Implications for Managers - The Enemy Is Not Us

A higher degree of prosecution of those who commit violence against fire personnel [is needed]. It is too often accepted as part of the job to be threatened, intimidated, or physically abused by those we encounter on runs. The public should know that assaults, threats, etc. on firefighters will be pursued.

Recognize the potential for workplace violence and develop programs and training to address it.

Despite the attention workplace violence has garnered in the human resource management and public personnel press in recent years, workplaces have been relatively slow to set in place policies and programs designed to prevent it, especially when it comes to policies addressing violence committed by organizational outsiders. In a recent survey of city and county governments, only one percent of respondents described violence against public employees in public facilities as a "very serious problem." More alarming, given our research findings, is that of local governments surveyed, 1) only approximately one quarter had violence prevention policies and programs in place, and of these, 2) customer-instigated violence was addressed in just one quarter of violence prevention training efforts.16

In light of our findings, we suggest that HR violence prevention policies should focus on organizational insiders (employees) and organizational outsiders (customers/citizens). Although our findings suggest a culture of workplace violence, they also suggest that organizational outsiders are perpetrating the majority of verbal and physical violence. Generally, the bulk of extant organizational violence prevention efforts concentrate on measures such as ensuring adequate background checks of applicants and watching for violent tendencies among current employees. Such efforts assume that the enemy (those who perpetrate violence) is one of us, that is, an organizational insider. Understandably, employers have more control over the actions of their own employees and current HR policies reflect this. However, violence precaution and planning can be undertaken even when organizations shift their awareness to acknowledge "the enemy is not us."

Beyond the clinical environment (i.e., in the patient-therapist relationship), little attention has been given to the fact that customers are a major source of workplace violence. Organizations must be concerned with not only understanding those paid to be in the workplace, but those who frequent their establishments as well. For instance, who is coming into the workplace and what are their physical and mental states? Are employees walking into potentially dangerous situations in visiting clients and customers? Customers common to the public sector, for example, incarcerated individuals, disgruntled traffic offenders, and complainants, are likely to be experiencing extreme stress and frustration. Customers who may use drugs and alcohol, feel powerless or socially isolated, have low or threatened self-esteem, all have a greater potential for violent behavior. As one of our respondents commented, "We deal with
people under the influence of alcohol and others whose behavior isn't predictable.” Appointment delays, inept customer service agents, and frustrations with voicemail, automation, and other perceived inattention have the potential to result in verbal or physical acts of violence.

[Our] staff works with the public and many times we cannot give them what they ask for... We have called the police several times when we received threats from citizens over the phone [who] were coming to the office [and who presented] an extremely hostile tone.

[We work] with the public, and sometimes the rules we apply do not always go smoothly and citizens...easily get out of control.

Employees, when asked about their workplace, as they were here, seemed quick to diagnose threats to safety and to offer valuable input on how to combat violence. Three preventive strategies are derived directly from the words of the municipal government employees we surveyed. First, make the physical environment safer by restricting areas accessible to customers, increasing visibility around buildings by modifying landscaping and improving lighting, limiting the amount of cash on hand, and establishing and monitoring security systems.

[We need] metal detectors—it's only a matter of time until someone comes here with a gun and starts shooting.

Layout of office should be conducive to a safe environment. Example: main entrance door could have a bell/buzzer to notify those in the back areas of incoming customers. In most cases there are women left by themselves in the office to fend for themselves if something was to happen.

Second, because customer violence is often an expression of anger or frustration, interpersonal training of employees is crucial. Employees need to know what they can and should say to a disgruntled customer. They need to be trained to recognize when it is in their best interest to exit a charged situation or to call in another employee or supervisor. Training should include listening skills and conflict negotiation/avoidance tactics designed to detect and diffuse potentially dangerous encounters. Employees must know both where to report and how to deal with violent and potentially violent situations.

Seems like you are supposed to keep ‘hush-hush’ about anything. And if you discuss it you are being a troublemaker.

[We need] classes on how workplace violence affects other people and how we can handle these problems.

Third, organizations where workers routinely deal with angry customers or citizens may do well to establish a progressive system of “discipline” for clients. Step one
may be the issuance of a warning when an angry outburst occurs. Step two may permit the employee to ask the customer to leave the establishment or the employee to exit the scene. Step three may involve calling in security personnel or the police. Role-plays are an effective way to provide the practice necessary for employees to call upon these procedures when threats arise.

Realize that the public is not always right and don't feel the need to coddle people because they are the public. Workers have the right to be treated fairly too!

"Customer is always right" translates in this environment into "citizens can do anything."

Concluding Thoughts

According to a recent Society for Human Resource Management violence survey, approximately 40 percent of organizations either have no set procedure or "don't know" how they would respond to situations of workplace violence. Using a survey of a municipal government workforce, we call attention to the problem of multiple types of workplace violence occurring simultaneously in an organization and the disturbing frequency of experiencing and observing violent episodes. Given the negative consequences of these episodes, managers who report a lack of preparation for workplace violence is worrisome. Our data suggest that organizations need sound policies and programs to address multiple violence issues, and that they be expanded to include customer violence control. As one respondent succinctly commented, "our bosses need to recognize the potential for workplace violence and develop programs and training to address it." It appears that frontline workers understand the problem and even its potential solutions, yet human resources and management personnel are slow to recognize current HR policies are not adequately addressing this social problem.

Notes


4 Ibid.


9 Laurent, op. cit., p. 12-20.


14 Narrative comments from survey respondents appear indented and italicized.


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