Assessing Individuals for Workplace Violence Propensity

There are no methods that can fully and accurately assess who is going to be violent in the workplace and who is not. However, the following guidelines can provide important and defensible considerations for assessing the likelihood of workplace violence. They can help the employer/organization determine what kinds of measures may be put in place to deal with a potentially violent situation.

10 Considerations: Who is Most Likely to Become Violent?

1. Only 36% of workplace assailants commit suicide. That means 64% aren't suicidal enough to kill themselves following their violent acts. Further, most people who are suicidal are not homicidal, especially in the workplace. Thus, the suicide paradigm is worthy of assessment consideration, but is not an accurate or comprehensive predictor of intended workplace violence.

2. Standardized psychological tests are not reliable or valid tools for predicting which persons will be violent and which will not. The ability to identify future violent persons through psychological tests and fitness-for-duty exams does not exist. Tests like the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) can tell if someone is depressed, having bizarre thoughts, and trending toward sociopathic tendencies. However, psychological tests will not predict who is going to be violent, with predictions of violence often being false positives. Most times, someone who is enraged enough to become violent in the workplace would not be willing to cooperate with a psychological/psychiatric exam, so other methods need to be incorporated.

3. Assessment of potential violence needs to consider the psychological makeup and behavioral tendencies of the threatening person. Questions about anger problems, sense of entitlement, depression, or suicide are important.
   - Does the person engage in poor judgment?
   - Do they believe in using violent methods to resolve a personal issue?
   - Do they exhibit negative coping skills?
   - Substance abuse is also correlated with violent offenders.
   - Paranoia, delusions and bipolar disorders are commonly found among individuals who engage in severe workplace violence.
   - Isolation, non-communication, and social withdrawal are additional tendencies that correlate to workplace violence.
   - A history of violence is a key predictor of future violence, especially if the person felt positively reinforced by previous acts of violence.
   - Domestic violence is also an indicator.
   - Has a sufficient criminal background check been conducted in a manner that is allowed? The more recent the historical acts of violence, the more pertinent.
   - Does the harassment, bullying, threats, intimidation, verbal/physical abuse, sense of entitlement, insubordination, isolation and other potential indicators to serious workplace violence appear to be progressive or increasingly problematic?

4. Assessment of potential violence should also include “context” and the evolving situation. Typically, a good starting place is to understand that potentially violent and threatening individuals almost always feel unfairly treated. Are there job problems, especially
insubordination? Does the individual overly identify with his/her job position? What is the perceived severity of unjust treatment? How long has the person endured the undesired situation? Have there been serious losses in the individual’s life, e.g., divorce, bankruptcy, loss (or anticipated loss) of job, serious health issues, etc.? What has the individual tried in order to resolve the provoking situation? What are the motives for justifying a potentially violent resolution? What could be changed in the environment to defuse potential violence?

5. Threats and communications of violent intent/desires are often exhibited before workplace violence occurs. In addition to overt threats and communications of intent, it is important to talk with anyone who may have knowledge about an individual’s comments, written content, or non-verbal actions that would indicate potential workplace violence. Understand that informants may be resistant to provide information about threatening behavior due to fear or cultural resistance, e.g., never “turn in” a union buddy. Informants must first understand they are not being investigated, how the information will be used, and if the information provided will remain confidential or anonymous. Skilled interviewers are capable of getting valuable information from informants, but it has to be conducted in the correct manner.

6. Premeditated acts of violence in the workplace involve visualization of retribution by the potential perpetrator. What thoughts of a vengeance is the individual rehearsing in his/her mind? What plans does the individual have for carrying out the mental visualizations of retribution? How would the individual do it, if carried out? While the rest of us walk away mad and finally resolve perceived injustices through socially acceptable methods, the violent perpetrator plans how to carry out the retribution and prepares with the needed resources and knowledge to commit the workplace violence act. Stalking or target planning is not uncommon. Does the person have access to and capability to utilize the intended weapon(s) of choice? Does the individual have a concealed weapon permit and/or registered weapons, especially assault rifles?

7. Communication is one of the best methods for assessing and defusing threatening individuals. Beyond the confidential responsibility of EAP, a threat assessment/defusing professional should be positioned in a “conduit of communication” role. In this manner, the intervening professional would serve to hear and understand the threatening individual’s concerns and pass that information back to the employer. Once alignment is properly established, a wealth of threat assessment information can be garnered and defusing strategies implemented.

8. When people talk about sensitive topics, like intended (or bluffed) workplace violence, the words they use become very important in threat assessment. Skilled linguistic analysts can determine with amazing accuracy (a.) where the threatening individual is being deceptive, (b.) where important information is being left out, and (c.) where additional inquiry is needed. Linguistic analysis is an important tool for assessing violence potential. If threats or concerning references to workplace violence are made, what are the exact words the individual used? Words spoken and written can be key indicators of intent.
9. Threat assessment should be balanced. What are the “red flag” indicators that signify likelihood for a violent response? Also, threat assessment should include the inhibitors that would indicate the individual will not be violent. By looking at both sides of the equation, i.e., red flags and inhibitors, a more accurate and defensible assessment of violence potential can be made.

10. A final consideration is about people who know or have had contact with the threatening individual. A key indicator of intended workplace violence is to understand the “gut level feeling” about violence propensities from others. Do people in the workplace or others feel afraid or intimidated by the individual? Does the EAP professional, management or employees have an intuitive sense that the individual is one who could become violent in the workplace or elsewhere? Following workplace violence shootings, it is not uncommon to hear co-workers and others who knew the perpetrator say, “I just knew he/she was going to do something like this.” Listen to that intuitive voice that says, “Something feels off here.” As a rule, when this occurs, talk it over with at least one person that is deemed appropriate to help in a constructive manner.

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