

Prevention of Violence in Workplace Requires Skill and Advance Planning

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



An Ohio State University janitor who was about to lose his job walked into a maintenance building for his early morning shift this month and shot his two supervisors, killing one of them and fatally shooting himself.

Shocking details continue to emerge about the February 12 shooting spree at the University of Alabama. Biology professor Amy Bishop shot and killed three colleagues, and wounded three others during a faculty meeting.

These are the latest in a tragic nationwide pattern of workplace violence that appears to grow as our nation's struggling economy places financial stress on families, layoffs continue to occur and employee workloads increase.

The Alabama shooting is a textbook case of what can happen when a business' background-checking appears to be lacking and when behavioral problems are not addressed quickly.

These tragedies and others remind us that business owners, supervisors and employees must work together to create a safe, violent-free, conflict-controlled workplace.

It begins with hiring qualified employees after backgrounds are verified and previous employment confirmed. It continues with establishing and enforcing policies and procedures that do not tolerate violence. This includes establishing practices that deal with workplace conflict, rather than letting it fester. A key component is a training program that identifies early warning signs of potentially violent behavior and appropriate steps for co-workers and supervisors to take.

A Harvard-educated professor, Bishop was told last year she would not be granted tenure at the University of Alabama at Huntsville. She was encouraged to find another job. This fueled her hostility toward colleagues on a campus where she was known for her "cyclical flip-outs."

Reportedly when the university hired her in 2003, officials did not know about her background: In 1986, the then 21-year-old Bishop shot and killed her 18-year-old brother. The shooting was called accidental. In 1994, she and her husband were questioned in a mail bomb plot against a colleague at Harvard. In 2002, she was charged with assaulting a woman at a restaurant.

Although she arrived at the University of Alabama with prestigious recommendations, her explosive behavior soon reappeared, causing students to avoid her classes.

No doubt university officials wish they had done a more thorough job of investigating Bishop's background before hiring her. But when they received complaints about her behavior, they took nearly six years to deny her tenure and advise her to move along.

Too often when we encounter disruptive workplace behavior, we want to ignore it and hope problems will move along. Most often this strategy just doesn't work.

The U.S. Department of Labor Statistics reported 628 people died in workplace homicides in 2007. In addition to the tragic loss of lives, the costs associated with workplace violence include lost business, lower productivity, medical expenses, higher insurance rates, negative publicity and litigation. The American Journal of Industrial Medicine estimated costs of workplace violence from 1992 to 2001 to be \$6.5 billion.

No community is immune. If a workplace tragedy can occur in Huntsville, Ala., a city about half the size of Bakersfield, it can happen here.

For example, just last year, the Bakersfield office of a major corporation made headlines when a former employee drove recklessly through the company's parking lot, threatening company officials over a disability insurance dispute. Security barriers were erected to protect workers and the man was sent to prison.

Likely at one time or another, we all have worked with someone who had a hot temper and threatening manner. Perhaps we feared violence. Did we confront the coworker, ask managers to intervene, or report concerns to human resources or a company ombudsman?

Business owners must establish clear policies that ban disruptive behavior. These policies must be consistently enforced. Procedures for reporting conflicts and disruptive behavior must be established. Steps that include counseling and mediation must be included in the company's disciplinary action program. Supervisors and workers must receive conflict resolution training.

The Bakersfield Police Department recognizes workplace violence as a real threat. It has posted a brochure on its webpage www.bakersfieldcity.us/police outlining "red flag behavior" and response tips.

Human resources consulting firms offer supervisors and workers training, and assist in developing policies and procedures to address workplace violence. Ignoring violent or disruptive behavior is not an option.

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