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WORKPLACE VIOLENCE THREATS

Many times, a violent act is preceded by a threat. The threat may have been explicit or veiled, spoken or unspoken, specific or vague, but it occurred. In other instances, behaviour may be observed by others, which might suggest the potential for some type of violent act to occur. Yet in other cases, it may be the off-handed remark or comments made to people close to the individual, which may suggest problematic behaviour.

Any workplace violence strategy must include measures to detect, assess and manage threats and behaviour. Saying that is easier than doing it. Normally there is no doubt that a homicide or assault has been committed; often it is harder to establish that a threat has been made. In addition, the effects of a threat are subjective and subtle; usually there is no physical evidence. Some threats are not criminal and, therefore, not subject to law enforcement intervention and prosecution.

Despite these difficulties, threat response is an essential component of any workplace violence plan. The first need, obviously, is to define the term.

What Constitutes a Threat?

Webster's Dictionary defines a threat as "a statement or expression of intention to hurt, destroy, punish, etc., as in retaliation or intimidation." That's clear enough, as far as it goes, but it leaves open a question that legal authorities or employers have to answer in framing and carrying out a policy on threats: who determines when an intention to hurt has been expressed?

A workplace violence prevention program addressing threats needs to include both a subjective and an objective component. It must set reasonably explicit standards of behaviour so employees know how they are expected to act or not act; it must also make clear to employees that no one has a right to make anyone else feel threatened.

A sample definition could be "an inappropriate behaviour, verbal or nonverbal communication or expression that would lead to the reasonable belief that an act has occurred or may occur which may lead to physical and/or psychological harm to the threatener, to others or to property." Alternative: "Any verbal or physical conduct that threatens property or personal safety or that reasonably could be interpreted as intent to cause harm."

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Identifying and Reporting Threats and Threatening Behaviour

The best plans for threat assessment and response will be useless if employers or those assigned to respond to workplace violence don't know that a threat has been made. Detecting threats depends largely on the workplace culture. If employees are too afraid or too alienated from management to report violent or threatening behaviour by co-workers, no violence prevention program will be effective. To encourage reporting, employers can create a climate in which safety is accepted as a common goal for workers and management and all employees feel free to report disturbing incidents or possible danger signs.

Along with encouraging employees to report violence or threats, employers also have to inform them where to report and what to report.

To the extent that employees feel comfortable reporting incidents to their immediate supervisors, the information may come through the normal management channels. However, having additional reporting channels can facilitate reporting where an employee finds it difficult to report through a supervisor. Whatever reporting system is adopted–

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publicizing it on bulletin boards, employee newsletters, notices distributed with paycheques or other means—will help ensure that all workers know how to report any behaviour they consider troubling.

To further facilitate the identification of threats, employees, supervisors and managers can receive training to help them detect out-of-bounds behaviour or other warning signs. Training can also help educate workers and supervisors on how to respond to someone who seems troubled or potentially dangerous and how to report that behaviour to managers. Training can also include a very clear statement to all employees on what to do if they see or become aware of a weapon (in almost all circumstances, leave the location and call for help). Any training program should be sensitive to cultural assumptions and stereotypes and emphasize focusing on an individual's manner, conduct and behaviour rather than ethnic or other group identity or a "profile" of a dangerous person.

Threat Assessment

Threat assessment has two parts: an evaluation of the threat itself; that is, the assessment of the credibility and overall viability of an expression of an intent to do harm, and an evaluation of the threatener. Together, these evaluations can help lead to an informed judgment on whether someone who has made a threat is likely to carry it out—a determination that has been described as "differentiating when someone is making a threat or is posing a threat." The assessment can also help the employer decide what will be an appropriate intervention.

Threat Management

The goal of threat assessment is to place a threat somewhere on a hierarchy of dangerousness and, on that basis, determine an appropriate intervention. If a threat is immediate, specific and critical, the obvious response is to call the police right away.

A threat that is veiled or less specific and does not appear to presage immediate violence may call for less urgent measures: referral for psychological evaluation and counselling, for example. Many threats will turn out to be harmless blowing off steam and require nothing more than a formal admonition to the employee that his or her language or conduct was not appropriate and violated company policy.

Threat Assessment and Incident Response Teams

An employer's workplace violence prevention program should designate the personnel who will be specifically responsible for overseeing the organization's antiviolence policy, including threat assessment and crisis management. Teams should have the authority, training and support needed to meet their responsibilities.

The threat assessment and incident response teams will be responsible for responding to ALL reports of violence, threats, harassment or other events or conduct that may frighten any employee.

Often, team members will receive special training in risk evaluation, threat assessment, conflict resolution and procedures to monitor, document and develop a response to all cases brought to their attention. They also need to be aware of, and have contingency plans for, issues such as dealing with the news media in the event of a major incident and helping meet employees' needs in the aftermath of a violent death or other traumatic workplace event.

It should be explained that, often, these teams will not conduct threat assessments themselves, but instead will seek the assistance of outside threat assessment professionals to perform the function with the team's collaboration.