VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE:
CAN IT BE STOPPED?

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By Christopher T. Marquet

Yesterday morning's tragedy in Manchester, Connecticut, where eight people were killed by an apparently disgruntled employee at a local beer distributorship before he turned the gun on himself, underscores the omnipresent threat of violence in the workplace. According to published reports, 34-year-old Omar Thornton, who had recently been hired as a union driver for the distributorship, was at a disciplinary hearing with local union officials and co-workers when he opened fired with a handgun, killing 7 and wounding 3. Thornton then fatally shot himself. One of the wounded later died at the hospital. At the disciplinary hearing, Thornton reportedly had been offered the choice of quitting or being fired after he was confronted with video evidence that he had stolen beer on more than one occasion from the distributorship. There are also reports that Thornton, who is African-American, had claimed that he was a victim of racial discrimination.

According to Department of Justice statistics, approximately 800 murders occur each year in the workplace. While many of those murders are committed during robberies, an estimated 75 percent of the incidents involve co-workers, supervisors, disgruntled employees, former employees, estranged significant others, vendors, customers and clients.

What can a prudent organization do to mitigate this risk?

Clearly, it is impossible to completely prevent threats and violent incidents from occurring in the workplace. However, a comprehensive program for organizations of all sizes can significantly reduce the threat and help employers become better prepared to respond to incidents when they occur. Such a program incorporates elements of prevention, detection and response.

Prevention & Detection

Contrary to popular belief, most workplace rampages are not caused by someone who "just snapped." There are often behavioral clues prior to the violence. Some of these include threatening statements made by the perpetrator or significant lifestyle changes. All employees, especially managers and HR personnel, should be trained to spot the signs

of potentially violent individuals and circumstances. Most perpetrators of violence in the workplace possess what we have determined to be typical characteristics for violent employees. These include: males over 35 years of age; prior history of violence; chronically disgruntled; inconsistent employment history; loner with little or no family support; former military or police; excessive interest in weapons; difficulty accepting authority or criticism; substance abuse problems; and mental health problems. The training of employees and managers should also include such elements as aggression management, conflict resolution, listening and communications skills and the identification of "red flag" warning signs. While the investigation of Omar Thornton is ongoing, Michael "Mucko" McDermott, a disgruntled programmer who killed 7 co-workers at Edgewater Technologies in Woburn, Mass a decade ago, exhibited at least six of these characteristics. McDermott had also made threatening statements to co-workers that should have set off alarm bells.

Another key to prevention is a robust code of conduct and "zero tolerance" policies. Employers must make it clear from the outset that threats and violent behavior will not be tolerated and that if corporate policies are violated the consequences are clearly outlined. Employees must understand that the company policy grants a minimum of privacy, occasionally necessitating the screening of e-mail communications, inspection of their physical workspaces and video surveillance.

Another preventive measure involves the screening of all employees. In my firm's experience, at least 25 percent of the resumes we scrutinize include material misrepresentations or omissions. Employers must therefore have a regular background checking procedure to independently verify the information provided by the applicant. Employers should pay particular attention to gaps in the resume and should be sure to interview references and non-references alike. Likewise, criminal records must be independently checked. Does the applicant have a prior history of violent acts? Other types of employee screening to consider include psychological/personality testing and substance abuse testing.

Employers should also conduct periodic security reviews as an essential component of prevention. Policies and procedures must be regularly updated including all relevant physical, electronic and personal security considerations. Corporate facilities must have adequate entry/egress controls, along with video cameras and panic buttons installed in key locations, ideally monitored from a central station. When problematic employees are terminated, keys and access cards should be collected immediately, codes and passwords changed or deleted and employees notified of the termination.

Once preventive measures have been taken, it is also crucial to implement tools for detection. Establishing an employee integrity hotline is essential to the early detection of potentially violent occurrences. Analysis at one hotline provider showed that more than 20 percent of the (integrity-related) calls involve reports of violence, threats and harassment. The most effective hotlines have trained crisis professionals available 24-hours a day and all callers are guaranteed total anonymity. This encourages better reporting of threats and incidents in the workplace that might otherwise be dismissed.

Threat Response

Proper response to an incident requires good preparation. Every organization should create a crisis plan, establish the members of its crisis team and designate a crisis center. The crisis team should be trained using a variety of simulated incidents. It is far better to be prepared for an incident than to be forced to react to one in an ad-hoc manner.

If a threat is reported, employers must take it seriously and rapidly assess its credibility. A speedy investigation of known facts is essential and swift action must be taken with a problem employee. Intervention and employee assistance programs are excellent means of diffusing potentially violent situations. Law enforcement authorities should be notified when threats escalate or a sensitive termination occurs. In our experience, a search of the office or workspace prior to a sensitive termination may be warranted. In one case I am familiar with, a cache of various weapons was found in a disgruntled employee's office. Law enforcement was immediately called in which led to more weapons found at the home.

In an increasingly competitive and stressful world, and especially during economic downturns, threats and incidents of violence will continue to occur in the workplace. However, with a few prudent steps, employers of any size can avoid or diffuse most threatening situations.

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