Workplace Violence

Practical Considerations for Mental Health Professionals in Consultation, Assessment, and Management of Risk

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KEYWORDS

- Workplace violence • Targeted violence • Threat assessment • Direct threat

KEY POINTS

- Workplace violence risk consultations focus on potential acts of targeted violence perpetrated by individuals with a connection to the workplace, directed toward others in the workplace.
- Distinctions exist between fitness for duty evaluations and violence risk consultations, the latter occurring in dynamic scenarios in which the opinion of risk shifts depending on case developments.
- Effective threat management requires multidisciplinary teamwork, the careful consideration of available interventions, and awareness of the possibility of risk mitigation interventions having unintended consequences.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, a series of shootings by disgruntled US postal workers and other employees focused media attention on acts of violence in the workplace. Over the past 3 decades, researchers have shed light onto the types of violence that occur in the workplace, the characteristics of individuals who engage in workplace violence, and the contextual factors that may escalate or mitigate the risk of violence. These advances and the accumulated experience of threat assessment practitioners have contributed to the development of industry practices designed to prevent workplace violence. Especially among large employers, multidisciplinary threat assessment and management teams receive, triage, investigate, and respond to scenarios of concern.

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These practices operate in a complex legal context in which the rights of the involved parties must be considered and balanced. In assessing and managing the potential for workplace violence, employers, and others participating in the evaluation process must first determine whether and how to intervene to ensure safety, yet in a manner mindful of the laws and policies intended to protect the employee of concern. In particular, the employer is subject to claims of invasion of privacy, discrimination, and wrongful termination. In this article, we describe the phenomenon of workplace violence, review important elements in the assessment of workplace violence risk, and provide an overview of threat management, including brief commentary on common legal considerations arising in these situations. For the purposes of this article we do not address the issue of "outsider" threats, for example, those posed by a jealous rejected husband or partner of an employee; however, many of the strategic points presented here still apply in those cases.

WHAT IS "WORKPLACE VIOLENCE"?

Naturally, media coverage of incidents of workplace violence focuses on the most egregious and tragic cases: those involving mass murder, often by current or former employees. In reality, homicide represents the extreme end of a continuum of behaviors comprising workplace violence, has been in steady decline since 1993, and accounts for less than 1% of all violent crimes in the workplace.[1] According to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration[2] workplace violence is defined as any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site, and may cause physical or emotional harm. Short of homicide and physical violence, other workplace violence behaviors include stalking, threats, bullying, and emotional abuse.[3] Specific individuals are not the only targets of workplace violence. Beyond the obvious severe psychological trauma caused by workplace shootings, aggression and threats of violence cause anxiety, fear, and frustration, with resulting damaged morale and productivity.[4] Direct and indirect victims may suffer stress or burnout, physical health problems, and may ultimately leave an organization.[5]

Acts of workplace violence have been categorized in numerous ways. One major typology divides acts of violence according to the relationship between the perpetrator and the organization (**Table 1**).[3] Type 1 acts account for most workplace violence.[6] A key distinction within this framework is that which exists between type 1 acts of workplace violence and all of the others: that is, in type 1 violence, the perpetrator is a stranger to the victims, whereas in types 2, 3, and 4, the perpetrator has a

Table 1 Categories of workplace violence
Type 1 Violent acts by criminals who have no other connection with the workplace, but enter to commit robbery or another crime.
Type 2 Violence directed at employees by customers, clients, patients, students, inmates, or any others for whom an organization provides services.
Type 3 Violence against coworkers, supervisors, or managers by a present or former employee.
Type 4 Violence committed in the workplace by someone who does not work there, but has a personal relationship with an employee (eg, abusive spouse or domestic partner).

From Rugala EA, Isaacs AR, editors. Workplace violence: issues in response. Quantico (VA): Critical Incident Response Group, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, FBI Academy; 2003.

real or perceived connection to the workplace. Although statistical compilations of the motives for workplace violence are not established, analyses of individual cases suggest the psychological reasons for these more "personalized" types of violence. They may be fueled by real or perceived disputes, rejections, grudges, or extreme beliefs rooted in mental illness.[6] In these scenarios, violence is more likely to be intentional, targeting certain individuals or groups. There is also a greater chance that an observable warning sign had likely reached the employer, and/or a "triggering context" was looming.[3]

Violence is more likely to occur in certain workplaces, often in the form of "type 2" acts, as listed in **Table 1**, where it happens in the course of the employee's execution of his or her ordinary duties. Health care workers, law enforcement professionals, security workers, and those involved in the exchange of goods and money (eg, sales clerks, taxi drivers) experience violence more often, due to the inherent nature of their work as well as the characteristics of their clientele. The violence in these instances is more commonly affective, that is, impulsive and unplanned. Workplace violence in the health care industry has received much attention. Hospital-based medical workers were found to have the highest rate of nonfatal assaults over all other sectors of employment.[3] Ironically, surveys and other studies indicate that health care workers tend to underreport acts of workplace violence for several reasons: the perception that violence is merely "part of the job"[7]; the expectation that nothing will be done, or done effectively, about reported problems; and fear of retaliation in instances in which the perpetrator is a superior of the reporting party.[8] Underreporting is just one reason for the unreliability of statistics on workplace violence. Differing definitions of violence and injury and methodological issues further confound interpretation of the data.[9]

Not only does violence occur more often in certain workplaces, but the nature and magnitude of violent acts also differs across workplaces. For example, the emergency room nurse may frequently experience verbal threats and intimidation from inebriated patients or frustrated family members in overcrowded waiting areas. The patient care attendant in a forensic psychiatric hospital may routinely be charged with managing agitated psychotic patients who become physically assaultive. The airline industry must concern itself with the disruptive passenger who may necessitate an emergency landing, an angry, acting-out crew member, or, extremely rare but most dreaded, the suicidal pilot who may endanger a flight full of passengers. These contextual differences call for different measures for prevention and management of violence, ranging from security procedures (eg, metal detectors at the entry points to hospitals) to staff training on deescalation of volatile people to preemployment screening and thoughtful policies triggering fitness for duty assessment. Professionals involved in assessing risk must also account for these contextual differences between workplaces when considering the scope and impact of potential violence.

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE RISK ASSESSMENT

Before describing issues specific to the workplace, certain more general aspects of violence risk assessment deserve mention. First, violence is contextual, meaning that it arises in and is influenced by circumstances. In turn, persons of concern are not either "dangerous" or "not dangerous." The consideration of whether they might engage in violence must account for the interaction between the individual, with all their inherent characteristics (eg, history of violence, poor coping skills, symptoms of mental illness), their circumstances (eg, financial stressors, social isolation), their environment (eg, provocation from others, including people in the workplace), and potential targets.

Viewed in this way, violence risk is dynamic and subject to influence by a number of factors, including interventions designed to help the potential perpetrator with certain personal problems, to control their behavior, or to protect would-be targets.

Another concept to consider when conducting any type of violence risk assessment is the distinction between affective and predatory violence. Affective violence, as referred to previously, is defined by spur-of-the moment aggression and is rooted in the fight-or-flight response. Individuals who are short-tempered and prone to agitation are more likely to engage in affective violence. In contrast, predatory violence refers to premeditated aggression executed in deliberate fashion, without the autonomic and emotional arousal observed in affective violence. Although affective violence is common in workplace settings, and affective and predatory violence are not mutually exclusive in individual cases, much of the research in workplace violence has more recently focused on predatory, targeted violence. The perpetrators of such acts usually have a connection to the workplace, target an individual or group in the organization, or the workplace itself is a symbolic target.

The "pathway to violence" is a framework for illustrating the process of predatory violence.[10] In this model, an individual develops a motive for violence, often a grievance, and reaches a point of rationalization for violence before progressing through preparatory steps culminating in an act of instrumental violence. Violent delusional and paranoid states may contribute in given cases and do not interfere with the perpetrator being organized in his preparation. De Becker[11] formulated the acronym "JACA" to describe that such individuals consider violence Justified, Alternatives to violence to be inadequate or unacceptable, the Consequences for violence to be worthwhile (even including arrest or death,) and they have the Ability and means to carry out violence. Individuals moving along the pathway to violence may display warning behaviors, such as communicating threats to family or friends, settling their affairs, attaining weapons, or withdrawing from usual routines due to immersing themselves in preparations.

Specific to the workplace context, extensive case study has revealed a common triggering phenomenon for violence: narcissistic injury and its conversion to narcissistic rage. Extreme vulnerability to underlying shame, but felt or expressed as a profound sense of injustice or "disrespect," motivates the violence. Psychologically, the act is often one of self-affirmation, a restoration of self-esteem and pride. Perpetrators of workplace violence have often experienced a triggering event of a major setback at work, ranging from unexpectedly being passed over for a promotion to being disciplined or terminated. The scenario of job loss or its potential is quite common in workplace violence consultations, as are ongoing or unsuccessful claims regarding disability, workplace harassment, or wrongful termination.[6] Individuals vulnerable to narcissistic injury are unable to cope with such setbacks in the manner that more commonly resilient employees demonstrate. Coupled with their often inherent problems adapting to disappointment and loss is their inflated perception of their achievement or value in the workplace, as well as their personal identity being excessively defined by their membership in the organization.[6] These factors contribute to the experience of the setback as humiliating, profoundly unfair, unresolvable, intolerable, and demanding action in response.[12] The feeling of impotence experienced with the narcissistic injury is resolved through vengeance, as these individuals achieve a "sense of final control… by going out in a blaze of glory."[12]

Aside from a job setback, threatened or imminent job loss, numerous other workplace-specific factors should be assessed in conducting a workplace violence risk consultation. These include aspects of the organization's culture that can contribute to agitation and grievances, such as excessive work demands; labor disputes and poor relations between labor and management; management with poor communication and

overly punitive and/or inconsistent disciplinary methods, including avoidant managing of difficult individuals; and inadequate security and lack of employee counseling.[3] Organizations should not be blamed for the horrible tragedies inflicted by vengeful employees or others, but they must recognize and should address the internal situational factors that enable violence, as well as the lapses in their prevention protocols that hinder safe as well as fair resolutions of threat scenarios.

Although workplace violence risk assessment does not emphasize psychiatric diagnosis, it is obviously critical to ascertain certain aspects of the mental state of the person of concern. The willingness to sacrifice oneself so as to commit violence, and more generally suicidal ideation, are critical risk factors for violence. Some acts of suicide in workplace violence arise out of depression and the desire to escape pain and loss,[6] whereas others reflect the narcissistic drive to restore potency through infamy and revenge. Case reviews of mass murder and workplace murders have demonstrated higher death tolls in those instances in which the perpetrator committed suicide.[13] Felthous and Hempel[14] point out that nearly all perpetrators of workplace homicide are fundamentally self-destructive. Case studies show that those who do not commit suicide (directly or indirectly) most commonly surrender or are captured without concern for escape or denial of culpability.[14]

Suicidality is just one aspect of mental health that should be assessed in violence risk consultation. Depression can contribute to feelings of desperation and hopelessness and can diminish resiliency to cope with stress. Mania or hypomania can manifest with irritability, grandiosity, volatility and erratic behavior, frequent sources of discomfort and concern when occurring in the workplace, and more frequently posing a risk of affective incidents of violence. Substance use can affect mood and cause disinhibited conduct and impaired work performance. It can also lead to the development of covert behaviors designed to conceal substance use that, when discussed or challenged, may trigger defensive, angry reactions from the at-risk employee. Psychosis, particularly paranoid delusions focused on individuals in close contact, such as coworkers, can steer an individual toward violence when the individual mistakenly perceives that he or she is in danger. A broad spectrum of problematic personality traits is also of concern in violence risk assessment. Individuals prone to anger who struggle to accept responsibility, to handle rejection or criticism, or who generally cope poorly with intense emotion are at risk for escalation to violence in response to triggering events. Entitlement, egocentricity, and disregard for others' feelings or needs may translate into justification for vindictive aggression. In assessing risk, it is not just the presence or absence of psychiatric symptoms or traits that is important, but more so their intensity, trajectory, and malleability in response to available interventions; that is, the dynamic (subject to change) rather than static (fixed) aspects of the would-be perpetrator's mental state.

The dynamism of risk and the fact that serious violence in the workplace is a low-base rate phenomenon are 2 reasons that the goal of workplace violence risk assessment is not to predict violence, but instead to identify and prioritize concerning aspects of a given scenario and translate findings into management strategies. Violence risk factors are categorized as either static or dynamic. In conducting workplace violence risk assessments, while certain static pieces of information may be quite important (eg, a history of stalking and domestic violence in a person of concern who is becoming fixated on a coworker), the emphasis is often on dynamic factors, as they are the focus of interventions designed to minimize the risk of violence. This is one reason to characterize the workplace violence risk assessment more as threat assessment, as opposed to traditional "violence risk assessment" (**Table 2**).

Table 2		
Some differences between violence risk assessment and threat assessment		
	Violence Risk Assessment	**Threat Assessment**
Urgency/acuity	Low, usually around scheduled events	High, ongoing situations
Person of concern	Often confined	Freely moving among potential victims
Context	Judicial determinations, for example, release from hospital, release onto probation	Unfolding risk scenario, for example, threatening communications and behaviors toward coworker
Available data	Often extensive	Often limited
Purpose	Predicting and/or mitigating risk; management of perpetrator	Mitigating risk; management of potential perpetrator and protection of victim(s)
Methodology	Actuarial and structured professional judgment (SPJ) instruments	SPJ instruments in concert with multidisciplinary input and collaboration

The goals in a workplace violence risk consultation include formulating a narrative for possible scenarios of violence, based on the assessment, integration, and weighing of risk factors, protective factors, and circumstantial factors. This process ultimately leads to hypotheses regarding the following questions about the person of concern:

1. What is a possible explanation for the behaviors causing alarm?
2. Are there identifiable motives or causes for violent action?
3. What would be the nature, severity, and timeline of any violence?
4. Who would be the likely targets?
5. What actions would mitigate risk?
6. What actions might exacerbate risk?

The assessment can be enhanced through the use of structured professional judgment (SPJ) instruments, guided assessment tools that provide a framework for the evaluator to collect data regarding the presence or absence, relevance, and stability of empirically validated risk factors and protective factors. The evaluator integrates this information before applying clinical judgment in arriving at opinions on the level of concern and recommendations for intervention. SPJ instruments increase the consistency and transparency of assessments by ensuring that the same factors are being considered across cases. In the workplace context, SPJs also provide a justifiable basis for employer decision-making regarding termination and other measures that may later be scrutinized in legal proceedings. Today, the use of evidence-based SPJs in violence risk assessment is a well-established practice. There are now a number of SPJs developed for specific populations or contexts, including the workplace. The WAVR-21 (Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk) is an SPJ designed to assess the risk of targeted violence and related behaviors of concern in workplaces and other organizational contexts.[6] Results of a reliability study showed summary interrater reliability correlations for overall presence of risk factors, risk of violence, and seriousness of the violent act in the fair to good range, similar to those of other SPJ instruments. A rating group of only psychologists produced summary rating of violence risk in the excellent range. Some of the individual items had poor reliability, likely due to both clinical and statistical reasons.[15] Predictive validity studies, the true test of an instrument's ability to correctly identify violent individuals before the fact, are the next step

in the development of the WAVR-21, and are under way. Such studies are sophisticated and expensive and require large sample sizes owing to the base rate issue: among those individuals who make threats or create concern, only a very few ever commit a workplace homicide.[16]

An important task for the mental health consultant in violence risk assessments is to gather as much information as possible in developing a perspective about the individual's mental state and the trajectory of his or her conduct, including observable behaviors and other collateral data (eg, hostile or paranoid e-mails sent by the person of concern). It is also critical to carefully consider the accuracy of the information and the reliability of sources of information.[17] Informants may intentionally or unintentionally report information that is partially or wholly untrue, for a variety of reasons,[17] and this may distort the view of potential psychiatric issues in the person of concern. Vetting the accuracy of information is especially important when the consultation is *indirect*, meaning that the person of concern is not interviewed. In such consultations, other individuals, including the potential target of violence, may be interviewed in order to gather more complete collateral information about the individual's mental state and behavior and to cross-reference data from other sources. However, when case information suggests that psychiatric symptoms may be significantly influencing the at-risk individual's conduct, direct assessment can provide valuable clarification and lead to effective interventions addressing mental health.

CASE MANAGEMENT

Violence risk assessment and management are inextricably linked. Even in scenarios in which a major goal of risk assessment is to produce a statistically driven prediction of a certain outcome, the utility of that information exists primarily in its implications for management. In more dynamic consultation contexts, such as workplace violence risk assessments, opinions on risk level and management strategies ebb and flow as scenarios unfold and new information arises (eg, the person of concern's responses to limit-setting or mental health treatment). Responding to and managing volatile situations in the workplace are some of the most anxiety-provoking and challenging tasks faced by employers. This is one reason that a common error in case management is to permit situations of concern to percolate and develop for considerable time before any intervention.

Recognition of the importance of timely, consistent, and reliable responses in dealing with disruptive and potentially violent workplace conduct is a major factor that led to the widespread development of workplace violence prevention policies and procedures. Although there is no legal mandate about the composition of such policies and procedures, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has identified several key elements of effective workplace violence prevention programs. These include the following: management commitment and employee involvement, worksite analysis to identify sources of risk and gauge efficacy of procedures, hazard prevention and control, safety and health training, and recordkeeping and program evaluation.[2] Effective violence risk prevention programs reduce consequences, such as poor work performance, poor workplace morale, and reduced productivity.[18]

Many scenarios of odd, agitated, or disruptive behavior, or even communicated threats, do not actually pose a high level of risk and are effectively handled by individual supervisors, managers, human resources staff, and/or security personnel. However, multidisciplinary, coordinated responses can enhance the assessment of scenarios of concern, particularly when there are indicators of higher risk and more complex considerations for resolution of the situation. Threat assessment and

management teams (TMTs) are now fairly commonplace among large companies, and are an emerging standard in institutions of higher education, having been mandated by law in some states.[19] TMTs usually include staff from human resources, security, risk management, legal counsel, workplace health/employee assistance programs, and mental health risk assessment professionals. Their purpose is to identify situations and persons of concern as early as possible, investigate and gather information, assess the situation, and to manage the situation through the selective use of available resources so as to mitigate risk.

Regardless of the personnel involved in investigating and responding to potentially violent situations in the workplace, a range of interventions are available for managing these scenarios, including "doing nothing" but continuing to monitor the situation. Interventions may be categorized along a continuum from confrontational or punitive to nonconfrontational or benevolent.[10] The goal in case management is for interventions to be effective in reducing risk, usually by virtue of timeliness and appropriate focus on the crux of the problem. However, the dynamic nature of risk gives rise to the issue of unintended consequences, or the "intervention dilemma," that is, the recognition that any intervention has the capacity to reduce risk, not affect risk, or even to intensify risk.[20] A rational threat assessment and management approach avoids cookbook responses and decreases vulnerability to the following important errors[6]:

- Not detecting or underestimating potentially high or imminent risk situations
- Overreacting to low or no risk situations, causing unnecessary disruption
- Misappropriating the organization's time and resources in such situations
- Exacerbating a threat scenario with ill-advised responses that increase risk
- Misapplying interventions, for example, treatment or dispute resolution in situations in which they will have little or no impact

A common erroneous response is for the employer to react punitively or with excessively control-focused methods without considering the potential impact of such disciplinary measures. Although it can be tempting and even justified to suspend or terminate an employee who has been engaging in various forms of misconduct or threatening behavior, doing so without considering the potential for these steps to represent triggering events for the at-risk individual can be perilous. Employers should consider conducting a threat assessment before taking significant disciplinary action against an employee raising concern for violence risk. Emergencies exist, but the prudent move is usually to place an employee on a paid leave of absence (so as not to add to his or her distress and implication of blame) while an investigation is undertaken.

When the decision is made to terminate an employee for conduct, suggesting that he or she poses a risk of violence, employers must recognize that risk is not necessarily eliminated. Every effort should be made to handle termination in a manner that preserves the individual's dignity and offers them the maximum opportunity to save face. When appropriate and available, severance packages may be considered, intended to temporarily bridge the individual to his or her next job. These can include sums of money sufficient to last until new income can be secured, or the extension of health care coverage, which might facilitate the person participating in necessary treatment (or avoid forcing the employee to terminate treatment). Regardless of whether such benevolent gestures are made, employers must also consider security measures. There should be consideration of the need for ongoing assessment of the risk posed by the individual and mechanisms to achieve it, ranging from further supportive contact (eg, "check-in" phone calls) to surveillance for communications or approaches to the workplace, to obtaining protective orders. Considering the pros and

cons of these options is a routinely complex matter for threat assessment teams, and engaged consultants.

LEGAL ISSUES IN WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Employers have a duty to maintain a safe workplace, but must fulfill it while minding protections for employees. Failure to do either can lead to costly litigation. There are numerous foundations for employers' responsibility to maintain a safe workplace. OSHA's "General Duty Clause" requires that the workplace be "free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm" to employees.[21] Employers are required by civil rights legislation to protect employees from harassment, including threats and violence, and if employees suffer injuries in the course of employment they are entitled to workers' compensation benefits. Incidents of workplace violence have led to findings of employer negligence in numerous areas, including hiring or retaining dangerous individuals, negligent supervision and training, and negligent recommendation (eg, misrepresenting an employee's violent tendencies to a prospective employer).

With respect to employee rights, there are limits to the type of information employers can request in hiring or investigations. Employers must manage employee misconduct investigations and procedures in accordance with due process, following company policies and collective bargaining agreements.[6] The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects employees with disabilities (including a variety of psychiatric conditions, such as personality disorders) from discrimination in all aspects of the employment process, including discipline and termination.

ADA issues are often the focus of fitness for duty examinations, common scenarios in which evaluators encounter concerns about workplace violence. The examinee may have been placed on administrative leave after exhibiting signs of possible mental instability and/or engaging in disruptive or threatening conduct. Employers are permitted to insist on a fitness for duty examination if the inquiry is "job-related" and "consistent with business necessity," a standard fulfilled by "a reasonable belief, based on objective evidence, that: (1) an employee's ability to perform essential job functions will be impaired by a medical condition; or (2) an employee will pose a direct threat due to a medical condition."[22] The factors weighed in consideration of direct threat include the following:

- Duration of the risk
- Nature and severity of the potential harm
- Likelihood that the potential harm will occur
- Imminence of the potential harm

In addition, the threat posed by the individual must be one that cannot be eliminated by reasonable accommodation. Although ADA protections may sound onerous for employers, in reality, courts tend to err on the side of caution when there is legitimate information to support the notion of an employee posing a threat in the workplace. First, an employee who threatens coworkers, for example, may not even be deemed to meet the ADA's definition of a "qualified individual" who can perform the "essential functions" of their job, as interacting with others appropriately may be deemed an essential job function. Second, courts have consistently ruled that violations of workplace conduct policies, especially violent behavior, are not protected under the ADA even if they stemmed from the employee's disability. Yet another interpretation of the ADA that has favored employers in cases of concern for workplace violence has

been the notion that it may not be reasonable to accommodate a potential threat if it continues to expose other employees to risk of harm.

Three points are essential for evaluators to keep in mind:

1. Employment law counsel must be involved in decisions about the organization's legal obligations in individual cases.
2. Professional experience and clinical judgment will still be essential (but grounded in empirically established risk factors) in defining risk-related terms, such as "direct threat," "duration," and "imminence."
3. The principle of "safety trumps privacy" and other personal rights is primary, but interveners must be able to justify their actions in the interest of safety that may raise legal exposure for the organization. As many attorneys have said to us, "I would rather defend a wrongful termination case than a wrongful death case."

CASE EXAMPLE

The following vignette illustrates the interaction between psychological factors in an individual of concern and workplace factors culminating in risk of violence:

"Bob" has been a maintenance mechanic at a small college for approximately a year and a half. His performance is average and he is subject to procedural mistakes that he denies are his doing. He is regarded as "prickly" and easily frustrated. His boss, Roger, is inconsistent in his supervision, and especially doesn't like dealing with Bob "because you can't talk to the guy." Bob has said openly, "I never trusted any boss. They are all alike." Coworkers can see that Roger is intimidated by Bob and is not dealing with him. When Bob learned that Roger had advocated for his own cousin to get hired at the college, in a completely unrelated department, he became very agitated and began making comments about "favoritism." He mumbled in the work bay about having been fired once because of "unfair treatment by members of the same family who ganged up on me." He started a "log," documenting Roger's "harassment and discrimination" against him.

When coworkers complained about Bob's increasing suspiciousness and unfounded accusations that they were "helping Roger set me up to get fired," the labor relations representative met with him. Bob got very angry in the meeting, accused the representative of colluding with Roger, and demanded someone else conduct an investigation. The representative felt very frightened of Bob and no longer agreed to meet with him. This led to Bob getting a written notice that his "unprofessional conduct will not be tolerated," that he must control his temper, and that any such "outbursts" in the future would lead to "further disciplinary action up to and including discharge." He was referred to the employee assistance program and recommended that he get into an "anger management" program. Bob taped the letter to the door of Roger's office, and wrote on it, "No wonder people come into work and blow everyone away! This is the kind of shit that makes them do it!" He then left the building. As management considered what to do next, Bob called in later and claimed he was suffering "emotional distress and anxiety" from being harassed and was unable to work.

In this case, Bob's perceptions and behaviors at work very likely stem from paranoid issues. Naturally mistrustful and defensive, especially under stress, he is not easy to help or manage with normal supervisory actions. Perceiving malicious intent where none exists leads to further anger on his part and increased avoidance by his boss. His display of problematic behaviors in the workplace for quite some time before any action was taken is a common scenario. Concern is another signal that assessment is warranted.

Somewhat predictably, Bob makes a veiled threat in response to receiving a disciplinary letter, but then claims emotional distress, actually a good sign from a threat assessment view because it implies a deescalation, that he is not in a "nothing to lose" mindset. This suggests several possibilities, including that he is ambivalent about violence, has no real violent intent but was venting or trying to intimidate others, and/or he wants to avoid discipline by declaring himself disabled; his M.O. may be litigious, not violent. In fact, a legitimate claim cannot be ruled out. A violence risk consultant would assist management by assessing any risk posed by Bob, as well as, in this case, evaluating the legitimacy of his stress claim.

Given Bob's susceptibility to shame and subsequent volatility, the entire evaluation response must be handled carefully, and likely include coordinating the assessment process with security measures. Many cases like this one are best resolved by the employee departing the organization, but with a benevolent severance, as mentioned previously, in an attempt to protect his dignity. Returning to the work group is problematic for all parties, as the conflicts cannot be resolved, especially given Bob's nature. The consultant may be helpful to Bob in this regard, noting that a "fresh start" would likely be better for *him*. However, this cannot be done in a manipulative way. The assessor can genuinely empathize with the employee's distress without agreeing with his perceptions, and as an outsider may have some leverage in helping the individual to move on, avoiding a showdown, and perhaps deadly outcome, for everyone involved.

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