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Layoffs & Firings When Violence is a Concern

By Bruce T. Blythe

There are no methods that can completely and accurately predict who is going to become violent in the workplace and who is not. However, the guidelines in this article provide important and defensible considerations for assessing the *likelihood* of workplace violence. EA professionals should know their boundaries in working with threatening cases based on training, expertise, professional code of conduct, confidentiality laws, dual relationship issues, and legal defensibility.

These recommendations will assist the EA professional in helping corporate clients determine the extent of “controls” to put in place to deal with potentially violent situations.

Standardized Testing Doesn't Work

Standardized psychological tests are not reliable or valid tools for predicting which persons will be violent. The capability simply doesn't exist to pick the “needle out of the haystack” through psychological tests and fitness-for-duty exams.

Tests like the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) can tell if someone is depressed, having bizarre thoughts, and trending toward sociopathic



tendencies. However, such tests will *not* predict who is going to become violent. In most cases, someone who is enraged enough to become violent in the workplace would *not* be willing to cooperate with a psychological/psychiatric exam. This means that other methods need to be incorporated.

Methods to Determine Who is Likeliest to Become Violent

❖ *An assessment of potential violence needs to consider the psychological makeup and behavioral tendencies of the threatening person.* Questions about anger issues, sense of entitlement, depression and/or suicide are important.

❖ *How does the individual cope with problems?* Does the person engage in poor judgment, perseveration about violent methods to resolve a personal issue, or exhibit negative coping skills?

❖ *Does the individual have a mental health issue?* If so, is he/

she being treated for it? Paranoia, delusions and bipolar disorder are common. This is **not** to say that all people with mental health problems are violent – rather, that it **can** be a contributing factor.

❖ *Does the individual use alcohol or other drugs?* Substance abuse is correlated with many violent offenders.

❖ *Is the individual socially withdrawn?* Isolation, non-communication

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and social withdrawal are traits common among mass shooters, e.g., Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech U., Columbine, etc.

❖ *Does the individual have a violent background?* A history of violence is a solid predictor of future violence, especially if the person felt empowered by previous acts of violence, including domestic violence. Has a criminal background check been conducted? Recent acts of violence are most pertinent.

❖ *Has hostile behavior gotten worse?* Are potential prerequisites to serious workplace violence becoming increasingly problematic, e.g., harassment, bullying, threats, intimidation, verbal and/or physical abuse, sense of entitlement, insubordination, isolation, etc?

❖ **Assess the “context” and evolving situation.**

❖ *How does the individual feel he/she is being treated in the workplace?* Threatening individuals almost always feel unfairly treated. Are there job problems, especially insubordination? Does the individual overly identify with his/her job position? What is the perceived severity of unjust treatment? How long has the person endured the undesired situation?

❖ *Have there been serious losses in the individual's life, e.g., divorce, bankruptcy, loss (or anticipated loss) of job, serious health issues, etc?* How has the individual tried to resolve the provoking situation? What are the motives for justifying a potentially violent resolution? What could be changed in the environment to defuse potential violence?

❖ **Threats and communication of violent intent are often exhibited before workplace violence is perpetrated.**

❖ *Which co-workers are most familiar with this individual?* It is important to talk with anyone who

may have knowledge about an individual's comments, written content, or non-verbal actions that would indicate potential workplace violence. Bear in mind that informants may resist providing information. Union workers and co-workers may have mixed loyalties. Stress the importance of confidentiality. Work at putting them at ease during interviews.

❖ *Do informants (incorrectly) think they're in trouble?* Informants must understand they are **not** being investigated. Explain *how* the information will be used, and *extent* the information provided will remain confidential or anonymous. Skilled interviewers, like former FBI agents, are capable of getting valuable information from informants, but it has to be conducted in a proper manner.

❖ **Communication is one of the best methods for assessing and defusing threatening individuals.**

❖ Beyond the confidential responsibility of EAP, the threat professional should be positioned as a “conduit of information.” In this role, the intervening professional would serve to hear and understand the threatening individual's concerns and pass this information back to the employer. Once this pipeline is properly established, a wealth of threat assessment information can be collected and defusing strategies implemented.

Document, Document, Document

EA professionals are concerned about liability when involved with hostile situations. Recognize that *any* degree of involvement puts the EAP in a position of potential liability. “*Are we defensible*” if a lawsuit, OSHA or management investigation, or public outrage occurs? Protect yourself. Don't extend yourself beyond your training, education and experience. Refer to qualified

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

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professionals, as appropriate. Then document your decisions and actions in a manner that passes the reasonable person test.

Anticipate

A threat management team needs to be in place, consisting minimally of Human Resources (HR), legal, and security. EAP could also be included on the team, especially when behavioral health issues are involved. The team should consider

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contingencies by anticipating “what if?” scenarios. *What if the threatening employee comes to a termination meeting carrying a bag? What if he storms out of the meeting room abruptly? What if he returns to the workplace after being terminated? What if he doesn't find a job before his money runs out?*

If appropriate, hold the meeting with the potentially violent employee in an offsite location such as a hotel. It's harder for an individual to carry out a premeditated plan in unfamiliar surroundings away from the worksite. If gun usage is a concern, consider utilizing a frequent flyer club at a local airport (to accommodate management's “travel schedule”). TSA will allow airline-issued passes for reserved conference rooms inside the airport security perimeter.

Consider having law enforcement or security guard present and plan actions for anticipated contingencies. Implement a safe escape strategy. Sit at a large table with the table in between staff and the potentially violent employee. Prearrange chairs so management is seated closest to the door. Other considerations include:

- ❖ *Prepare a term sheet (ahead of time) for review with the threatening employee.* Use the term sheet to keep the conversation on track. Build the individual's sense of dignity by saying good things, such as: “I'm sorry you're being let go because I understand you're a very hard worker.”

- ❖ *Stress what the company can do for the employee.* Remember that every worker wants to feel successful, accepted, significant, and fairly treated. Be prepared to listen. Threatening individuals almost always feel unfairly treated. Strive to understand his/her concerns and look for opportunities to establish win-win solutions, when possible.



Editor's Notebook

Virginia Tech, 2007; Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, Tucson, AZ 2011; “Dark Night Rises” movie theatre shooting, Aurora, CO, 2012; Sikh temple, Oak Creek, WI; and Empire State Building, NYC, also 2012.

With all these mass shootings in recent history, it's no wonder there wasn't a chair to be found at a session conducted by Bruce Blythe on “employee layoffs and terminations” at last fall's World EAP Conference in Baltimore, MD. (See page 3 of January 2013 *EAR*.)

And, bear in mind, this event was well *before* the tragic school shooting at Sandy Hook in Connecticut!

Blythe, chairman of several crisis care organizations, is widely recognized as an expert on the subject. He repeatedly made the point that HR, security, and other individuals involved in possible critical incident escalation absolutely *have* to anticipate the scenarios that not only

“could” happen – but which very well “MIGHT” occur.

“An ‘I don't want to think about it’ mindset doesn't work,” said Blythe. Indeed. We can think that such horrors won't happen where we live, but the fact of the matter is, these tragedies *can* and *do* occur in small town America, and not just big cities. We can no longer afford to keep our “head buried in the sand” like an ostrich, pretending a mass shooting couldn't possibly affect one of US.

We also can't get too caught up in specific debates, such as the endless banter over gun control. We can agree to disagree, *or* we can take *action*, NOW before one more helpless child or adult is killed in a senseless shooting. Thanks Bruce for your time, talent, and suggestions! Until next time.

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Summary

Plan each phase of the process before confronting the threatening individual. Identify potential reactions and establish contingency plans for each. EA professionals can complement the threat management process through behavioral health expertise, but know your boundaries and defer to appropriate professionals when appropriate.

Disclaimer

This article is not intended to be construed as legal advice, but is provided as an overview of good business practices. No written material can ever take the place of prudent judgment and decision-making.

Remember that the ultimate decision in handling any threat of violence situation naturally rests with the management of the companies/organizations that retain the EAP. Utilize professionals with appropriate expertise to assist, when appropriate.

Bruce T. Blythe is an internationally acclaimed crisis management expert. He is the owner and chairman of Crisis Management International, and the author of “Blindsided: A Manager's Guide to Catastrophic Incidents in the Workplace.” For more information, contact him at bblythe@cmiatl.com.

Editor's note: A version of this story, “Assessing Individuals for Workplace Violence Propensity” was published by the PAS Employee Assistance Program and is re-used with permission of the author.

School Shootings – How Do They Fit into the Picture?

Whether you're sitting in a classroom at school, or at your workplace, when shots ring out in the general vicinity, the issues and consequences are the same: People are in grave danger. It's unexpected and frantic responses ensue.

In the school setting and workplace, the perpetrator often gives warning signs before the incident occurs (e.g., threats, insubordination, preoccupation with violence, etc.). Almost always, the perpetrator feels unfairly treated in some manner.

Even rudimentary methods of prevention will help. Three basic components include:

1. Policy: The school or workplace should have a violence prevention and response policy that is well publicized on a periodic basis.

2. Threat Notification System: There should be a threat notification system in place that people feel comfortable in using. Family members should be included so they know how to make notifications.

3. Threat Response Team: The school or workplace should have a multidisciplinary trained and available team (e.g., representatives from HR, security and legal, at a minimum) ready to respond when threatening situations arise. External threat professionals and/or law enforcement should be included.

While gun control advocates and mental health professionals debate methods to mitigate these violent occurrences, schools and workplaces can take charge by being ready to respond to threatening situations before violence occurs. In addition to the three methods listed above, threatening individuals can often be defused through effective intervention.

❖ **Effective two-way communication** is typically the single best

method to defuse escalating hostile reactions. This involves making contact to hear and understand the concerns and mindset of the threatening individual. It includes respect for the dignity and self-esteem of the threatening individual. By making contact, negotiations to establish alternative methods for resolving perceived grievances can often be established that "soften" the individual's focus on a vengeful act. Even in cases where the individual is a substance abuser, mentally deranged, or antisocial, a mitigating relationship can often be established by a person skilled at defusing threatening individuals.

❖ **Now is the time to establish the systems and personnel** (internal and external to the organization) **to address threatening situations before they become violent.** Assault weapons can be limited or an armed police officer can be placed in every school and workplace. But whether these proposed ideas are implemented, or not, *a prepared organization that is skilled at defusing situations as they escalate is a vital component* for preventing people

from being gravely injured or mentally traumatized by a violent school or workplace incident.

Summary

Are comprehensive systems effective for preventing school / workplace violence? The U.S. Postal Service implemented such a program. Even with a long history of many mass shootings and approximately 750,000 employees at the time, they went over 8 years without an employee/ex-employee shooting after implementing their workplace violence program. These programs are effective. Lives can be saved, and a vital component of prevention is within the control and influence of school and workplace leaders if they prepare *now*. ■

Source: Bruce Blythe, an internationally acclaimed crisis management expert. He is the owner and chairman of Crisis Management International, and the author of "Blindsided: A Manager's Guide to Catastrophic Incidents in the Workplace." For more information, contact him at bblythe@cmitatl.com. Editor's note: A version of this story, "Assessing Individuals for Workplace Violence Propensity" was published by the PAS Employee Assistance Program and is re-used with permission of the author.

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Health Care Premiums Up 62%

Average health insurance premiums for employer-sponsored family coverage soared 62% between 2003 and 2011, far outpacing the rise in wages, a new study found.

By 2011, there were 35 states in which the annual premium equaled 20% or more of income, according to a study issued recently by The Commonwealth Fund. This compares to just one state in 2003.

Premiums in the south and south-central United States were the highest relative to income. In New

Mexico, South Carolina and West Virginia, average premiums exceeded one-quarter of median income.

In 2011, employees paid an average of \$3,962 for their share of family plan premiums, up from \$2,283 in 2003. In addition, family deductibles more than doubled to an average of \$1,123, up from \$518 in 2003.

If costs continue rising at the same pace, annual premiums could hit nearly \$25,000 in 2020. But The Commonwealth Fund expects the rate to slow thanks to provisions in the Affordable Care Act. These include the

creation of state-based health insurance exchanges, the introduction of new consumer protections and insurance market rules and more state and federal oversight of industry practices.

For instance, insurers must now report the share of premiums spent on medical care. If they spend less than 80% or 85% of the premiums on this care, depending on their target market, they must provide rebates to employees and employers. ■

Sources: CNN Money, EAP News Brief, a service of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA).

On the Job

Is Online Snooping Acceptable?

Thanks to Facebook, Google and other social media outlets, we can often satisfy our curiosity in a few keystrokes. But such technologies also present a dilemma for psychologists and psychology graduate students: *Should you ever search a client online?*

In most cases, search only if you have the client's consent, says Jeffrey E. Barnett, PsyD, past chair of the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethics Committee. It's OK to pull up a client's personal website or Facebook page during a therapy session to see pictures of his or her children or to better understand a personal crisis he's coping with, says Barnett. But spying just because you can is inappropriate, he says.

"Most psychologists wouldn't like to find out that a client was parking outside our house with binoculars each night," says Barnett. "If we are snooping on them electroni-

cally, how would that make them feel and affect the relationship?"

Protecting the safety of a client or a third party may warrant a search, says Stephen H. Behnke, PhD, JD, director of APA's Ethics Office. "But one must always weigh the clinical implications, especially if the client has not provided consent," he says. Until the field issues more formal guidance on Internet searching, psychologists should constantly monitor their motivations when determining whether it's necessary to gather client information online, according to Behnke.

"Personal curiosity is not a clinically appropriate reason to do a search," says Behnke. "Ask yourself, 'Why am I doing this? What will I derive that will be helpful to the professional relationship?'"

On the flip side, what if a client pursues *you* online, such as by sending you a friend request on Facebook? Don't automatically

ignore it and risk hurting your client's feelings, but don't feel obligated to *accept* either, says Barnett. Instead, use the request as an opportunity to discuss how being "friends" on a public platform could complicate or even harm your therapeutic relationship by, for example, sparking jealousy if a newly widowed woman sees her therapist walking on the beach with her husband in Fiji, he says.

To head off such troubles, Keely Kolmes, PsyD, a therapist in San Francisco, has developed a social media policy for clients to read before they begin therapy. The policy covers her stance on searching clients (not unless she has reason to suspect they might be in danger) and friending clients (she doesn't, to protect both parties' privacy), among other topics. ■

Additional source: EAP NewsBrief.

Distractions a Bigger Problem than Ever

Distractions at the office are hardly new, but as screens multiply and managers push frazzled workers to do more with less, companies say the problem is worsening and is affecting business.



While some firms make noises about workers wasting time on the Web, companies are realizing the problem is partly their own fault.

The modern workday seems built to destroy individual focus. Open-plan offices and an emphasis on col-

laborative work leave workers with little insulation from colleagues' chatter. A ceaseless tide of meetings and internal emails means that workers increasingly scramble to get their "real work" done. In addition, the lure of social-networking streams and status updates make it easy for workers to interrupt *themselves*.

What can be Done?

Companies are experimenting with strategies to keep workers focused. Some are limiting internal emails while others are reducing the number of projects workers can tackle at a time.

Part of the solution for one team was that oft-forgotten piece of office technology: *the telephone*.

Workers were instructed to let the importance and complexity of their message dictate whether to use cell phones, office phones or email. Truly urgent messages and complex issues

merited phone calls or in-person conversations, while email was reserved for messages that could wait.

Workers now pick up the phone more, logging fewer internal emails and say they have more clarity about what's urgent and isn't. However, staff still has to remain current with emails from clients or co-workers outside the group.

Another firm instituted a no-device policy during some team *meetings*, a change that has made these gatherings more efficient.

After an internal study found that workers spent some two hours a day managing their inboxes, another company vowed to *phase out internal email entirely*, although workers can still use email with outside customers. ■

Sources: Wall Street Journal, EAP News Brief, a service of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA).

Marketing Matters

The Lost Art of Schmoozing

Between cell phones, text messages, and email, it isn't easy to connect with people one-on-one these days. There's still nothing quite like talking with people *face to face*. Whether it's communicating with prospects or current clients keep the following points in mind:

❖ Determine what matters most to the prospect or client.

Hint: It usually has nothing to do with the business at hand. Pay close attention to what *really* drives him or her.

❖ Practice the art of "elevation." Elevate a prospect's experience from ordinary to memorable.

For instance, instead of just inviting a budding client to a round of golf, invite the prospect's son, too – or provide personalized golf balls.

❖ Follow up immediately.

Within a week, a potential client has forgotten 90% of what he/she has been shown! You don't want to be a pest, but you *do* need them to remember *something* about your services. One EA professional sends personalized post-it notes to

potential clients within one week after meeting them.

❖ **Don't limit schmoozing to "people who matter."** Everyone is important! You can't build goodwill with too many people.

❖ **Schmoozing isn't manipulative.** You're going to interact with these people anyway, so why not try to make their lives a little easier? ■

Source: Richard Abraham, author of "Mr. Schmooze: The Art and Science of Selling Through Relationships."

Do YOU Have True Grit?

Psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania, University of Michigan, and West Point developed a Grit Scale, presented in *The Intelligent Optimist* (November 2012) to test their hypothesis that persistence was as important to success as intelligence.

To measure *your own* grit, answer the following questions with A meaning very much like me, B mostly like me, C somewhat like me, D not much like me, and E not like me at all:

1. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.

2. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.

3. My interests change from year to year.

4. Setbacks don't discourage me.

5. I have been obsessed with a certain idea for a short time, but later lost interest.

6. I am a hard worker.

7. I often set a goal, but later choose to pursue a different one.

8. I have difficulty focusing on projects that take more than a few months to complete.

9. I finish whatever I start.

10. I have achieved a goal that took years of work.

11. I become interested in new

pursuits every few months.

12. I am diligent.

Now it's time to determine your grit score. For questions 1, 4, 6, 9, 10, and 12 assign the following points: a = 5, b = 4, c = 3, d = 2, e = 1. For questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 11 assign the following points: a = 1, b = 2, c = 3, d = 4, e = 5. Now, add all your points and divide by 12. The maximum score is 5 (meaning you are extremely gritty) and the lowest is 1 (you have no grit at all). ■

Additional source: ExchangeEveryDay, a service of "Exchange" magazine (www.childcareexchange.com).

Clinical Perspective

Traits of Outstanding Counselors

A truly great counselor integrates all aspects [of] effective counseling practice by masterfully developing the therapeutic alliance, instilling hope, quickly centering on achievable objectives, judiciously selecting evidence-based practices, maximizing out-of-session change opportunities, and facilitating treatment adherence and follow-up to make sure treatment gains are maintained long after termination.

❖ Outstanding skills –

Flexibility, empathy and advocacy.

❖ Overrated, underrated skills –

Rapport building skills are important,

but a great deal of the connection that leads to an effective therapeutic alliance was described by Freud as transference. This is one of the most difficult experiences for new counselors to handle, the "*Why couldn't I connect with that client*" conundrum. Sometimes the difficulty in connecting has more to do with characteristics (e.g., "*You remind me of...*") than any skill or behavior. Experience is what you earn when you attempt something unsuccessfully. Great counselors have A LOT of experience.

❖ Skills necessary to develop –

Learning to not "mother" my clients. Sometimes when I have worked

with children, it has been hard for me to let go and realize that sometimes the systems in place will only allow me to do so much.

Summary

Great counselors aren't "born." Instead, great counselors develop and perfect the intricacies of their counseling skills over time. Counselors who merely replicate the same counseling elements over and over again likely are perfecting imperfection. Superior supervisors provide critical direction. They enable average counselors to become more satisfied and effective. ■

Sources: "Counseling Today," EAP NewsBrief.

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Keeping Financial Fitness Resolutions

By Rick Rodgers

The New Year is a great time to get pointed in the right direction financially. Just as a person would embark on an exercise program to lose weight and get physically fit, there are simple steps anyone can take that will lead to being financially healthy and fit. Here are some tips for improving employees' financial lives in 2013.

❖ Review credit reports –

Borrowing money isn't the only reason to check one's credit. Employers and insurance companies also check credit reports. A credit score can have a profound effect on the amount a person pays on all types of insurance. Order a free report at AnnualCreditReport.com.

❖ Set up an Automatic Savings Plan (ASP) –

If an employer doesn't offer this through payroll deduction they can be set up through a bank or brokerage account. Simply have a certain amount of money withdrawn from a checking or savings account each month and deposited into an investment account. That way, it's saved before there's a chance to spend it. The goal should be to increase the amount invested at least once a year.

❖ Establish a cash flow plan –

Business owners know you can't control what you don't track. Take the time to forecast your income and expenses for the year, and put it in writing. Then adjust those numbers to reach individual goals, such as paying down debt or

replacing a car. Track progress on a regular basis by holding a monthly meeting to review the plan.

❖ Pay off your credit cards –

It's especially important to take action on *debt* in 2013. Cash doesn't earn much interest sitting in a deposit account (less than 1%) and even "low interest" credit cards charge 10 to 12%. So any extra savings should be used to pay down credit card debt *first*. A cash flow plan should include a schedule to eliminate credit card debt as quickly as possible.

❖ Shop insurance –

Insurance agents are often paid commission based on premium levels, so they have no incentive for finding existing customers lower premiums. However, there is a huge incentive for a competing agent to find you the lowest premium in order to win your business. Make note of the coverage levels for homeowner's and auto policies and use them to comparison shop. Look at ways to save on *health insurance* coverage, too, such as switching to a high-deductible plan and opening a Health Savings Account.

❖ Meet with a financial adviser –

An adviser is to financial planning as a personal trainer is to an exercise program. It's important to be held accountable by a third party who will push you. Good advisers will help develop a budget, and examine debts, taxes, retirement and college savings, estate planning and insurance. An individual does *not* have to have a high net worth to seek the assistance of a financial adviser. Go to the National Association of Personal Financial Advisors (NAPFA) and search for one in your area.

Summary

Don't just make a vague resolution to save money. According to *Psychology Today*, of the millions of Americans who make a New Year's resolution, 40% have already failed by Jan. 31! Let 2013 be the year you make lasting changes to improve your financial life. ■

Rick Rodgers, CFP, is the author of "The New Three-Legged Stool: A Tax Efficient Approach To Retirement Planning" (www.TheNewThreeLeggedStool.com).

