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5 Lethal Mistakes

Avoid Increasing Your Risk
of Workplace Violence

**A GRC WHITEPAPER
FROM THE NETWORK**

5 Mistakes That Increase Your Risk of Workplace Violence

A WHITEPAPER
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As psychologists specializing in threat assessment and workplace violence prevention over the past 25 years, my associates and I at Critical Response Associates have worked on literally thousands of cases that have involved an active threat of violence or some kind of high-risk behavior that set off everyone's internal alarms.

While we typically get called in at the last minute, we have been involved in enough cases to this point that we now have a good understanding of the critical factors that either were or were not in place – factors that had facilitated or propelled events to the point that company employees feared for their safety.

While our cases certainly differ from each other, each with its own set of specific events, behaviors, and "triggers," we nonetheless see the same general patterns, when we examine the history and context of the event.

I have boiled my primary list down to five that I believe are most critical – in terms of what we can learn from them. These are general categories - some represent cultural issues, and some are more operational, but each represents an issue that has to be ultimately addressed if a company wants to effectively manage and prevent violence within their workplace.

5 LETHAL MISTAKES

1. **Denial & Avoidance**

2. **Hasty Termination**

3. **Dangerous Defaults**

4. **Lack a Threat Management Team**

5. **Lack of Employee Participation**

Mistake #1: Denial and Avoidance (and Delays)

This is admittedly a very general category, and it actually describes an otherwise normal human defense mechanism. It is our most common defense mechanism, one in which all of use to some extent every single day of our lives. Very simply, when faced with the specter of potentially negative consequences that either we do not want to confront or that simply overwhelm our resources, we human beings have the ability to protect ourselves from this discomfort by just *not thinking about it.*

This means that we can avoid confronting problems to the point that problems fester, behavior gets reinforced, situations become more complicated, the workforce gets more disrupted, and the employee nestles into his or her job more comfortably (but to everyone else's discomfort.)

People do not just "snap."

We sometimes encounter accounts in the media involving apparently sudden tragic acts of violence, with the bystanders explaining how the perpetrator "just snapped." However, those who of us who specialize in this area do not find that to be the case. People do not just "snap."

Once we begin to analyze these events and review available historic data, information almost invariably begins to emerge, with prior and ongoing (and often escalating) behaviors that were either not adequately addressed or not addressed at all. By not intervening at critical points earlier in the process, the risks often escalate and become increasingly more difficult to resolve, and with fewer available options.

As an example, a significant percentage of our referrals could be described as simply "workplace bullies." The result is that their co-workers avoid them, and their supervisors may even avoid disciplining them – and may even give them undeserved good performance evaluations. Everyone simply stays out of their way and gives them a wide berth in everything they do, with many indirect negative consequences through the years for the other employees and for the company in general.

Not only does avoidance not eliminate the undesirable behavior, the behavior is reinforced and is allowed to escalate over time. The continued avoidance of discipline provides the employee with a sense of entitlement that makes his or her eventual separation from the company increasingly difficult as time goes by. Avoidance as a tactic is eventually doomed to failure, as the company is just postponing the inevitable – and rendering the inevitable more hazardous.

Any and all actions taken by an organization to more effectively prevent workplace violence ultimately must address and overcome the natural inclination to denial and avoidance.

Mistake #2: Terminating Too Hastily

The second biggest mistake that companies make is the opposite of what we just discussed. After years of avoiding the problem employee, another very natural human response kicks in, that operates on the principle that we need to just "make him go away" – and that we need to do it quickly. Embedded in this is the belief (or wish) that if we can just terminate this individual and get him or her out the door, our problems will be over.

This is not only incorrect, but it can be *deadly* incorrect. The most dangerous time in these "high risk" cases will be after (not during) the termination, and usually not immediately after. There have been many lethal events involving ex-employees, which have occurred long after (even years after) their termination. In our current economic environment where someone may not immediately find other work, the individual may experience continuing losses.

We tell our client companies that if you have a high-risk individual who is about to encounter a high-risk event, your first step is to **hit the pause button**. If you act too quickly without considering the consequences, assessing the risks and planning the termination (and post-termination) process very carefully, then you can quickly reach a point of no return.

You can end up in an out-of-control situation in which the terminated employee is out of the workplace, but with his or her whereabouts, emotional status and motivations completely unknown.

We may actually have many potential options available to us, which can help us reduce and manage the risks, even for the long-term. However, these solutions will not often be initially apparent, and can only be revealed through a careful risk assessment process. If an employee is considered at risk and is facing the most adverse employment action possible and will soon be released into the community, you want to make sure that you thoroughly understand the risks and have planned accordingly.

The point is that we have to do all of this *prior* to the termination. Our options are significantly reduced once the employee leaves the building. We recommend that you consider consulting with a qualified Threat Assessment Professional during this process. Because you probably will not have a second chance.

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Mistake #3: Treating All Cases The Same (Relying on "Dangerous Defaults")

Whenever we encounter an organization that has not considered the issue of violence or other high-risk events occurring in the workplace, and we inquire about their expected reaction to these critical situations, a common response is "well, we'll just call the police". Another common response is, "we'll just refer him to the EAP program." Or maybe, "we can always just get a temporary restraining order."

We often become involved in situations in which the risks have escalated or have actually become more complicated,

because the organization made some quick decisions or initiated some default responses, that on the surface appeared to be logical. Or maybe it worked the last time.

I am certainly not somehow implying that one should not refer to law enforcement or mental health or the courts; these kinds of decisions may eventually be part of a threat response plan to a particular threat. But these are not default responses that will necessarily always address your needs.

It is critical that any action (or inaction) be considered in light of the possible consequences, both positive and negative. These and other responses need to take into consideration the very critical factors that underlie the risks, and the factors that could serve to mitigate those risks. What may reduce the risk in one situation may trigger a murderous response in another.

At the basis of this is sometimes the belief that managing workplace violence is solely a "security problem" – the belief that this is just a matter of walking someone out the door or having some kind of armed presence in front of your office for a couple of days. For some situations, that may be exactly what is required. For some, it is not – and may even be counterproductive.

We have a simple saying in my profession: "good management is dependent on good assessment." Each and every case that we have helped to resolve to a safe conclusion has required solutions that were often unique to that particular individual and to that particular situation. Those solutions do exist, but will only be revealed through the assessment process. We do not want to get to a point where increasing security is our only remaining option.

Mistake #4: Not Having a Threat Management Team in Place

The first thing that has to happen when someone reports a potentially threatening set of circumstances is to make certain that this information is quickly and effectively routed to the individual, or individuals, within the company who are responsible for the company's response.

When a threat occurs, there is often not much time – these can be rapidly developing incidents, where information is incomplete, stress levels are high, but there is a realization that not making a decision is no longer an option. If a company is not prepared, and does not have in place designated personnel who are trained and capable of managing a response process, then events can rapidly get out of control, and mistakes will be made.

Most all of the experts in this field have concurred that the establishment of a Threat Management Team (or Threat Response Team or Critical Incident Team) is the most effective vehicle to coordinate and plan this process. This process truly works better through a multi-disciplinary approach that, dependent on the organization, may include members of Human Resources, Corporate Security, Legal Counsel, or others.

This team should be trained so that they understand their responsibilities and the basics of initiating and conducting a safe and effective response plan. It is not necessary for them to be experts in threat assessment or security procedures, but they do need to know the options and the resources that are available to them, if their preliminary assessment suggests a significant risk.

The organization's Threat Management Team would be ideally responsible for coordinating all aspects of the company's workplace violence program. They will not only coordinate the company's response to specific events, but could also be the ones responsible for reviewing the company's program, managing the training and making sure that appropriate security is in place.

Mistake #5: Inadequate Employee Participation

A company can have a workplace violence policy, a trained Threat Management Team and professional resources standing by, but if their employees are not active and educated participants in the process, then the program simply will not work.

Employees truly represent the company's front line of defense. Without their participation, without their knowledge, and without their attention, the company will not be able to receive the critical information to respond early enough to prevent potential acts of violence.

It is not sufficient to simply compose and announce a policy of workplace violence. Even sending out written notification to all employees and having them sign agreements may not be sufficient to break through an existing climate of denial. The company needs to conduct an active awareness campaign to promote and encourage employee participation.

The goals of this kind of training are primarily to promote employee awareness of the many manifestations of violent behaviors, to explain the company's policy regarding this issue, and to define the employees' respective responsibilities under this policy. Employees need to understand that they are a critical part of the program in order for it to succeed – because they are!

Summary

"[Although many had information]...., no one had all the information and no one connected the dots." This statement appeared In the Virginia Tech Commission's report on the 2008 shootings - a statement that rings true for anyone who consults in the area of workplace violence. To be successful in safeguarding their employees, a company must be certain that it is receives, and can therefore act on, "all the information."

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ABOUT THE NETWORK

The Network is a leading provider of integrated governance, risk and compliance (GRC) solutions that allow organizations to create better workplaces and ethical cultures. The Network's Integrated GRC Suite, recognized as the "Apple of GRC" by GRC 20/20, is the first natively integrated enterprise GRC software platform in the compliance industry. The Suite was built to leverage the way employees retain and apply ethics and compliance information and helps companies prevent, detect and remediate non-compliance and unethical conduct. A SaaS-based technology solution, the Suite integrates policy management, training and communications, Code of Conduct, surveys and assessments and case management, all on a reporting and analytics platform. Originally established as the first whistleblower hotline provider in 1982, The Network serves thousands of organizations in every industry, including nearly half of the Fortune 500.

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