Workplace violence: Impact, causes, and prevention

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Received 15 February 2010
Accepted 6 August 2010

Abstract. Objectives: Using a variety of sources, the author explores the complex reasons for aggression and violence in workplace settings, as well as suggesting means of prevention and intervention. Methods: Literature Review. Results: Studies indicate workplace violence affects more than half of U.S. organizations, yet nearly 70 percent have no programs or policies to deal with this problem. Research indicates that aggressive behavior of a psychological nature often precedes physical violence in the workforce, yet employers regularly ignore warning signs even when reported by employees. Costs to U.S. employers are estimated in the millions due to employee absences, medical costs, theft, and costs related to litigation. Conclusions: Organizations with cultures which support fair working conditions and zero-tolerance for workplace aggression have been shown to help mitigate workplace violence.

Keywords: Organizational conflict, aggression, conflict resolution

1. Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006), half of all organizations with 1,000 employees or more reported an incident of violence in the workplace in 2005 [18]. The U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration reports homicide “is the fourth-leading cause of fatal occupational injury in the United States” [20]. Still, nearly seventy percent of workplaces in 2005 did not have a formal program or policy to deal with workplace violence [18].

Workplace aggression is defined as “any behavior initiated by employees that is intended to harm another individual in their organization or the organization itself” [2, p. 672]. Violence can include aggressive behavior of either a psychological or physical nature [5]. Importantly, workplace violence perpetrated by employees is often preceded by acts of psychological aggression which offer warning signs if heeded [11].

While the study of violence is a well-established field, the area of workplace aggression and violence research only began within the past fifteen years [2]. The field often distinguishes between aggressive behavior in the workplace and violence. Whereas all violent behavior is aggressive, not all aggression is physically violent [2]. In fact, “the majority of incidents of violence are not lethal attacks but habitual incidents of fighting, verbal threats, and harassment” [11, p. 14]. Study of aggressive behavior of a psychological nature includes acts of incivility, harassment, intimidation, sexual harassment, bullying (sometimes referred to as mobbing), isolation, insubordination, and theft.
Further differentiation includes the source of violence in the workplace. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) distinguishes four sources of violence on the job: criminal, customer or client, co-worker, and domestic or personal violence. Criminal violence in the workplace is perpetrated during the commission of a crime, such as a robbery. Customer or client violence occurs when someone doing business with the organization causes harm to its employees. Domestic or personal violence occurs when someone know to a worker, such as a partner or spouse, enters the workplace to cause harm to the worker. Violence occurring between workers or perpetrated by one worker against another is referred to as co-worker violence. While the majority of aggressive and violent incidents on the job come from co-workers (34%), customer or client violence is nearly as prevalent (28%), and domestic violence accounts for almost a fourth of all on the job violence [18]. As might be expected, criminal violence accounts for the smallest percentage of incidence however it is the deadliest, accounting for up to 85 percent of murders on the job [10].

Workplace aggression and violence affect all sectors of the workforce to varying degrees. The emotional, physical, and financial impact of such acts is far-reaching. By understanding the causes of such violence, employers can institute policies and programs to prevent workplace violence and to deal with incidents of internal and external sources of violence more effectively should they occur.

This paper explores the impact of workplace violence, its causes, and means of prevention. For purposes of this paper, the definition of violence will include both psychological aggression and physical acts, as both cause harm to workers and organizations. However, the focus of this paper will be limited to co-worker violence.

2. Impact of workplace violence

The highest cost of workplace violence is its toll on the human resources of the organization. Employees who experience workplace aggression, such as bullying and harassment, have an increased likelihood of physical and mental health issues including insomnia, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal symptoms, insecurity, crying spells, weight loss, depression, increased use of alcohol, and in severe cases suicide [3,16,17]. Even more devastating, an average of more than ten U.S. private industry workers per week lost their lives in 2007 due to workplace violence [19]. All forms of violence, including harassment, bullying and acts of physical violence, impact not only the worker directly affected, but co-workers who witness such incidents.

The financial fallout for employers is immeasurable. The cost of workplace violence has been compared to that of sexual harassment, "because incivility and sexual harassment often have similar characteristics when looking at time, productivity, and turnover" (pp. 215-216) [1]. The EEOC reported in 1999 that the average cost of sexual harassment for a Fortune 500 company was $6.7 million per year [1,21]. Of the 53 percent of workers who were targeted for minor aggression by co-workers, studied by the University of North Carolina, 37 percent were less committed to their job and 22 percent decreased their work effort [14]. Harassment is cited as the reason one third of people leave their jobs [3]. While the cost of employee turnover is unique to the organization, estimates run as high as 38 to 76 percent of the annual wages of the employee leaving to fill a position [13].

Employee aggression toward the organization itself can be particularly costly. As an expression of frustration and anger, employees have sabotaged employers by purposely decreasing quality and productivity, damaging equipment, and stealing goods or property [14]. Studies have indicated that theft is perpetrated by up to two-thirds of all employees at some time, with unhappy employees being more likely to steal [14]. Costs to organizations include loss of product and productivity. Litigation is of particular concern to organizations in matters of workplace violence. Most employees are protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act for cases of sexual harassment and discrimination. Bullying, other forms or harassment, physical assault, and murder in the workplace may constitute an occupational hazard or negligence on the part of the employer to provide a safe work environment [8,9,11,24]. In one dramatic example an employee of Deutsche Bank, in a 2006 British case, was awarded nearly $1.75 million in damages for "psychological injury" sustained as the result of "persistent bullying by co-workers" [12, p. 79].

3. Causes of workplace violence

There are a diverse array of causes contributing to workplace violence including negative affect, anger, and poor emotional control on the part of the perpetrator; alcohol use; job stress; role conflict; abusive super-


vision; poor leadership; and, rarely, mental illness [2, 4, 8, 11]. Two causes in particular appear to lead to a greater likelihood of workplace aggression and escalation to violence – sustained negative external attribution on the part of the perpetrator and a lack of organizational responsiveness to workplace violence. The two often work symbiotically. A workplace which tolerates poor leadership, abuse among workers, and lacks policies and procedures for dealing with aggression creates an environment for resentment and negative attribution on the part of the worker. This in no way excuses acts of aggression or physical violence in the workplace. Rather, it highlights that employers can take steps to decrease or, in many instances, eliminate workplace aggression and violence [2].

Attribution refers to the process individuals go through in order to make sense of their environment and what is happening to them. Individuals, based upon their personal and cultural perspective, interpret organizational events and behave based upon these interpretations [14]. Numerous studies indicate, those who act aggressively and violently in the workplace do so as a result of negative external attribution, which can occur as the result of a single event or over time [2, 4, 14]. In other words, an employee who is angry or dissatisfied over a perceived injustice attributes the cause of his or her feelings to an external source such as a co-worker, supervisor, or the organization in general. Those who lack an internal locus of control, are unable to reflect and consider appropriate choices related to negative feelings which are triggered [4, 14].

As more experiences of frustration occur, the employee internally lists reasons to be angry and act inappropriately toward his or her co-worker, supervisor, or organization, thus increasing the likelihood of aggression. For a great majority of workers who perpetrate violence in the workplace, there is a pattern of anger and external attribution which has occurred over time until a triggering event precipitates the violent action [2, 4]. Aggression tends to be less intense following a single event and more intense following a series of incidents, particularly when the initial perceived injustice was paired with anger on the part of the perpetrator [4, 14]. The perpetrator perpetrates minor acts of aggression which escalate over time, diminishing the employee’s guilt and increasing his or her comfort with each successive act [14]. When an act of physical violence does occur, the perpetrator feels morally “justified” in his or her action and has often spent considerable time planning for how he or she will carry out the act against a specific target [2, 4, 23].

While it is possible, it is less likely that negative attribution will escalate in a work environment with zero-tolerance for aggression and violence. Unfortunately, many workplace environments do tolerate aggression either through ignorance or outright approval [8, 11]. For example, many supervisors ignore employee complaints about an aggressive event or the employee’s fear of violence or retribution [1, 8, 11, 12, 14]. Additionally, some workplace cultures encourage autocratic management styles which increase the likelihood of resentment and aggression amongst the workforce. Rigid rules, micromanagement, public humiliation of workers, and lack of support have all been shown to increase aggression and violence in the workplace [3, 11, 14, 22]. For example, while many people assume layoffs or job dismissal increase the incidence of violence it is actually how such circumstances are handled which predict a violent event [2].

4. Prevention

Prevention of workplace aggression and violence first and foremost requires the creation and sustenance of a positive work culture where people are treated with respect by management and co-workers, where good work is recognized, and where conflict is effectively dealt with as it arises. This involves a dedicated systemic approach which includes development of policies and procedures; effective communication, training, and enforcement; and an ongoing effort to analyze and evaluate the workplace environment [2, 4, 7, 8, 12, 11, 14, 22].

However, if an organization already has a culture which tolerates or encourages aggression, change will require commitment to a sustained cultural transformation effort, often involving outside assistance, and may require replacement of leadership who are unwilling to change. Those organizations which ignore warning signs and only prepare for crisis management are at the greatest risk for workplace violence to occur [11]. If for no other reason than the exposure of litigation, organizations should take the need to deal with aggression and violence in the workplace seriously before it happens [11].

4.1. Assessment

Organizations have existing cultures. Therefore, benchmarking is a necessary approach to deal with aggression in a way that will sustain lasting change. A
system-wide evaluation of norms and values can reveal organizational culture and subculture which may need to be reformed [12]. If the organization is large enough to have a human resources and/or organizational development staff, they may be able to design and conduct an internal cultural assessment survey. There are also numerous consulting firms who can be contracted with to carry out an “attitude/climate survey” [22]. One advantage of using an outside source is their status as a neutral third party, allowing them to lead focus groups where honest dialogue can take place.

It is also important if there are current policies and procedures in place regarding workplace aggression (i.e. harassment, bullying) and/or violence, that testing of employees regarding their awareness of such policies take place. In studying universities with workplace violence policies, only slightly more than half of the faculty and librarians surveyed were aware such a policy existed [7]. However, those who did know about the policy were more likely to report incidents, thereby creating a safer environment.

An A-B-C analysis can be used by supervisors after an incidence of aggression has occurred. “In this model, an antecedent (A) is a stimulus which precedes [or triggers] a behavior (B). A consequence (C) is an event that follows a given behavior” [8, p. 153]. The A-B-C analysis can be a useful tool in determining the kinds of events and behaviors which are currently taking place to develop policies to better address them as they occur. It might also be used after a policy is in place to assess a reported incident and determine the appropriate response.

Finally, to assess current dangers, two tools can be used – a post-employment Behavioral Observation Plan (BOP) and a Dangerousness Assessment [22]. Using the BOP, a supervisor makes notations on a form of any observed changes in employee behavior. These forms are then sent to an outside organization where they are analyzed. If merited, a confidential referral can then be made to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Dangerousness Assessments include all staff and are formal psychological evaluations conducted by a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist from an outside company [22]. Legal and privacy concerns may come into play with either tool, particularly with the psychological evaluation, so a review of regulations is needed prior to conducting any assessment [22].

4.2. Policies and procedures

An audit of workplace policies should be conducted to determine the measures currently in place to deal with aggressive acts and violence [7,11]. The primary policy should be one of zero-tolerance for acts of aggression in the workplace [22]. Definition of workplace aggression, a system for reporting it, and clearly identified consequences for those who perpetrate such acts should be written [22]. A number of steps including ongoing monitoring of internal communication, training employees, onsite management supervision, incentives for positive employee behavior, positive company values which are regularly communicated, and consistent application of formal discipline are suggested [11]. It is also important to have a procedure for employee dismissal, when needed, which minimizes the likelihood of aggression [22].

Further, policies must extend beyond the area of aggression and violence. Fairness in hiring practices, compensation and evaluation can help prevent violence in the workplace. Equally important is the opportunity for workers to have a direct say in issues which affect them [22]. When employees are provided with a just and supportive work environment including a means to honestly address frustration, the likelihood of aggression and violence go down [14].

Hiring and orientation policies can help ensure new employees fit with the organizational culture and garner their support for zero-tolerance policies. This is particularly important when hiring management who set the tone for the workplace [22]. While proper screening is important, there are mixed results as to its effectiveness and even the legality of certain methods [2,4,24]. However, unexplained significant gaps in employment history and use of alcohol and drugs are warning signs which can generally be easily screened [24].

It is important to have policies and procedures in place to handle violence should it erupt. Ensuring proper security and controlling access to the premises are basic steps [6,7]. However for small businesses or open environments, such as college campuses, this may not be entirely possible. Establishment of an internal crisis management team allows pre-planning which can limit injuries and fatalities if an employee becomes violent or a violent perpetrator enters the premises [6,22]. Rooms should be equipped with a first aid kit including gauze, thermal blanket, a flashlight, a diagram of the building, a grease pencil and luminous tape [6]. The first aid kit and blanket can be used to assist an injured co-worker. The diagram can be used to assist emergency workers in locating the perpetrator and victims, while flashlights can be used to signal, and grease pencil and luminous tape can be used in windows to mark locations [6]. Additionally, practice scenarios should
be regularly conducted, similar to fire drills, to ensure everyone is prepared in case of emergency [6,22].

In addition to a good plan, policies, and training, employers should also have adequate insurance coverage in the unfortunate circumstance that violence does occur on their premises. As noted earlier, injured employees and their families may sue the employer for damages. Insurance can be used in the cost of litigation defense and to pay settlements or awards [9].

4.3. Training

New employee orientation allows development of a zero-tolerance culture from day one. Beyond helping new hires understand policies regarding acceptable behavior and procedures for handling and reporting workplace aggression, such training should include means for dealing with it effectively. Training should make transparent the external negative attribution process and highlight the systems the organization has in place for employees experiencing frustration [4,7,14]. Systems to report workplace frustrations, opportunities to vent (such as staff meetings), chances to make organizational change (such as suggestion processes and advancement from within), and EAP should each be explored and explained. Likewise, reward systems and other systems which create and support a positive work environment should be highlighted.

On-going training can support new hires and existing employees. Mandatory training in empathy, anger management, proper communication, conflict management, and emotional intelligence reinforce the creation of a healthy environment [4,7,14]. Particularly for management it is important to provide training to predict, prevent, and react to aggression [2,22].

4.4. Enforcement and on-going assessment

Organizational policies and procedures must be strictly followed and enforced, because attributions occur over time [14]. Enforcement must always be conducted in a respectful, non-punitive manner [14]. “A supervisor showing respect for an employee’s feelings while enforcing these procedures will help minimize the employee’s sense of injustice. Conversely, frustration could be heightened if the employee is upset not only at an outcome (e.g. negative feedback from a supervisor), but also at the process (e.g. inaccurately labeling the employee incompetent when poor results were due to extraneous circumstances or rudely dealing with an employee when giving corrective actions)” (p. 388) [14]. Clearly written policies which are understood and regularly communicated to employees help make enforcement matter of fact. The use of “persuasive arguments” are the most effective way of dealing with aggressors [4]. This would include presenting new information, building positive peer pressure for “pro-social” behavior, and “encouraging the self-generation of beliefs that counter the initial attitude” [4, pp. 443–444]. Working with the employee, the supervisor can also assist the individual in understanding any negative external attribution which took place prior to the incident, thereby reinforcing self-awareness and promoting emotional self-control [14].

Managers primary tools are positive reinforcement, empowering employees to use the systems which are in place, encouraging workers to draw on their training, and offering further training and skill-building where needed [8]. Performance reviews offer an occasion to assess with the employee areas of strength and opportunities for growth. Reviews can also be used to gather information about internal systems’ effectiveness for handling workplace aggression and violence [3].

Periodic internal review and reassessment of the environment is needed to maintain a positive work environment. Exit interviews often provide an unvarnished source of information about the culture of the organization [3]. Information regarding recent changes in the workplace environment and issues which might affect security could come to light [24].

5. Conclusion

While half of organizations with one thousand employees or more have experienced violence in the workplace, less than half have programs or policies in place to deal with this serious problem [18]. Employees experience psychological and physical harm as a result of workplace aggression. Further, it is estimated that violence, including psychological aggression, costs U.S. employers millions of dollars each year in lost productivity, product, and the cost of litigation [1,3,16,17,19,21].

Addressing the root causes of aggression and violence in the workplace would need to start early in life. Children would need to be taught to identify their emotions, learn they can control their emotions, and make choices about how best to deal with them in a non-aggressive way. When a society learns these lessons, bullying and other forms of aggression will not only decrease in schools, but in society in general including the
workplace. Due to outliers such as rare forms of mental illness, the use of aggression producing drugs, and other anomalies, aggression and violence at some level will continue. Nevertheless, a societal commitment to the eradication of aggression and violence wherever possible, would greatly lessen its occurrence.

Measures must be instituted within the U.S. workforce now in order to diminish the likelihood of violence and to deal with those instances in which it occurs. An unfortunate recurring theme of the research is that victims of workplace aggression tend to be ignored or placated by those they report it to [1, 8, 11, 12, 14]. Research shows, violent episodes often occur after a period of time where the perpetrator has exhibited warning signs [2, 4, 11]. Such ignorance of remedy on the part of employers sets the stage for greater incidence of violence in the workplace. Likewise, setting expectations is especially important in reducing its occurrence. Letting the workforce and clients served know aggression and violence will not be tolerated serves not only as a deterrent, but also as a means of establishing a culture of peace. Further, instituting programs which reward peace-developing behavior fosters civility, care and empathy in the workplace.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Sam E. Baroni, Ph.D., NOVA Southeastern University, for her assistance in developing the concept for this paper and her encouragement in researching, writing, and publishing its content.

References
