

# **THE POSTALIZATION OF CORPORATE AMERICA**

## **WORKPLACE VIOLENCE**

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**Violence permeates every aspect of modern society. Violence has been reported in churches, courts, offices, schools, public facilities, private facilities and homes. There appears to be no place where one can guarantee violence can be avoided. The probability that you or one of your loved ones will be the victim of some type of violent behavior appears to increase each year. In 1992 the Center for Disease Control (C.D.C.) declared that homicide in the workplace was a serious public health problem. The number of violent episodes in the workplace has tripled in the past decade and each year nearly a million individuals are victims of violence while in the workplace. Homicide in the workplace has become the number one risk factor for women. The U.S. Department of Justice recently stated that the workplace has now become the most dangerous place in America (Anfuso, 1994). According to Mantell & Albrecht (1994) in 1992 the U.S. Postal Service, with 750,000 employees, determined that there were over 2,000 cases of workplace violence at their facilities. However, Kinney & Johnson (1993) report that figure as 5,000 incidences. Projected to the overall work force of about 115 million workers, this would mean that over 300,000 such incidents would be expected throughout the country (Mantell & Albrecht, 1994). That prediction, however, is only an estimate, as, like other types of criminal behavior, the true base rate remains unknown in many cases due to errors in reporting. Kinney and Johnson (1993) have estimated that the average cost of each serious workplace violence incident is \$250,000. This figure represents an enormous, potentially controllable, but not necessarily eliminative, cost of doing business. The well-publicized incidents of violence at America's post offices have resulted in some authorities referring to workplace violence as "going postal". We think that the "Postalization of Corporate America" is a phenomena that will continue to escalate unless definitive measures are implemented by all governmental agencies and businesses, both large and small, throughout the country. While the federal government has been working on strategies to deal with workplace violence, state governmental agencies have only recently begun to assess and develop programs to deal**

with potential violence in the workplace. We predict that in the not too distant future, an act of violence is likely to occur from a commissioned peace officer, in some police facility, who is experiencing stresses beyond his control that precipitate his using deadly force against his fellow workers.

Workplace violence differs in several important ways from other crimes. It can be broken down into two major categories. The commercial type crime which would include high incident robberies of convenience and liquor stores, taxicab drivers and also workplace violence toward law enforcement officers, security guards and correctional institution officers. The second major category would include violence directed toward employees and supervisors in offices, warehouses and factories. A distinction between these two major categories is significant and the majority of the professional literature glosses over this information without clearly differentiating between the two. Businesses that are not directly engaged in dealing with the public consumer are primarily concerned with in-house directed acts of violence. For example, this type of violence in the workplace may be viewed as threats from inside versus the outside. Women who are attacked at work are more likely to be attacked by someone known to them as opposed to men. Domestic conflicts are likely to extend to the workplace and 5 percent of women who are assaulted at work are victimized by husbands and boyfriends, both current and ex. (Bachman, 1994). In those instances domestic violence spills over into the workplace from the outside unless it stems from an intimate relationship that initially began from contact at work such as a "love triangle". Other forms of potential violence involve stalking. Police training courses, in the past, have addressed stalking as a phenomena stemming from an erotic fixation. These have been primarily males who have fixated on women. This can, of course, occur outside the workplace as well, and has become such a well-known problem that virtually all states now have some type of antistalking legislation. In many such cases the victim may have no personal relationship with the perpetrator and may have attempted to discourage interest by ignoring the person, specifically denying any interest on their part and even notifying management. As has been reported in the media, men have become fixated on movie and TV personalities and have even attacked and killed them. Hence, therefore a common response from management has been to take no remedial action and, in some cases, have said personal relationship problems are not a company problem.

**Additional types of threats in the workplace, in addition to those that are made in person, include those made over the telephone, by Fax or by E-mail. While some of these individuals do not attempt to conceal their identities, that is not usually the case. Some of these threats are meant to harass and intimidate and, while the majority are not dangerous, they are quite disruptive. The type of threat that is most likely to be dangerous is when the perpetrator specifically states an intent to injure or kill the victim.**

**However, management is encouraged to respond to every type of threat and to establish a policy that governs the response that will be made for each type of incident. This approach is a proactive as opposed to a reactive mind-set and will, hopefully, deter an escalation from intimidation to actual physical confrontations. There should be a “zero tolerance policy” that is well documented and supported from the C.E.O. or administrators of governmental agencies down to on-site supervisors. This documentation should also include the development of an employee handbook that all members of the agency or company are required to read and sign a statement that they are aware of the outlined policies and the consequences of not following the rules. Additionally, it is imperative that each employee has a clear understanding of the organization’s policies and procedures and the consequences of each type of threat, be it considered “horseplay” or other type of behavior that many have heretofore been considered to be innuendoes behavior. Additional examples are abuses that are frequently couched in humor, sexual innuendoes that are in actuality sexual harassment, and other forms of belittlement and attempts to create an emotional reaction in the intended target.**

**Early attempts to determine who was likely to eventually engage in violent behavior focused on early childhood behaviors. MacDonald (1963;67) developed a triad of behaviors that included persistent bed wetting (enuresis), fire setting and cruelty to animals. These risk factors have been found in some cases of violence, including serial rapists and murderers, but are not inclusive enough. Along the same vein we have developed an additional triad and together these could be referred to as the dual triad of potentially violent individuals. This new triad includes a lack of early nurturance, such as child neglect and abuse, and has been referred to as the victim/victimizer link where the abused individual later acts out his own victimization. The second element of our new proposed triad is the historical presence of violent behavior. The recency, frequency and levels of violent behavior are also an important component of this second**

**element. The third element of our dual triad of potentially violent individuals is a precipitation psychosocial stressor that acts as a trigger for a violent act. The individual is a walking, ticking, time bomb waiting to explode. He then experiences that precipitating stressor that pushes him over the edge to a point that he attempts to resolve his problems via violence. The movie “Falling Down” starring Michael Douglas and produced by Warner Brothers (1992) is a classical example of a man who was overwhelmed by the stressors in his life as well as being angry and frustrated and sought to get even by killing a number of people.**

**If a more comprehensive approach to delineating the risk factors associated with violence is desired, then the major developmental domains must be considered. These factors associated with violence can be grouped in the following domains:**

### **1. Psychological, Social/Situational and Biological.**

#### **\* Psychological Correlates include the following:**

- **Male Violence tends to be gender related-** Males are approximately 10:1 more violent than females. Mantell & Albrecht (94) also point out that few lethal acts of violence are committed by women in the workplace.
- **Ages 15-24 About 40%-**of all violence is committed by those between the ages of 15 and 24 while they constitute less than 10% of the population. Except in the case of Antisocial Personality Disorders (psychopaths), violence tends to reduce greatly after the 20's; in psychopaths they may not “burn out” until the 40's or 50's. Mantell & Albrecht (94) report that they have found that the most serious acts of violence in the workplace are committed by males between the ages of 30 and 45. The U.S. Bureau of Statistics indicates that workers 65 and above suffer the highest fatality rate among all age groups in the workplace.
- **Past History-**of violence as mentioned earlier, behavior predicts behavior. Thus a past history of violence is predictive of future violence. However, the recency and frequency of such behavior is also an important consideration. During childhood, violence to animals, particularly to domestic ones is more predictive than to lower animals and other living creatures, such as insects. Violence to animals such as dogs and cats is more suggestive of a lack of emotional attachment than is the case, for example of insects and less domestic animals such as rodents.
- **Paranoid Ideation-**the presence of poor reality contact and feelings that others are “out to get me” (delusions of persecution) may lead to an irrational fear that an attack is imminent. Thus violence may be initiated as a defensive behavior due to misperception of the actual level of threat.
- **Intelligence Below Average-**as one's IQ decreases (within limits) the probability of violence tends to increase. This is not to say that individuals with higher IQ's are not violent but rather that average or above IQ affords one more options to

deal with conflict resolution as opposed to merely reacting aggressively.

**Psychopathy/other Attachment Pathology**-a poor bonding history and other attachment problems are also correlated with violence. If the child does not experience an early parenting relationship that is mostly nurturant, then they may become destructive toward themselves, as in Borderline Disorders or violent toward others, as in Antisocial Personality Disorders.

## 2. Social/Situational Correlates

- **Family that teaches Violence as a mode of communication**-the child that is exposed to parental violence in the home may learn that this is an acceptable mode of communication. The parents are seen physically assaulting each other and she/he learns that this is a “normal” type of interaction. They may also develop fantasies which involve violence and this may also become an impetus for future violent behavior.
- **Peer group endorses violence**-during adolescence the influence of the parents lessens as that of the peer group becomes dominant. If the adolescent is a member of a group that approves of violence, such as some gangs and other organizations, then violence is more probable. Additionally, interest in movies that depict violence toward women, such as slasher type movies, lower the control threshold and may initiate fantasies that are later acted out on a female victim
- **Job Instability, Loss, Threatened Loss**-economic suffering or threat increases the risk of violence. Socioeconomic status is a more important factor than race. This type of risk is increased during times when it is necessary for businesses to downsize and lay off employees. Termination of an individual is a significant psychosocial stressor that may eventually overwhelm their ability to cope. This may not be immediately evident as it may take some time for the terminated employee to exhaust monetary reserves and other sources of support. When they have exhausted all of their resources and appeals, then the tension level increases and at that point the individual may return to the workplace and engage in violence targeted primarily against management and others perceived as being responsible for their being fired. Highly publicized incidents of a terminated employee returning to the workplace and engaging in acts of mass destruction appears to be a delayed response ranging from two months to several years.
- **Weapons interest, Possession or Use**-the availability of guns and other weapons is associated with violent behavior. This is especially true when there is training in weapons use as approximately 75% of those people who carry out acts of violence in the workplace use guns. The presence of history of training, such as the military, going to the gun range and attending gun shows are “**approach**” behaviors. An interest in violent TV shows and movies that depict the use of weapons against others also shows an interest in violent behavior. Survivalist training when individuals use “**Paint Balls**” to mark the point of impact that would have been the bullet wound is a current example of this excessive focus on weapons training. This over focus on weapons can even apply to those whose job it is to carry arms such as law enforcement. We have personally witnessed a few officers who appear to be overly armed and show an obsessive interest in

weapons and the “**commando**” role. They would carry from 4 to 6 side arms and wear **SWAT** type clothing even when not on duty. Even children can “**pretend**” to use deadly force while playing video games. For example, the video game **Mortal Combat** allows you to decapitate your opponent and then watch the head roll on the ground while spurting blood and there will be more to come motivated by profit.

- **Victim availability**-the “**Victim Pool**” are those individuals that are available to the aggressor. This may include spouses, children and friends due to proximity. However victims of opportunity also include strangers who happen to be “**unlucky**” enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time as well as victims who are preselected and “**targeted**” for one reason or another. However, once these individuals become “**mission oriented**” and are in the process of acting out internalized anger, they are likely to kill anyone with whom they come in contact. In many cases the perpetrator kills himself after his rampage or when he perceives he will likely be apprehended by authorities.
- **Alcohol and/or Stimulant Use**-contrary to what many people believe, alcohol is commonly linked to violence. The accounts of cocaine or PCP “crazed” individuals going on a violence rampage is reported on the news while many more commonly alcohol induced attacks are not reported by the media. Lansevin, et al (82) stated that, “**the use of intoxicants in violence-prone individuals is the most important factor in homicide.**” However, most experts believe that the use of intoxicants is a contributing factor rather than being causative as the vast majority of such individuals are not violent (Forrest & Gorden, 1990).

### 3. Biological Correlates

- **History of Central Nervous System (CNS) Trauma**-there are forms of brain damage that are associated with violence. Therefore, a history of loss of consciousness, seizures, or head injury may be associated with some forms of violence.
- **Major Mental Illness**-while the mentally ill are usually more of a threat to themselves than others, loss of reality contact, delusions and hallucinations may lead to aggression. A history of violent behavior associated with a diagnosable mental condition is more predictive of future violence than a mental illness per se. There are also a number of different theories that attempt to explain violence but they can be distilled down into the following **six areas**:
- **Conflict/Frustration**-according to Dollard & Miller, the blocking of desired goals results in frustration and, depending upon the three domains mentioned above, aggressive behavior may result. The potentially aggressive person is likely to show body tension, facial rage, change in skin tone (red or purple) and increased voice volume.
- **Intimidation**-this may also result from conflict but some individuals can calmly threaten another and not exhibit the behavior signs mentioned above. They may be antisocial personalities who are devoid of empathic feelings and thus can take hostages, commit murder and brutalize others without feelings of remorse.

- **Manipulation.**-this individual may begin quite passively and attempt to engender pity in the person they are attempting to “*con*”. If this ploy does not work then they may progress to more strident and aggressive demands and actions.
- **Fear**-when a person perceives that they are under attack then they may respond in like kind. This perception may not be valid but it is their reality and thus drives their actions. The “**fight or flight**” syndrome may be seen which typically includes irregular breathing (rapid and shallow), pale, ashen colored skin with face fearful and eyes widely opened. The voice tone may vary and may be pleading and unsteady.
- **Social learning**-children learn through observation and imitation. When aggression is seen in the home and in the media as a way to resolve conflict, they learn to use violence as an acceptable mode for resolving human differences. Thus, according to Bandura, the child learns to act aggressively because it is reinforced and because of other exposure to it.
- **Catharsis**-Freud postulated that aggression is due to instinctual needs and needed to be released. Thus activities such as competing in and watching sports as well as reading about violence, and watching it for entertainment actually relieves the stress of one’s pent up predisposition to act aggressively.

## RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE CAN BE SEEN ON A CONTINUUM

- **Your presence**-your physical size and actions are a factor in determining whether or not someone will aggress toward you. Law enforcement refers to this as command presence. Those with it have fewer assaults than those whose command presence is seen as being poor. Criminals convicted of assaults have been questioned about the type of people they prefer to attack. They try to select someone who appears weak and vulnerable. They seek to avoid people who appear to be confident, self assured and able to protect themselves.
- **Communication skills**-appropriate phrases can decrease the probability of an assault while other verbalizations may increase the odds of being confronted. Verbal persuasion may appeal to reason, consequences or emotions. Appeals to reason deal with rational thinking and may involve problem solving, correcting errors in logic and a reinterpretation of the event. Appeal to consequences is also consistent with a rational approach; however , it is best to point out how certain behavioral choices will lead to a positive outcome for them as opposed to focusing on negative consequences. Words have both literal and emotional meaning. Certain words can trigger powerful emotions that may result in aggressive (or other) behavior. Words that may be interpreted negatively should be avoided while words that evoke positive emotions are preferred. How those words are spoken (prosody) also influences the message that is being sent.
- **Nonverbal communication**-the study of personal space is called proxemics. Intrusion into one’s most intimate zone (touch to about 3 feet) cause most of us to feel uncomfortable. A touch can be soothing or can evoke aggression. Cultural factors also influence these zones. Your body posture, eye contact and facial expressions also convey information.

- **Physical elements**-the deflection of a blow is an evasive form of self-defense. Defenses against grabs and holds are also forms of self-defense although offensive tactics can be incorporated in their delivery. Finally, offensive behaviors that involve strikes by the hands, elbows, knees or feet along with throws and other physical actions can be initiated against an aggressor. These methods, both defensive and offensive, typically require formal training as well as practice if one is to be proficient. Before physical force is considered, it is important for the intervener to not only be proficient in the use of force, but also to adhere to company policies and guidelines as well as considering the legal implications such actions.
- **Weapons**-the use of weapons for defense against aggression can vary from a spray (such as mace or pepper), club, or knife to a firearm. These are clearly aggressive measures and may not be a legal form of defense, depending upon the circumstances. When such drastic measures are needed the help of law enforcement should be enlisted.

**Any aggression may be looked at as involving a cycle. There are some events that activate the person emotionally. This involves the individual's perception which may or may not mirror reality but it is their reality. Once activated, another stimulus further increases the sympathetic nervous system's response and thus escalates the probability of aggression. At some point a critical level will be reached and violent behavior occurs. After this happens the body seeks to recover and return to a more balanced, less excited state (homeostasis). As heightened emotional states are draining, both physically and psychologically, feelings of being emotionally drained and physically exhausted may be experienced. Fisher & Ury (1987) and Thompson & Stroud (1984) both focus on trying to resolve conflict through win-win solutions. Attempts to include the person being disciplined in developing appropriate responses lessens emotional arousal and thus the probability of a violent reaction.**

**Those seeking to respond effectively to a potentially aggressive assault will do well to keep the discussed factors and reactive behaviors in mind. While violent behavior is not always predictable, the above detailed information has been found to be reliably associated with aggressive behavior. Just as schools and other facilities have fire drills, exercises desired to deal with workplace violence should also be planned, implemented and practiced so that a well-established course of action has been predetermined in the event such actions are required.**

### ***A TEN STEP VIOLENCE PREVENTION APPROACH***

- **Initial screening**-this is probably the **most effective** step that an employer can take. While it is imperative that you obtain legal counsel regarding the appropriateness of such screening, research has determined that psychological testing may be helpful. Additionally, you should make every effort to validate **criminal, credit, academic, work, driving, and military** histories/records. Appropriate preemployment screening eliminates many potentially future violent individuals and needs to be consistently applied to all applicants. This may not be

effective “down the road” when formerly good employees become disgruntled due to uncontrollable circumstances, some unpredictable mental decompensation or loss of support systems, but it can be a deterrent in many cases. Outplacement counseling and assistance programs may lessen the effects of downsizing, layoffs and other necessary reductions in the work force.

- **Supervisory identification training**-immediate supervisors should be trained to identify employees who appear to be experiencing emotional problems and other personal crises. This training should be mandatory for all levels but it is imperative that those with the most contact with workers receive adequate training including ongoing updates. This training should also include when and how to discipline employees. Discipline should be done in private and away from other workers. It should also be consistently applied to all employees and should not degenerate to personal attack but rather remain focused on work related issues, leaving the person’s dignity intact. Appropriate disciplining should follow the simple yet effective **A, B, and C model**. **A** stands for **Attendance**. Does the person come to work on time, stay the whole day, return from breaks and lunch on time, not abuse sick leave and generally adhere to company attendance policies? **B** stands for **Behavior**. Does the worker exhibit appropriate workplace behavior? This would include following company work rules, treating others in a civil manner and generally being a team player. **C** stands for **Competency**. Does the worker know how to do the job at an acceptable level? Is the work produced consistent with expectations when compared with peers of similar job assignment and experience levels? Failure to adhere to the ABC’s are the only reasons for disciplining an employee.
- **Management approaches to dealing with conflicts**-arbitrary and dictatorial approaches to workers that do not take into consideration the needs and wants of others tends to engender resentment and anger in workers. This may eventually result in acts of violence ranging from minor forms of intimidation, sabotage of work produce or equipment, to more violently overt acts such as homicidal rage.
- **How one’s life experiences affect the workplace**-management needs to accept the fact that events outside the workplace affect worker performance. Family conflicts and personal issues of the workers may necessitate having the supervisor listen to the worker’s concerns and making appropriate mental health referrals when indicated.
- **Training the employees in conflict resolution**-increasing the worker’s options to include the ability to verbalize complaints, will lessen the probability that the person will eventually act out violently. The employee needs to learn how to express their wants and needs in an objective manner and the supervisor needs to help them focus on the available options and alternatives. Stress management training, to provide employees with effective coping skills, is an important means of inoculating employees against the negative effects of cumulative stress
- **Counseling and employee assistance programs**-many companies today have established Employee Assistance Programs (E.A.P.) These may be in-house or involve an outside referral with an independent contractor. If such services are not available at your company, it is strongly recommended that such a program be initiated. Additional resources are the establishment of peer counselors, which has

been initiated in many emergency response organizations. Pastoral counseling is also an option that some companies have begun to offer as an adjunct to other available services.

- **Security options**-the initial purpose of these devices was to protect resources from outside forces; however, they are also a valuable tool for curtailing all types of employee interactions that are not company approved. Security cameras have been useful in recording criminal acts, such as armed robbery and theft of goods. Additionally, the presence of security personnel provides a high profile observable deterrent to confrontations by all individuals in the area. Other considerations are physical facilities layout, controlled access, monitoring of reception areas and signaling devices in the case of emergencies. This should also extend to employee and customer parking areas as the company may be liable for acts of violence directed toward individuals on any of the company premises. There are **legal implications** related to **negligent security**. Other legal implications include **negligent hiring, negligent retention and failure to inform**. A well-developed plan should also include the steps needed to contact emergency response personnel in the event the need arises.
- **Assessment of overall program**-risk management **assessment** is an **ongoing process**. Once a program has been developed and implemented, its effectiveness needs to be constantly assessed. Those assessments should be the basis for changes that are designed to further improve security measures for protection of company resources and personnel. This proactive approach will not only reduce violence in the workplace but will also offer a good legal defense should that become necessary.
- **Soliciting input from all employees**-while supervisors and security personnel are the identified personnel for developing and implementing violence control programs, the workers are also valuable resources. They know from their own observations what appears to be effective and what is not working as it was designed. Actively seeking comments for improvement from all employees will enhance feelings of belonging on the team and make them feel that what they have to contribute is worthwhile and valuable. Also, to the extent they were responsible for the programs in place, they will be more motivated to adhere to them. The long time Neighborhood Watch Program used by local police departments is a good example of an attempt to include those they are trying to protect in their crime deterrent approach. Similarly, one could develop a **“Company Watch Program”** designed to include all workers for the benefit of everyone concerned.
- **Debriefing after an incident**-despite all the precautions taken, it is impossible to guarantee that no violence will occur at your company or governmental agency. The capacity to protect is limited. Even the Secret Service, with all their resources, is not always able to guarantee the safety of the President of the United States. If an incident does occur, then measures to help employees deal with the psychological aftermath are imperative to forestall even more potentially debilitating results. Critical incident Stress Debriefing (C.I.S.D.) was developed by Mitchell (1984) to help emergency response personnel deal with the vast array of violent events that they experience in their daily work experiences. While these

individuals, by the very nature of their jobs, constantly have to deal with human tragedy and violence, it has been determined that they are not immune from having personal reactions. These same procedures are also applicable to the private sector as a form of psychological first aid which initiates and facilitates the healing process.

## **SUMMARY**

**It appears to be a foregone conclusion that frequent headlines depicting workplace violence will continue to appear in newsprint around the nation. Research has indicated that pre-employment screening continues to be an important tool in screening out those workers who show a tendency toward future workplace violence. An institutionally promulgated plan regarding violence in the workplace as well as a zero tolerance policy toward any overt or covert acts, be they minor or significant, is also an important spoke in the wheel of violence elimination. Supervisory training in the ABC's of disciplining and a policy of addressing these issues early on as opposed to allowing them to continue until termination is imminent should also be a major consideration in one's violence prevention program. An overall company policy of applying the Golden Rule should be both the formal and informal policy. This rule, of course, dates back to Biblical days, and simply states, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Additionally, a response team needs to be established that includes personnel from management, security and human relations services. Finally, care after an event should also be a part of the overall violence prevention policy as it will establish in the worker's minds the care and concern that the company or agencies has for all its employees. This policy of after care may not only reduce any future psychological problems in the workers but even prevent future employee conflicts with management.**

**Adhering to these recommendations will help reduce conflicts and emotional upheavals in the workplace and make both the employer and the employees winners.**

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