THE LETHAL EMPLOYEE

BY BILL LEWINSKI

Workplace violence has recently exploded into the consciousness of the American public. We frequently gawk at headlines of mass murder in the workplace or school. Most Americans, including law enforcement officers, do not understand these senseless, malicious acts of violence. Because we realize how deadly they are and yet have no understanding of their reasons, we've come to fear them.

The marginally comforting fact is that we do actually have some understanding about who commits these acts and why. The disturbing fact is that we now know that workplace violence is epidemic.

Various studies have found differing results, but all the research concludes that generally the American workplace is violent. History tells us it may have always been that way, at least in some occupations. This is not news to law enforcement. Many officers work daily under dangerous and sometimes deadly conditions.

A close examination of the statistics on workplace violence reveals that the majority of the violence is clustered in certain occupations. The statistics for law enforcement, corrections, the medical world, taxi cabs, and the "stop and robs" are exceptionally high and have served to significantly inflate the national statistics across all occupations. However, even after eliminating these particularly dangerous jobs from the statistics, it is still true that for the average American, going to work can be a dangerous and even terminal action.

The following statistics from the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice and Statistics tell how violent the workplace can be in any given year.
- About 2 million Americans are victims of assault
- More than 1,000 are killed
- About 40,000 are victims of aggravated assaults
- About 1.5 million are victims of simple assaults
- 51,000 are raped and/or sexually assaulted
- About 1 out of 4 assaults occur to law enforcement officers

The Statistics are equally shocking when we take a closer look at workplace homicides.
- Workplace homicides account for 1 out of 6 fatal occupational injuries
- Firearms were used to commit more than 80% of all workplace homicides
- 20% were a result of bombings, stabbings or beatings
- About 75% of the homicides occurred during a robbery
- About 10% were committed by the victims coworkers or angry customers
- About 5% were committed by the victims personal acquaintances

Looking at it in a different time frame, each week about 18,000 workers are assaulted in the workplace and 20 are killed. Much of this violence is caused by run-of-the-mill criminal activity. For example, 75% of the homicides were committed during a robbery. In spite of criminal behavior being the prime cause of workplace violence, distraught employees or personal acquaintances of employees are also assaulting or killing their coworkers, supervisors, friends or lovers in the workplace at an alarming rate.

This homicidal rage, expressed in the workplace, is an exaggeration of another rampant American phenomenon – anger in the workplace. In a 1996 nationwide Gallup poll, 25% of all workers surveyed said they were generally at least somewhat angry at work. This anger was due to the actions of supervisors, the lack of productivity of coworkers, tight deadlines or heavy workloads, dealing with the public or being treated badly. Experts in the business world also attribute this anger to the downsizing of companies and the resulting termination of workers who leave their jobs feeling overworked an under appreciated.

The majority of the stress factors leading to workplace violence can be deeply appreciated by law enforcement officers because many officers work under equally stressful circumstances. For example, many officers work for understaffed departments with tight budgets, sometimes the supervision is not the best, often the public and even the officer's department does not appreciate them or treat them fairly. Yet, in all of the mass killings that have occurred in the workplace in the last 20 years, not one was committed by a law enforcement officer. As someone with a lot of experience in working with people, officers intuitively know that it is more than just the workplace or even relational stress that causes this violence and homicide. It is clear that something is not working right in the minds of the perpetrators of these assaults, or killings, and in fact, this is true.

Many people who attack their coworkers or supervisors have been found to have personality disorders such as an explosive or aggressive personality disorder. Many have strong psychopathic or "criminal mind" components, while some have full-blown paranoid schizophrenic mental health disorders. They may believe that if not the world, then someone or some group at work is out to get them. Individuals with this kind of personality disorder can explode when they experience some personal stressor such as separation or divorce, job loss, health problems, financial problems or problems in any area that begins to threaten their sense of personal control. These are not the only kind of people who commit workplace homicide, and in looking for an answer to the question of who does this horrific act; we will find there is not a simple explanation.

For example, within a very short period last fall, we had several mass killings, all done by very different people. Larry Ashbrook entered the Wedgewood Baptist Church in Ft. Worth and killed seven people before committing suicide. He was described as a paranoid schizophrenic and was alleged to be shouting anti-Baptist rhetoric as he slaughtered his victims.

Soon after in Hawaii, Byron Uyesugi walked into a meeting at Xerox and killed seven employees. He had undergone anger management counseling, but apparently had no negative work issues, and was described as being very normal and mild-mannered. His father said he knew of only one time when Bryan had lost his temper at work during his 15 years with Xerox. In his only angry outburst, he kicked an elevator door.

The next day in the Seattle area, a gunman walked into a boat repair shop, opened fire and killed two people, wounding two others. The cause of the shooting was apparently a grudge against one of the victims.

It is clear that mass killings and particularly workplace homicides are done by a variety of people with their own bizarre view of the world. But, as we come to a better understanding of the lethal employee, it is becoming possible to lump them into some groups. *Generally,* they have been found to fall within one of the following categories:

- The First is a person who has a history of violent behavior and poor impulse control. This person is sometimes known as a bully and not trusted by people. This is because they never know when this person will "lose it." Some researchers have referred to this kind of individual as a "pit bull." With this kind of person, the abuse of alcohol has frequently been found to be a trigger to a violent act. He can be charismatic and will often distort the truth or openly lie on his employment application. After being hired, this kind of person, whether or not this is objectively true, begins to feel cheated or betrayed in the workplace. For him, the source of this unfair treatment is usually seen as a particular individual or specific group. This type of lethal employee has a poorly developed sense of the future, with no awareness of any possible punishment for his actions. The murders may be planned or they may occur suddenly when the incident at work turns from a "push" to a "shove." This minor provocation propels him over the edge and his impulses turn into violent lethal action. This type of lethal employee, although not initially suicidal, may become so after he calms down and realizes the consequences of his violent outburst.

- The second kind of person is one whose murderous thoughts are cultivated and developed by the management. This has no real history of violence. However, he is extremely fearful of ridicule and rejection, which he imagines everywhere. Therefore, he tends to avoid contact with others. Subsequently, he is seen as shy and reclusive. One mass murderer in this category was remembered as a fine young man who received A's in school for courtesy, cooperation, religion and attendance. Usually, this kind of person has a good work record, which begins to deteriorate. The deterioration normally starts with small problems that the employee either has or creates for others. These are ignored or the employee is slighted, demeaned or in some other way mismanaged. The frequencies of the problems increase and the employee's behavior may be seen as

show any symptom of the inner turmoil he is facing. The problems fester and become more intense and symbolic in the mind of the employee. Because he is unable to solve his dilemmas, resentment and rage build but are held in check by powerful controls until suddenly the employee snaps.

What puzzles us most about the brutal incidents perpetrated by these lethal employees are their unpredictability and senselessness. How can you protect yourself or to others from violence committed by fine young men of exemplary character? Also, because of the length of time of the emotional build-up and the intensity of hatred felt by this kind of perpetrator, the action he takes is usually way out of proportion to whatever caused him to snap. For instance, mass murder and mayhem could be committed because another employee mistakenly took his seat at a meeting.

There are four common features of this kind of homicidal employee: (1) he has overwhelming emotional tension, usually around shyness, rejection, ridicule and self-protection; (2) he has an inability to see any alternative to violence; (3) time slows down, he loses objective outside references. His problems become his entire world. He sees no way out and has no ability to look beyond *getting* even; and (4) a sense of detachment develops. This allows him to separate the person he thinks he is from the rageful beast developing inside. Subsequently, he feels no personal responsibility for killing and maiming others and can do so in a frighteningly detached and impersonal way.

- The third category of lethal employee is one who becomes obviously mentally deranged on the job. This person usually has a history of mental illness, most often involving some level of schizophrenia and paranoia. At the time he began employment, he was probably functioning well and his mental illness was probably under control. However, for some reason, as time goes on, he may have stopped taking his medication or stress at work or home has pushed him over the edge and he becomes mentally deranged. Usually there are ample behavioral signs that this person is in trouble, but no one acts to get help before he viciously turns on a coworker.

- The fourth category is the murder/suicide one. This may blend with one of the previous categories, or stand-alone. Some lethal employees almost look and act as if they want to die or actually do kill themselves as the final act in their murderous sprees. In July 1999, Joseph Barton killed nine people, wounded 13, then killed himself. In June 1999, Joseph Brooks killed his former psychiatrist and five others then killed himself. In March 1998 Mathew Beck killed the Connecticut Lottery Corporation's president and three of his supervisors, then killed himself. In June 1997, Daniel Marsden, after an argument with co-workers, killed two and wounded four others before killing himself.

It has been long understood that in a small number of individuals there is a clear relationship between suicide and murder. The research and understanding of the "suicide by cop" phenomenon, which many officers are now familiar with, lends credence to the possibility of suicide as a motive for some workplace homicides. In some cases, the lethal employee simply does not have the courage to kill himself. Simply stated he kills others so he, in turn, can die by being shot by police – this seems to have happened in a number of mass murders. Another murder/suicide scenario is the one of the suicidally depressed employee who may be seeking meaning or honor in his death by taking others with him, particularly those who have "wronged" him. A third scenario is the homicidal employee who is so full of self-destructive rage; he literally destroys the main figures in his world, as well as himself. Research into this motive is difficult because almost all of the perpetrators in this category are dead. It is know that some mass murderers, who have survived their murderous episodes, such as Charles Whitman, Richard Speck and Albert DeSalvo had suicidal thoughts or acts prior to going out to kill others.

Regardless of the motivation of the lethal employee or mass murderer, law enforcement's response is almost always reactive and the carnage is completed before they arrive on the scene. To become more proactive, law enforcement needs to do a number of things to prepare their agencies and their communities for the possibility of workplace homicide and violence.

First, officers can prepare themselves by learning about the causes of workplace homicide and building their own tactical and crisis communication skills in case they are actually able to intervene in an ongoing incident. They can also help their agency by building response formats and strategies that include workplace violence/homicide. This includes a variety of activities from having the building plans of all the major work and school sites in the community, to training the dispatchers to recognize and respond appropriately to these calls.

Next, law enforcement can help train and coordinate their activities with that of the community. This may involve training the workplaces and schools on the possibility of workplace violence/homicide. It may also include

ongoing incidences in the workplace. For instance, getting supervisors or personnel to call you before they deal with a potentially lethal or violent employee, will allow law enforcement to anticipate and coordinate an effective response or support system. This might do a lot to prevent, deflect or minimize potentially lethal incidents. More specifically, we know that termination or fear of termination is a significant trigger in workplace violence. If workplace supervisors are terminating a potentially violent employee, it is vital that they inform local law enforcement agencies before acting. The need to know that and you need to tell them.

Checklists have been developed that outline the warning signs suggesting someone might be a lethal employee. Although only minimally helpful in actually profiling a lethal employee or in predicting violence, it may be informative to see a sample list of the behaviors shown by lethal employees before they attacked. Officers who work on this issue with companies can use this list as a springboard into a discussion of who might be prone to violence/homicide in the workplace.

The lethal employee had one or more of the following behaviors:
- Shows little humor.
- Difficulty with authority figures and accepting criticism – either from supervisors or peers
- Brooding over a recent humiliating life event or a recent sense of being unfairly treated
- Self-esteem is closely linked to the job – even if he is not a particularly good employee. These are kinds of people who "need to get a life."
- Lack social support or peer groups out-side of work
- Poor interpersonal skills – particularly poor in conflict solving
- A past history of violence, impulsivity or making threats
- Currently raises his voice, intimidates or loses temper with coworkers
- Evidence of planning violent activity
- Abuses alcohol or drugs. Two thirds of all homicides at work involved alcohol.
- Has a history of domestic violence, legal difficulties, conflict with coworkers, unwelcome sexual advance
- Experience a recent termination or is expecting termination – this might be in his imagination.
- Demographics – most violence is perpetrated by poor, young males who live in a violence-prone world. Most Lethal employees are middle aged, living alone and work in a blue-collar position that they've held for some time.
- The relatives of an injured or slighted worker who is acting to bring their own sense of justice or fair play to their relative's problems at work.

It is important to note that many individuals who had or have one or more of the preceding behavior have never hurt anyone either inside or outside the workplace.

This leads us to the difficult problem of predicting violence. This article was not written to help the officer predict violence, for even trained experts, working with a very specific group of people have a difficult time predicting who will or will not be violent. These is, however, no question, that officer responding to call involving a lethal employee in the midst of murderous rage will be more productive if he understands the dynamic s of what is going on and has planned for this incident ahead of time.

About the Author

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