Stress & Aggression in Today’s Leaner and Meaner Workplace: A View from the Trenches

Dr. Joel H. Neuman, Director
Center for Applied Management &
Associate Professor of Management & Organizational Behavior
School of Business
State University of New York at New Paltz

CHRMS Breakfast Seminar


— The Associated Press
Postal worker shoots 2 colleagues

The Associated Press

PALATINE, Ill. — A postal worker described by co-workers as a "beautiful guy" walked into work Tuesday and shot and wounded two men he regularly joked and ate lunch with, police and fellow employees said.

Donny S. Thomas, 33, was arrested 20 miles away near his home in Northlake. He was charged with attempted murder of two federal employees and ordered held until a hearing Thursday.

Thomas' attorney, Terry Gillemie, said his client had been on medication for physical problems and depression.

But Postal Inspector Ida Gillis said Thomas, whom she described as "a quiet, a quiet individual," had been acting normally at work, and investigators had not determined any motive for the shootings.

Co-workers at the mail-processing center said they, too, had no idea why Thomas, who union officials said had an exemplary record, would shoot his friends.

"I can't figure out why he did it," said clerk Maude Kelly, who had worked with Thomas for 20 years.

"He was just a beautiful guy. We would joke and laugh together," Thomas arrived for the start of the 7 a.m. shift in the Chicago suburb, walked to the second floor sorting area and fired two rounds into the chest of clerk Steve Colura, police said.

Thomas then ran downstairs and shot clerk Mike Meike in the jaw and chest, then hit him with the semi-automatic pistol, police said.

Colura, 45, and Meike, 41, were hospitalized in stable condition.

An uncanny trend continuing

Recent post office shootings:
July 9, 1994: A postal worker walks up to his boss in a processing center in City of Industry, Calif., and shoots him to death.

May 21, 1993: Christopher Green, 29, a former postal worker burdened with "a mountain of debt," kills four people and wounds another during a holdup at the Montclair, N.J., post office.

May 6, 1993: A postal worker kills one and wounds two at a post office garage in Dearborn, Mich., before killing himself.

Aug. 30, 1992: A postal worker kills his wife at their home, then drives to the post office in Orange Glen, Calif., where he shoots two colleagues to death and wounds another before killing himself.


— The Associated Press

Workplace Violence
Employees "Going Postal"
A New Worry: Going to Work Can Be Murder

Ex-worker
kills two
at N.C. plant

Crime down —
except for homicide deaths.

Disgruntled Employees—Ticking Time Bombs?

ARMED AND DANGEROUS AT WORK
Other media accounts that establish workplace violence as a serious issue...

“Davis, come in here and take a bullet.”
"We’ve got to get rid of some people, Cosgrove. Who are the least likely to come back and shoot us?"

"An excellent defense. Let’s give her the doctorate."

Key finding: Violence & harassment in the workplace are pervasive:

- more than 2 million Americans were victims of physical attack during the past year
- 6 million workers were threatened
- 16 million were harassed.

In short . . .

- One out of four full-time workers was harassed, threatened, or attacked between July 1992 and July 1993
Beyond homicide...

- U.S. residents experience more than 2 million violent incidents/year at work
- 1.5 million simple assaults
- 395,000 aggravated assaults
- 51,000 rapes & sexual assaults
- 84,000 robberies
- Costs about half a million employees 1,751,000 days of work
- $55 million in lost wages annually (unpaid time)

Overall Costs of Workplace Violence

- $4.2 Billion annually (National Safe Workplace Institute)
- $36 Billion annually (Workplace Violence Research Institute)
Aggression and Stress

Costs of Stress

- $10,000 per worker/per year (NIOSH)
- $150 billion/year (absenteeism, health insurance claims, lost productivity)
- 79% of those surveyed claimed work was the primary cause of their stress
- Stress is a factor of 60-80% of all work-related injuries & 40% of turnovers
Stress: A Global Problem

In the UK, it has been estimated that:

- Better management of stress-related absenteeism could save $2 billion US dollars annually.
- Employers spend more than $14.5 billion per year on absences and stress-related heart disease (21% of all absences from work).
- In Japan, 10,000 stress-related suicides (i.e., “Karoshi”—death by overwork)

A Closer Look at Workplace Violence
Percentage of Workplace Homicides Occurring in Different Circumstances

- Robberies & Other Crime: 81%
- Current/Former Employees: 4%
- Customer/Client: 5%
- Police/Line of Duty: 6%
- Business Disputes: 4%


1992-1998 CFOI Homicide Data

- Armed Robberies: 68%
- Other: 12%
- Present-Former Employees: 13%
- Customers-Clients: 7%

n=3,549 Homicides in which perpetrator was identified
1992-98 Work-related homicides: A closer look…

Homicides perpetrated by Organizational Insiders & Organizational Outsiders: A Shift?

Workplace Violence…

Just the tip of the iceberg?

Workplace Aggression:

Efforts by individuals to harm others at work (or the entire organization) in ways the intended targets are motivated to avoid.
Applying aggression research to the study of workplace violence

The Buss Typology:
- Physical or Verbal
- Active or Passive
- Direct or Indirect

The Effect-Danger Ratio: Aggressors seek behaviors that are effective at harming others while, at the same time, incurring as little danger to themselves as possible.

Consistent with aggression theories, Baron & Neuman (1996) found that...

Aggression in work settings most often is:
- **verbal** rather than **physical**
- **passive** rather than **active**
- **indirect** rather than **direct**

- Overall, **covert** aggression is more prevalent than **overt** aggression
Leaner = Meaner?

- Downsizing
- Layoffs
- Budget cuts
- Technological change
- Increasing diversity
- Affirmative action
- Employee monitoring
- Change in Management
- Org. Restructuring
- Reengineering
- Pay cuts or freezes
- Use of Part-timers
- Job Sharing

Baron & Neuman (1996; 1997)
Top 10 Acts of Rudeness

Based on his interviews and surveys of workers, Joel H. Neuman, director of the Center for Applied Management at the State University of New York at New Paltz, developed a list of the most commonly cited aggressive behaviors in the workplace.

- Talking about someone behind his or her back.
- Interrupting others when they are speaking or working.
- Flaunting status or authority; acting in a condescending manner.
- Belittling someone’s opinion to others.
- Failing to return phone calls or respond to memos.
- Giving others the silent treatment.
- Insults, yelling and shouting.
- Verbal forms of sexual harassment.
- Staring, dirty looks or other negative eye contact.
- Intentionally damning with faint praise.

THE WASHINGTON POST

Stress & Aggression In the Workplace

A Collaborative Action Research Project

A COLLABORATIVE ACTION PROJECT BETWEEN

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NY AT NEW PALTZ
FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY
WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
VAMROC
Sioux Falls
Fargo
VHA Minneapolis
St Cloud MC
VHA Black Hills St Paul
VHA St Paul MC
VHA Milwaukee
VBA Chicago RO
VBA St Paul RO
VBA Des Moines RO
VBA Milwaukee RO
VBA Phoenix RO

Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
VBA+VHA = VA Medical/Regional Office Center (VAMROC)
National Cemetery Administration (NCA)

Project Team Members

VAOSH Project Manager................................. Jim Scaringi
SUNY New Palz ........................................ Joel H. Neuman
CHEP Project Coordinator......................... Harley Carpenter
VBA Program Analyst................................ Rita Kowalski
VBA Chief Negotiator............................ Jennifer Long
VHA HR Advisory Group......................... Dan Kowalski
OHRM Management Analyst.................... Ellen Kollar
VHA VISN 13 Operations......................... Michelle Blakely
Columbia U............................................... Lyle Yorks
Wayne State U........................................ Loraleigh Keashly
Fairleigh Dickinson U............................. Joel Harmon
Office of Resolution Mgmt..................... Odessa Johnson
Director, Network 23......................... Robert Petzel
VHA EES Network 23.......................... Bridget Cannon
NCA Field Operations.......................... Robert Kline
VHA VISN Education Off..................... Gene Mickelson
VBA AFGE National Rep...................... Barbara Cook
National VA Council AFGE................ Oscar Williams
National VA Council AFGE................ Anthony McCray
National VA Council AFGE................ Pat Russell
VBA Office of Field Ops...................... Lorena Ruley
The Action Teams

1. Facilities volunteered to join the project after the Project Team briefed them on the project’s objectives.
   - Both management and the union have to agree.
   - Either party can withdraw the facility from the project.

2. Management and the Union jointly selected Action Team Members using the following criteria:
   - Credibility with employees and leadership
   - High potential for success
   - Action-orientation
   - Varied backgrounds
   - Committed to learning
   - Good communication skills
Just-In-Time Training & Initial Actions

3. The Project Team trained the Action Teams on:
   - The way to ask questions about the data they would receive, and
   - Learning practices that would help them work and learn together

4. Each team had a team leader and a learning coach.

5. The Action Teams provided the Project Team with input into the original survey.

6. The Action Teams prepared the facility for the taking the survey by briefing employees on project goals and survey process.

WAR-Q

The Workplace Aggression Research Questionnaire

- Consists of 60 examples of workplace aggression based on previous research & extensive pilot testing
- Respondents indicate (on a 7-point scale) the extent to which they've experienced each behavior over the preceding 12 months (Never, Once, A few times, Several times, Monthly, Weekly, Daily)
- Identification of actor & target
- The degree to which behaviors bothered the target

© Neuman, J. H., & Keashly, L. (2001)
Sample of WAR-Q Questions & Layout...

Have you been subject to any of the behaviors listed below in the past 12 months? Only consider those behaviors that have occurred in your workplace.

Note: The behaviors listed below represent actions that vary dramatically in terms of their intensity, seriousness, and consequences. As a result, there are instances where very dissimilar items may be grouped together.

1. Subjected to bad jokes
2. Been stared at in a hostile manner
3. Been excluded from work-related social gatherings
4. Had others storm out of the work area when you entered
5. Had others consistently arrive late for meetings that you called
6. Been sworn at in a hostile manner
7. Been subjected to negative comments about your religious beliefs
8. Been given the "silent treatment"
9. Not been given the praise for which you felt entitled
10. Been treated in a rude and/or disrespectful manner
11. Had your personal property defaced, damaged, or stolen
12. Had others fail to take action to protect you from harm
13. Been subjected to negative comments about a disability
14. Been subjected to stories or hostile gestures
15. Had others refuse you requests for assistance
16. Had others fail to deny false rumors about you
17. Given little or no feedback about your performance
18. Had others delay action on matters that were important to you
19. Been yelled at or shouted at in a hostile manner
20. Been subjected to negative comments about your intelligence or competence

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Phase I Results

26 Facilities (11 Pilot & 15 Comparison sites)
4,790 Respondents
Relative Frequency of Different Forms of Aggression

Top 10 List

- Treated in a rude/disrespectful manner.............. (67)
- Not given praise for which you felt entitled........ (65)
- Others delay action on matters important to you.. (63)
- Been glared at in a hostile manner.................. (57)
- Given little/feedback about your performance.....(55)
- Others fail to give information you really needed. (53)
- Been lied to............................................. (53)
- Had your contributions ignored by others.......... (51)
- Been given the “silent treatment”....................(50)
- Prevented from expressing yourself.................(49)
Bottom 10 List

- Had signs or notes left to embarrass you........... (9)
- Been kicked, bitten, spat on................................. (9)
- Told how to spend personal time......................... (9)
- Pushed, shoved, bumped with unnecessary force (9)
- Subjected to racist remarks................................. (8)
- Had someone hit you with an object..................... (7)
- Threats to reveal private/embarrassing info.......... (5)
- Negative comments about your sexual orientation (3)
- Assaulted with weapon or other dangerous object (2)
- Been raped or sexually assaulted.......................(1)

Source of Aggression...

- Coworker 43%
- Supervisor 35%
- Customer 13%
- Subordinate 5%
- Other 4%
FREQ OF OCCURRENCE | RESPONSES | TOTALS
---|---|---
Never | 200426 | 200426
Once | 11703 | 11703
Few | 36400 | 109200
Several | 15629 | 93774
Monthly | 2981 | 35772
Weekly | 3455 | 172750
Daily | 3042 | 765500
SUM INCLUDING NEVER | 273636 |
SUM EXCLUDING NEVER | 73210 | 1,183,699

Potential more than 1 million aggressive acts per year!

These numbers are conservative, because people remember more good than bad!

Total Number of Aggressive Behaviors Reported for 4,790 Respondents

Respondents Reporting that they Experience Aggressive Events Daily or Weekly

- No Aggression 6%
- Aggression Less Than Weekly 58%
- At Least 1-5 Events Weekly 29%
- At Least 6+ Events Weekly 7%

Bullied 36%

Non-Bullied: Aggression Less Than Weekly 58%
Degree to which targets claim they are bothered by aggression

- Not at all: 26%
- A little: 38%
- Moderately: 20%
- Quite a bit: 16%

74% of targets claimed to be bothered by aggression.

Amount of Bother Experienced as a Function of Persistence

* Columns with different colors differ significantly $p < .05$
Job Satisfaction as a Function of Persistence

Satisfaction with Organization as a Function of Persistence

* Columns with different colors differ significantly $p < .05$
Intention to Leave Organization as a Function of Persistence

* Columns with different colors differ significantly $p<.05$

While controlling for total number of aggressive acts…

Satisfaction with the Job and the Organization

No Aggression  |  Non-Bullied  |  Bullied  |  Severely Bullied
• NOT GIVEN PRAISE FOR WHICH YOU FELT ENTITLED
• TREATED IN A RUDE AND/OR DISRESPECTFUL MANNER
• HAVING YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS IGNORED BY OTHERS
• BEING LIED TO
• BEING GIVEN UNREASONABLE WORKLOADS OR DEADLINES MORE THAN OTHERS
• BEING SHOWN LITTLE EMPATHY/SYMPATHY WHEN HAVING A TOUGH TIME

I feel tense & stressed on my job

- Strongly Agree: 23%
- Strongly Disagree: 5%
- Disagree: 22%
- Agree: 33%
- Neither Agree/Disagree: 17%
- 56%
Work is a source of stress for me

While controlling for total number of aggressive acts...

Stress and Intentions to Leave the Organization
Source x Stress

Columns with different colors differ significantly $p < .05$

Source x Job Satisfaction

Columns with different colors differ significantly $p < .05$
Source x Satisfaction with Org

Columns with different colors differ significantly $p < .05$

Did you file a formal complaint?
- Yes: 9%
- No: 91%

Did you confront the individual?
- Yes: 51%
- No: 49%

Did you report experience to a superior or union official?
- Yes: 37%
- No: 63%
Filing Formal Grievance/Complaint as a Function of Persistence of Aggression

NOTE: Seldom do people file formal complaints

EVEN WHEN BEHAVIORS OCCUR OFTEN & PERSIST OVER TIME

OWCP Claims Related to Stress and Workplace Violence

\[ R(68) = .39, p = .001 \]
Acting on the data:

The Action Teams in Action...

Reviewing Data and Providing Feedback to the Workforce

The academic researchers received completed surveys and provided results to the teams.

- Conference held with all action team members to release initial data and reinforce previous training.
- Action Teams requested data analysis of facility-level data from the academic partners.
- Action Teams received facility descriptive statistics for each survey question (means, frequency distribution and standard deviations), comparison data for the other pilot sites, & some causal models.
- Action Teams briefed employees on the survey results.
Acting on the Data

- Action teams examined and discussed the data and suggested possible areas of intervention.
  - In some cases, the Project Team asked questions to test the assumptions underlying the suggested interventions.
- Action Teams are presently in various stages of the analysis, identification, and implementation process.
- The Project and Action Teams have just re-administer the survey and are in the process of analyzing the results.
Three Action Teams
Tell Their Stories…

- VHA, Black Hills, SD
- NCA, Houston, TX
- VBA, Chicago, IL

Concluding comments and…

Q & A

For additional information:
http://www.va.gov/valu