



# Loss Control Insight

Preventing Violence in the Workplace

Few would argue that over the past ten years, occupational violence has become a serious problem facing workers and employers alike.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), nearly 7000 workers were victims of homicide in the workplace during the period of 1980 to 1989. Among female employees, homicide was the number one cause of death. In 1992, five states and the District of Columbia reported that homicide was the leading cause of occupational deaths for all employees, men or women.

If on average, 700 workers died each year in the 1980s, how many others must have been victims of non-lethal attacks? Northwestern National Life reported that more than 2 million Americans, or 15 percent, were victims of physical attacks at the workplace during 1992. Eighteen percent were attacked with a deadly weapon. Other experts believe these figures to be too conservative since they may not take into account acts of violence committed outside, but originating inside, the workplace.

Clearly, something must be done. Employees not only deserve a safe work environment, several states mandate it. Labor attorneys recognize that employers may be exposing their corporations to potentially costly litigations if there is no Workplace Violence Prevention Program and executives are being made aware of the enormous costs associated with incidents involving occupational violence.

Three questions deserve closer examination: Why the increase in workplace related violence? How does an incident involving occupational violence affect a business economically? And what can be done to avoid violence in the workplace?

## **The Growth of Occupational Violence**

Incidents of work related violence were virtually unheard of until the 1970s. Since then, it has more than tripled. As companies down-size, reorganize, reengineer, and demand more of each employee, stress levels increase to the breaking point, causing work related violence to escalate.

Most experts agree that social issues, especially substance abuse, illegal drugs, layoffs, and poverty are major contributors to occupational violence. The ease with which guns can be obtained, excessive graphic violence on TV and in movies, language and ethnic differences among workers, and the general acceptance of violence as a form of communication by a large segment of our population are other causes frequently cited by those closely associated with this problem.

## **The Economics of Violence**

Top management is just now starting to recognize the enormity of the financial consequences associated with an incident involving workplace violence. The three most affected areas are costly litigations, lost productivity, and damage control. Research conducted by the Workplace Violence Research Institute (WVRI) revealed that multiple law suits were filed against the employer in each instance where the act resulted in deaths or injuries. The causes for the litigations involving acts of violence by employees are generally negligent hiring and negligent retention. Since most cases are settled out of court, accurate average costs are not known. There are, however, several recent awards in excess of 3 million dollars, including the \$4.25 million awarded on December 3, 1993 to a postal employee shot by a co-worker in Dearborn, Michigan.

Lost productivity following an incident is frequently underestimated. Losses in productivity occur throughout the enterprise with decreases of up to 80 percent for up to two weeks immediately after the incident. Losses are caused by the unavailability of the killed or injured worker, work interruptions caused by police and internal

security investigations and damage to the facility, time lost by surviving employees talking about the incident and the details leading up to it, decreased efficiency and productivity due to post-traumatic stress syndrome, and time spent by employees in counseling sessions.

Every company surveyed by the WVRI which had a workplace violence related incident reported a dramatic increase in employee turnover and an equally dramatic drop in employee morale. Among the many reasons cited for these changes is the fact that most individuals readily accept responsibility for their own safety and security at home. However, almost all employees feel that it is the employer's duty to provide a safe work environment. Therefore, employees feel betrayed when a violent incident occurs at work. The direct financial consequences of turn-over and low morale are hiring and training expenditures and decreased productivity.

Damage control has both tangible and intangible cost factors. Media accounts of the incident, whether accurate or not, and rumors that always follow, may influence the buying decisions of the firm's customers. Restoring the corporation's reputation following charges of incompetent or irresponsible management may require a major commitment of both human and financial resources.

### **Protecting Workers from Violence**

The final question is: What can be done to avoid occupational violence? The answer is not so much what should be done but what must be done. Since proven methods exist to reduce workplace violence, every company has a responsibility to implement a Workplace Violence Prevention Program. Not to do so exposes employees to unnecessary risks and may well violate labor laws in some states.

There is, of course, no one solution for all acts of work related violence. In some cases, such as hold-ups of jewelry, liquor, and fast-food stores, traditional security measures must be implemented. However, those incidents that most people now call "workplace violence" and which involve present or former employees, clients, and customers (including applicants for welfare or unemployment) require the efforts of a committee comprised of representatives of various departments. Depending on the size and complexity of the company, the Executive Committee charged with implementing and administering the Workplace Violence Prevention Program may include Human Resources, Employee Assistance, Legal Counsel, Medical, Risk Management, Security/Loss Control, Plant Management, and Union Leadership.

However, for a program with such a diversity of participants to succeed, two prerequisites have to be met. One, the program must have the support and endorsement of top management. This could be evidenced by a letter from the chairman, president, or CEO to all employees and a separate memorandum to all affected department heads mandating their personal participation. Two, the chairperson of the committee should either be an executive higher than the participating department heads or an experienced consultant approved by senior management.

### **How the Executive Committee Functions**

The committee must first agree on the program's mission and objectives. Committee members must realize that some tasks can only be achieved through inter-departmental cooperative efforts. Next, the committee should draft company policies, procedures, and regulations for approval by senior management. Employees should have a clear understanding of management's position on drug and alcohol use, sexual harassment, threats, intimidation, violence, minimum standards of conduct, dress, and language, etc. There should also be a clear statement regarding items that are prohibited on company property, including parking areas. This of course would include all types of firearms, switchblades and knives with a blade in excess of a defined length. It may also include chains and baseball bats.

The committee must be aware of the three primary opportunities to prevent workplace violence: At the time an employee is hired, when he is terminated, and through employee education.

### **New Hire Practices**

Proper screening procedures during the hiring process will keep potentially dangerous individuals out of the work force. These procedures should include a clear warning to all applicants that the enterprise conducts thorough background investigations of all new employees and requires a signed waiver to allow the company access to criminal, drivers, employment, financial, military, and other appropriate records. In addition, all prospective employees should be warned that they are subject to random drug and alcohol testing and that failing the test is reason for immediate dismissal.

Being made aware of policy, many would-be applicants never complete their application forms. Human resources or security department personnel should carefully check each item on the application. Repeated studies have shown that up to 42 percent of applications contain intentional misstatements of material facts. They include inflated employment periods to hide jobs with unsatisfactory performance, termination for cause (theft, fighting, insubordination), or time spent in jail. Frequently, applicants list non-existent undergraduate and graduate degrees and exaggerate their position descriptions and accomplishments.

It is true that it is increasingly difficult to get meaningful performance and conduct information from a former employer. Frequently, a personal visit to the applicant's former place of employment will bring more successful results, especially if they are provided with a copy of the waiver signed by the employee.

References furnished by the applicant rarely have negative comments. They should, however, be used to obtain names of other people who are familiar with the applicant. These individuals and others whose names will be furnished by them will probably give you the information needed to make a meaningful evaluation.

"Reading" criminal and motor vehicle records may require some assistance from a security practitioner, private investigator, or police officer. A "reckless driving" conviction may be a reduced charge of driving under the influence of illegal drugs or alcohol. Petty larceny could be a plea-bargained charge of grand theft.

Finally, each applicant should be interviewed individually by two responsible members of the company's staff at different times. This provides another opportunity to question and obtain concurring opinions on the suitability of the applicant.

## **Firing Procedures**

To reduce the possibility of violence resulting from a termination, policies and procedures should be designed to assist those responsible for carrying out this task. Although procedures may vary depending on the type of business, the following items should be considered:

- Terminate at the beginning or the end of the shift.
- Do not allow the employee to return to his/her work area.
- Make the firing a statement of fact, not a discussion or debate.
- The act of termination and all associated paperwork and other activities including counseling and/or out placement, should take place in the same locale.
- The terminated employee's dignity must be preserved.
- Post-termination communications should be future-oriented.
- If a violent reaction can be reasonably anticipated, brief the security department and ask them to stand by.

## **VIOLENCE PRONE BEHAVIOR**

Research of over 200 incidents of workplace violence revealed that in each case, the suspect exhibited multiple pre-incident indicators that included the following symptoms:

- Increased use of alcohol and/or illegal drugs
- Unexplained increase in absenteeism

- Noticeable decrease in attention to appearance and hygiene
- Depression and withdrawal
- Explosive outbursts of anger or rage without provocation
- Threatens or verbally abuses co-workers and supervisors
- Repeated comments that indicate suicidal tendencies
- Frequent, vague physical complaints
- Noticeably unstable emotional responses
- Behavior which is suspect of paranoia
- Preoccupation with previous incidents of violence
- Increased mood swings
- Has a plan to "solve all problems"
- Resistance and over-reaction to changes in procedures Increase of unsolicited comments about firearms and other dangerous weapons
- Empathy with individuals committing violence
- Repeated violations of company policies
- Fascination with violent and/or sexually explicit movies or publications
- Escalation of domestic problems
- Large withdrawals from or closing his/her account in the company's credit union.

During post-incident investigations, employees and co-workers in each case stated that they observed one or more of these symptoms but considered them insignificant or just "weird" behavior. Unfortunately, these employees had not been briefed in symptom recognition of potentially violent behavior, nor given instructions on how to report such information.

### **Employee Education**

Probably the most effective way to identify and thus have the opportunity to correctly deal with a potentially violent employee, client, or customer is through employee education and the adoption of a "Confidential Information Collection and Evaluation Center" (CICEC).

Additionally, without seminars or workshops, most employees feel that bringing odd behavior to the attention of the company constitutes a form of "ratting" or informing on their co-workers. Not until the system is explained to them in a training session do they realize that reporting such potentially dangerous behavior is in the best interest of all, including the offender. Only if management is aware can they take appropriate actions, including counseling for the troubled employee.

The most effective vehicle to deal with the identification, collection, and evaluation of workplace violence related information is the CICEC. Employees are given a toll-free, 24-hour, "800" telephone number to report suspect behavior by a co-worker, client, or customer. Once an employee files such a report, he or she is issued a personal identification number (PIN) to assure continued anonymity and asked to call back at the end of the next business day. The information is then checked against other information previously received on the same individual. The evaluator, an expert on occupational violence, will brief members of the Executive Committee and make recommendations concerning appropriate actions that should be taken. The requested call-back by the reporting employee gives the evaluator the opportunity to obtain clarification or additional information.

To be effective, all employees must have complete trust in the integrity and confidentiality of the CICEC. For this reason, only very large corporations should have this function in-house. Others may select a well-established, reputable outside firm to handle this task.

Of the hundreds of inquiries that are received each week by the Workplace Violence Research Institute, none is more pervasive than the question: What is the profile of the individual who commits acts of violence in the workplace?

It is true that commonalities exist among the offenders of past workplace violence and that these characteristics will probably appear in future suspects. However, it would be a grave mistake to disregard suspected symptoms simply because the individual does not fit the description of the "profile."

Following are some of the commonalities identified in offenders of workplace related violence:

- White male, 35 to 45 years of age
- Migratory job history
- Loner with little or no family or social support
- Chronically disgruntled
- Externalizes blame; rarely accepts responsibility for things gone wrong
- Takes criticism poorly
- Identifies with violence
- More than a casual user of drugs and/or alcohol
- Keen interest in firearms and other dangerous weapons

There is no indication that the social and other issues that are believed to be the underlying causes for the dramatic increase in occupational violence will change in the near future. On the contrary, experts believe that violence as a form of communication and conflict resolution will continue to increase. Fortunately, answers and methods for addressing the problem are now available.

There simply is no good reason for a business, large or small, not to have a Workplace Violence Prevention Program in place. It protects the employees, avoids costly litigations, preserves the company's reputation, improves the bottom line, but most of all is morally and ethically the right thing to do. After all, everybody who earns a living has a right to a safe and secure work environment.