When violence occurs in the workplace

Events such as downsizing, suspension, terminations, strikes, toxic cultures, bullying, harassment, lawsuits, stalking, domestic violence, substance abuse, political polarization, natural disasters, service failures among others can all lead to threats, and incidents of violence. These continue to create challenges on a daily basis for organizations and those involved are tasked with ensuring they have the right solutions in place to help their organizations and the people within to remain resilient in the midst of such events.

When a disruptive event such as a threat or an incident of violence occurs in the workplace, it can have a profound impact not only on individuals, employees, families, but on leadership and crisis responders. Because of the targeted nature behind these events, the reach can be deeply distressing and extensive.

As organizational leaders in these situations, you occupy a unique place—one that calls on you to maintain the strength and viability of your organization while simultaneously responding to the needs of all stakeholders. Times of crisis inevitably turn all eyes toward leadership; and your ability to restore a sense of control, agency, and security—all crucial aspects for the organization.

Coordinating all aspects in managing a threat or responding to an event when there is potentially competing demands, interests, and motivations is important for the eventual wellbeing of the organization and its people.

Understanding the violent mind

Understanding the violent mind is a critical component in defusing hostile and violent people. Questions such as "What should I look for to ensure the safety of myself and others?" or "How do I know if I'm being responsible in reporting something, or overreacting?" are becoming more and more common, particularly when threats of targeted violence are involved.

To maintain best practices within an organization and to contain personal fear and anxiety, education is beneficial. Everyone within an organization should be aware of what is considered a concern of violence, what are the characteristics of individuals who commit violent acts, and what do you do if a situation arises in your organization.

First it is important to understand that all threats of violence are not the same. There is a difference in affective and predatory types of violence.

Affective violence

Is emotional, defensive against an immediate perceived threat, physiologically elevated, and often frenetic in cognitive focus. By far the most common type of violence is affective, crimes of passion and emotion. Affective violence is the "fight or flight" response.

Predatory violence

Is cognitive, non-emotional, not defensive as there is no immediate threat, physiologically calm, well planned in advance, and with laser cognitive focus on its target. They almost never threaten the intended targets but will often tell non-targeted 3rd-party confidants of their intentions (see "leakage"). Mass shooters are almost always engaging in predatory violence. These threats can both be very serious in severity, yet have very different dynamics related to motives, pre-attack warning signs, planning, execution, and lethality. However, certain risk factors likely surface in the days, weeks, and months prior to the attack.

A few important aspects of these crimes allow us to establish prevention measures, they include:

- **Geography**—most of the perpetrators act through mental "maps" from experience, habits, and knowledge; and therefore, reside or work near the communities they threaten.
- **"Leakage"**—many will begin to speak or act in a more threatening manner both in person and on social media. This behavior, if you know what to look for, has the potential to be identified early. If you encounter hateful rhetoric at or directed toward your organization, it is important to share such with those in authority who can investigate further (law enforcement, management, security personnel, etc.).
- **Contagion effect**—The contagion effect refers to the increased likelihood of subsequent mass attacks by other, unrelated assailants in response to widespread media coverage of a prior mass shooting or attack. The effect is significant and increases risk for another event over the subsequent few weeks in most instances.
- **Anticipatory actions**—many begin to plan their actions by surveilling the site in a conspicuous manner.

As always, if you "see something, or hear something, say something."

Tools and decisions

School and workplace shootings, like all human violence, are complex problems that require comprehensive and complex understanding and solutions. Yet, when we see patterns, again and again, we can learn from those and use those to improve our interventions.

A large concern for administrators, HR professionals and legal counsel is managing an angry, disgruntled individual who has communicated or is considered a potential threat. Questions persist, such as protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Do nothing, and the individual may act on their violent threat, presenting a host of problems—human loss and suffering, cessation of business operations, structural and logistical costs to resume operations, long-term legal exposure to wrongful death litigation, etc.

Quickly remove or terminate without a proper assessment, and the individual may take legal action, which presents it's on set of headaches—entrenched, costly, and arduous legal battles, reputational damage, increased oversight, etc. Thus, it is critical to use standardized, structured assessment protocols, and the proper specialists to ensure that employment-based decisions are fully informed by an expert, behaviorally-anchored and fact-specific assessment that directly addresses the risk issue in question.

Two tools that are important in these situations

Fitness for Duty with Violence Screen (FFD-VS): A critical tool in helping employers navigate these decisions and increase their defensibility when applying the ADA's direct threat defense. It provides all the benefits of a traditional FFD evaluation, with the added benefit of specifically addressing violence risk. The FFD-VS is a structured, behavioral health assessment of an individual's cognitive, emotional, and psychological functioning within the context of their job requirements, but with an added focus on assessing risk factors for both reactive and targeted violence.

Threat of violence consultation: Active shooter drills can be traumatic themselves. Appropriateness and pre-planned, on-site counseling during drills are beneficial in reducing disruptions, fear and liability.

Through education, the right tools, and proper support, it is possible to better identify and pre-emptively engage troubled individuals on a trajectory of violence early on, so that they can better redirected to more prosocial and non-violent resolutions.

Response and recovery

During a crisis, you are in a situation with harsh consequences, incomplete information, and enormous pressure to take action. How do you effectively protect your reputation, people, and other core assets when unexpectedly threatened? What can be done to ensure the wellbeing and resiliency of your people?

Having a time-honored framework that organizational leadership can apply to manage and communicate helps align the team and provides focus on the critical decisions. In past events, many leaders have found it helpful to structure their communications/interactions around a simple acronym—ACT:

Acknowledge and name the event—ignoring it or assuming it has not touched individuals can be a reckless form of denial. By addressing the issue directly, you are clearly stating that you "get it," that you care, and that the organization is going to respond appropriately. These are all essential elements in recovery.

Communicate compassion and competence—communicate the organizational response plan by recognizing the wide range of emotional reactions to these events and having a corresponding message of resilience (i.e. think "Boston Strong"), you create an atmosphere in which individuals can express their concerns while also tapping into their coping skills—a natural process following crisis.

Transition to a future focus—beyond emotional expression, it is also essential that leaders have a clear plan for the immediate future. That plan should include information about ongoing support resources, encouraging heightened situational awareness, any changes to work schedules/duties, and a commitment to review existing policies/protocols/practices around safety and security.

When is a crisis over?

It is important to understand that a crisis like this is not a static period of time. The psychologist James Hillman once said, "The problem with trauma is not the traumatic event itself, it's remembering traumatically". He was on to something, drilling down to the relevance and importance of how we remember, what we take away from a traumatic event, and the long-lasting impact.

Organizations should be prepared for a lengthy recovery. Planning for at least the first year is critical and can extend beyond that. Issues of re-triggering events, PTSD symptoms and survivor guilt can persist long after the initial crisis response subsided and well after many try to reclaim a sense of "normal".