

Lessons learned from the Crandon shooting

Question:

In light of the recent deadly shooting spree in Crandon, we've spent some time talking about a company policy for dealing with violent employees or those we feel have the potential to be violent. We've had a number of employees who I guess you'd say exhibited weird behavior, but fortunately for us, nothing's ever happened. But these stories about drive-by shootings, school shootings and the like are too common to ignore. What is a reasonable approach for a company that wants to make sure that it does what it can to minimize the chances of a violent act occurring?

Answer:

At the outset, let me say that I applaud you for confronting this issue. Whether we want to believe it or not, the facts tell us that our society is a violent one. Consider, for a moment, these statistics from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the U.S.

Department of Justice:

- While working or on duty, U.S. residents experienced 1.7 million violent victimizations annually, between 1993 and 1999.
- Workplace violence accounted for 18 percent of all violent crime between 1993 and 1999.
- Each week, an average of 20 people are murdered and 18,000 are assaulted while working or on duty in the United States.
- Homicide is the leading cause of death from occupational injury among females and the second leading cause of death from occupational injury among males.

With specific reference to the Crandon shooting incident, we know that the perpetrator was a law enforcement officer. While this was an unusual situation, let me observe that the same sources cited above tell us that law enforcement is the occupation in which individuals are most likely to be victims of workplace violence. Specifically, police officers were victims of a non-fatal violent crime while they were working or on duty at the rate of 261 per 1,000 officers, between 1993 and 1999. Next in order in terms of likelihood of being victimized were correctional officers, taxicab drivers, private security workers and bartenders.

It is worth noting that the Occupational Health and Safety Act (Act 181 of 1993) has a general duty clause that tasks employers with ensuring the health and safety of employees, as follows: "Every employer shall provide and maintain, as far as is rea-

sonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of his employees. The logical extension of this clause is that employers should protect employees from the violent acts of their colleagues. Clearly, employers need to do what they can to ensure that the workplace is free from violent acts.

At a general level, then, what should you, as a manager within a company, do to make sure you are doing what you can to minimize the threat of workplace violence? Here are my suggestions:

- Establish a policy against workplace violence. Having a specific policy that is well communicated lets everyone know that violence is not to be tolerated at this company.
- Make screening for violence potential part of the employee selection process. Build in some interview questions regarding how people handle stress. Consider making use of criminal background checks. Make use of reference checks to get as much information as possible.
- The wise course of action is to take all threats seriously. Prepare managers and employees to practice the policies that have been established.
- Make use of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAPs are third-party agencies that offer counseling and related services to employees who are having difficulties of various kinds.

At a more specific level, here are some suggestions for dealing with employees whom you believe might be dangerous:

- Do what you need to, to make sure

you and others are safe. For instance, if an employee is being stalked, adjusting his or her work schedule, providing an escort to or from work, etc. are prudent steps.

- If you must discipline a potentially violent employee, make sure two people are involved, one from human resources and one with managerial authority (i.e., the person's boss, or the boss's boss if the employee and his or her boss have a strained relationship). If possible, try to involve someone whom the employee respects or with whom he or she has had a friendly relationship. Stick to the facts of the situation and focus on the behavior that is problematic (e.g., "You made a threatening statement to Linda at the staff meeting on Tuesday. As you know, according to our company policy, we do not tolerate that here. Please do not say things like that again. If this continues, further disciplinary action (specify) will

be taken.)"

- Refer the employee to the EAP. As I mentioned above, an EAP referral can be very helpful. You might say something like, "I don't know if you know it, but we have a resource that is really good at helping people through stressful times. It's called the employee assistance program. Here's how you can access it (specify)."
- If you believe that an employee might be immediately dangerous to himself or others, use whatever communication means that you are able in order to notify top management and the emergency contact person at your company so that the proper authorities (e.g., police department) can be alerted.
- If the person is making suicidal or homicidal threats, he or she can be committed involuntarily for treatment. A psychologist or other qualified mental health professional should be contacted under these circumstances.

In the final analysis, while these kinds of situations are relatively rare, we must recognize that violent acts do occur. Ignorance and indifference are simply not viable options. Rather, we must be proactive. Put a workplace violence policy in place and spend time helping managers practice it. Over time, make refinements as experience accumulates. On this issue, a vigilant stance is the only way to go.



Daniel Schroeder,
Ph.D. of Organization
Development
Consultants, Inc. (ODC)
in Brookfield, provides
"HR Connection." Small
Business Times readers

who would like to see an issue addressed in an article may reach him at (262) 827-1901, via fax at (262) 827-8383, via e-mail at Dan.Schroeder@OD-Consultants.com or via the internet at www.OD-Consultants.com