



MANAGING TODAY'S ANGRY WORKFORCE

by Florence M. Stone



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Anger is on the increase in our workplaces, affecting interpersonal relationships at the lowest levels and triggering violent behavior at the highest.
- Organizations are indirectly contributing to the situation by their demands for more work in less time and a throwaway attitude towards members of the workforce.
- Managers need to become sensitive to the levels of stress their employees are under, recognize danger signs, and address issues of stress and anxiety before they become performance issues.
- Companies need to have recognized protocols and processes for managing all levels of anger in the workplace, including a zero-tolerance policy for threats of violence.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict isn't new in the workplace—indeed, disagreements can help select the best among good ideas—but today's offices seem prone to excessive conflict. Studies by Integra Realty Resources of more than 1,000 office workers in the United States and the United Kingdom revealed growing numbers of overworked, overwrought employees. The surveys showed a worldwide pattern of endless complaints, put-downs, angry outbursts, trashed office equipment, and gave a name to the behavioral pattern—"desk rage." The U.S./U.K. findings and subsequent surveys have found anger at work to be pervasive, taking not only the forms of yelling, verbal abuse, and damage to office technology, but of fistfights among office colleagues. One in ten respondents in the Integra survey said they worked in an office where physical violence had occurred.

TICKED OFF...AND TICKING

These survey results should not cause surprise. After all, the phrase "going postal," derived from early incidents of employee violence in U.S. post offices, has become part of our vernacular. Although some may see workplace anger as a U.S. phenomenon, it is a worldwide trend.

According to a report from the Geneva-based International Labour Organization in 1997, *Violence at Work* by Duncan Chappell and Vittorio Di Martino, the issue "transcends the boundaries of a particular country, work setting, or occupational group." Because the initial survey on anger was sponsored by a real estate firm considering, among other factors, office working conditions—particularly the "Dilbertization" of the workplace, the accommodation of em-

ployees in cubicles barely bigger than their desks—its results were belittled in some quarters. But interviews with security experts have supported the findings. They all point to the same situations in our workplaces: more work, less time, much change in how the work is done, continuous demand for greater productivity.

According to R. Brayton Bowen, anger is often triggered by the threatened loss of something greatly valued. Translate this to the workplace, and I'd rank these three factors as the biggest causes of anger:

- downsizing, or the threat of job loss
- the pressure to do more with less, or the loss of existing resources
- disempowerment, or the loss of control over the work to be done

The high-stress conditions in today's offices make it difficult to achieve teamwork or creativity, but the bigger problem is that they set the stage for unstable people to act out their anger, pushing them over the edge to violent behavior. Circumstances ranging from an unresolved conflict with a coworker or supervisor to a bad performance evaluation or a major change in work procedures can contribute to heightened anxiety and, in turn, to raw anger. If an individual has a predisposition to aggressiveness and perceives the workplace as a hostile environment, experiencing stress can trigger violent behavior, according to Anthony Baron, C.E.O. of Baron Center, California-based organization of trainers specializing in workplace and school violence protection.

The number of homicides is already disturbing: "boss-icide" has doubled in a little more than 10 years. In 1999, 856 homicides were reported in the workplace, more than twice the number reported a dozen years be-

fore. On average, workers murder three to four supervisors a month, or double the number a little more than a decade ago. A study by the American Management Association in 1994 found more than half of 500 human resources managers had had to contend with threats of violence in their companies in the previous four years. Multiple occurrences were reported by 30% of respondents.

Security experts contend that most violence-prevention programs are initiated after an incident, not beforehand. As the labor shortage has made it more difficult to find qualified employees, some organizations have forgone reference checks, thereby increasing the potential for negligent hiring. Threats to coworkers or managers are ignored because there is no zero-tolerance policy that covers them. Many supervisors aren't trained to handle on-the-job conflicts, and consequently conflicts are allowed to fester. Employee-assistance programs (EAPs) that exist to help identify and address personal and work-related problems may be not mandatory or not accessible.

DEFUSING AN ANGRY WORKPLACE

On the assumption that intervention by an EAP may come too late, the Purdue Employees Credit Union in West Lafayette, Indiana, also trains its own managers to identify and advise employees on stress-related behaviors that could evolve into threats or violent behavior. Training updates, provided quarterly, keep managers alert to the issue and abreast of the latest need-to-know information.

As we see an increase in desk rage, it's evident that companies should not wait for anger to grow into violent behavior. Yet too often that is exactly what has happened. Employees at U.S. Foodservice in East Allentown, Pennsylvania, have not forgotten the day three years ago when a troubled and angry employee shot three managers, killing one, before fatally shooting himself. Repetition of the incident is unlikely: security has increased since the shootings. U.S. Foodservice has been training managers in its 38 branches about violence in the workplace and how to spot the warning signs of a violent employee, according to Bonna Walker, vice president of marketing and public relations. Managers, in turn, teach their employees. The company also has

"Anger can be an effective negotiating tool, but only as a calculated act, never as a reaction."

(Mark McCormack)



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instituted zero-tolerance guidelines on violence in the workplace. A policy on violence existed before the shootings, but has since been rewritten in, says Walker, “plainer language so there is no misunderstanding of what that policy is.”

According to Larry Chavez, founder of Critical Incidents Associates, an organization that conducts training seminars on preventing workplace violence, companies should go beyond spelling out policies. Top management should be quick and stern in dealing with violations. Indeed, there should be zero tolerance.

Applied Materials' lawsuit to obtain a restraining order is an example of the way businesses should respond to threats, even when offenders state that they meant nothing by a threatening remark. In the case of Applied Materials, an employee allegedly complained to fellow workers about a potential job reassignment, saying that he would “bring an Uzi and start mowing people down.” Concerned not only with the threat but with the coworker's aggressive nature, a colleague reported the remark to a manager. As a consequence, the worker was placed on administrative leave while an investigation was undertaken. The company's response to the verbal threat illustrates the zero-tolerance policy that is spreading across the country.

Steve Kaufer, cofounder of the Workplace Violence Research Institute, compares corporate response to the heightened use of metal detectors in airports. “You can't joke about guns and bombs,” he says. “Employees are being trained to understand that those threats aren't appropriate and will be dealt with very seriously.” Employees can be placed on unpaid leave or fired if found guilty of making remarks perceived as threatening, since they challenge a company's responsibility to secure the workplace and protect the other employees.

Besides a no-threat policy and supervisory and employee training in violence prevention, a means should be established whereby employees and their family members can anonymously report potential threats. Special consideration should be given to procedures to address involuntary separations and disciplinary actions. These two kinds of incidents trigger almost half of the violent incidents in the workplace.

MINI-CASES

Airlines all have EAPs, but the *Association of Flight Attendants (AFA)* has an additional support system, the Member Assistance Program (MAP). This program provides AFA's 47,000 members, representing 26 air-

lines, with peer support for work-related or personal problems and referral to professional resources. Volunteer employees receive special training on how to counsel their peers, and to date the AFA has more than 170 peer counselors worldwide. The peer program is considered superior to traditional management-sponsored EAPs in that employees don't have to wait until the problem intrudes on their job performance.

In 1999, *Pfizer* launched its Vista Rx program, which allows salespeople to cut back to a 60% work schedule while retaining 100% of their full-time benefits. The program alleviates a major source of stress—difficulty balancing work and family demands. According to Bruce Fleischmann, national sales director of Vista Rx, the program meets Pfizer's need to have 100+ salespeople calling on physicians, yet also allows the participants to balance work-life issues. For some, Vista Rx is a short-term solution to a family situation; for others, it's a permanent career change. The company limits participation to around 130 employees, and there's currently a waiting list.

MAKING IT HAPPEN ►►

Companies need a tandem effort of prevention and protection to defuse and protect against workplace tension.

- Review hiring processes, including background checks, reference verifications, and applicant screening for propensity toward violence.
- Review and implement policies and procedures that ensure that under the worst of circumstances employees are treated with dignity. Many of those who exhibit violent behavior attribute it to actions they say stripped them of their dignity in some way.
- Institute handgun policies covering the carrying of concealed firearms on the premises.
- Institute training programs to educate managers on early-warning signs and emergency procedures.
- Create a safe environment by establishing workplace violence policies, including a zero-tolerance policy on threats of harm. Provide for an employee assistance or counseling program for workers who threaten or harass fellow employees.
- Create a threat management team to detail a specific plan of action to be taken every time a threat is reported, with participants from human resources, security, the EAP, and legal counsel.

CONCLUSION

Companies need to take the issue of growing anger and uncivil behavior among colleagues seriously. Left unchecked, in certain individuals it can trigger violent incidents that can be costly beyond the safety of coworkers and customers. Businesses are facing recent judicial trends that find employers liable for acts of violence due to negligence in hiring, supervision, or retention. Aside from instituting violence prevention/protection programs, companies need to look more closely at surveys that show pervasive anger within their rank and file. Anger in the workplace is a signal that there's something wrong in the system. It's management's responsibility to investigate the corporate climate and culture, identify the causes, and, with its workforce, collaboratively and collectively seek effective solutions.

For More Information

Books:

- Denenberg, Richard V., and Mark Braverman. *The Violence-prone Workplace: A New Approach to Dealing with Hostile, Threatening and Uncivil Behavior*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- McClure, Lynne. *Anger and Conflict in the Workplace: Spot the Signs, Avoid the Trauma*. Manassas Park, VA: Impact, 2000.
- Potter-Efron, Ronald T. *Working Anger: Preventing and Resolving Conflict on the Job*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1998.

Web Site:

<http://www.angermgmt.com> is a site providing information about anger management, and offering a range of services and products including courses, counseling, and a questionnaire measuring your anger level.

See also:

- ☆ **Driving Fear from the Workplace (pp. 330-31)**
- ☆ **From Crisis Management to Crisis Leadership (pp. 293-94)**
- ☆ **Making Cultures Behave (pp. 51-52)**
- ☆ **Viewpoint: Margaret J. Wheatley (pp. 273-74)**
- 🔗 **Stress and Stress Management (pp. 2117-19)**

“Rash and incessant scolding runs into custom and renders itself despised.”

(Michel de Montaigne)