

Myths And Reality About Anger In The Workplace: What Do Managers Need To Know?

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ABSTRACT

Existing categorization of workplace data ignores an opportunity to provide more distinct and relevant information on workplace incidents. This article describes current reporting of violence in the workplace and what issues must be addressed to be of better service to organizations. In addition to knowing statistical realities, managers must become very self-aware of their reactions to anger as a part of the overall anger management strategy of the organization. Emotional Intelligence research provides valuable tools for managers and supervisors to improve their responses to anger in the workplace.

Keywords: workplace violence, anger management, emotional intelligence

INTRODUCTION

*P*olice: One Dead In Disgruntled Worker's Rampage” August 30, 2007, WNBC News, New York City, NY

“Suspect, Victims In Safeway Shooting Rampage Identified” June 26m 2006, ABC News, Denver, CO.

“City worker opens fire after being reprimanded -- one dead, gunman kills himself,” Feb. 25, 2005, ABC News, Los Angeles, CA.

“Sixth Death In KC Rampage” July 3, 2004 CBS News, Kansas City, KS.

“7 Dead In Chicago Rampage” August 27, 2003 CBS News

“7 dead in Nimitz Hwy. Xerox shooting” November 2, 1999 Honolulu Star-Bulletin

These news headlines cover stories about allegedly disgruntled employees killing coworkers. National awareness of violence in the workplace was raised by a series of fatal shootings in U.S. post offices during the 1990s.

Despite stereotypes about these tragic events, not all violence in the workplace is the result of angry or disgruntled employees. Actually, the tragedies covered in news reports represent a very small percent of the incidents of workplace violence. Statistical analyses of workplace violence data have produced conflicting opinions about the potential threat. Although there is some value in the data, the US statistics on workplace violence provide managers and supervisors with little direction about possible strategies to address anger in the workplace.

One purpose of this article is to increase awareness of how the existing categorization of data ignores an opportunity to provide more distinct and relevant information on workplace incidents. This gap in the reporting results in misleading data. The article describes the U.S. government data and reporting of violence in the workplace and what issues must be addressed for the data to help organizations develop appropriate strategies.

The second purpose of this article is to emphasize the need for managers and supervisors to become very self-aware of their own reactions to anger as a part of the overall anger management strategy of the organization; this point is demonstrated in psychology literature, but lacking in the business and management literature. Emotional

Intelligence (EI) research offers tools for improving self-awareness, which can facilitate appropriate responses to anger in the workplace.

Through this examination of the current data collection and categorizations on violence in the workplace, managers and supervisors can better understand the realities of how these reporting methods identify the issues related to their organizations. With greater awareness of the types of threats in their situations, managers and supervisors can know how to prepare.

MYTHS ABOUT WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), under the U.S. Department of Labor, “Workplace Violence is violence or the threat of violence against workers. It can occur at or outside the workplace and can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide, one of the leading causes of job-related deaths. However it manifests itself, workplace violence is a growing concern for employers and employees nationwide” (Workplace Violence 2002). This growing concern is stimulated in part by the methodology used by the federal government to categorize workplace violence.

In November 2004, the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (n.d.) convened a conference on workplace violence prevention with the following categories of types of violence in the workplace delineated in the conference plan.

Type I – criminal intent
Type II – customer/client

Type III – worker-on-worker
Type IV – personal relationship

Many resources offering guidance, services, and equipment to managers and supervisors about violence in the workplace are either focused on type I risks or specific occupations with high type II risks. Examples of high risk occupations include convenience store robberies (type I) and attacks on community health workers (type II). Domestic violence accounts for many of the type IV incidents. However, workplace violence prevention strategies vary greatly for different workplace environments, occupations, work sites, and clientele.

In spite of the recognized four categories of types of violence in the workplace that result in death or physical and emotional injury, the various agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, that track statistics tend to combine all the reported incidents. For example, a database query on the number of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses treated in U.S. emergency department for 1999 shows 46,300 people were injured by assaults and violent acts by persons other than the injured worker (@workRISQS nd). The most recent data from the US Bureau of Justice website (2001) are also from 1999 and there is no separation of injuries suffered by taxi drivers during robberies and injuries suffered by a clerk who was hit by a book thrown by an angry coworker. This data handling results in information that can be misleading for management.

STATISTICAL REALITIES

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics report (2001), *Violence in the Workplace, 1993-1999*, tells us, “Twelve percent of all workplace victims sustained injuries from the incident. Of those injuries sustained from workplace violence, about 10 out of 11 were minor injuries. Fifty-three percent of all injured victims were not treated or did not receive medical care for injuries sustained, while 26% received treatment from a medical office, clinic, or hospital” (p. 6).

This is not to say that any physical violence is acceptable, but rather, to point out that physical danger in the workplace from angry current or former employees is not found statistically to be as great a threat as the headlines might lead us to believe. Although not all violence in the workplace is caused by anger and not all anger in the workplace results in physical violence, managers and supervisors do need to learn about anger in the workplace.

ANGER IN THE WORKPLACE

Some researchers argue that violence in the workplace is most often situation-specific—a combination of factors that converge (Tedeschi & Felson 1994). Whereas others take an individual-specific or profile approach to identify an employee with the potential to “go postal” (Davis 1997). According to Denenberg and Braverman (2001), worker-on-worker violence is often the eruption of accumulated hostility, stress, or conflict. Sensitive employment decisions can also contribute worker-on-worker violence (Dickinson 1997). As such, the potential factors can often be identified and addressed; this is where managers and supervisors are the key personnel for early intervention. However, resources providing guidance for type III risks are limited.

There is considerable anger in the workplace that managers and supervisors can and must be prepared to address. Anger manifests itself in a wide variety of ways and costs organizations money and productivity. An analysis of a 1996 Gallup Poll revealed that one in four employees has a constant feeling of work-related anger. (Gibson & Barsade 1999) Both episodic and chronic anger issues pose threats in the workplace and managers and supervisors must be trained to address them.

In a study published in 1995, Gibson identified criticism by others, being ignored by others, and being treated unjustly as the primary causes indicated by nearly half of the respondents who felt anger in workplace situations. Passive-aggressive behavior is one way employees demonstrate anger (Kirwan-Taylor 2003). Passive-aggressive behaviors can manifest in willful procrastination and incompetence to sabotage and undermining organizational objectives. Workplace anger can be demonstrated by various degrees—from inappropriate behavior to violent aggression.

WHAT MANAGERS NEED TO KNOW

Most organizations recognize the need to protect workers from dangers. The U.S. government and the courts are holding organizations liable for violence in the workplace where the employer has not provided adequate protection of employees. A 2005 American Management Association survey found that 65% of the executive members and customers have a crisis plan for workplace violence or unethical employee behavior (up from 35% in 1994) (American Management Association n.d.). However, these plans are often developed after an incident or crisis has occurred (Sarkis 2000).

Literature on workplace anger and anger management primarily examines two perspectives: 1) to help supervisors deal with angry employees and 2) to help employees deal with their own anger issues. However, the management literature does not emphasize the need to become self-aware of emotions in order to address anger in the workplace.

As emotional beings, managers and supervisors have developed automatic reactions to angry behaviors based on cumulative experiences, including the sensationalized publicity about employee rampages. Therefore, the anticipated behaviors of angry employees may or may not manifest in expected consequences (Van Coillie & Van Mechelen 2006). Managers and supervisors need to become very self-aware of their own reactions to anger as a part of the overall anger management strategy of the organization; this point is missing in the business and management literature.

The flight/fight psychology theory explains that when someone encounters an angry person, there is a tendency to react, physically and emotionally, the same way as one reacts when they get angry themselves (Gilbert 2001). The gap in management and employee training literature is in the dearth of guidance to help managers and supervisors identify their own reactions to expressions of anger by others. Literature in negotiation and conflict resolution does emphasize that one must be self-aware of their own responses to anger in order to be effective in their mediations (Schreier 2002). *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzer 2002) offers managers keys to self-awareness and strategies for dialogue in highly emotional contexts.

Emotional intelligence literature also provides guidance for identifying one's own emotions and emphasizes that managing emotions, one's own and others', is a more complex skill (Mayer & Salovey 1993). Emotional Intelligence literature provides tools for individuals and groups to develop their skills in recognizing and managing emotions (Rivers, Brackett, Katulak & Salovey 2006; P Ogilvie & Carsky 2002 Adler, Rosen & Silverstein 1998).

Emotional Intelligence literature offers several ways for managers and supervisors to become more self-aware of their responses to employee manifestations of anger. There are several useful emotional intelligence tools for improving self-awareness and, as shown above, self-awareness is key to implementation of learned guidelines for dealing with angry employees. Managers can develop skills to identify their own reactions and more effectively respond to inappropriate employee behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Managers who recognize the myths and realities of workplace violence can better address anger in their workplace. The news headlines and the federal government methodology for reporting on violence in the workplace contribute to a myth about the prevalence of violence perpetrated by angry employees.

The realities of anger in the workplace are that it is much less likely that an angry employee will go on a killing rampage than the prevailing and costly threats of sabotage, procrastination, and other forms of aggressive and passive-aggressive employee behavior resulting from chronic and episodic employee anger.

With the prevalence of angry employees, whether chronic or episodic, managers and supervisors need to develop their anger management tools to facilitate appropriate expressions in the workplace and to assist employees. Managers and supervisors need to understand their own reactions to employees' various expressions of anger in order to be better prepared to implement the most effective techniques for dealing with angry employees.

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