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James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

Best practices for preventing another Wakefield massacre

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Today's tenth anniversary of the Wakefield massacre in which Michael McDermott methodically executed seven co-workers whom he blamed for conspiring with the IRS to rob him of his hard earned money, is filled with a mixture of sadness and dread. We collectively mourn the senseless loss of life and extend our hearts to the surviving families for whom the Christmas season is not quite as joyous as it should be. At the same time, we recall the bizarre and scary image of a gunman bent on revenge and wonder if and when history will repeat itself at some other workplace, just as it did a few months ago in Manchester, Connecticut. And, we may contemplate, even fleetingly, the thought that the next workplace devastated by a disgruntled employee could be our own?

In reaction to whatever the latest episode of workplace terror may be, many companies try to minimize the risk of violence by vigilantly watching out for warning signs, comparing their employees with various profiles found in books, pamphlets, and on the Internet. The typical workplace avenger is a reclusive, middle-aged white male who feels that his job and financial well-being are in jeopardy. Facing yet another disappointment or failure at work, he senses that his career is slipping away and with it his self-esteem. He also believes that he is not to blame. Rather, it's the supervisor who gives him poor assignments or doesn't appreciate his hard work; it's his co-workers who get all the credit when profits increase; it's the human resources personnel who are out to get him.

Although the risk of workplace violence, at least to the point where employees are killed or seriously wounded, is exceptionally small, many companies attempt to avoid trouble (and resulting liability for negligent supervision) by training employees at all levels in how to identify the warning signs. Typical of this approach, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) offers an online violence prevention course that promotes a laundry list of warning signs divided and graded by the degree of risk. Employees are advised to look out for the early signs of potential trouble, such as a co-worker who is short-tempered, argumentative and uncooperative. At the disturbing extreme, behaviors such as fighting, making threats, and menacing displaying a weapon should be considered red flags of imminent danger. And as if these indicators were not sufficiently obvious, the NCDHHS website includes a video of a frustrated office worker walloping his computer screen with a keyboard as a vivid demonstration of the kind of behavior that should trip an alarm.

Notwithstanding the obvious nature of many of the profile descriptors, the unfortunate and occasionally tragic fact is that this and other similar lists of warning signs are not particularly helpful. Some of behaviors believed to be telltale signs are simply that: belief, often contradicted by empirical reality. For example, a history of substance abuse, often acknowledged as a warning sign, may be indicative of a troubled soul, but is not often characteristic of those who have perpetrated workplace attacks.

More important, profiles and checklists designed to predict rare events -- such as workplace shootings-- tend to over-predict and to produce a large number of "false positives." Regardless of the specific profile elements, many more employees will likely fit the profile than will in fact seek revenge at work. The challenge is a matter of finding needles in haystacks. There is a very large haystack of people who closely match the profile angry, frustrated employees who never smile and are always ready to blame others for their shortcomings and make threatening statements -- but very few needles who will in fact commit murder on the job. And if it ever comes to the point where an employee is showing co-workers a weapon and talks about his fantasy of killing off the boss, it may be much too late to intervene effectively.

Relying too heavily on profiling also has its downside, besides the inevitable false positives trap that may unfairly label the reclusive eccentric at the next desk as a potential troublemaker. An aggressive effort to identify the problem worker may actually create a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby a combative employee becomes enraged when singled out in a negative way. If urged or even coerced to seek counseling, he'll respond angrily to the suggestion that something is wrong with him. "I don't need counseling,• he will argue. You're the one who needs counseling. Actually, all you have to do is to start treating me fairly and everything will be just fine."

In the aftermath of a violent incident, of course, survivors tend to question why certain warning signs were ignored. If anything, these warning signs are yellow flags that only turn red once the blood has spilled -- that is, in the aftermath of tragedy. Of course, these "warning signs" only come into focus with 20/20 hindsight. Prediction is quite another matter altogether.

Finally, there have been many explosive situations that implicate a problematic workplace climate more than a problem worker. Organizations that encourage, if not reward, an authoritarian management style, that tolerate intimidation and bullying of subordinates, or that have inadequate grievance procedures breed employee distrust, disappointment and disgruntlement. Indeed, much more telling than warning signs of an at-risk worker are indicators of an at-risk workplace, a critical point appropriately noted in the NCDHHS training program.

The overriding goal should be to make civility and decency in the workplace as important a goal as profit. Companies need to upgrade and humanize the way in which they deal with all employees every day rather than focusing narrowly on how to respond to the occasional worker who has made threats, be they subtle or overt. Long-term initiatives designed to improve employee morale pay off in human terms.

It would be exceptionally unfair to imply that Edgewater Technology was in any way responsible for the carnage that occurred one decade ago today. However, as a legacy to the tragedy in Wakefield as well as others like it near and far, it would be wise to concentrate as much on how to enhance the climate in companies large and small as on how to deal with those workers who may resemble in any way a character like Michael McDermott.