

## **Workplace Violence – Reducing the Risk**

Leadership and Executive Development

### **Copycat Risk**

### **Recent Incidents of Workplace Violence**

November 2009

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#### *Leadership Excellence Training*

#### *Enterprise Risk Management*

#### *Behavioral Risk Management*

- PWICollaboration Software
- Managing Workplace Violence Process
- Violence Vulnerability Audit Services
- Protective Measures for Public Venues
- Terrorism Vulnerability Assessment Services
- Managing School Violence Process
- Leadership Enhanced Decision Making
- Violence Threat Assessment
- Expert Witness

## **Nationally Spotlighted Incidents**

The two back to back nationally spotlighted incidents of workplace violence at the beginning of November, 2009, left many employers concerned about the growing threat of workplace violence and proactive steps their organizations can take to reduce the risk and prevent incidents from occurring.

### **Workplace Violence Incidents More Numerous**

In addition to those two incidents that made such headlines, you may not be aware that there were several other incidents within the last week that did grab much media attention. The acts of workplace violence, however, were just as important to those organizations and the victims who were involved. In Tualatin, Oregon, for instance, an estranged husband killed his wife and wounded her co-workers, and then committed suicide after opening fire in a drug-testing laboratory. The Department of Justice reports more than 1,000,000 violent victimizations in the workplace each year, resulting in over 160,000 serious injuries.

After these tragic incidents, there is always the danger that copycat incidents will follow. For people already contemplating committing acts of violence in their place of employment or their former workplace (as was the case in the Florida shooting), seeing the news coverage of an incident may trigger action on the part of someone already not thinking rationally. The comment of the shooter in Florida when asked why he'd done it was that he felt the company had left him to "rot". This is a classic case of blaming someone else for your problems. The danger with this type of thinking is that whatever violence they commit is, in their minds, deserved by the victims.

### **Inappropriate, Violent Behaviors**

Inappropriate violent behaviors at the earliest stage reveal a person who uses confrontation and challenge as coping mechanisms. As the violent behaviors move to the second stage, indicators may intensify in severity and include threats. The most extreme stage of violent behavior is hands on violence including rape and sexual assaults. The Department of Justice reports 51,000 such assaults; these are acts of workplace violence.

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### **Observable Behaviors**

People who commit acts of workplace violence usually display a cluster of behaviors. Sometimes you may observe only one behavior, but colleagues and co-workers may observe several other troublesome behaviors. Good, timely communication helps put all the pieces together. Over the last few days, the news media have interviewed many people who saw behaviors in the shooting suspects that should have raised red flags, but failed to communicate their concerns to others or did not follow up with a thorough investigation utilizing trained threat assessors. The missed red flags often come to light after these tragic incidents. In 8 of 10 cases analyzed after violent incidents, the killers left behind clear warning signs. Some of these behaviors are: showing guns to co-workers; threatening a bosses or co-workers; or talking about attacking. But in the majority of cases, employers ignored, downplayed or misjudged the threat.

That is why it is imperative to have on-call; licensed, experienced threat assessment professionals analyze all of the behavioral signs and determine the level of dangerousness they present.

### **Professionally Trained Threat Assessors**

In order to appropriately respond to workplace violence, Professional Workplace Interaction (PWI) provides a mental health professional (psychologist) with experience in workplace violence intervention and prevention procedures, behavioral analysis, and threat response techniques and procedures. This licensed, experienced professional is available for consultation in the event of a threatening situation or a hands-on workplace violence incident. PWI provides 24-hour, 7-day a week telephonic and electronic threat assessment consultation services. Upon request onsite assessment is also available.

The objectives of threat assessment are to:

- Obtain as much information as possible about the behavior of the individual making the threat and the associated circumstances.
- Develop an understanding of the threat level of the individual that includes behavioral patterns and impulse control, and potential for violence.
- Create and implement a response plan aimed at defusing the threat, preventing its reoccurrence, and diminishing the chance of injury to those involved.

We encourage organizations to involve our Threat Assessment professionals at the lowest level of behavioral issues, before the incident escalates. The Threat Assessment Professional can then immediately begin to strategize the best manner for the company to proceed. It does not what time of day or night an incident unfolds as early intervention is the best remedy for maintaining a safe workplace.

Lessons learned from workplace violence incidents clearly show that if an organization does not provide a safe environment, workplace violence will continue to escalate until it is too late. In order to protect workers as required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), organizations must have a Workplace Violence Prevention Program in place.

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### **Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)**

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) mandates that employers maintain a safe workplace which encompasses several critical components. OSHA identifies the following key components of a Workplace Violence Prevention Program:

1. Management commitment and employee involvement
2. Worksite hazard analysis
3. Hazard prevention and control
4. Safety and health training for workers, managers and supervisors (this includes workplace violence prevention training)
5. Post incident debriefing activities including appropriate evaluation and treatment of all workers affected by an incident of violence
6. Accurate recordkeeping and frequent evaluation of the program by employees, management, and outside consultants

#### **Additionally, your Workplace Violence Prevention Program should include:**

- Policies that address harassment and bullying
- Methods for detection, confiscation and control of firearms and weapons from anyone (other than law enforcement officers) that enter your buildings
- Security guards trained according to national standards

Issues such as workplace violence, bullying, harassment, theft, and discrimination are serious problems that are often not reported. Whether an employee is a victim or a witness, there are several reasons why they are reluctant to tell anyone about it. The employee may feel like they will get in trouble if they “tell” on someone, they may feel threatened or intimidated. Often, they feel like their report will just be ignored.

### **Resources for Those Affected by the Fort Hood Shootings**

We wanted to include a resource for anyone affected by the shootings at Fort Hood. This is information from the American Psychological Association regarding the shootings at Fort Hood in Texas: “In response to the tragic shootings at Fort Hood in Texas, we have posted the following resources to [www.apahelpcenter.org](http://www.apahelpcenter.org), “*Managing Your Distress after a Mass Shooting*”, as well as, “*Resilience in a Time of War*.””

At the same time we are interested in providing support services to those affected by these horrific shootings, we caution you to be aware of anyone praising these violent deeds. Often after a shooting, sympathizers of the shooter are open in their praise for these violent deeds. Such actions should be immediately assessed by professional threat assessors.

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### **Let PWI Help You**

Organizations can make a difference in reducing the risk of workplace violence when given the opportunity and we help you by providing workplace solutions to many of the challenges organizations face in maintaining a safe, productive work place. We applaud your efforts to educate employees on the growing threat of workplace violence and proactive steps your organization can take to prevent incidents from occurring.

Is there a good date/time you would be available for a quick conference call/online demonstration to learn about our Threat Assessment services and how Professional Workplace Interaction's full Behavioral Risk Reduction program can assist you to reach your goals? We have several potential opportunities for us to work together to help you prevent workplace violence while keeping your employees safe and productive.

### **About the author**

ROBERTA S. FLYNN, Psy.D. is a Director, trainer and product development specialist for Professional Workplace Interaction, Inc. She has 30 years of experience as a speaker, teacher, and instructor in government, school, hospital, industrial, and law enforcement settings. Her training seminar topics include professional interaction, conflict resolution, cultural diversity, stress management, ethics, and workplace and school violence.

She also specializes in Threat Assessment, Expert Witness testimony, Violence Assessments, and Disaster Preparedness/Response/Recovery issues. She has trained response teams for organizations in the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and led table-top and other exercises to produce more effective preparation and response protocols.

Dr. Flynn is a retired San Diego Police Sergeant, with 15 years of law enforcement experience; responding to critical incidents and disasters. She is an expert in working with special populations such as mentally and physically challenged individuals, psychiatric clients, the homeless, the elderly and veterans. Her expertise includes workers' compensation issues, workplace ergonomics, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and counseling industrially injured workers. She is knowledgeable about vicarious liability, negligent retention and sexual harassment; issues that seriously impact both employers and employees.