

# WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: A Clarification

Successful companies recognize secure working environments make good business sense B economically, socially, and morally. They dedicate human resource (HR), safety, and security resources to reduce hazards to employees and to respond to major and minor emergencies. From time to time, however, cultural conditions create or alter threats to employee safety to the degree that additional guidance for the application of those resources becomes necessary. HR and security managers must always be assured of the accuracy and effectiveness of that guidance. Sadly, treatment of workplace violence has not fostered assurance. Rather, media treatment of workplace violence tends towards the dramatic, and clouds the important issues facing members of the contemporary business community. A refocusing is in order.

Competent security professionals will explain that originally workplace violence identified physical misbehavior, ranging from heated arguments to homicide, occurring between co-workers at their place of employment. Recent published reports on workplace violence have attracted attention to this cultural condition wanting an immediate and appropriate response. However, media focus on recent isolated outrages within that context has inspired expansion of the phenomenon to unwieldy proportion. A sensible approach to controlling workplace violence calls for its redefinition and a division of security measures related to prevention of, and response to, physical conflicts at places of employment.

First, a return to the original concept of workplace violence as that occurring between co-workers at work (intra-company) is in order. The broader definition fostered by the media coverage of extrinsic physical threats to employees, including irate customers and clients, should be considered in the context of everyday crime, and not necessarily within the spectrum of issues considered by security practitioners looking to prevent violence in the workplace. Response to crime is a hard security issue because little opportunity is available for resolving the problem with proactive counseling or management intervention. Prevention and response must take the form of physical preparation (good lighting, controlled access, ID badges, combination locks, video cameras and monitors, or even executive protection), and of appropriate forceful reaction (restraint, investigation, and arrest by security and law enforcement personnel). Of course hard security efforts crossover to prevention and response to workplace violence with the nature of controlling devices and security staff monitoring.

We can properly describe workplace violence as a soft security issue because as a human relations problem it can most often be resolved through proactive HR involvement, such as thorough background checks prior to employment, separation of individuals with strong personality conflicts, counseling, and strong management involvement immediately following complaints or other indications. Business-related conflict between employees and clients or customers can be considered soft as a security issue, because it too is somewhat proactively manageable through proper employee training with respect to handling complaints and business disputes.

Now, with a focused definition of workplace violence, HR managers and directors of security can thoroughly and reasonably address the issue from a knowledgeable point of view. Workplace violence is any physical assault, menacing behavior or verbal abuse occurring in the work setting between co-workers. This can range from verbal threats to physical attacks to attempted or committed murders. Co-workers are current or former employees, supervisors, or managers. Workplace may be any location either permanent or temporary where employees perform work-related duties within the limits of company buildings and perimeter, parking lots, and field locations. If we include client offices, homes, and traveling to and from work assignments, we enter the area of total crime and accident prevention and establish impossible expectations.

Within this context we can reasonably profile offenders remembering that violence is a process as well as an act. It is the product of the interaction among three factors: the individual, a stimulus or triggering mechanism, and a setting. Applicable statistics have shown the following characteristics of workplace violence (as redefined) offenders:

- (Usually) white, male, age 25 - 50
- Demonstrating low self esteem
- Considered a loner
- Fascinated with weapons
- Historically violent
- Indicates paranoia and delusions and unable to appropriately release frustrations
- Profoundly narcissistic
- Described as "sour" by co-workers
- Interpretive of everyday events in an idiosyncratic and pernicious way
- Consider themselves perpetual victims of injustice
- Controlling & demanding
- Tend to make co-workers uncomfortable
- Devotees of conspiracy theories
- Prone to multiple gun ownership
- File one grievance after another
- Harbor persistent and inappropriate anger
- Belong to fringe right-wing, antigovernment or racist political groups
- Make cryptic statements
- Task rather than people oriented
- Humorless
- May have a minor criminal record
- May have a history of drug/alcohol abuse
- Suffers what is for him/her a profound humiliation or rejection (latent issues can surface after several years.)
- May have suffered a trauma that leaves him/her feeling completely helpless
- May appear increasingly anxious or depressed
- Personality traits take a distinctive turn for the worse

Among the general categories of causes of workplace violence, obvious examples include:

- Corporate downsizing, lay-offs, and firings
- Internal disputes and personality conflicts
- Disciplinary issues
- Labor related issues
- Drug/alcohol related issues

General means to remedy workplace violence begin with the establishment of company policies and procedures based on a survey of past experiences and existing company cultural conditions. HR and security departments must work together with management to adopt threat management and response plans for appropriately dealing with all degrees of misbehavior. Intensified HR pre-employment screening helps identify and exclude individuals who may add to the problem.

The adoption of a zero-tolerance policy, meaning simply that no threat or indication of violent behavior will be ignored, is a good starting point for employee education and training on the issue. Personnel awareness is the key to any employee-related security issue, and reporting of all incidents of violence must be assured. Preventive measures can include a no-weapons policy, drug & alcohol testing, and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) programs (administrated means to mediate and quell disagreements).

Implementation of additional hard and soft security measures derived from threat identification and response plans and aimed at intra-company circumstances complement the effort.

This mere outline of workplace violence remedies should convince those who would dissipate the issue that we must concentrate our efforts in structured, manageable contexts to effectively treat the social maladies we face. And we can cure more than one malady at a time if we clearly distinguish their composition.