevention program.

The members of the team may vary. It is typically suggested that the core team consist of representatives from security/risk management, legal, and human resources, but this depends on the organization's structure. Other permanent members may include (but are not limited to) someone from management, a member of the company's occupational health or medical team, and a consulting psychologist who specializes in threat assessment.

It is generally not recommended that a representative from the company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) serve as a member of this team. Employees must view EAPs as a confidential resource, and the organization therefore should not jeopardize the credibility of that program. The organization's goals would generally be better served if the EAP remains as a potential option, as part of the resulting management plan.

In order to function adequately, this team should undergo a training process, as proposed in the last chapter, in order to clarify their roles, understand the threat response process, and discuss response options. Generally, it is the team's responsibility to review the company's policy and prevention program and to develop a compatible response process. The team should establish a protocol for response to critical incidents that defines the documentation and communication process.

While the team should meet on a regular basis, once the initial development process is completed, these meetings do not necessarily have to be that frequent. And not all team members need to be actively involved in every incident. A coordinator, or team leader, may have the option and the responsibility to enlist the help of particular team members as required. Regardless, there does need to be a designated process, to ensure that all members are aware of reported incidents and subsequent decisions, and have the chance to provide input.

Initiating the Threat Response Process

Few companies are organized in such a way that they naturally have the resources and skills to respond to these relatively

low-frequency but high-risk events. Without a response team and a response plan in place, the organization can be quickly overwhelmed. Without an organized and deliberate approach, rushed, panic-driven decisions can be made that may actually increase and complicate the risks.

This process usually occurs under a great deal of pressure to respond quickly. There are generally some very real limitations, in terms of available time and resources. Good decision-making involving critical issues of safety have to be balanced with the need to come to decisions relatively quickly, and often with limited data. A trained response team, operating with an understanding of the appropriate protocol, and with access to the required resources, is better able to keep these concerns in balance and manage the situation safely.

It is not the purpose of this volume to train the threat response team or to offer a detailed review of the threat assessment and management process. While this book is offered as a general guide to organizations, it cannot also serve as a menu for the threat response process. There is no substitute for having a workplace violence program in place that includes a trained team, with access to available specialists. Each and every situation offers a different and generally unique framework of factors that need to be understood before they can be adequately managed. What I will present is an outline of the process as it generally occurs, but the reader should keep in mind that this is a *fluid* process that has to adapt and respond to the dynamics of the given situation.

A guiding principle throughout this process is to *not over-respond and create a greater risk*. While decisions may have to be made quickly, careful planning is critical. Time spent gathering information, in order to formulate a safe plan of approach, is generally time well spent. It will be always important to proceed carefully and in a stepwise manner. Any response or decision to intervene in any manner, even if just to interview particular individuals, should be carefully considered in light of any potential consequences that could serve to increase the risk to a member of the organization. Any response or decision should err on the side of caution and represent the least intrusive or

when the employee loses a job that may have represented the “pinnacle” of his or her success. These separated employees may come to a realization (which may be accurate) that they are not likely to find a position that is as rewarding as what they have enjoyed in the past, financially or in terms of their perceived status. The loss is doubled in that they are not only subjected to the shame of being terminated, but their new position represents a demotion of sorts.

Many grow to rely on their relationships within the company as their *primary* relationships, and may refer to the organization as their “family.” This identification certainly may have served to benefit the company during their period of employment, but a price for this loyalty is paid at termination. Separating these employees takes on the emotional crisis of any major, unwanted family separation—one of several reasons that interest in the employee’s support system is often a critical part of the threat assessment process during these events.

Separating High-Risk Employees

All of the above being said, there are certain employees who raise special concerns, beyond the ordinary—concerns that this employee will react in an inappropriate, rage-filled, or retaliatory manner. This is particularly the case when abusive or bullying employees are finally confronted and terminated. The end result is the apprehension that everyone has always experienced around this individual—the fear that has been at the root of the company’s prior avoidance of any kind of adverse action.

Sometimes our concerns are difficult to define and may even be dismissed as just a “gut feeling,” subsequently convincing ourselves that we are “overreacting” with no clear evidence to support a legitimate concern. Sometimes, the company terminates employees in which the concerns are not so much about their immediate emotional reaction, as there are concerns about a more fundamental social or character disturbance—that this individual may have the means, personality, and motivation to strategically

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plan and carry out an act of revenge.

There are a variety of scenarios that can be assumed under the heading of a “high-risk” termination, which can give a manager pause. It is imperative that the management do just that: *pause ...* before proceeding into a potentially inflammatory process.

Proceeding with caution

We have already discussed the common error of denying or avoiding problems that we do not wish to confront, and many terminations may be long overdue for that reason. However, even with these employees, the organization must be on guard against the *second most common error* (after denial and avoidance): the error of *acting too hastily*, in an effort to make the problem quickly “go away.” Separating an employee identified as potentially at risk without a careful review invites a potential cavalcade of disastrous events that one cannot undo.

The separation process is usually the employer’s last chance to effectively interact with this particular individual, and further, to adequately assess and understand some of the important issues that are involved, particularly ones that are related to the potential for violence. It is also the last opportunity to influence the situation in a preventative or proactive manner.

Once the termination occurs, the company no longer has a relationship with this employee and certainly has little in the way of leverage. The just-separated ex-employee is hardly one who is motivated to engage in a dialogue, and will reject any attempt at a relationship, other than one that springs from his or her immediate, more reactive needs. The person will be defensive and hurt, and may be emotionally destabilized—certainly not inclined to become engaged in a cooperative problem-solving process with the organization. Further, the organization would be ill-advised to engage in any process that continues to reinforce a relationship, for obvious reasons.

Engaging with an ex-employee in order to assess or somehow accomplish an intervention is always problematic. Many times, the damage is done and the employee is hurt, angry, and hardly inclined to communicate with the employer or its consultants, as

there exist no recognizable incentives to do so. In more urgent scenarios, we may have a situation that is rapidly destabilizing, with no safeguards or contingency plans in place.

Pause... Assess... Confer... Plan

The first rule of thumb in any termination is to take a breath and not rush into it. Before we begin the separation process with a potentially high-risk employee, we have to make certain that we have completed an assessment that addresses our concerns to the greatest degree possible, and to our satisfaction. If we decide to wait until after the termination, we have relatively few options or leverage to assess or influence or monitor a situation that may quickly destabilize.

The value of simply taking a pause and conferencing with others cannot be overstated. This, once again, appears to run contrary to a rather typical, almost instinctual response that many of us have witnessed: the desire to drive this to a quick conclusion. It appears to be motivated by a desire to simply rid ourselves of this disagreeable, potentially dangerous person, as if sending him or her packing will truly end the problem.

If the employer has concerns about a particular employee, the first step would be to assemble whatever information is available, and to conference with those personnel who are responsible for making decisions in high-risk situations. A manager may want to first confer with a peer, to help verbalize, clarify, and confirm any concerns. Through this communication process, management will arrive at a clearer idea of some of the critical issues, both internal and external to the organization, which may not be initially apparent.

It is often remarkable how well the denial process works. When first consulted regarding a particular case, there is often an initial apology of sorts, with the company's representative alluding to a relatively minor problem that is "probably no big deal." However, once the manager begins presenting the evidence (which generally is of greater quantity than anyone in the room initially realized), there is suddenly a recognition that was not there before—that this is indeed a situation that *could be*

from outside the organization, as previously discussed in relation to domestic issues.

I am not referring here to more random acts of violence that are committed by those who do not have a relationship with or who are not previously known to the organization, such as an act of violence committed during a robbery, for example. Our focus here represents a basic overview of predatory behavior that is directed toward members of the organization as part of a perceived relationship.

This chapter also includes a discussion on stalking, which is a particular (but not rare) set of behaviors. While stalking is often more driven by affective factors, it nevertheless involves some of the same focused and purposeful aspects of predatory behavior, such that effective management requires similar considerations.

The basic assessment and management model offered within this volume is not altered in these circumstances, but there are several elements that should be considered and emphasized when encountering these kinds of behaviors, as will be discussed. A team-oriented approach as previously described that carefully considers the ramifications of all decisions is even more critical in these instances.

Affective vs. Predatory Violence

As noted above, most of the aggression that we encounter in the workplace is *affective*, that is to say that there is a significant emotional and reactive component. *Predatory* violence, as defined here, is significantly different, in that it is generally more planned and purposeful, and less driven by primary emotional needs.

Any kind of labeling or categorization always runs the risk of over-simplifying and dichotomizing behavior that falls—more often than not—on a continuum. We often cannot completely separate acts of violence into either affective or predatory. What is most important for our purposes is the degree to which the behavior is predatory in nature, which will affect the way we manage the situation. Aggression that is primarily affective or

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Stalking and Predatory Behaviors In the Workplace

Up to this point, we have more often focused on violence that is generally *internal* to the organization (that is, perpetrated by the employee), with threats and/or behaviors in which there is a strong *affective* or emotional component, related to an identifiable source of stress. While there may be a range of stressors (including events external to the organization), there is generally an internal triggering event or central issue that has angered the subject. This emphasis is not without reason, as this is what represents most of the aggressive behavior that generally comes to our attention.

The workplace however, is not immune to violence and aggression of the more predatory type, when an individual is motivated by more sinister, goal-oriented, and egocentric motives. Individuals with chronically maladaptive social and personality disorders are more prevalent in this category, plus our concerns may be focused on aggressive behaviors that are more planned, purposeful, and prolonged in nature. Concerns about manipulation and deception may be more central, thereby complicating the work of the company's threat management team. The workplace is also not immune to violence that is perpetrated by someone

emotionally driven may have certain predatory elements, and many incidents of primarily predatory violence may involve significant emotionality. For a more detailed description of the difference between these two categories, read Meloy's (2000) review of the subject. (See Bibliography for details.)

Affective violence generally refers to that which is accompanied by anger, fear, or any intense emotion or combination of emotions. Generally, the individuals who threaten or commit this kind of violence themselves feel threatened and are highly aroused. Their behavior is designed essentially to remove or reduce the threat that they are internally experiencing, and they are operating in a relatively defensive mode. Affective violence is usually time-limited and is generally temporarily connected to a perceived threat or object of concern. With individuals who are in the midst of committing this kind of aggressive act, we generally witness signs of increased autonomic arousal, in that their face may be flushed, they are heavily perspiring, their muscles are tensed, and so forth. We usually see these people coming. They present signs and symptoms that we can often identify before the violence occurs.

Predatory violence on the other hand, refers to generally planned or purposeful violence that is carried out with less emotion. The individual is generally focused on his or her target and may actually act long after a triggering event. The perpetrator is often thoughtful and deceptive and very focused on his or her goal—a goal that may be related to internal dynamics (i.e., delusions) that are not always obvious. These acts of violence may be carefully planned, to fulfill the subject's private agenda.

The Psychopathic Personality

When speaking of predatory violence, we often encounter what psychologists and psychiatrists refer to as “personality (or characterological) disorders,” and more specifically, those disorders that reflect a disturbed capacity to develop and maintain relationships. Predominant in this category is the *antisocial*