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THE OFFICIAL
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NATIONAL
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STRESSED TO KILL WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Protecting your store
from violence-prone employees.

HIGH RISK, HIGH RETURN

Avoiding the pitfalls
of buy-here/pay-here

Rx FOR AILING CREDIT

How dealers are nursing along
"financially challenged" customers



**Protecting
your store
from
violence-prone
employees.**

By Eric Minton

THE DEALERSHIP EMPLOYEE WAS A LONER. HE OFTEN EXPRESSED DESPAIR, was a fringe member of a motorcycle club with a bad reputation, and was a suspected substance abuser. He was known to own weapons.

These traits fit the psychological profile of someone prone to erupt in violence at his or her job. So when this employee began threatening violence at the store, the dealer became alarmed. Referring to a well-known shooting spree in a local post office, the man would say he was going to make the post office look like a picnic.

Such statements indicate "the individual has focused upon that and accepted that as a model to deal with his specific situation," says a lawyer involved with the case. The dealer acted to defuse the threat and eventually the employee took a job in another state.

STRESSED

WORKPLACE

it's ME
AGAIN

THREAT

WATCH
OUT

DARE
ME

COUNSELLING

Illustrations by Dave Merrill

TO KILL VIOLENCE



While a lot of dealers say violence could never happen at their store, less dramatic but far more prevalent forms of workplace violence can affect employees on a day-to-day basis.

And you sure can't convince the dealer mentioned above that the workplace violence issue is blown out of proportion.

Upsurge in violence

"In today's society, if you've got two or more employees who are not your relatives, you need to address the possibility of workplace violence," says Dan Fite, a 16-year veteran of the Santa Cruz, Calif., police department, who has since worked security at a Honeywell plant, an AT&T plant, and Santa Clara University, and is currently chief of security for the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk.

Violence on the job, in fact, is expanding in variety and location at such a pace that the Justice Department has proclaimed the workplace the most dangerous place to be (see "Murder and Mayhem" sidebar). The Justice Department, able to track only police reports, found that from 1987 to 1992 an average of one million victimizations occurred each year on the job, resulting in some 160,000 injuries. Most homicides and assaults are robbery related, and the majority of incidents occur at gas stations, grocery stores, hotels, motels, restaurants, and bars. But last year, a salesman in Richmond, Va., was killed by two men he took on a test drive, and similar incidents have been recounted by dealers around the country.

Dealers are usually prepared to handle such outside violence. The Connecticut Automotive Trades Association, for instance, counsels salespeople to give up the car in a robbery.

But are dealers equally prepared for the disgruntled customer who uses an AK-47 for restitution? Or the disenchanted employee who seeks recourse with a knife? Or an employee's estranged spouse who attempts reconciliation with a baseball bat? Or the frustrated supervisor who resorts to clenched fists to motivate staff? Or the customer who physically threatens, then assaults, a sales manager? All of these examples occurred recently in, respectively, an investment house, an insurance agency, a dentists' office, a corporate headquarters, and a Connecticut auto dealership. In all but the last case, men were the perpetrators.

MURDER AND MAYHEM

During the 1980s, some 7,600 murders made occupational homicide the third leading cause (12 percent) of death in the workplace, says the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). By 1993 it was about 17 percent, second only to transportation accidents, says the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The bureau also found that of 1,063 job-related homicides in 1993, 10 percent—163 murders—were caused by work associates (59 by coworkers, 43 by customers). Compare that with the number of police officers (67) and security guards (52) killed in the line of duty the same year.

But workplace violence is not just about murder. In a 1993 Society of Human Resource Managers survey, one-third reported a violent incident in their workplace in the past five years; almost 30 percent reported from three to five incidents. Fistfights or other physical altercations were involved in 75 percent of the incidents, guns in 17 percent, and stabbings in 7.5 percent. The most common kind of violence was employee to employee (53.5 percent), then employee to supervisor (12.6 percent), and customer to employee (6.9 percent). The remaining cases were supervisor to employee or involved relatives, girlfriends, or boyfriends. Only one case was a former employee to supervisor.

A disturbing side issue is that more than half of such victimizations are not reported to the police. Either the victim keeps the incident a private matter or tells company officials, who don't report it to law enforcement authorities.



7 STEPS TO A VIOLENCE-FREE WORKPLACE

Preparing for disasters is common business practice. Instituting violence prevention measures should be, too. Below are steps you can take to prevent employee violence:

1. Survey employees. In a poll of 600 civilian workers in July 1993, Northwestern National Life Insurance Company found that 58 percent of responding harassment victims, 43 percent of threat victims, and 24 percent of attack victims did not report the offense. Victims might be ashamed of the attack, afraid of retaliation from the perpetrator, or even worried about retribution from management. Conduct an anonymous survey that clearly defines the various forms of violence and asks if these are occurring or are a concern to employees. Discern, too, if any part of the building poses security problems. Not only does this take the employees' temperature, but it sends a



Pilchak

Fistfights, threats, and harassment aren't as dramatic as shooting rampages but can cause just as much trauma in the workplace long-term, among not only victims but nonvictims. And they are far more prevalent. Attorney William Pilchak, who works with the Michigan Automobile Dealers Association and gives seminars on violence prevention, says that while he has seen only one case of a dealer firing an employee for threats of violence, "we've seen a lot of people making threats. [An employee] uses the prospect of violence as a way to gain power over

the manager. He makes it known he has a large weapons collection or a crossbow, and he makes insinuating threats."

Residual effects

A 1993 survey of members of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Alexandria, Va., found 40 percent of violent incidents led to more stress among employees, and 11.3 percent of respondents reported decreased productivity. Such violent incidents also result in lost workdays, even among nonvictims. And the estimated cost per incident—including lost wages, medical bills, lost productivity, property damage, workers' comp, and legal expenses—was \$250,000.

Exacerbating the problem of workplace violence is the lack of interest, either through ignorance or fear, of managers and supervisors. "People tend to become ostriches when they see someone or a situation that's potentially violent," says Jerry L. Wright, a principal with Risk Analysis Management, Inc., Ann Arbor, Mich. Wright—who is also the Crime Prevention Committee chair of the 25,000-member American Society for Industrial Security. He says companies have few models to follow in instituting violence-prevention measures.

Hire learning

Wright and other experts offer some general guidelines to help dealers reduce the risk of workplace violence among employees (see "7 Steps to a Violence-Free Workplace" above). Still, the first line of defense is in the hiring process.

"I try to hire people who do not have tempers," says Forrest McConnell, owner, McConnell Honda and McConnell Acura and Infiniti, both in Montgomery, Ala. He orders exhaustive reference checks. "I think it's the kiss of death in business to hire someone who can't control his temper. I don't care how good they are, how many cars they can sell, it hurts in the long run."

Though some people are prone to violent temperaments, others slide into such behavior because of external pressures. All studies say violence most often results from either stress—financial, personal, interpersonal, or domestic—or drug and alcohol abuse. "Most of us at one time or another are troubled employees; that's part of being human," says trainer Jeanne A. Rufflo, National Employee Assistance Services, Inc., Waukesha, Wisc. "Does that mean we are going to end up being violent? Probably not. But, when you look at it from the other side—the violent employee—was that person a troubled employee? Probably."



McConnell

Assistance programs

Buzz Braley, general manager and owner, Braley & Graham Co., Portland, Oreg., says that in the past 10 years at his dealership, there have been only a couple of fistfights, which were quickly over. "We try to have an open door so if an employee has a problem with another employee, we can resolve it," he says. Plus, "we're working harder during the 90-day employee probation period to make sure they're a good fit." If not, they are let go.

message to potential aggressors that certain behavior is not acceptable.

2. Establish a zero-tolerance policy. Distribute and post a statement that any form of violence or threat is grounds for disciplinary action, including discharge. Include concise definitions, such as "Violence is any physical force used for the purpose of hurting or intimidating a person, damaging property, or use of weapons or objects that can result in injury or death" and "Threat means any physical or verbal expression of an individual's present or future attempt to inflict pain or damage to property, or cause intimidation, helplessness, and fear, regardless of the person's ability to carry out the threat." Dealers may also establish inspections as part of an antiviolence policy, but they must tell all employees from the outset that if the company needs to investigate a threat of violence, it reserves the right to search all property on the premises, including lockers, cars, purses, and desks.

3. Form a task force to implement policy. Establishing a zero-tolerance policy requires enforcement, and that can't be taken lightly. A committee of experts can cover all aspects of the policy's implementation and should include representatives from human resources, security, medicine, mental health, and law. If your store doesn't have this expertise, hire a consultant.

4. Provide procedures for reporting incidents. The Northwestern survey showed that half or more of incidents aren't being reported, indicating that many victims, for many reasons, suffer in silence. That doesn't fix the problem and it undermines your business's operations. Employees need to have a mechanism by which they can report concerns—either for themselves or a colleague—without fear of retaliation, retribution, rejection, or cover-up.

5. Institute an employee assistance program (EAP). An EAP, with professional counselors available 24 hours a day can help employees deal with their personal, domestic, and financial problems, and aid managers working with stressed or potentially dangerous employees. If your store can't afford an individual EAP, contact your chamber of commerce about EAP consortiums.

6. Provide procedures for handling violent employees. Get the affected employees into an EAP or some form of counseling, and make attendance a requirement for continued employment. Have them sign a "last-chance agreement," making clear that if they act violently, demonstrate any rage, or talk about violence, they will be dismissed. Use a nonconfrontational, matter-of-fact approach when ordering the person to counseling, giving them a last chance, or discharging them. Remember that while you're discharging the individual, the threat remains. Try to build a support mechanism with fired employees' family or community to remove them from the area or find them a less stressful job.

7. Train supervisors in all the above procedures. Without a concerted training program that helps managers and other supervisors recognize a potential problem and take preventive measures, you don't have a zero-tolerance policy.

The National Safety Council, Itasca, Ill., publishes *Workplace Violence*, which contains tips for preventing violent confrontations among employees. Cost: 95¢. Call (800) 621-7619.



Dealer Martin Bennett aids employees but also has a zero-tolerance policy.

Owner Martin P. Bennett, Thoroughbred Motorcars, Inc., Nashville, credits his willingness to aid troubled employees through financial hardships for keeping the peace. "People have been upset and it could possibly have led to violence, and I like to think it hasn't happened because we are a close-knit organization." He has gone as far as bailing out an employee jailed for failure to pay child support, working out a payroll-deduction deal with the district attorney.

"Sometimes it backfires on us and we lose money, and other times they appreciate what we've done for them, and that's why we've had people stay so long," Bennett says. Even if that person skips out, the other employees close ranks with the company, he says. "I regard it as an investment."

An employee assistance program (EAP) with professional counselors available 24 hours a day can also help, says Jesse Bernstein, president, Employee Assistance Associates, Inc., Ann Arbor, Mich. EAPs help employees deal with their personal, domestic, and financial problems before they lead to disaster, and aid managers working with troubled employees.

"Companies that say, 'We don't need an EAP because we don't have problems' are putting a gun to their head, since in this day and age, you don't know who is going to go off the deep end," Bernstein says.

"No guns or threats allowed!"

Still, providing assistance doesn't mean pampering people who have made threats. Zero tolerance should be the rule, starting with the issue of weapons on the premises. When Tennessee passed legislation allowing people to carry firearms, dealer Bennett sent around a memo restating his company's policy that guns were not permitted on the property. "If I even thought anybody was on the premises with a gun, I would be down there," he says.

And Bennett says he would immediately fire anybody who threatened another employee, and would seek prosecution of anyone who carried out a threat. "Retribution, swift and sure, even if it's a question of forfeiting money for the prosecution," he says.

But a stern confrontation without considering all the consequences could trigger the outburst a manager is hoping to prevent. Addressing potential violence requires a preestablished, carefully carried-out plan.

Confrontation management

First, get the troubled employee into counseling, making attendance a

JOB-RELATED HOMICIDES—1994

Number of homicides 1071

WORKER DESCRIPTION

Wage and salary workers	
76%	
Self-employed	24%
Men	83%
Women	17%
Under 20 years	3%
20 to 24 years	10%
25 to 34 years	27%
35 to 44 years	27%
45 to 54 years	10%
65 years and over	6%
White	64%
Black	20%
Hispanic	13%
Asian or Pacific Islander	10%
Other	6%

CIRCUMSTANCE

Work associates	9%
Co-worker, former	
co-worker	5%
Customer, client	4%
Personal acquaintances	4%
Victim's husband,	
ex-husband	2%
Boyfriend, ex-boyfriend	1%
Other relative or	
acquaintance	1%
Security guard in the line	
of duty	7%
Robberies and	
miscellaneous crimes	73%

METHOD

Shooting	86%
Stabbing	6%
Beating	4%
Other	4%

Note: Data may not sum to totals because of the omission of miscellaneous categories and because of rounding.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor.

THREATENING SIGNS

Anybody can go on a violent rampage, but most violence arises from certain conditions, and most perpetrators fit a psychological profile. Here are some warning signs that your workplace might soon erupt in violence.

Note if the person:

- has a history of rejection, failure, or borderline work,
- has no sense of humor or a humor centering on violent themes,
- has little respect for authority,
- avoids eye contact,
- has a history of resolving conflict with threats of violence, or a history of legal problems, domestic violence, or cruelty to animals,
- has a fascination with weapons, or
- uses alcohol or other drugs.

Be alert if:

- you see a marked change in behavior,
- the person starts talking, writing, or joking about aggressive acts,
- talks of revenge, or
- denies that anything is wrong.

requirement for continued employment. Then give the employee an antiviolence statement to sign saying that any act of violence, any demonstration of rage, or even any mention of outside violence will result in termination.

Often this takes care of the problem. If not, the employee may have to be fired. But this, too, should be done in a non-confrontational manner.

The bottom line is that dealers must always be aware—and ready to take early prevention. No threat should be taken lightly, even if the person making the threat intended

For employees who are going through stressful times or may be victims of workplace violence, look for the following signs:

- frequent and unexplained absences or tardiness,
- decline in work performance or lack of concentration,
- "on the job" absenteeism,
- increase in missed deadlines, accidents, or mistakes,
- change in behavior,
- change in character, attitude, or appearance,
- increase in interpersonal problems with other employees or management,
- avoidance of coworkers,
- on-the-job alcohol or drug use,
- increased physical complaints or health problems, or
- theft.



it as a joke or doesn't seem capable of carrying it out. "Whether it is a prank or joke, you take it seriously," consultant Wright says, "you don't joke about hijacking on an airplane."

Eric Minton is a free-lance writer based in Dayton.

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