

Beyond Profiling: Can You Screen for Violence Potential?

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Hardly a week passes in the life of a workplace violence consultant that “the call” does not come in. Usually, it comes from a Human Resources or Safety & Health manager who has been tasked with implementing a violence prevention program for his or her company. The caller usually makes one or both of the following request: “Can you provide guidelines for screening individuals with violence potential?” Can you train our supervisors on the ‘profile’ of the violent employee?” It is then the job of the consultant to respectfully but firmly put this aspect of workplace violence prevention into proper perspective. Violence prevention efforts that are limited to the search for “telltale” individual characteristics are at best ineffective. In our experience, they actually get employers into trouble. Focusing violence prevention efforts on prediction based on a “profile” list leads to panicky and often disastrous “witch hunt” reactions. With respect to pre-employment screening, it raises troublesome legal issues. Yes, you must be diligent in your hiring practice, and you must react to behaviors that create a dangerous or unhealthy climate in the workplace. But workplace violence prevention has more to do with building systems than it has to do with predicting individual behavior.

Human behavior is difficult to predict and extremely complex. Violence occurs as a response to stress, through an interaction of personality factors and life circumstances. The individual factors that may predispose to violence at some point in the future cannot be reliably detected through testing or interviewing. The value of any information that you gather regarding an employee will be useful only when viewed in context, that is, when the employee is exhibiting particular behavior as a response to circumstances. The best interviewing and screening efforts are highly fallible with respect to effective violence prevention. We do not recommend the use of personality tests or other inventories as a way to “screen” for violence potential at the hiring stage. The most effective way to prevent violence is to implement systems that can *detect actual behavior*, both past and present. This means (1) exercising diligence in exploring a potential hire’s past history, and (2) implementing policies that increase your ability to detect and respond to danger signs when they appear.

Hiring: If violence potential is so hard to spot, how can I protect myself at the hiring stage? We recommend two strategies: (1) Adopt policies to ensure that your diligence and judgment about this issue at the hiring stage is not compromised by business pressures or personal preferences (e.g. an urgent need to hire help during a growth period, or pressure from a superior to hire a favorite applicant). In order to avoid these dangers, you need (a) criteria to “trigger” the need for special procedures to follow in considering a hire, and (b) clearly articulated procedures to follow in those cases. (2) Strengthen your information-gathering from previous employers by reminding them that they can be liable if they withhold information that would warn of violence potential. This and other non-standard actions should not be a matter for individual discretion, but based on consultation with an appropriate team and guided by predetermined principles that are part of an overall violence prevention policy.

Record keeping and documentation: Typically, an employer will come to us about someone who has reportedly threatened others or who is perceived as dangerous. We usually find that this behavior has been going on for a while, usually years, and that there is little, if any, documentation of administrative actions taken in response to these behaviors. This is because most threatening behavior is used to control and intimidate others, and it usually works. In the absence of company policies regarding violence and threats, this sort of behavior is often ignored: the offender is given “wide berth.” When the person finally pushes to far, the company managers are in a weak position because they have ignored or tolerated the behavior for so long. This is not good for the offender and not good for the company. Have your policies be clear and consistently applied, and document carefully. When there is a reported threat, you should be able to open a file and see if there is a record of actions taken in response to behaviors that violate your zero tolerance policy. If, *in the course of your response to unacceptable behavior*, your investigation turns up information relevant to violence risk, (e.g., a history of violence, problems with alcohol, or experience with and ownership of weapons), this can now properly, usefully and legally be part of that person’s file and the basis for any action.

The need for special procedures: Understanding the reality of organizational change and the stresses that it brings for a particular company is key in developing these solutions. In our work with companies large and small, we have learned that organizational change increases the need for a focused approach to violence prevention. This is true for two reasons. First, psychological uncertainty and economic insecurity create stress that in some employees results in threatening or violent behavior. Second, organizational change can strain management system so that rapid and smooth decision-making, especially in crisis situations (which proliferate in a change environment), can be altered. We have found that standard Human Resource procedures and practices are dangerously ineffective in dealing with violence prevention and response to possible threats. Therefore, the most efficient approach is to develop special procedures and policies to manage the rise by the hiring process, downsizing, and reported threats. These policies and procedures must become part of your emerging organizational culture, a culture that acknowledges the reality of change and the stresses it exerts on individuals and systems.

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