

Alert and Alive: **Defusing Anger and Violence** **in the Workplace**

Daniel Paulk, Ph.D.



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by Daniel Paulk, Ph.D.

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Virginia Beach, Virginia 23452

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Introduction

Every threat of violence is unique. For that reason, the information in this book is intended to provide guidelines for developing a systematic approach to threats of violence. No written material can ever take the place of independent judgment and decisions. You should consult professional resources, such as threat assessment specialists and attorneys, in addressing specific circumstances. The ultimate decision in handling any threat of violence naturally rests with the management of your company.

About the Author

Daniel Paulk, Ph.D., is a senior consultant with Crisis Management International, Inc., a firm specializing in workplace crisis issues. His expertise includes crisis and threat evaluation, threat-of-violence management training, and direct intervention with companies regarding the defusing of violent threats and hostile behavior.

Previously, Dr. Paulk consulted with corporations in the outplacement industry. He offered specialized expertise in the termination of difficult and potentially volatile employees.

Dr. Paulk is an accomplished author. He has published three books and authored four audiovisual programs on a variety of psychological topics, including *Anger: The Turbulent Emotion*. Dan is a frequent contributor to a number of business-related publications.

Are You Prepared to Defuse Anger, Hostility, and Threats of Violence?

This self-assessment will help you measure your preparedness to deal with potential violence in the workplace. Place a check in the box by each statement that accurately describes your present knowledge. After you finish the book, take the posttest and compare your answers.

- ☐ I have a clear understanding of the kinds of stimuli that can trigger anger in others.
- ☐ I know which threats to take seriously and which to ignore.
- ☐ I can describe the three phases of violence escalation and the key features of each phase.
- ☐ I know how to defuse anger in its early stages.
- ☐ I know how and when to involve outside professional resources, such as the police, Employee Assistance Program, psychiatrists, security, etc., to help with threatening individuals.
- ☐ I understand and can use various “defusing strategies” to prevent or reduce potential violence in employees.
- ☐ I know how and when to confront potentially dangerous employees and discipline them appropriately.
- ☐ I know how to orchestrate a psychiatric intervention with a potentially dangerous employee who has emotional problems.
- ☐ I know how to terminate a threatening individual while maintaining a good level of control over that person’s behavior so he or she won’t retaliate.
- ☐ I can describe the S.A.F.E. confrontation model and how it operates in reducing potential violence.

How Did You Score?

How many statements did you check? If you only checked a few, the information you will find in the following chapters will be invaluable in developing your knowledge and skills in defusing hostility and threatening behavior. We will reevaluate your skill level at the end of this book.

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Chapter *One*

Managing Safety Risks

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Recognize the importance of communication in handling confrontations.
- ▶ Identify the most common type of workplace violence.
- ▶ Define the employer's "duty of care" in providing a safe workplace.
- ▶ Identify and describe the various kinds of threatening behavior and conduct.
- ▶ Outline five hostility management strategies to prevent or reduce workplace hostility and potential violence.

Violence is a familiar concern in today's workplace.

Societal hostility and violence are nothing new—we have centuries of recorded incidents. But workplace hostility and violence seem to be relatively recent phenomena. Just 10 years ago, such threats were barely discussed. They certainly were not considered pressing business issues. In today's workplace, however, threatening conduct has become a familiar concern. *Workforce* reports that 84 percent of human resource professionals who responded to a 1998 survey believed their companies were experiencing increased hostility as well as more employee willingness to express anger, hostility, and frustration at not getting their perceived needs met.

Consider the following real-life scenarios:

- A longtime male employee is passed over for promotion in favor of a female who has half his tenure. He becomes enraged, then embittered. He glares at her whenever he sees

her at the office. He blocks her path as they pass in the hallway. At meetings she conducts, he mutters derogatory remarks under his breath.

- After a grueling basketball practice in which a promising athlete feels like he is being “dissed” by his coach, the offended player goes to the coach’s office and physically attacks his boss, choking him. The player returns to his locker but still feels angry, so he goes back to the coach’s office and chokes him again.
- In an ongoing personality conflict, a production worker has repeatedly threatened his supervisor by saying that he will “blow his head off.” After one of these episodes, the supervisor says that the employee is full of “hot air” and dares him to carry out the threat. Minutes later, the employee goes to his car, retrieves a handgun, and returns to the shop floor. The supervisor hides, and police are called.

Take a Moment

Think of an incident at your workplace that involved a verbal outburst or physical expression of anger. How did poor conflict resolution skills contribute to this situation?



Why do incidents like these happen? Most workplace anger, hostility, and threats of violence seem to result from poor conflict resolution skills. Surveys consistently show the vital role communication and effective conflict resolution skills can play in preventing or reducing violent behavior. After the Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King verdict, experts noted: “Physical presence and communications skills alone could handle up to 98 percent of the incidents potentially requiring force” (“Days of Rage”). It is tragic that effective confrontation skills are often underappreciated or simply not utilized in the management of aggressive individuals.

Most threats of workplace violence seem to result from poor conflict resolution skills.

Workplace Violence: False Crisis or Serious Reality?

- “Disturbed worker goes on rampage, kills seven” . . . “Irate husband stalks wife, then attacks her at her office” . . . “Man kills three managers; says, ‘This is what you get for firing me!’” . . . “With songs and loving words, friends mourn slain workers”

When someone mentions workplace violence, what comes to mind? A deranged survivalist with an AK-47 mowing down coworkers for some petty indignity? That type of event is often publicized, but statistically it’s quite rare. In fact, you have a greater chance of being struck by lightning than being killed by a coworker (Larson, 94).

In its *1996 Workplace Violence Survey*, the Society for Human Resource Management reported that *verbal threats were the most common form of violence in the workplace*. Fighting was more common than shootings, stabbings, rape, or sexual assault.

In 1996, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) compiled these statistics. Of the more than 1,000 deaths in the workplace each year, the majority—75 percent—were related to a robbery. Another 10 percent were attributable to business disputes. Only 6 percent of reported workplace homicides were attributed to coworkers.

As these figures illustrate, the number of deaths from employee violence is statistically small. The greater enemy in the workplace is the psychological impact generated from threatening, harassing, and aggressive behavior.

The number of deaths from employee violence is statistically small.

- ◆ **Nonfatal violence and harassment are far more pervasive in the workplace than homicide.** A 1995 article, “Fear and Violence in the Workplace,” reported that more than 2 million Americans were victims of physical attack, another 6 million were threatened, and 16 million were harassed.
- ◆ **Most violent incidents are not fatal or catastrophic.** A 1993 survey cited in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* categorized 75 percent of violent incidents as fistfights, 17 percent as shootings, 8 percent as stabbings, and 6 percent as sexual assaults. The survey reported only one death.
- ◆ **Coworkers or bosses are more likely to harass while**

customers are more likely to physically attack. Most victims believe that interpersonal conflicts caused harassment or threats; irrational behavior is believed to precipitate attacks.

- ◆ **Improved interpersonal relations can reduce harassment and violence.** “Fear and Violence in the Workplace” reported lower rates of violence in workplaces with effective grievance, harassment, and security programs in place.

Consider the more commonplace, less publicized expressions of workplace violence:

- ◆ The employee who gets in a shouting match with her supervisor
- ◆ The terminated employee who says, “You haven’t heard the last of this!”
- ◆ The spurned lover who stalks a fellow employee in the parking lot
- ◆ The person passed over for promotion who sabotages some company equipment to get even
- ◆ The intimidating employee who glares at others

Managers and other frontline personnel can be instrumental in helping their employers exercise a duty of care when it comes to curtailing workplace violence. *Duty of care* is a concept rooted in early conceptions of master-servant law and employer liability. For example, in the early 1800s, many people feared steam locomotives, a new but “dangerous” technology. The principle of a contract of safe passage was developed. The employer was held absolutely liable for delivering passengers to their destinations safely. This duty included protecting them from assaults from the carrier’s employees.

The Employer’s Duty

An employer who sees the warning signs of potential violence has a duty to act to ensure the safety of the workplace. Today, U.S. Courts are concluding that employers have an obligation to address an employee’s violent tendencies once they learn of them, either through rehabilitation or by removal from the workplace. If employers do not fulfill this obligation, they are potentially liable and punishable under a number of tort (legal) standards, specifically negligent retention.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) supports workplace

An employer who sees the warning signs of potential violence has a duty to act to ensure the safety of the workplace.

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standards regarding violence. Employers have a right to hold employees to the same behavioral standards regardless of disability protection.

- After a drinking binge, an employee tried to throw a stool at his supervisor but was restrained by coworkers. Fired for his violent outburst, the employee claimed that his conduct was the result of his alcoholism (for which he had received treatment). The employee further claimed that he had an alcoholic blackout and could not remember the violent behavior. After five years of being alcohol-free, the employee asked to have his job reinstated but was denied. He sued, claiming that he was protected under the Rehabilitation Act. But in *Ferby vs. USPS et al.*, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that “the Rehabilitation Act does not permit an employee who has fallen below acceptable performance or behavior standards to use the disability as a shield from retribution.”

Recognizing a Risk



Take a Moment

Indicate whether you think the following statements are true or false. Answers are on page 123.

- T/F 1. Most workplace violence seems to result from poor conflict resolution skills.
- T/F 2. The most common form of violence in the workplace is physical assault.
- T/F 3. The majority of violent incidents in the workplace are not fatal or catastrophic.
- T/F 4. Coworkers are usually harassers, whereas customers tend to be the attackers.
- T/F 5. Negligent retention obligates an employer to rehabilitate a violent employee once the employee's violent propensities are known; the company may not fire this employee.

Troubling behavior takes many forms in the workplace. Following are descriptions of several types of threatening, intimidating, and aggressive behavior.

Troubling behavior takes many forms in the workplace.

Threatening Behavior or Conduct

Threatening behavior expresses an intent to injure, either through words or through actions.

- ◆ Threatening statements:
 - Direct threats (“I’ll put you in your grave.”)
 - Veiled threats (“Somebody’s going to get hurt.”)
 - Indirect threats (“I’ve had it with the supervisor; if he cuts my overtime one more time, it’ll be the last decision he’ll ever make.”)
- ◆ Threatening actions:
 - Brandishing or displaying weapons on company property
 - Associating with or alluding to hate groups where violence is used against others
 - Displaying symbols associated with menacing groups (certain tattoos, dress, etc.)

Intimidating or Harassing Behavior

This category includes provocative words, gestures, or acts that are meant to worry or trouble others. Such behavior is usually coercive in tone.

- ◆ Body language that is threatening or intrusive:
 - Glaring at others
 - Getting in people’s faces
 - Brushing against others
 - Pointing fingers in others’ faces
 - Cornering people or blocking their path
 - Using a tone of voice that sounds ominous or threatening
 - Stalking behavior

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- ◆ Actions that are belligerent, disruptive, or unruly:
 - Consistently arguing with coworkers
 - Frequent or constant swearing at others
 - Arguments with others that escalate to the point of losing verbal control (yelling, shouting, insulting)
 - Belittling, degrading, or humiliating another, especially in front of others
- ◆ Provocative communications that are sent or posted:
 - Violent notes, articles, or sensational literature (e.g., funeral ads, newspaper clippings regarding recent workplace shootings, etc.)
 - Symbols that are frightening to some individuals (e.g., a voodoo doll)
 - Sexually graphic literature
- ◆ Sexually harassing behavior:
 - Unwanted sexual advances
 - Romantic fixation or obsession for another

Assaultive or Aggressive Behavior

This category includes verbal or physical attacks that result in physical injury and/or emotional harm; criminal behavior; and force capable of producing death:

- ◆ Hitting, shoving, kicking, biting, cutting, scratching as part of a physical attack, or other strongly invasive behaviors (e.g., grabbing or fondling another's private parts)
- ◆ Destruction of property, vandalism, arson, sabotaging equipment
- ◆ Attempting to carry out murder or rape

Take a Moment

Match the appropriate description of behavior to the kind of threatening or hostile behavior it illustrates. Answers are on page 123.



TB = Threatening behavior or conduct

IH = Intimidating or harassing behavior

AA = Assaultive or aggressive behavior

- _____ 1. Vandalizing some company equipment.
- _____ 2. Telling a coworker, "You better watch your back from now on."
- _____ 3. A coworker who consistently gets in his coworkers' faces when they disagree with him.
- _____ 4. A team leader who keeps leaving somewhat sexually explicit cartoons out for his team members to see, even after his female colleagues ask him not to do so.
- _____ 5. An employee who appeared to be carrying a gun in his briefcase on several recent occasions.

Effective Violence Reduction Strategies

The following Alert and Alive strategies can provide you with the techniques and skills to defuse anger before it escalates, confront threatening individuals in a nonprovocative manner, and effectively discipline troublemakers.

Strategy 1: Create and Publicize a Policy That Condemns Threatening Workplace Conduct

If your organization currently does not have a policy prohibiting threatening conduct in the workplace, you should develop one. This policy should convey zero tolerance for threatening or intimidating behavior. (See Appendix A for a sample policy.) To convey zero tolerance, the policy should state that violations are subject to disciplinary action up to and including termination.

Your workplace policy should convey zero tolerance for threatening behavior.

● Managing Safety Risks

A written policy furnishes the message and the muscle that threatening behavior will not be tolerated. Your policy should state the following:

- ◆ All threats will be taken seriously.
- ◆ Incidents will be investigated and appropriate disciplinary action will be taken.
- ◆ Firearms and other weapons are prohibited on company property (including parking lots) or in connection with conducting company business. Note: *The Workplace Violence Prevention Reporter* estimates that 4 million Americans routinely carry guns to work.
- ◆ All threats or violent actions should be reported immediately to management or other designated contacts.
- ◆ Employees who have obtained restraining orders or protective orders should notify management.

Written policies create a defensible legal foundation for action.

Written policies create a defensible legal foundation for action. For example, a policy requiring that all involuntarily terminated employees be escorted off the property (not just those suspected of violence) shields the employer from potential claims of defamation by conduct.



Take a Moment

Give examples of three kinds of statements that should probably go in a “zero tolerance” policy prohibiting workplace violence. Answers are on page 123.

Strategy 2: Take Threatening or Intimidating Behavior Seriously

- Michael L. was an operations manager for the Michigan branch of a large manufacturing facility. Michael had consulted with company management concerning the performance of an employee named Robert Z., and jointly they decided to fire Robert at the start of the following week.

Robert apparently learned of his impending termination and requested a meeting with Michael. Michael again spoke with management and received permission to discharge Robert when the two met. When Michael informed Robert of his dismissal, Robert shot Michael.

Prior to that fateful meeting, Robert had told a coworker that if Michael fired him, it would be the last thing Michael would ever do. The coworker never reported this threat to management because he didn't think Robert was serious (*LaDuke vs. Ziebart Corporation* 211 MICH APP 169,535N.W.2d201).

The previous example teaches the painful lesson that all threats must be taken seriously and investigated. Failure to investigate in the face of known or suspected dangers can lead to claims of negligence. The plaintiff's message is simple: the job is a place where you go to work, not a place you go to be threatened, harassed, attacked or killed. If someone is injured, somebody's going to pay. Juries are not sympathetic to an employer who does not appear to exercise reasonable precautions in dealing with a potentially violent situation.

**All threats
must be taken
seriously and
investigated.**

Employers cannot ignore reports of relationship abuse.

Domestic Violence Is Coming to Work

The employer's duty to maintain a safe workplace includes potential hazards resulting from domestic violence. Employers cannot ignore reports of relationship abuse—failure to act increases risk and legal liability for the employer, as the following example illustrates:

- Patrick T. gunned down his ex-girlfriend, Francesia, at her office and was sentenced to life in prison for his offense. Francesia's family sued her employer and the office building management for failing to protect her even though she had notified them that she had taken out a restraining order against Patrick.

Though domestic violence garners little attention in most discussions of workplace violence, employers can no longer look the other way—*an average of three women per week are murdered at work*. Corporate education and prevention programs can increase sensitivity among all employees about the cycle of domestic violence, abuse prevention, antistalking laws, the role of the criminal justice system, and the impact of domestic violence in the workplace.

Although domestic violence in the workplace has not been formally recognized as an occupational hazard, Cal/OSHA treats it as a Type III event and affirms that the inclusion of domestic violence in company antiviolence plans makes “good and safe business sense.”

Strategy 3: Defuse Anger in Its Early Stages

Frontline personnel who supervise and manage others need to know how to effectively handle hostile and aggressive individuals. Knowing how to defuse anger before it turns into violence can help reduce legal exposure, as this story illustrates:

- Richard B., a musician with a country-and-western band, played at a Christmas party hosted by a construction company at a local bar. William G., an employee of the construction company, was responsible for arranging the party and for supervising the company party goers. During the evening, several people from the construction company (including William) got into a fight with Richard. The musician suffered several injuries. He sued the construction company and

William, alleging that negligent supervision resulted in conduct that caused his injuries.

Compelling reasons to prevent or reduce hostility and violence include:

- ◆ Violence, harassment, and intimidation affect employees' morale, health, and productivity. While victims of workplace violence report varying degrees of physical injury, three out of four report psychological distress ("Fear and Violence in the Workplace"). Reducing hostility is a real quality-of-life issue that benefits all employees.
- ◆ Employees have a right to work in a safe, nonthreatening workplace. Employers have a moral duty to protect threatened individuals and warn them of possible harm so they may take security precautions.
- ◆ Potential perpetrators need help. Most often, an employee making threats or behaving in an outwardly hostile manner is in need of help. It is far better that a person get help before a potential assault, homicide, or suicide occurs.

Strategy 4: Apply Effective Confrontation Skills to Discipline or Rehabilitate the Threatening Employee

When effective confrontation and appropriate intervention are used, an employee's aggressive energies can be redirected in a more socially appropriate manner. But disciplinary options need to be well thought out, or unintended results may occur. For example, a highly intimidating individual may become more violent if discipline is timid or inconsistent or if a planned termination is not carried out in a timely fashion.

The incident that made the phrase "going postal" infamous illustrates such a dynamic:

- In November 1991, six days after losing his grievance hearing for reinstatement, former employee Thomas M. carried a sawed-off rifle into the Royal Oak Post Office.

A highly intimidating individual may become more violent if discipline is timid or inconsistent.

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Months earlier, Thomas had been fired for a host of work-related offenses: insubordination, threatening managers and coworkers, even getting in fights with some of his route customers (he was a black-belt kick boxer). Before his firing, he had been suspended. The suspension enraged Thomas. In an ongoing dispute with postal management, Thomas repeatedly vowed revenge if he was not reinstated. He even telephoned his threats into the Royal Oak office.

A fellow coworker later reported, “Hey, everyone knew he had a short fuse . . . He told anyone who would listen there’d be hell to pay if he wasn’t reinstated . . . The guy obviously had real problems.” A postal inspector stated, “We were aware of his threats, but this is a mail processing facility. It is impossible to keep it locked up tight” (Baron, 48–49).

When a threat of a violent act occurs, an employer has a duty to carefully evaluate the threat, investigate the surrounding circumstances, and take responsible measures to prevent violent conduct.

Strategy 5: Document All Incidents in a Well-Organized, Accurate Manner

Documentation—or the lack of documentation—can have grave legal consequences for the employer when handling a threatening employee. There are several compelling reasons to create usable documentation when managing threatening situations:

- ◆ You need good, reliable data to make good, reliable decisions.
- ◆ Your documentation may provide legal support for several defusing options, such as a Temporary Restraining Order or a possible involuntary psychiatric commitment (if appropriate).
- ◆ Your documentation will make your decisions more defensible (e.g., employees accused of violent or threatening behavior frequently assert claims of defamation in response).

Lack of documentation can have grave legal consequences for the employer.

What Makes Good Documentation?

Good documentation describes specific, observable behavior, as in this example:

- “When Chris asked Darryl to turn in his voucher, Darryl said in a loud voice, ‘Your days of ordering me around are over.’ Then he stomped out of the room and slammed the door.”

You can remember common documentation pitfalls with the letters AEIOU:

AEIOU Pitfalls	
Pitfall	Example
Attitude descriptions	“Jerry has had a vindictive attitude ever since he’s worked here.”
Emotional labels/ diagnoses	“Tracy is suspicious of everybody around here—we think she’s paranoid and depressed.”
Inferences	“Brad has red eyes most of the time and he’s tardy a lot; we think he’s doing drugs.”
Others’ hearsay	“Two people on the loading dock heard a rumor that Roger was going to hurt the foreman for firing him.”
Unsubstantiated facts	“We think Jan’s going through a pretty messy divorce right now.”

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Your documentation does not have to be lengthy and embellished. *Short* and *informative* are the operative words here. Take a lesson from Cornelius Vanderbilt, who wrote this note to some businessmen he felt were trying to swindle him:

- “Gentlemen: You have undertaken to cheat me. I will not sue you, for law takes too long. I will ruin you. Sincerely yours, Cornelius Vanderbilt” (Perret, 223).



Take a Moment

Describe three kinds of statements to avoid when you document a threatening situation. Answers are on page 123.

Chapter Summary

Statistically, verbal threats and fighting are the most common forms of workplace violence. Coworkers or bosses are more likely to harass while customers are more likely to physically attack.

Most workplace anger, hostility, and threats of violence seem to result from poor conflict resolution skills. Experts estimate that “Physical presence and communications skills alone could handle up to 98 percent of the incidents potentially requiring force.”

If violent behavior escalates, employers must rehabilitate or remove the threatening employee. Employers have a duty to ensure that their workplaces are safe.

Violent behavior includes:

- ◆ Threatening behavior or conduct, such as threatening statements or actions.
- ◆ Intimidating or harassing behavior, including threatening body language, disruptive actions, written communications, and sexual harassment.
- ◆ Assaultive or aggressive behavior.

Alert and Alive strategies that can prevent or minimize workplace violence include:

- ◆ Create and publicize a policy that condemns threatening workplace conduct.
- ◆ Take threatening or intimidating behavior seriously.
- ◆ Defuse anger in its early stages.
- ◆ Apply effective confrontation skills to discipline or rehabilitate threatening employees.
- ◆ Document all incidents in a well-organized, accurate manner.

Employers have a duty to ensure that their workplaces are safe.



Self-Check: Chapter One Review

Indicate whether you think the following statements are true or false. Answers may be found on page 124.

1. True or False?
Many violent incidents could have been prevented by good communication skills.
2. True or False?
Most workplace homicides are attributable to conflict between coworkers.
3. True or False?
An employer who does nothing about an employee's threats could be liable for negligent retention or negligent supervision.
4. True or False?
Verbal threats, whether direct or veiled, are good examples of intimidating or harassing behavior.
5. True or False?
Having a written workplace violence policy provides for enforcement standards, affects employee expectations, and has some deterrent value.
6. True or False?
Good documentation of a threatening incident should contain your best guess or inference about what's causing the behavior.

Notes

SAMPLE

Chapter *Two*

Understanding Anger Escalation

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Describe the three phases of anger escalation.
- ▶ Differentiate the four different types of verbal threats.
- ▶ Describe the behavioral and physiological indicators of physical aggression.
- ▶ Identify major inhibitors and disinhibitors of aggression and violence.
- ▶ Describe the phases associated with violence escalation.

If allowed to grow, hostility can turn into catastrophe.

Recently, a large manufacturing company conducted an employee survey to identify perceptions of management. The firm analyzing the survey forms found this anonymous message: “I’m sick and tired of being treated unfairly; I feel like coming into this place and killing people . . . I’m not just writing this . . . I’ll do the time for the crime . . . I don’t care.”

The author of this threat was eventually identified through handwriting analysis. However, such hidden hostility, if allowed to grow, can erupt into catastrophe.

Take a Moment

List below some things in the work setting that make you angry or upset—your boss, your coworkers, your customers, your work conditions:

Now, review your list and see if you notice any “themes” or things that the items on your list have in common. Is your anger provoked by situations that are unfair? insensitive treatment? favoritism? lack of trust or support? being overly controlled?



When surveyed about what makes them angry, most employees list situations that Dr. Hendrie Weisinger calls the dirty dozen of anger triggers:

- ◆ Harassment
- ◆ Favoritism
- ◆ Insensitivity
- ◆ Depersonalization
- ◆ Unfair performance appraisals
- ◆ Withdrawal of earned benefits
- ◆ Lack of resources
- ◆ Lack of adequate planning
- ◆ Lack of teamwork
- ◆ Lack or violation of trust
- ◆ Poor communication
- ◆ The boss who wastes time

● Understanding Anger Escalation

Aggression may require anger, but anger does not always lead to aggression.

While everyone experiences some of these common triggers, many individuals mismanage anger. They don't know how to defuse it in its early stages. Worse yet, they may provoke further anger with their words or gestures.

Anger's potential to grow into rage or acted-out aggression is significant. However, anger does not necessarily cause aggression. Aggression may require anger, but anger does not always lead to aggression.

From Anger to Aggression

Becoming angry is thought to be the first in a series of phases that can end in imminent aggression toward another human being. These three phases are:

- ◆ Anger arousal.
- ◆ Verbal aggression (profanity, threats, insults, etc.).
- ◆ Physical aggression or attack (especially if a provocative situation arises).

Anger Arousal

- ◆ **Anger is a derivative of the fight-or-flight response.**
When individuals are aroused, especially during a confrontation, their behavior is influenced by adrenaline effects. The sympathetic nervous system prepares for a fight by increasing blood pressure, muscle strength, motor speed, and sensory acuity.
- ◆ **Anger creates a heightened sense of control.**
Feeling and expressing anger is often healthy and appropriate. Anger can create a wonderful feeling of power; it can drive people to perform superbly or to right wrongs. Tennis great John McEnroe played his best when angry. Martin Luther said, "When I am angry I can write, pray, and preach well."
- ◆ **Anger can weaken and inhibit rationality.**
Adrenaline prepares people to act. When people are angry, their decision making is impeded and their range of choices is limited. Thus, someone aroused by anger is a potential aggressor with an expanded sense of control and restricted powers of reason. Sounds a bit like a dinosaur, doesn't it?

Once anger is aroused, it can take more than 90 minutes for a person to de-escalate. For example, during a long high-speed chase, police officers experience heightened adrenaline levels. Recent television newscasts have shown officers clubbing and kicking suspects at the end of prolonged car chases. This tendency to apply unnecessary force has been named *high-speed pursuit syndrome*.

As with most emotions, the primary way anger is communicated is through body language.

Once anger is aroused, it can take more than 90 minutes for a person to de-escalate.

Way of Communicating Anger	Signs of Anger
Body Posture/Gestures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shuddering• Goose bumps• Becoming flushed• Sweating• Clenched fists• Rigid posture• Pacing• Panting• Sighing• Preening (touching one's body or face in an anxious manner, such as fiddling with clothing or stroking one's hair)
Facial Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clenching the jaw• Grinding the teeth• Twitching• Glaring (extreme pupil dilation and fixation on the target)• Scowling• Flushing or becoming pale
Voice Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choking• Marked increase or decrease in speed of speech• Strong, deliberate enunciation• Increase in volume• Stammering or some other indicator that vocal control is difficult to maintain

Verbal Aggression

Verbal aggression is almost unlimited in kind and quality. In some cultures, insult games or word duels provide an alternative to fighting. Insults or threats can also be the prelude to a physical attack.

All forms of verbal aggression can be a way of gaining control and power.

All forms of verbal aggression can be a way of gaining control and power. Such aggression often works because it derails productive discussion, provokes the listener, or makes the aggressor so intimidating that others avoid provocation.

The most serious form of verbal aggression is a threat. Psychologically speaking, a threat is a provocative communication meant to instill fear for one's safety or well-being. Paradoxically, threats assert power, but they really signal a sense of failure. Threats are a desperate attempt to convince others to take action or to take strong feelings seriously.

It should be noted that simply reporting anger is not a threat. A statement like "I'm angry that you don't discipline those who make racial slurs" is a straightforward expression of feeling. A statement like "If he doesn't stop his racial put-downs, I'm going to shut him up" is a threat.

Venting anger is also not a threat. However, freely expressing anger may do more harm than good. Expressing anger tends to create more feelings of anger unless the expression is:

- ◆ Directed at the person causing the anger.
- ◆ Not likely to lead to retaliation.
- ◆ Made to someone who is willing to help bring about appropriate change.

A verbal threat is one of the most important "warning signals" of potential violence and should not be ignored. In virtually every case of workplace homicide, the perpetrator announced his intentions before committing the fatal act.

Here are some of the most common types of threats.

Type of Threat	Examples
Direct Threats	“I’m going to punch you out.” (The threat is a clear statement of an intent to do harm.)
Veiled Threats	“You know, I can understand why people ‘go postal.’ That’s going to happen here one day.” (The intent to harm is implied rather than directly stated.)
Manipulative Threats	“If you don’t reverse your decision, then it will be the last decision you’ll ever make.” (The threat is intended to produce a certain result.)
Pure Threats	“All I can think about is burning this place down to the ground.” (Expressing rage is more important than achieving a result.)

Establishing the validity or seriousness of a threat is difficult. Treat all threats of violence as having serious potential for harm. This is particularly true when the threat appears to be an expression of pure rage: “I feel like just blowing some people away around here.” Manipulative-type threats are easier to defuse because the individual has identified a condition to be met; this condition can become an opening to negotiation.

From a risk-management perspective, it does not matter whether you think the person making the threat is serious or not—a verbal threat negatively impacts others’ sense of well-being and safety. Many experts caution that a threat of violence is in itself an act of violence.

Treat all threats of violence as having serious potential for harm.



Take a Moment

Identify the type of threat made in each of the examples below. Answers are on page 124.

1. "If you mess with my job, I'll make your life a living hell."

Type of threat: _____

2. "I can see why people attack their supervisors; something like that could happen around here one day."

Type of threat: _____

3. "All I can think about is coming back into this office and just mowing people down."

Type of threat: _____

4. "I'm going to wire that machine up to blow up in your face when you turn it on."

Type of threat: _____

For Your Information

What should you do if you learn of a threat directed at a specific individual? For moral and safety reasons, you should warn the potential victim as soon as possible.

- Be as informative as possible. Don't speculate, but do describe the range of possible behaviors the perpetrator might exhibit based upon your assessment data at this time. To be specific and detailed, share the documented statements from others who heard or observed the perpetrator.
- Support your actions with documentation. Document exactly what you intend on communicating to the targeted victim; don't vary from that "script" in the "warning" meeting. Likewise, document the potential "victim's" reactions and exact comments.
- Offer the potential victim protection. If possible, share any suggested strategies or options that might help prevent a provocation. Offer the potential victim any added security (at work as well as at home, if necessary). Ask the targeted individual what he or she needs to feel more comfortable and protected.



Physical Aggression

- Jake LaMotta was a gifted prizefighter from the 1950s whose life was portrayed in the movie *Raging Bull*. Television interviewer Dick Cavitt asked LaMotta whether he had fought much while growing up on the streets of New York. LaMotta replied that the other kids could "argue good" and he could not, so he learned to settle arguments by punching people out.

If conflict cannot be handled effectively on a verbal level, it may escalate to a physical level for those predisposed to violence. Dr. Hans Toch, an expert on violence, recently conducted detailed interviews with chronic violent offenders, prison inmates, and problem police officers. He classified some people prone to violence as pressure removers who often lack verbal and social skills. "Where others may be able to solve a problem through nonviolent techniques, such as verbal persuasion, the pressure remover finds himself smothered, walled-in, or subject to overwhelming odds."

● Understanding Anger Escalation

Here are some signals that a person is becoming physically aggressive.

Aggressive Signal	Explanation
Body Posture/Gestures	
Intense unblinking gaze, often with dilated pupils	Glaring at the object of aggression is fairly common and denotes heightened arousal (pupils may be four times their natural size).
Bold body language and stance	Aggressive individuals frequently get “in the faces” of those they are threatening: they may poke at them with a hard, pointed finger; spit; or get nose-to-nose in defiance.
Mocking body language and stance	Some aggressors will stand close to their victim, hands on hips, leaning back, head cocked back and to the side, looking down their nose as if to say, “Go ahead, I dare you to take a shot at me.” Some will even “motion” an invitation.
Clenched fists	The aggressor may unconsciously clench the fists in preparation for a fight. (Self-defense note: look at the palms; is he or she cupping a knife, gun, or weapon?)
Deep breathing	Breathing may become almost gasping. Because of elevated blood pressure and the effects of adrenaline, oxygen needs are high.

Cessation of movement/glancing at the target	Attackers frequently stop all movement and quickly look at the part of the body to be attacked just before they “close” on a victim. (Self-defense note: pacing back and forth or a rhythmic rocking may signal ambivalence—fighting or fleeing are equally attractive.)
Facial Expression	
Changes in facial coloration	Blood is shunted to the major muscle groups in the body, so the face may show dramatic color changes (“white with rage”; “seeing red”); veins may pop up on the neck or forehead.
Facial grimace	Facial musculature becomes tight; the jaw may be clenched or teeth may be bared or gritted.
Voice Tone	
Loud, booming voice	Because the muscles of the face and neck become so tense, voice tone may sound very different and uncontrolled.

Provoking and Controlling Aggression

What causes an aggressive person to become violent? Psychologists have identified several conditions that can escalate anger to explosive dimensions. These contributing factors are called disinhibitors because they weaken the restraints on our behavior. The controls or supports that keep us from acting out anger are called inhibitors.

● Understanding Anger Escalation

This chart shows some disinhibitors and inhibitors that regulate the expression of anger.

Disinhibitors	Inhibitors
Loss of choice/control	Sense of control
Perceived inequity	Sense of fairness
Feeling demeaned or belittled	Personal dignity
Lack of support	Trust
Feeling discounted or blamed	Feeling appreciated or valued
Feeling powerless or overpowered	Sense of power

Here's how disinhibitors influenced the outcome of this real life scenario.



Case Study

Heightened Anger Arousal

Phil had managed a large manufacturing facility for four years. The mill's productivity had shown steady growth under his direction, but new management decided to fire Phil because he was too "old school." Phil was devastated: he felt betrayed by the company and the general manager who fired him.

First Series of Disinhibitors

For two weeks, Phil stewed over the firing. At 57, he feared he wouldn't be able to get a new job and support his family. Out of desperation, he showed up unannounced at his former boss's office. "I have a few things to say to you, Jim," Phil said in a solemn, commanding manner. Jim, frightened by Phil's sudden appearance, unwittingly made matters worse by replying, "Well, I'm busy; you'll have to go down to the lobby and wait until I have time."

Second Disinhibitor

This brush-off pierced Phil like a knife. "You're not going to tell me what to do," Phil raged. Jim unintentionally provoked him further by saying, "You're not the boss around here anymore."

Transition to Verbal Aggression

Phil's anger escalated full throttle: "Damn you, I'll kill you and your family. . . . I know where you live and you can't protect them all the time." Phil stormed out and the police were called.

Being told to wait and being reminded that he wasn't the boss anymore made Phil feel powerless, belittled, and discounted. His anger had already been festering for over two weeks without any constructive outlet. Jim's words escalated the situation and incited Phil's aggression.

Take a Moment

Read the following statements verbalized to someone during a confrontation. Indicate with an arrow whether you think the statement would tend to escalate anger ↑ or inhibit anger ↓. Answers are on page 124.

- _____ 1. "Fred, you'll work overtime because I'm team leader and I say you'll work overtime."
- _____ 2. "Laurie, I may be mistaken, but my records show that you did not turn in your expense voucher on time."
- _____ 3. "Jim, I'm not sure how we'll handle references after your dismissal; what would you like us to say?"
- _____ 4. "The company policy is very clear and needs no explanation, Becky. The discussion is closed."
- _____ 5. "You haven't been here long enough to criticize, so don't bother to comment."



How Aggression Escalates

Many experts have observed that workplace violence is typically not spontaneous. Invariably, according to Joseph Kinney, it is the culmination of long-developing, identifiable problems, conflicts, and failures. Increasing aggression typically has three phases.

● Understanding Anger Escalation

1. Anger Arousal

What Happens	Typical Feelings/Behaviors
<p>An individual experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• an event perceived as unfair, such as impending layoffs and denial of promotion or disability benefits.• a recurring stressor, such as a difficult supervisor or an ongoing personality conflict.• an affront to sensitivity, such as a racial slur.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A judgment of injustice is made. Blame is often projected outwardly; e.g., “They could care less about how hard we’re working.”• Arousal of the autonomic nervous system intensifies behavior such as yelling or door-slammings.• Anger arousal diminishes the ability to think rationally.

2. Loss of Verbal Control

What Happens	Typical Feelings/Behaviors
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Behavior may become more coercive as the person attempts to establish control over a situation through forceful, often verbally threatening, means.• Requests may quickly become demands or threats; e.g., “You’re not going to suspend me.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thinking/reasoning becomes increasingly disorganized and simplistic; e.g., “You either promote people when they’re ready or you don’t.”• It becomes easier to make verbally abusive statements like “You’re garbage” than to present a well-organized, persuasive rationale.• Reactions may become more crude, vulgar, and insulting, with little or no regard for consequences.

3. Loss of Physical Control

What Happens	Typical Feelings/Behaviors
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A destructive “solution” is contemplated or premeditated.• A physical act of punishment or pain is seen as more effective than a verbal resolution to the conflict; e.g., “Taking him out is the only way to end this.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is often a strong mindset of moral indignation (“Just who do they think they are?”) and self-justification (“They’re going to pay for their years of stepping on me.”)• As autonomic nervous system arousal decreases, the person feels little emotion; aggression may evolve into a predatory focus on target(s).• Violence may be attempted toward others and quite possibly toward self; e.g., “I’m going to die and take a few people with me.”

Take a Moment

Review your understanding of the three phases of violence escalation by writing some key characteristics for each of the following phases. Answers are on page 124.

Anger arousal: _____

Loss of verbal control: _____

Loss of physical control: _____



A Case Study of Escalating Aggression

Knowing the phases of anger escalation makes it possible to identify the “points of intervention” at which a situation might be defused. The following case study illustrates how one worker’s anger grew through the three phases of anger escalation.



Case Study

Anger Arousal

Jerome is an African American who worked in production control as an expeditor for a large aircraft systems plant. When he first bid on a materials handler position, he was not promoted. About a year later, he bid on the position again and was promoted. However, during his forklift training several months later, he failed certification because of his poor eyesight and diabetes.

Coupled with these setbacks were several ongoing problems with his immediate Hispanic supervisor, Ramon. Jerome felt Ramon did not like him and, furthermore, that the plant was favorably biased toward Hispanics at the expense of African Americans. Jerome felt that Ramon failed to resolve a couple of time-card issues and a dispute over vacation time calculation.

Jerome went to Ramon’s supervisor, Norm, to discuss his frustrations. Jerome demanded immediate action from Norm to correct the situation. Norm promised to “look into the matter,” which Jerome interpreted as an evasion. A week later, Jerome accused Norm of sandbagging. He said that Norm replied with the following racial insult: “You’re entitled to your opinion, Jerome, but you know, Martin Luther King had an opinion and you see what happened to him.”

Loss of Verbal Control

Jerome became openly hostile and vocal about the work environment at the facility. He started blaming management for playing favorites after a nephew of Ramon’s was promoted ahead of him. Jerome described blacks in management positions as “a bunch of Uncle Toms.” Eventually he went to an attorney, but was told he did not have a strong case. Jerome then began joining other disaffected workers in regular gripe sessions. One day, he cornered Ramon in the stock room and said, “You can’t keep treating people like this. . . . Somebody’s going to go postal one day and take out some people around here.”

Loss of Physical Control

Jerome asked for a private meeting with the Human Resources director. Jerome informed her, “I’m letting you know that I won’t take any more discrimination. This is the last time. There have been so many times I’ve been discriminated against, but I’m telling you, I will kill him [Ramon]. I’ve had enough and I will kill him.”

Jerome was eventually terminated for his very serious threats. His threats were well documented and supported by other data that suggested he was becoming increasingly menacing and distorted in his views.

Contributing Factors

Jerome’s case illustrates another element sometimes prevalent in threatening situations—the role of “toxic” influences. To what extent did racial prejudice (real or perceived) contribute to his anger? Could/should something have been done to address this “toxic” atmosphere? Could some other meaningful job have been made available to Jerome to accommodate his medical limitations?

Sometimes a supervisor or coworker contributes to the escalation of a situation by provoking or stressing a vulnerable individual. In one recent incident, a factory worker was convinced that his manager was stealing from him by intercepting his payroll checks and substituting a paycheck with bogus deductions. Coworkers added to Martin’s paranoia; when the supervisor would go into his office and draw his blinds, they would say, “You see, Martin, there he goes again. He’s in there cashing your check right now. Are you going to let him get away with that?” Their sick humor added unnecessary fuel to Martin’s paranoid rage.

Sometimes a supervisor or coworker contributes to the escalation of a situation.

Besides toxic atmosphere, other factors may play a significant role in triggering aggression:

- ◆ Improperly/insensitively handled disciplinary meetings
- ◆ Rigid, authoritarian, or “paternalistic” management style
- ◆ Economic pressures coupled with job insecurity
- ◆ Provocative or combative supervisors/coworkers

● Understanding Anger Escalation

- ◆ Lack of discipline or inconsistent enforcement of rules
- ◆ Chronic labor/management disputes
- ◆ Grievances not handled promptly or appropriately
- ◆ Psychological instability/emotional problems
- ◆ Personality conflicts
- ◆ Alcohol/drug abuse
- ◆ Perceived discrimination or unfair treatment
- ◆ Marital/family disputes and problems
- ◆ Work-related stress

A recent survey reported in *HR News* identified the most common motivations for workplace violence: personality conflicts (62 percent), work-related stress (27 percent), family or marital problems (27 percent), emotional problems/mental illnesses (25 percent), terminations (16 percent), and drug and alcohol abuse (16 percent).

Chapter Summary

When people become angry, adrenaline prepares them to fight or flee. It also limits their power to think about their choices. As a result, unchecked anger can grow into rage or acts of aggression. The three phases of anger escalation are:

- ◆ Anger arousal.
- ◆ Verbal aggression.
- ◆ Physical aggression.

Unchecked anger can grow into rage or acts of aggression.

It can be difficult to determine whether a threatening person actually intends to carry out a threat. Treat all threats of violence as having serious potential for harm. The four most common types of threats are:

- ◆ Direct threats.
- ◆ Veiled threats.
- ◆ Manipulative threats.
- ◆ Pure threats.

Signs that a person is about to become physically aggressive include:

- ◆ Challenging body language or direct stare.
- ◆ Facial grimace or changes in facial coloration.
- ◆ Loud, booming voice.

Supporting the angry person's sense of control and personal dignity tends to inhibit further expressions of anger. On the other hand, an angry person who feels that he has no choice, gets no respect, or is overpowered is likely to become angrier. That person may then move through the three phases of violence escalation:

- ◆ Anger arousal
- ◆ Loss of verbal control
- ◆ Loss of physical control



Self-Check: Chapter Two Review

Indicate whether you think the following statements are true or false. Answers may be found on page 125.

1. True or False?
Inhibitors tend to keep individuals from acting on their anger.
2. True or False?
Loss of choice or perceived control is a typical inhibitor.
3. True or False?
Expressing anger freely, or venting, almost always sets the stage for effective conflict resolution.
4. True or False?
Though fairly common, verbal threats are one of the least important “warning signals” of potential violence.
5. True or False?
Pure threats are often the most dangerous type of threat.
6. True or False?
“I hope your life insurance policy is paid up” is an example of a direct threat.
7. True or False?
A manipulative threat is an attempt to get a certain result.
8. True or False?
In the final phase of violence escalation, punishment is seen as the most effective way to resolve a conflict.

Notes

SAMPLE

Chapter *Three*

Reducing Hostility

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Identify and apply the four Ds of hostility reduction.
- ▶ Describe four de-escalation techniques.
- ▶ Explain four techniques to deflect criticisms and insults.
- ▶ Describe four techniques to defuse a verbal threat and check for commitment level.
- ▶ Identify four distancing techniques to use if physical attack is probable.

Recently the manager of a popular convenience store in Texas thwarted the attempted theft of a case of beer by three young thugs. The eight-year employee blocked their exit and ordered them to drop the beer. When the manager warned an elderly customer to move away from the doorway so she wouldn't get hurt, the robbers ran, throwing the beer at the manager. He wrestled one of them to the floor, police were called, and the robbers were apprehended. Although celebrated as a local hero for his "I'm-not-going-to-take-it-anymore" attitude, the manager was fired the next day for not following the store's policy of nonresistance.

If physical attack is probable, your best bet is nonresistance and escape.

If physical attack is probable, your best bet is nonresistance and escape, not counterattack. This convenience store chain was following a well-established industry standard of nonresistance: studies have shown that 80 percent of the murders committed during commercial robberies occur when there is active resistance.

If resistance isn't a good idea, how do you handle an employee who is visibly angry? Do you ignore the anger and hope it will subside? Do you try to talk the person through it? Do you simply tell the employee to cool off? Four principles—de-escalate, deflect, defuse, and distance—can help you reduce hostility or support others in managing their anger. We call these principles the four Ds.

Principle 1: De-escalate Anger in Its Early Stages

Intervene When You See the First Signs of Anger

An important key to de-escalating anger is intervening before the anger escalates to potential aggression. According to Dr. Hendrie Weisinger, emotional tension is the initial stage in anger arousal. When employees are stressed by time demands, interpersonal frictions, or difficult job assignments, they may be more easily provoked. Recognizing this tension is an important cue.

**Intervene
before anger
escalates to
aggression.**

One immediate problem is that we tend to notice others' anger only when it escalates to high levels of expression. But slow-burning fuses allowed to smolder can grow into rage. Ironically, many people have found that they will not receive serious attention until they blow up, so this is a behavior pattern reinforced for its high levels of expression.

According to Dr. Weisinger, one way to identify the intensity of anger is to pay attention to the person's words:

- ◆ At the lower end of the anger vocabulary are words like irritating, annoying, bothered, aggravating, or rubbed the wrong way.
- ◆ Medium levels of anger might be expressed as angry, mad, pissed, offended, or resentful.
- ◆ Intense anger might be expressed in words such as infuriating, outraged, fuming, bitter, or in expressions of potential aggression or hostility ("I was so angry I could have decked him right there!").

Anger feeds
on itself.

Slow Things Down with a Time-Out

Reducing anger arousal requires the recognition of a very simple, yet well-documented principle: anger feeds on itself. One very practical way to de-escalate anger is to immediately remove the person from the provocative situation, creating a time out. For this intervention to be effective, it is vitally important that you have the person physically move from the immediate setting rather than just advising, “chill out,” “calm down,” or “get a grip.” Our adrenaline is not as easily dissipated when the provocative stimuli are still present.

- Two individuals in adjoining cubicles got into a shouting match. The supervisor, somewhat new to his position, saw the conflict and asked both employees to go to his office immediately. He tried to get both parties to “work out their problems then and there.” As you might guess, the two employees, still at full throttle from their shouting match, went at it in front of the startled supervisor. One employee ended her problem-solving discussion by a decisive right uppercut to her coworker’s jaw. This did not constitute a real time-out—the object of extreme provocation was sitting right in front of the excited party. (This supervisor was later terminated, by the way, in part for the way he handled this scenario.)



Take a Moment

In the case above, the supervisor’s actions intensified the conflict. What might the supervisor have done to de-escalate the workers’ anger? Answers are on page 125.

Dr. Weisinger recommends a number of ways to create a time-out:

- ◆ Get the person to stop the present work activity.
- ◆ Separate the person from the immediate work environment and find a place away from the provocative “triggers” of the current situation (a private, relaxing place is best).
- ◆ Get the person to sit down and lean back (if possible).
- ◆ Offer a cool beverage (preferably noncaffeinated) or water.

During this time-out, communicate your desire to help. You can invite discussion without denying feelings by using phrases such as:

- “Let’s talk about what’s going on.”
- “I can tell something’s bugging you; you can talk with me.”
- “I’d like to help you . . . what can I do?”

Resist the temptation to play armchair psychologist: “Oh, Terry, what you’re feeling is called displaced anger; talk to me so you can ventilate the anger.” Remember, we’re not talking about trapped stomach gas; anger is not so easily dissipated.

Resist the temptation to play armchair psychologist.

Go with the Flow

Rather than resisting anger, counterattacking, or trying to talk someone out of being angry, Bruce Blythe suggests reframing your recognition of anger into a positive emotion. Avoid saying things like “This is nothing to get upset over.” Instead, acknowledge the anger with phrases such as:

- “You obviously have a strong sense of what needs to be done.”
- “You seem to have a lot of passion about . . .”
- “I can tell you feel enthusiastic about . . .”

This reframing technique allows you to acknowledge anger without implying something negative (“Hey, you’re out of control”) or putting the angry person down (“Well, what’s got your nose out of joint?”).

Use a Focusing Technique

Interrupt the escalation with a focusing technique. One way to defuse or de-escalate anger is to get the aggressor to think in a focused and concrete manner. An especially effective way to interrupt a hostile person while seeming to allow the person control is the “I have a question” technique. (This technique is described in John Byrnes’ *The Art of Aggression Management*.)

- As the hostile person is speaking vehemently, interrupt and say,
“I have a question . . . so that I can help you get what you want, tell me exactly what you need or what you want to happen.”

Pausing right after saying “I have a question” is important. The pause signals that you’re listening; it also forces the attacker to think about what he or she is trying to communicate instead of ranting and raving on. This diversionary tactic may help reduce some of the irrationality associated with anger arousal.



Take a Moment

Match the de-escalation technique with its appropriate name. Answers are on page 125.

- A. Intervene at early signs of anger.
 - B. Use a time-out.
 - C. Go with the flow of anger.
 - D. Use a focusing technique.
-
- _____ 1. “Whoa, wait a minute; I’ve got a question—so that I can help you settle your disability claim, what is it exactly that you need?”
 - _____ 2. Intervening when someone talks about feeling “resentful” instead of waiting until the person is “fuming.”
 - _____ 3. Saying to an angry customer, “I can see you have a strong sense of what ought to be done.”
 - _____ 4. Suggesting that a coworker leave the area and go to a private place to sit down, lean back, and have some water to cool off.

Principle 2: Deflect Criticism and Insults

An ancient Samurai saying offers invaluable instruction: “When a man throws a spear of insult at your head, move your head! The spear will miss its target and leave the man empty-handed; spear in wall, not in you!” Translation: don’t counterattack when you hear insults, heavy-handed criticisms, or vulgarities, as this will typically escalate the other’s anger. Even though personal pride urges you to do so, try to avoid this high-risk behavior. Instead, utilize the following deflective techniques:

Maintain Calm

A loss of verbal control often begins with a loss of volume control. A coworker shouts at you. You shout back a bit louder. The coworker shouts back louder yet. This is an example of something called emotional contagion, which Dr. Hendrie Weisinger describes as the tendency to “catch” or mimic another person’s emotions. A shouting match is a good example of this process in action. No one suddenly became hard of hearing, but the volume spirals out of control.

A loss of verbal control often begins with a loss of volume control.

Just as one person’s anger tends to provoke others to anger, calmness tends to have a soothing effect. The foundation for managing others’ verbal aggression is to avoid getting hooked by the aggressor’s provocative intent. It’s no fun fighting with someone who won’t fight back. If you can keep your psychological distance, you can make the calming effect work for you. Tell yourself, “Just because he’s angry and losing control doesn’t mean I have to get angry and lose control.” This kind of self-statement increases your awareness that the out-of-control individual needs help, not a counterattack.

Align with the Aggressor

Agreement makes the other person feel that you have acknowledged the validity of what has been said. Saying something like “I’d be mad too if I felt that the company didn’t care” appears to put you in alignment with the aggressor. Alignment doesn’t mean that you agree with everything that has been said; it simply means that you acknowledge that the other person’s perception may be true:

● Reducing Hostility

Speaker:

You should have come to me a long time ago and told me that you didn't think I was right for this project.

Listener:

You're probably right, I should have.

Acknowledging the aggressor's experience is very disarming because the hostile person is expecting confrontation.

Agreement can be a powerful inhibitor to further anger escalation.

Agreement can be a powerful inhibitor to further anger escalation.

Allow the Aggressor to Speak Freely (To a Point)

Some individuals become verbally aggressive as an attempt to (re)gain a sense of control and power. You may be able to tolerate that just so far. If you need to curtail the persistent use of insults, shouting, or cursing, use a consequence statement. Such statements begin with "If . . ." and end with "Then this is what will happen. . . ."

- "If you continue to call me names or shout over me, I'm going to have to discontinue the meeting."
- "If you continue to get in my face, I'm going to have to call security."

These statements allow the aggressor some feeling of control by communicating the options if the aggressive behavior continues. This sense of control might inhibit further aggression. Note: You must act on your consequence statements or your response will be an empty threat.

One of the most practical ways to defuse individuals during a confrontation is to avoid weakening the inhibitors of aggression. These inhibitors include self-respect, dignity, trust, a sense of control, and personal power. Their opposites, the disinhibitors, can act as a provocative pointed finger.

- A police officer described being called, with his partner, to a family dispute (always considered a dangerous assignment). The intervention went well and calm was restored. As they were leaving, the officer's partner made one last simple warning remark to the husband. But, while doing so, he pointed his finger in the man's face. The husband immediately erupted into violent behavior and had to be physically restrained. Never, the officer instructed later, do anything that is like a finger pointed in someone's face.

Use Active Listening

In conversations where “problems” are discussed, listening expert Thomas Gordon estimates that about 90 percent of the average listener's response falls into one of these categories:

- ◆ Making judgments: criticizing, name-calling, psychoanalyzing
- ◆ Offering ready-made solutions: ordering, advising, threatening, moralizing
- ◆ Avoiding the speaker's feelings altogether: diverting the train of thought, arguing with the other person's logic, giving false reassurances

Criticizing, moralizing, and belittling achieve nothing but temporary compliance. Moreover, in tense situations, these behaviors may increase irrationality and provoke further aggression.

Active listening is a technique that supports verbal control for both speaker and listener. An active listener tries to feel what it's like to be in the speaker's shoes. After listening without making judgments, the listener reflects what has been heard back to the speaker. The focus remains on the speaker, which helps the aggressor maintain a sense of personal control. Active listening is especially important when trying to de-escalate anger with someone who is not verbally skilled, as in this example:

Speaker:

I'm tired of other people around here gettin' in my zone; you know what I mean, man?

Listener:

You're saying you're tired of others butting into your business . . . is that right?

Criticizing,
moralizing,
and belittling
achieve
nothing but
temporary
compliance.

● Reducing Hostility

An empathic listener reflects the speaker's feelings.

If you want to earn your black belt in listening skills, listen with empathy. While sympathy is feeling for another, empathy is identifying with another. A sympathetic person might feel sorry for the speaker; an empathic listener would reflect the speaker's feelings. Empathy does not require agreement. You can acknowledge the feelings behind what the speaker says without agreeing with the speaker's ideas.

Speaker:

You say you want me to train a backup person, but whenever I try to do that, there you are, telling them something different and undoing most of what I'm trying to accomplish.

Listener:

So you're feeling frustrated that I'm not letting you do your job the way you want to do it.

Using empathy is a good strategy if an employee is expressing residual anger from other situations.

Speaker:

I don't know why I blew up when you confronted me on those quality flaws; I guess it just hit me the wrong way today.

Listener:

That does seem a little out of character for you . . . Is there anything else going on that's bothering you? You've seemed a little uptight the last couple of days.

Speaker:

Well, it seems like the only time I hear from you is when there's a problem, not when things are going right . . .

Take a Moment

Read the following statements or techniques regarding deflecting criticisms or insults. Indicate, with an arrow, whether you think the statement would tend to escalate anger ↑ or inhibit (deflect) anger ↓. Answers are on page 125.

- _____ 1. Use a calm voice tone in response to the person shouting or expressing anger.
- _____ 2. Offer quick solutions, advice, or opinions in the early stages of a disagreement.
- _____ 3. Decide not to use active listening during a conflict situation.
- _____ 4. Align with an aggressor by agreeing with the person's perception.
- _____ 5. Use empathy in conflict discussion.



Principle 3: Defuse the Threat

Some of the wisest advice on defusing violence was given around 500 B.C. by a Chinese philosopher named Sun Tzu: “To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

- One of the most courageous displays of an individual defusing a volatile situation involved a personnel manager who survived a hostage situation. Shortly after being fired, an angry ex-employee shot his immediate supervisor. The wounded supervisor was immediately rushed to the hospital, but in the meantime, the perpetrator took the personnel manager hostage and held police at bay for over four hours.

The gunman was chain-smoking pot. Every 15 minutes or so, he threatened to end the personnel manager's life, saying things like “You're gonna be next, man.” The manager kept appealing to his captor, “It's not too late to give up; your ex-supervisor was taken to the hospital and will probably live, so don't make matters worse by killing me. It's not as bad as you think. There's still time.”

● Reducing Hostility

In reality, there wasn't time. During one of their calls to the hostage room, police informed the personnel manager that the supervisor had died shortly after reaching the hospital. The manager wisely chose not to share this information and instead kept repeating "it's not too late to give up." The gunman perceived he still had options, and the personnel manager is alive today because of his wits.

Allow the aggressive person to smooth over or recover from a threat.

Provide a Way to Save Face

Allow the aggressive person to smooth over or recover from a threat. One simple way you can allow a verbally threatening person to save face is to provide an opportunity to retract or explain the threat, as in this example.

- "We all say things in the heat of the moment that we don't really mean; you don't really want to injure anyone, do you?"

This kind of smoothing statement allows the threatener to save face by denying that harm is intended. It also provides an unequivocal opportunity to restate or recommit to violent intentions ("You heard me right; I'm not going to let you get away with this"). If the threatener recommits to the threat, regard the situation as extremely serious. (See "Check for Commitment" below.)

Build Self-Esteem

Highlighting an aggressor's personal qualities can inhibit hostility by building self-worth. Statements that build an individual's sense of worth might be:

- "Rodney, you've been working here for nine years now."
- "Luanne, you have one of the best attendance records of anyone here."
- "Gary, you're one of the best programmers I've ever seen."

See how this type of statement works in the following example:

- A male employee who had been disciplined by his female supervisor saw her going into a small deli. He followed her into the shop and began verbally abusing her. When she went to call the police, the man yanked the phone out of her hand,

pressed his forearm against her throat, spit at her, and said, “Nobody is calling no one.” The shop owner rushed toward the confrontation and defused it by repeating to the volatile attacker, “It’s okay, you’re the man, you’re the man.”

The shop owner simply, but effectively, averted a potentially explosive situation by building on the aggressor’s sense of personal status and power.

Use Concrete Mental Imagery

Anger limits people’s ability to think about choices and consequences. Aggression management expert John Byrnes suggests that one way to deal with someone who is irrationally angry is to create a “mental snapshot” of a successful resolution to the problem.

Anger limits people’s ability to think about choices and consequences.

- “Brenda, I want to help you put this situation behind you so you won’t lose your job and the respect others have for you around here; would you be interested in working with me on that?”

Check for Commitment

To assess the potential seriousness of a threat, check the aggressor’s willingness to commit to his or her threatening remark:

- “Whoa, wait a minute; it sounds as if you’re threatening to hurt somebody; is that what you really mean?”
- “How would you follow through on that?”
- “When (or how) will that happen?”

If the threatener remains committed to hostility, the probability for physical violence may be more likely. If so, Byrnes recommends one more option: ask the angry person for cooperation.

- “Tony, what can I say or do to help resolve this problem? I know it seems like a stalemate, but I’d like to think we can do something to make this situation better.”

If the aggressor's reply is "nothing," this may be another revealing clue that physical aggression is more likely.



Take a Moment

Match each defusing technique to the statement that illustrates it. Answers are on page 125.

- A. Smoothing statement
- B. Self-esteem building statement
- C. Use of concrete imagery
- D. Commitment level check

- _____ 1. "Jeremy, you said 'somebody's going to pay.' Do you intend to hurt someone?"
- _____ 2. "Allen, I've seen the quality of your work—you can fix anything we give you, but we have to talk about how you bully people."
- _____ 3. "Sandie, we all say things when we're angry, I know I do. You probably don't really mean what you just said—do you?"
- _____ 4. "Barbara, I don't want to see you get suspended and lose some of your overtime—let's see if we can put this conflict behind us."

Principle 4: Distance Yourself if Physical Attack Seems Probable

If talking does not calm a threatening person, move carefully to protect yourself and avoid provoking an attack. Approach the aggressor in a nonchallenging open stance. Move in slow, deliberate steps toward the aggressor. Keep your actions predictable and nonconfrontational. Don't try any fancy footwork or karate poses.

Stop just outside the aggressor's personal space (approximately 6 feet). Moving in too closely may escalate the situation (and put you within attack range); standing too far away may communicate too much fear.

Other tips offered by Roland Ouellette include:

- ◆ Avoid touching an aggressor: touch can be highly provocative.
- ◆ Move in at a 45° angle instead of head on: this reduces the psychological sense of having one's space invaded.
- ◆ Approach the attacker's weak side (usually the nongesturing hand and the one with the watch on the wrist); this provides better evasive options and may give you a lifesaving edge in case of an attack.
- ◆ Keep your palms open and about waist high. The open-palm gesture has strong submissive connotations. It's thought that the handshake originated from a gesture of "showing your hands" to prove there was no weapon in them.
- ◆ Eye contact should show attentiveness, not intimidation or "staring down." Watch the aggressor's nonverbal signals and focus on him, but don't make it a standoff—blink naturally.

**Avoid touching
an aggressor.**

For Your Information

The study of body spacing and distance (called proxemics) has some lifesaving implications. When approaching aggressive individuals, do not violate their personal space. Standing 4 to 6 feet away is generally comfortable to them. This 4-to-6-foot zone also allows for a reactionary gap: if the person decides to kick, stab, punch, or lunge, you have time to duck or run. (See Roland Ouellette, *The Management of Aggressive Behavior*.)

- A sports psychologist, Paul, used the reactionary gap to defuse a volatile situation. He was working with a major league ball club during winter training in Florida. A young player attacked his batting coach for ragging him too much during practice one day. He struck the coach with a 70-mile-per-hour swing, knocking him out and sending him to the hospital. The other players cleared the area and the team psychologist was called immediately. The first thing Paul did was approach the player slowly and ask that they both sit down and talk (he didn't ask the player to drop the bat). Paul reasoned that sitting down would start a calming process (and would restrict the player's lightning-quick swing). For added insurance, Paul sat about 6 feet away in case the player had a notion to bat 1,000 for the day.



Divert Attention

When an attack seems imminent, distract the aggressor's attention from the immediate action. Now is not the time to get into elaborate active listening ("I can see by the hunting knife in your hands that you're having a bad day; would you like to talk about it?"). Instead, in a strong, commanding voice, say "Stop!" or "Drop the knife!" or "Look at me!" or "Step away!" The rationale behind these commands is to get the aggressor's attention on what you just suggested instead of on attacking. Even if the attacker stops only a half second, you may have bought yourself a lifesaving moment.

- Robbery is a major work hazard for companies in the parcel delivery industry. During one of his rounds, a driver had just completed delivery to a customer. When he returned to his van, a thief was in his truck, arms loaded with merchandise. The driver (who literally had the thief boxed in) stepped back a couple of steps from the door, pointed down the street, and said, "Get out of here now." He lost some company inventory, but he probably saved his own life by not challenging the robber and provoking attack.

Many self-defense experts advocate the same tactic for various types of streetcrime, such as robbery or carjacking. If a thief demands your car keys or your money, hand it over. But first throw the desired object away from the immediate area so that the attacker is distracted (momentarily) and you can escape.

Mentally Map Out an Escape Route

Many people freeze when an attack starts. If they flee, they sometimes inadvertently run right into the attacker or in a corner where there is no escape.

Self-defense experts such as John Byrnes and Roland Ouellette offer this advice on safe escape:

- ◆ Note the exits. Try to stay between an exit and the aggressor, even if you have to move around. Don't let the aggressor corner you. Avoid cornering the aggressor (virtually every creature, however timid, will fight when cornered).

Try to stay between an exit and the aggressor, even if you have to move around.

- ◆ Note any objects that could serve as an obstacle or shield should an attack ensue; this block could provide lifesaving seconds for your escape.
- ◆ In general, move perpendicularly to the attacker. With a sharp-edged weapon, like a knife, an attacker tends to run straight at you. Sideways movement may get you out of the way more effectively. (Some victims have fallen backward trying to run away from an attacker.)

The FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime advises that there are few, if any, meaningful guidelines to assist persons confronted by someone in the workplace with a gun intent on murder. No effective movement will beat a bullet. In almost every documented situation, when an armed perpetrator had entered the worksite intent on murder, it was far too late to do anything except run, hide, and alert authorities.

If the attacker is hesitating or hasn't attacked yet, you may still have an opportunity to defuse. In some instances, an armed person who entered the workplace obviously intent on homicide has first taken several people aside into an enclosed area. This is an unusual form of hostage taking because typically no demand is made. The hostage taking is a delaying action, which may indicate that this person is not yet ready to pull the trigger.

If the attack hasn't yet begun, you may still have an opportunity to dissuade the would-be perpetrator.

- In a recent mass murder at a cafeteria in Texas, several victims were spared from death. They showed family photos to the gunman, thus personalizing themselves.

Remember, the acme of skill is to subdue the enemy . . . without fighting.

The acme of skill is to subdue the enemy . . . without fighting.



Take a Moment

Use a check mark (✓) to indicate which of the following ways to use distance are recommended if physical aggression is likely. Answers are on page 126.

- _____ 1. Approach an aggressor at a 90° angle.
- _____ 2. Maintain a reactionary gap of about 4 to 6 feet.
- _____ 3. Don't corner or be cornered.
- _____ 4. Gently touch the aggressor on the upper arm only.
- _____ 5. Be visually attentive to the aggressor, but don't glare.
- _____ 6. Approach with your hands behind you, out of sight.
- _____ 7. Try to engage the attacker in a discussion about what's "bugging" him so you can actively listen.

Chapter Summary

The four hostility reduction principles are:

Principle	Application
De-escalate	<p>Intervene before anger escalates.</p> <p>Use time-out to cool down.</p> <p>Acknowledge anger positively.</p> <p>Use a focusing technique.</p>
Deflect	<p>Maintain a deliberate calm.</p> <p>Agree with the angry person's perception.</p> <p>Allow person to say what s/he wants (to a point).</p> <p>Use active listening.</p>
Defuse	<p>Allow threatener to "smooth over" or recover.</p> <p>Make self-esteem building statements.</p> <p>Use concrete mental imagery.</p> <p>Check for commitment level.</p>
Distance	<p>Approach an attacker in a non-challenging manner.</p> <p>Maintain a distance that allows you to react to an attack.</p> <p>Divert attention away from the immediate action.</p> <p>Mentally map your escape route.</p>



Self-Check: Chapter Three Review

Match each statement below to the hostility management principle it illustrates. Answers are on page 126.

- A. De-escalate.
- B. Deflect.
- C. Defuse.
- D. Distance.

- _____ 1. Create a “mental snapshot” (“I don’t want to see you get fired”).
- _____ 2. Ask, “Do you intend to hurt someone?”
- _____ 3. Mentally note the location of the nearest exit.
- _____ 4. Say, “I’d be upset too if I felt my ideas were ignored.”
- _____ 5. Say, “We all say things we don’t mean sometimes.”
- _____ 6. Approach a person at the first sign of anger.
- _____ 7. In a commanding voice, say, “Leave immediately!”
- _____ 8. Allow an angry person to shout a couple of times before stating the consequences if the shouting continues.

Notes

SAMPLE

Chapter *Four*

Confronting Problems Before They Escalate

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Describe the advantages and disadvantages of retaining and of terminating a threatening employee.
- ▶ Identify four conditions that favor early-stage discipline and intervention.
- ▶ Apply the S.A.F.E. model of confrontation to a disciplinary meeting.
- ▶ Demonstrate appropriate communication techniques in response to denial, minimization, or rationalization of threatening behavior.

At the end of the 16th century, Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar*, which dramatized the intrigue surrounding Caesar's death in 44 B.C. Brutus was one of the assassins, yet his brilliant oratory convinced the populace that he had acted in their best interests and for the greater glory of Rome.

Marc Antony was a likely target for mob anger.

Moments later, Marc Antony (a devoted follower of Caesar) had to address the same crowd. By now, the mob was hostile, screaming out that Caesar was a tyrant and Brutus a patriot. The most likely target for their anger was Marc Antony.

Confronting the hostile mob, Antony delivered one of history's greatest orations:

- He treated the crowd with respect. ("Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.")
- He repeated parts of Brutus' speech that deeply moved the crowd, yet he responded to their outrage. ("The noble Brutus hath told you Caesar was ambitious. If it were so, it was a grievous fault, and grievously hath Caesar answered it.")

- He presented his own opinions in noninflammatory words. (“He was my friend, faithful and just to me . . . You all did see that on the Lupercal I thrice presented him a kingly crown, which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?”)
- He then disarmed them completely by producing Caesar’s will, which left the bulk of the dead ruler’s wealth to the citizens of Rome (*Julius Caesar*, Act 3 Scene 2).

Marc Antony knew he had to deal with the crowd’s emotions before he could deliver his message. Until the mob’s anger was defused, he could not be persuasive. The confrontation meeting with the threatening employee should be handled in a non-provocational manner, yet with firm, clear expectations.

Deciding Whether to Retain or Terminate

What do you do with an intimidating, threatening employee? Before any job action with the employee is executed, a rock-and-a-hard-place decision has to be made. Should the threatening employee be retained, confronted about his conduct, and told never to blow up again? Or should the troublemaker be fired and ushered out the door with a prayer that he doesn’t come back to “make people pay”?

What do you do with a threatening employee?

The following decision matrix illustrates the dilemmas inherent in these employment action considerations (Blythe, Shockley, and Paulk, 1998):

Retain and rehabilitate the threatening employee	
Advantages:	Disadvantages:
Can better monitor his daily behavior	Leaves coworkers exposed to him
May salvage a valuable employee	Others may remain uncomfortable
Greater opportunity to control employee	Possible negligent retention claim

● Confronting Problems Before They Escalate

Terminate the threatening employee	
<i>Advantages:</i>	<i>Disadvantages:</i>
“Zero tolerance” policy enforced	Firing may be a further provocation
Removes threatening employee from the worksite	Loss of control over employee
Coworkers may feel safer	Risk of retaliation or surprise attack

Whatever you do, don’t postpone your decision. Avoidance of the threatening employee is a common problem.

- Big Ronnie had worked at a manufacturing facility for 17 years. His head was shaved except for a long, braided ponytail with an eyeball tattooed on the back of his scalp so he could “see people coming up from behind.” Although his supervisors had for years felt that Ronnie needed to be disciplined for his intimidation and bullying behavior, no one relished the idea of confronting him.

Don’t delay confrontations hoping the problem will go away.

Confrontations need to be done in a timely manner. Don’t delay them out of a false hope that the problem will go away; it won’t. The tendency to deny, minimize, and postpone confrontation of a difficult situation can be overwhelming. Not only does avoidance allow the problem to continue, it also exposes you to potential liability for negligent retention or negligent supervision. (Negligent retention is an employer’s failure to insure that a current employee does not cause harm or death to a fellow employee or a member of the public.)

Take a Moment

Match the appropriate advantage listed below with one of the following employment actions. Answers are on page 126.

R = Retain and rehabilitate threatening employee

T = Terminate the threatening employee

- _____ 1. Greater opportunity to control employee.
- _____ 2. “Zero tolerance” policy enforced.
- _____ 3. May salvage a good employee.
- _____ 4. Coworkers may feel safer.
- _____ 5. Better opportunities to monitor future actions.



When Early-Stage Discipline Is Your Best Option

Early-stage discipline is a good option when:

- ◆ Company policy allows for retention of the offending employee, with the options of participation in an appropriate rehabilitative plan or giving a “last chance” warning—notice that any future policy violation will result in immediate termination.
- ◆ The threatening conduct is clearly an aberration or a relatively isolated episode; a reliable assessment reveals no real intent of injury; or the threat is attributable, in part, to some other stressors and motivations that may have little to do with tendencies toward violence.
- ◆ The offending employee is fundamentally stable and is not currently enraged or escalating his behavior; the employee is approachable and seems willing to listen.
- ◆ There is a good opportunity for problem solving or conflict resolution, especially if the threat or intimidation involves a specific issue (e.g., being passed over for promotion) or centers on a specific individual (e.g., poor chemistry between boss and employee).

● Confronting Problems Before They Escalate

Clear-cut, firm consequences early on in an employee's history can prevent further threatening behavior. Perpetrators frequently report that when they started displaying warning signs of impending violence, no one would intervene to ask them what was going on.

- William Cartwright, serving time in the Granite, Oklahoma, Penitentiary, advises: "If you've got a man that's breaking his back to do his best for the company, and you feel something's not right, sit down with him and talk about it; get it out in the open; if it's a problem at home that's interfering with his work, talk with him, try to help him with it, don't let him keep it bottled up because usually that's when he winds up getting fired, and things [start to] happen."

Cartwright shot his boss, Hugh Riddle, point blank and slashed Riddle's wife for throwing him out of the couple's remodeling business; Cartwright held particular bitterness because he felt the Riddles lacked compassion for what the job loss would do to his already troubled life.

Effective communication can redirect an employee's destructive energies.

There is a good chance that if effective confrontation and appropriate early-stage discipline are utilized, an employee's destructive energies can be redirected in a more socially appropriate manner. Cartwright continues, "[Intervention] would have made a big difference; they would still be alive and I wouldn't be in here" (*Workplace Violence: First Line of Defense*).



Take a Moment

Describe three conditions that favor early-stage disciplinary action with the potentially violent employee. Answers are on page 126.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The S.A.F.E. Disciplinary Meeting

One theme that keeps recurring in the literature on workplace hostility is the poor, often inflammatory, manner in which many confrontations with troubled employees were handled. So many times, confrontations took on the tone of a personal attack, greatly increasing the probability of provoking aggression.

- In a production facility, ongoing tension existed between a floor supervisor and one of his lead operators, Allen. The supervisor often disciplined and chided Allen in front of his coworkers. The last straw occurred one day when the supervisor approached Allen and quipped, “We shouldn’t allow trash like you to keep working in this shop.” Allen steamed privately for about two minutes, then picked up a T-handle wrench and went looking for his supervisor. Luckily, the supervisor hid; otherwise, he might have been critically injured by an enraged employee.

With disgruntled, abusive, or threatening employees, confrontational meetings need to be carefully planned. Plans should include contingency measures if aggression occurs. One approach to planning any kind of disciplinary meeting is to apply the S.A.F.E. steps:

- ◆ Security and structure in the disciplinary meeting
- ◆ Action and accountability
- ◆ Fair but firm communication
- ◆ Exiting expectations

**Plan
confrontational
meetings
carefully.**

Security and Structure in the Disciplinary Meeting

Anticipated meetings should take place in settings that are relatively easy to secure if backup is needed. The format also needs to be structured so that the purpose of the meeting is accomplished.

1. Consider these questions:

- Who will conduct the meeting?
- Where will the meeting take place?
- When will the meeting occur?
- What is the objective of the confrontation?
- What is security supposed to do? Not do?

● Confronting Problems Before They Escalate

2. **Have two people present at the confrontation.**

The employee's immediate supervisor (unless he or she's the object of the threats) and someone from Human Resources are good choices. The presence of an additional person signals the seriousness of the situation, provides an additional witness, and helps the lead person stay on track.

Note: Have no more than two people present or the employee may feel that the company is "ganging up" on her.

3. **Hold the meeting in a discreet, private area.**

Choose a meeting place that can be easily monitored and accessed by backup security (if it should be needed). Make sure the office has been sanitized—that is, it contains no objects or valuable pieces that can be thrown, toppled, or defaced. Also, mentally note the exits in case quick escape is required, and look for office items to use as a barrier if the employee charges at you.

4. **Script the meeting.**

Your objective in an early-stage disciplinary meeting is effective and firm confrontation of a problem that, if left unchecked, may escalate to a much more serious safety problem for everyone. A scripted approach to the confrontation meeting will help you stay focused on your goal:

- "We have documented evidence that you've violated our workplace violence policy which could result in immediate termination. We want to keep you, however, because you are a valuable employee to us. We've identified the following plan(s) for you to follow in order to correct this situation; if you do not follow this plan, then we must consider immediate termination. You may not have meant the threat or you may feel we are overreacting, but we must tell you that we take all threats seriously and must take action. We know you can change and be a safe, productive employee."

Take a Moment

Assume that you are a manager of an individual who recently got into a heated argument with a female coworker on his work team. His shouting and stone-cold glaring at her have frightened and intimidated her and others in the work group. The two coworkers now both limit their interactions with one another, but whenever the male employee sees his female coworker, he just glares at her. She has come forward to you to express her fear of this employee and ask you to do something about it.

Instructions: Before you confront this employee, you need to script a message to communicate the objective of the meeting. What will your central message be? A suggested script may be found on page 127.



Action and Accountability in the Disciplinary Meeting

Dealing with Denial

Sometimes, the greatest challenge to confronting a threatening employee is simply getting this person to own up to threatening behavior. Even though many employers have a written zero tolerance policy for violence-related behaviors, many managers have experienced problems during the confrontation stage of enforcing the policy, especially regarding the interpretation of the word *threat*. Often the offending employee will deny that a threat was spoken or intended.

Sometimes, the greatest challenge to confronting a threatening employee is simply getting this person to own up to threatening behavior.

● Confronting Problems Before They Escalate

Most threats tend to be ambiguous so that, when challenged, the threatener may deny that a threat was intended.

- I once advised a company with an employee who had a number of performance and conduct problems. The company decided to confront this individual for discipline and possible termination over a statement he made. His threat, made to his supervisor during a heated disagreement, was, “You know, I got my 9 fixed [intimating his 9mm pistol].” When he was confronted over this perceived threatening remark, he offered a rather creative explanation: “Oh, I didn’t mean a gun, I meant my nine iron—I’m gonna whip you in a golf match!”

In Georgia where I grew up, there is a defense tactic lawyers call the “dog-bite defense.” This exculpatory ploy has a predictable script:

Denial:	“My dog didn’t bite you.”
Minimization:	“Well, if my dog did bite you, it didn’t do any damage.”
Justification:	“Well, if my dog did do some damage, you deserved it for provoking him!”

This script aptly describes the potential defensive remarks one sometimes hears when confronting employees about their threats or intimidating behavior:

Denial:	“I didn’t threaten anyone.”
Minimization:	“Well, I was just angry—I wouldn’t really hurt anyone.”
Justification:	“Yeah, I threatened to get even, but you can’t let a person just keep running over you, can you?”

1. Confront employees who minimize or justify their threats with a “common enemy” tactic.
 - “Our company policy requires that all documented threats, whether intended or not, be treated seriously and that appropriate disciplinary action be taken.” (Thus, it’s not personal, it’s policy.)
2. Use language that considers how an employee’s behavior affects others. Many employers have enhanced their workplace violence policy to include “any behavior that causes intimidation or reasonable fear responses in others.” The threatening individual may argue that he didn’t make a threat or that his actions were misinterpreted, but he will have a hard time dismissing others’ reactions to his behavior. Appropriate job action can then be taken without unnecessary arguments or provocation (Blythe, Shockley, and Paulk, 1998).

Use language that considers how an employee’s behavior affects others.

Employer:

I need to discuss your conduct in light of our zero tolerance policy for threats, intimidation, and harassment. Many of your coworkers feel intimidated and fearful, especially when there is a disagreement with you. After carefully reviewing this documented evidence, we feel we have to take action to stop this offending behavior.

Employee:

Nobody made a threat; where’s your evidence that I threatened anybody?

Employer:

John, we have documented evidence that others feel threatened and intimidated by you.

Employee:

Oh, yeah; who says I threatened them?

Employer:

John, the identity of those who say you’re threatening is not the point here; we’ve documented that several individuals feel threatened and intimidated by you, and identifying them to you would only make them feel more fearful. What we must do now is take action based upon our documented evidence.

● Confronting Problems Before They Escalate

3. Stipulate immediate plans of action or options to remedy the problem. If a decision is made to retain the employee, then an effective and appropriate corrective plan should be applied to reduce further threatening conduct from the offending employee (and reduce negligent retention exposure).



Case Study

A retail store hired a 19-year-old college student to work as a part-time inside security person. In a discussion with store personnel one day regarding the lavish, and apparently unpunished, lifestyles of several local, notorious drug dealers, he made a facetious comment: "Instead of making an honest living, maybe I ought to just start selling drugs, buy an Uzi, and blow away anybody who gets in my way."

Coworkers were disturbed about his remarks and reported them to his supervisor. After an investigation and preliminary assessment, it seemed that no homicidal intentions were meant; his remarks reflected the inappropriate and socially immature comments of a 19-year-old kid in a new job, who was working long hours at minimum wage, with a six-month-old baby at home and an equally young, working spouse. His comments reflected stress and frustration at trying to balance work and life demands.

The company took serious action but kept the employee: he was referred to some short-term counseling, was transferred to another store, and was given a "last-chance warning" that all threats are taken seriously and one more violation would result in immediate termination.

The young man was told, "You're one of our hardest working employees; people look up to you. I'm concerned that if we don't get this problem behind us, you're at risk of losing your job and others' respect for you."

Corrective Options

Corrective plans need to explicitly outline terms and conditions that the threatening employee must follow. Possible corrective options include:

- ◆ Referral to an employee-development program, such as diversity training, conflict resolution, sensitivity training, anger management, or assertive communications.

- ◆ Short-term suspension or a decision-making leave, with or without pay. Note: Making continuation of pay contingent upon participating in some appropriate program is a good form of leverage.
- ◆ Employee Assistance Program referral, credit counseling, or marital/family counseling (if environmental stressors are contributing to escalating aggression).
- ◆ Job reevaluation or reassignment, or extensive career assessment.
- ◆ Frequent, intensive coaching sessions to be conducted by a designated person or a peer review and support group.
- ◆ Participation in alternative dispute resolution or some other constructive grievance or mediation process.

Note that the idea behind most of these options is support/help for the offending employee, not just punishment.

Fair but Firm Communication in the Disciplinary Meeting

The method of confrontation should clearly be focused on the problem but balanced with an equally strong expression of support for the threatening employee.

- “You’re one of our most loyal employees; you’ve been with us over 15 years. People look up to you. I’m concerned that if we don’t get this problem behind us, however, you’re at risk of losing your job and others’ respect for you.”

1. **De-escalate the emotionalism that confrontation typically elicits.** Many managers/supervisors start their confrontation with the best of intentions, only to have the employee take control of the meeting and change its direction completely. These verbal judo tactics will help you keep focused and avoid counterattack:

● Confronting Problems Before They Escalate

Defensive Statement	Response
"You guys are making a mountain out of a molehill."	Avoid criticizing back: "It may seem that way, but we have to take all threats seriously."
"I didn't mean anything harmful by that comment; I was angry."	Support, but don't ignore: "We all say things we don't mean sometimes, but we have to take all threats seriously."
"You're trying to get rid of me just like you did Fred."	Redefine: "That's certainly not our intention at this point; we'd like to discuss some options to prevent a possible termination."
"Your facts are dead wrong."	Agree . . . but: "Well, people do make errors, but based upon our documented evidence, we have to take action."
"So why don't you guys go ahead and can me now?"	Affirm personal dignity: "Because you're a valuable employee to us, we're more interested in correcting the problem."
"I've always carried a gun in my car; no one ever said anything before."	Acknowledge, but affirm current conditions: "That may have been true before, but our violence policy clearly bans weapons—we have to enforce that for everyone."
"I'm not the only one who makes racial slurs; everyone on the dock does."	Acknowledge, but stay focused: "We will be interested in anyone who violates our policy, but for now, we need to act on our documented evidence regarding your behavior."

You may notice a conspicuous pronoun use throughout these scripted messages: *we* instead of *I*. That's deliberate. Using *we* is an explicit reminder that the documented evidence requiring action reflects the company's initiative, not just one person acting alone.

2. Consider these nonverbal disarming techniques:

- ◆ **The persistent, calm vocal delivery of your message is very disarming.** It subtly, but firmly, shows that you are not going to be provoked (remember the emotional-contagion effect). Typically, recycling your message three or four times leads the other person to reduce or drop initial resistance to what you are saying.
- ◆ **Use silence.** This is another greatly underutilized, non-provocative communications tool. It's difficult to do sometimes, but let the employee ventilate, complain, or disagree while you silently wait. Stay focused and repeat your message—this powerfully communicates that the issue is not going to be easily denied or dismissed.
- ◆ **Break eye contact.** Another nonverbal way to avoid escalation is to briefly disengage your eye contact (especially when using silence). Among mammals, glaring or staring down signals an escalating confrontation. Break that cycle (but remain vigilant).
- ◆ **Maintain a relaxed but animated posture**—let your body show neither agitation or fear. Sit comfortably without twitching, tapping your fingers, wringing your hands, or crossing your arms across your chest.

Use silence.



Take a Moment

Decide whether each statement below is true or false.
Answers are on page 127.

- T/F 1. The following statement is an example of affirming personal dignity: "Susan, your production levels are consistently among the highest in the department . . ."
- T/F 2. Silence should not be used during confrontation meetings, as it adds discomfort and tension to the interaction.
- T/F 3. If the employee makes a critical remark, it is important not to criticize back.
- T/F 4. Use I instead of we when confronting a threatening individual who has violated company policy.
- T/F 5. In response to the critical remark, "You guys are just on a witch-hunt," an example of a redefinition would be "We're trying to enforce a policy that will make the workplace safe for everyone."

Exiting Expectations in the Disciplinary Meeting

At the end of the meeting, state your expectations and summarize follow-up actions. Explain how follow-up monitoring will occur. Give any appropriate last-chance warnings at this time. End with encouragement and a restatement of your expectations for success.

1. **Create a mental snapshot of what it will be like if the employee behaves appropriately.**

■ "John, if you choose to follow the guidelines we're suggesting here and eliminate the shoving matches, you'll be able to keep your job and continue your productive career, and others will feel more comfortable in approaching you and working with you, even if you both have a disagreement. If you don't end the pushing tantrums, you will lose your job, your ability to support your family, and maybe worst of all, the respect of your coworkers. Do you understand the importance of what we're communicating here?"

This enhances the employee's sense of dignity by supporting continued employment and by allowing the employee a choice in determining his own destiny.

2. **End the meeting with a summary of follow-up plans and an explicit last-chance warning.**

- "I appreciate your cooperation; we've agreed that you will be suspended for one week without pay and that you will enroll in the upcoming Conflict Resolution seminar offered through internal staff training. You also understand that if there is one more documented instance of a shoving match on company property, you will be immediately terminated. John, I hope you know I'll be available to you if you need to talk about any kind of problem and how to handle it. Let me end our meeting by saying that I have a lot of confidence that you'll be successful in keeping this a safe workplace."

3. **Always document the plan presented in the meeting.**

This includes the meeting date, names of individuals present, actions agreed to, and follow-up plans with designated dates.

**Always
document the
plan presented
in the meeting.**

The S.A.F.E. model of confrontation establishes a positive tone for discipline, sets a standard of conduct, and demonstrates that any violation of that standard has consequences.

Chapter Summary

Avoiding confrontation with a threatening employee solves nothing. Delay can expose employers to potential liability for negligent retention or negligent supervision. Early interventions can salvage a valuable employee and prevent violence from escalating.

Four conditions favor early-stage discipline and retention:

- ◆ Company policy allows an offending employee to be retained after rehabilitation or a final warning.
- ◆ The threatening conduct was an isolated incident, or there was no real intent of injury.
- ◆ The offending employee is basically stable and is causing no further problems.
- ◆ A specific trigger can be dealt with through problem solving or conflict resolution.

When planning a disciplinary meeting, apply the S.A.F.E. steps:

- ◆ Security and structure in the disciplinary meeting
- ◆ Action and accountability
- ◆ Fair but firm communication
- ◆ Exiting expectations

During a disciplinary meeting, be prepared to deal with denial. Some threats are deliberately ambiguous so that the threatener may deny that a threat was intended. Sometimes an employee will insist that “I wouldn’t really hurt anyone.” You can cope with denial by citing company policy that all documented threats must be taken seriously, by including “any behavior that causes intimidation or reasonable fear responses in others” in your workplace violence policy, and by specifying ways to correct the problem.

You can also use these verbal disarming techniques.

- ◆ Deliver your message calmly and persistently.
- ◆ Use silence.
- ◆ Break eye contact.
- ◆ Maintain a relaxed but animated posture.

Self-Check: Chapter Four Review

Answers are on page 127.



1. Define what each element of the confrontation model, S.A.F.E., stands for:
 - a. S: _____
 - b. A: _____
 - c. F: _____
 - d. E: _____
2. Summarize, in your own words, two communication tactics that can be used with a threatening employee who denies any intent to harm.

3. List three possible corrective options that might be used to rehabilitate a threatening employee:

Chapter *Five*

Providing Psychological Help

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ List four situations in which intervention should be considered.
- ▶ Recognize behaviors that may indicate a need for intervention.
- ▶ Apply the S.A.F.E. steps to an intervention meeting.
- ▶ Demonstrate appropriate communication techniques in response to denial, minimization, or rationalization of threatening behavior.

In 1843, a Scotsman named Daniel McNaughtan attempted to assassinate the Prime Minister of Britain but mistakenly killed his secretary instead. McNaughtan's attorney provided expert medical testimony that McNaughtan was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia; he was convinced that members of the Tory parliament were following him everywhere and destroying his life. The jury found McNaughtan not guilty by reason of insanity.

The public was outraged at such a lenient treatment for an assassin. The House of Lords subsequently tightened such a defense and developed the "McNaughtan test": the defendant must be shown to be "labouring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as to not know the nature and quality of the act he was doing, or, if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong" (quoted in Moran's *Knowing Right from Wrong*).

Fast-forward to the mid-1990s: A depressed employee threatened to kill her supervisor, announcing, "I hate the bitch. She is living on borrowed time . . . I have killed her a thousand times in my mind." The employee was fired for her threatening remarks but sued her employer, claiming that "depression made me do it." Expert opinion testimony supported her expressions of deadly intentions

as mere “expressions of her thought and ‘homicidal ideations’ consistent with plaintiff’s psychiatric diagnosis.” The court sided with the employee, awarded her damages, and ordered her reinstated to her previous job under the Americans with Disabilities Act. In March 1998, the Michigan Court of Appeals reversed the decision, stating that “a disabled employee may be discharged for misconduct, even where the misconduct is a manifestation of the employee’s disability” (*Collins vs. Blue Cross Blue Shield* 916 F.Supp. 638 E.D.Mich. 1995).

When to Intervene

Employers are increasingly having to walk a thin line when dealing with potentially violent employees who also have emotional problems or psychological distresses. These kinds of situations often warrant using outside medical and psychological resources for their expertise in orchestrating an *intervention*. An intervention is a planned confrontation, usually by a team of individuals, that results in a prescribed course of treatment aimed at helping an individual.

Individuals with apparent emotional problems present challenges to our thinking. For example, misconceptions about suicide are common. People falsely reason that if a person is suicidal, he shouldn’t be confronted. This idea is not only mistaken but potentially dangerous. A person who doesn’t value his own life doesn’t value the lives of others either—workplace homicides are followed by a suicide in almost 50 percent of all cases. Intervention is necessary not only for the sake of the suicidal employee, but for the safety of others.

An intervention is a planned confrontation that results in a prescribed course of treatment aimed at helping an individual.

Consider intervening when:

- ◆ A threatening individual has a mental disability which may be causing the violent behavior, and the mental condition is treatable by medication or some other therapy. In this case, the employer is obligated to explore whether the disability can be accommodated.
- ◆ The offending employee’s behavior has recently started to escalate or change dramatically; and direct confrontation will not work due to an employee’s psychological inability or incapacity.
- ◆ The offensive behavior results from or is being complicated

● Providing Psychological Help

by a possible psychological disturbance, or there are significant stressors impacting the employee.

- ◆ A volatile employee is going to be terminated. An intervention may provide psychological stabilization: equipping the employee with coping resources, problem-solving strategies, job search knowledge, etc., to handle the stress of transition and reduce the need for retaliation.



Take a Moment

Read the following situations regarding threatening situations and check (✓) those conditions that might benefit from an intervention approach. Answers are on page 128.

1. An increasingly threatening employee has been observed going through very marked “mood swings” for the last six months of his employment.
2. A young, somewhat immature, employee, “pops off” one day and says he’s fed up with working conditions and is going to “kick some ass.”
3. An employee who intimidates others on her work team has a glazed look in her eyes most of the time; previous attempts to confront her on her intimidating behavior have caused her to “blow up,” leading her to curse others and mutter all kinds of unintelligible words underneath her breath.
4. An older employee, who is going through a great deal of personal family and financial troubles, is going to be terminated soon because of his poor performance and difficulty communicating with others. Coworkers believe he’s going to “snap” any day due to his stresses at home.

Not only does intervention make good sense from a humanitarian point of view, but taking a proactive approach:

- ◆ May reduce negligent retention exposure by providing an effective rehabilitative control to mitigate the troublesome or offensive behavior.
- ◆ Provides important documentation for dangerous tendencies toward violence since this documentation typically results from a professional assessment.

Ever since Cain asked God if he was his brother's keeper, the answer to that question has received equivocal treatment by humankind and the legal community. Consult with your legal counsel before implementing a psychological intervention.

- Recently, an off-duty plant employee entered his plant with a concealed weapon, pointed it at a coworker and pulled the trigger—incredibly, it failed to discharge. The employee had a history of mental problems and was abusing alcohol and other drugs. After this incident, he received treatment for his substance abuse and psychological problems. The employer subsequently terminated him after determining he was a safety risk. The labor arbitrator, however, required the company to treat the employee's case as a medical issue and reinstate him if he could produce a release-to-work statement (Bowater Inc., Southern Division and Paperworkers Local 788 No. 95-1 ARB (CCH) 5142 1995).

Consult with your legal counsel before implementing a psychological intervention.

Recognizing Potential Psychological Problems

Mandatory referrals are appropriate if the employer believes an employee may harm himself or others. You should never play armchair psychologist and diagnose suspected psychological disorders in fellow employees. However, since you know your employees' typical behavior, pay attention to significant changes in behavior or any behavior that gives you a bad or odd feeling (trust your intuition).

● Providing Psychological Help

Talk your concerns over with a professional mental health practitioner or threat assessment expert. Some of the more critical kinds of behavior to take notice of include:

- ◆ **Poor or deficient interpersonal/social skills**
 - Tendency to be manipulative, deceitful, or controlling of others or of outcomes
 - Uncommunicative, unassertive, or passive
 - Avoidance of normal conflict, or the opposite, overreaction and assertion that's disproportionate to the situation
 - Lack of connection to others, detachment, or a marked absence of responsiveness to others ("Sometimes talking to Mark is like talking to a brick wall.")
 - Becoming a loner or estranged from others
- ◆ **Emotional instability or unpredictability**
 - Moodiness ("Some days Nancy's happy and having fun and other days she's mad at the world.")
 - Love-hate vacillations, switching from liking and respecting someone to despising or hating that person
 - Irritability
 - Impulsiveness—tendency to act quickly and emotionally without thinking
 - Rapid mood changes—from depressed to normal to angry to anxious in a short period of time
 - "Acting out"—making provocative or sexually suggestive advances or other socially inappropriate behavior
- ◆ **Thought disorders or extreme perceptions**
 - Rigid, absolutistic thinking ("There's only one way to stop this country's drug problem, and that's to execute every drug user.")
 - Paranoid suspicions or delusions ("The boss has been spying on me, even when I go home.")
 - Externalizing or blaming ("It's everyone else's fault.")
 - "Command" hallucinations ("Secret messages in the Bible tell me I should take revenge on my enemies.")
 - Consistent themes of persecution ("He's always had it in for me; he's out to get me.")

◆ **Depression or anxiety**

- Lack of emotion or energy
- Staying “down” for a protracted period of time
- Lack of involvement with others or work
- A pessimistic view of life (“I’ll be dead in six months anyway, so what does it matter?”)
- Display of the three Hs: helpless, hapless, hopeless
- Lethargy
- Anxious or worrisome thoughts
- Jumping to the worst case scenario immediately
- Inability to make decisions; “paralyzed” with concern or worry to the point of complete ambivalence or lack of forward motion
- Hypersensitive
- Exaggerated mental and/or health concerns (“I’m going crazy” or “I know I have a fatal illness.”)

◆ **Evidence of self-destructive behavior**

- Increased drug/alcohol use
- Persistently engaging in “excessive” behaviors (such as overeating, drinking, gambling, etc.)
- Ignoring safety or health precautions (discontinuing some vital medication, for example)
- Suicidal thoughts or behavior (“My life doesn’t matter much anymore.”)
- Gross inattention to responsibilities or negligence (spending recklessly, not showing up for work, dereliction of parental duties, etc.)
- Jeopardizing one’s own health or that of others
- Playing with guns, such as Russian Roulette



Take a Moment

Match the appropriate description of behavior to the kind of potential dysfunctional behavior it illustrates. Answers are on page 128.

A = Poor or deficient interpersonal/social skills

B = Emotional instability/unpredictability

C = Thought disorders or extreme perceptions

D = Presence of depression or anxiety

E = Evidence of self-destructive behavior

1. Chris, a diabetic, has recently stopped taking his medication (against medical advice), started abusing alcohol, and told his supervisor that he doesn't care if he lives or dies.
2. Coworkers are never sure what kind of mood Jen's going to be in lately—sometimes she comes into work whistling and singing; other times she's looking for an argument.
3. Harold does not interact with coworkers or join them for lunch. He seems most at home working alone on the computer.
4. Jim believes that management has installed tiny cameras at both his worksite and his home to watch his every move; he's convinced they're up to no good.
5. Barry says he no longer cares about his job or about his life; furthermore, he doesn't care that he doesn't care.

Many psychological disorders are treatable.

Many psychological disorders are treatable. For example, 80 percent of those with depression can be markedly improved in just six to eight weeks. Finding the right treatment resource soon enough is the key.

Unfortunately, one of the greatest obstacles to getting psychological help is the stigma associated with the label of mental illness.

- In a provocative experiment in the 1970s, reported by D. L. Rosenhan, eight people with no history of psychological problems arranged to have themselves admitted into a psychiatric hospital by reporting that they had heard voices saying things like “hollow,” “empty,” and “thud.” Once admitted, these pseudopatients never again referred to these hallucinations.

Interestingly, the real mental patients soon realized these people were impostors, but hospital staff members did not! Furthermore, ordinary behaviors like taking notes were interpreted as symptoms of a psychological disorder. Within a couple of weeks, the patients were discharged with the diagnosis “schizophrenia in remission.”

The damning point of the study: once labels are attached to people, everything they do is interpreted in light of that label (whether it is accurate or not).

Any therapeutic rehabilitation must be handled with care and an effort to minimize the stigma of getting mental help.

- Maryanne had been making threats to her boss, who had passed her over for an important promotion. Then Maryanne started to disengage from others; instead of joining friends for lunch, she ate in her car. Finally, a concerned employee noticed Maryanne crying on several occasions while sitting in her car at lunchtime.

Rather than terminate her, the company chose to intervene psychiatrically without telling other employees. Why? Their documented rationale: Maryanne’s supervisor would watch her closely; secrecy would prevent rumors getting back to Maryanne and possibly inflaming the situation; and lastly, they wanted to protect Maryanne from any stigma. She was confronted in her manager’s office after most employees had already left for the weekend and escorted to a hospital outside the small town she lived in. She received much needed treatment and successfully returned to work.

Any therapeutic rehabilitation must be handled with care and an effort to minimize the stigma of getting mental help.

The S.A.F.E. Intervention

The S.A.F.E. steps can also be applied to an intervention.

- Security and structure in the intervention meeting
- Action and accountability
- Fair but firm communication
- Exiting expectations

Security and Structure in the Intervention Meeting

The format of this meeting needs to be thoughtfully planned and scripted. Many “what if” scenarios need to be anticipated. Otherwise, the well-intentioned attempt to help a troubled employee may lead to further complications.

1. Plan for every possible contingency.

- ◆ What additional information about the employee is needed?
- ◆ What additional security precautions need to be taken while an intervention plan is being formulated?
- ◆ Do you anticipate the employee’s cooperation during the intervention? What if he is too incapacitated, disturbed, or resistant to understand the reason for intervention?
- ◆ Do you need to investigate the possibility of an involuntary assessment or commitment? Where would that take place? Who would initiate this process? Note: You should know that getting anybody committed is exceedingly difficult in most states; mental health laws are very liberal and protective of the patient. Even with involuntary admission, the assessment period is typically only 72 hours or less.
- ◆ How will the employee’s treatment be monitored? Who at the company will be receiving this information?
- ◆ If the employee is hospitalized: Will you be notified of the upcoming discharge date? What kind of follow-up

Try to anticipate “what if” scenarios when planning the intervention meeting.

treatment will be in place? What special considerations need to be taken to help the employee reenter the workplace?

- ◆ If the employee is an outpatient: What follow-up treatment will be needed to maintain the rehabilitative success? What special considerations need to be taken to help the employee reenter the workplace?

2. **Hold the meeting in an appropriate place.**

The meeting should be in a relatively private room that lends itself to surveillance. If appropriate, have backup security available.

3. **Have at least two people conduct the meeting.**

Ideally the two people who lead the meeting would have a good working relationship with the affected employee. No one who has been threatened should be present at this meeting. Consider having the treatment team present as well. If this is not possible, a security escort might take the employee immediately to the treatment team.

4. **Rehearse your central script to stay focused on the objective of the meeting.**

- “We’re very concerned about your behavior—we feel you need help now. We want to help you because you are a valuable employee to us. We’ve developed a well-thought-out plan that includes a number of terms and conditions that we hope you’ll choose to follow. If you don’t cooperate with our plan, then we must go ahead with the termination process. This decision has been carefully planned. We want you to be a productive employee again; we know you can achieve that if you get help now.”

5. **Remember that the goal of an intervention is rehabilitation, not just a referral.**

- Management suspended an employee for some threats he had been making, but asked that he seek psychiatric treatment for what was felt to be manic-depression (bipolar disorder). The company carefully stipulated that unless he cooperated with treatment, his employment would be terminated. The employee chose a psychiatrist, went to two sessions, then returned to

**Stay focused
on the
objective of
the meeting.**

work. A quick phone call to the doctor revealed that the employee had attended two sessions but was essentially uncommunicative. When confronted, the employee defended his understanding of the bargain; “I cooperated; I told him what my name was, where I worked, and that I had no problems. That was all. Now I’m ready to come back to work!”

Action and Accountability in the Intervention Meeting

1. **If possible, make the employee’s job status conditional on getting help.** Use that option to leverage the individual into treatment.
2. **Don’t make an empty or unenforceable promise.** If your employee will not comply with the intervention plan, you should be prepared to implement a more severe disciplinary action, such as immediate termination.
3. **Support the employee’s dignity.** Emphasize the value the employee has to the company. Use phrases like “you’re a person we don’t want to lose,” but affirm the consequences if the employee chooses not to cooperate. The power of choice is a strong support for dignity.

Emphasize the value the employee has to the company.

Employer:

Chris, violating our safe conduct policy is serious business. It could result in immediate termination. We also have some concerns about your behavior based upon what we have observed lately. We want to keep you because you are a valued employee to us, but in order for us to consider you at this point, you must be evaluated by a professional we’ve identified.

Employee:

This is just another way of saying I’m not fit to do the job so you guys can fire me, isn’t it?

Employer:

Chris, if we wanted to fire you, we could do that now; we’re interested in your getting some help.

Employee:

So, is this some sort of ultimatum? You guys can’t make me get psychological help; I’ll get an attorney.

Employer:

Chris, you have a choice, and you're welcome to consult with whomever you wish, but if you don't voluntarily get help now, we must go ahead with our termination decision.

Fair but Firm Communication in the Intervention Meeting

The method of confrontation should clearly be task-focused, but balanced with an equally strong expression of support of the threatening employee (to avoid further provocation):

Defensive Statement	Response
"What the hell are you saying? I'm crazy? Some kind of nut case?"	Focus on behavior, not labels: "We're not saying you're a nut or that you're crazy, but your behavior lately has concerned us greatly and we want you to get help."
"I don't need any help. Why are you guys picking on me?"	Empathize, but stick to task: "It may seem like we're picking on you, but we're very concerned about you; we want you to get help."
"I know what ya'll are trying to do . . . you're trying to get me committed and locked away forever."	Redefine, support employee's dignity: "You are a valuable employee to us; we want to keep you, but we want you to get help."
"Well, maybe I've got some problems, but I can take care of them . . . haven't you ever had problems before?"	Affirm, but present plan: "Yes, we've all had problems, but we feel you would greatly benefit from the kind of help only a professional can provide."

● Providing Psychological Help

Defensive Statement	Response
"Okay, I'll get some help, but I'll go to my own doctor, not some damn shrink!"	Affirm, but present plan: "We are happy you're going to cooperate; however, we've put a lot of planning into getting you the right kind of professional help; we're confident you'll see we've picked the best possible resource for you."
"So, is this some sort of ultimatum? You guys can't make me get psychological help."	Affirm choice: "You clearly have a choice; but if you don't voluntarily get help now, we must go ahead with our termination decision."



Take a Moment

Read the following objections a threatening employee might make in response to your request that he get some psychological help, and script an appropriate reply. Answers are on page 128.

1. "Hey, I'm not a weirdo—I'm just going through some problems right now. It's no big deal, so lay off!"

2. "There's nothing that can be done to help me. I've had therapy before and it doesn't help."

Continued on next page

Take a Moment *(continued)*



3. "Whoa, what are you talking about? I find what you're saying to be very insulting."

4. "Hey, I don't have any problems—you're the one with problems, not me!"

5. "You can't send me to a shrink—I'll get an attorney and sue you."

Exiting Expectations in the Intervention Meeting

At the end of the meeting, restate the agreement and summarize follow-up actions. Explain how follow-up monitoring will occur. Give any appropriate last-chance warnings at this time. Bruce Blythe recommends:

1. **Have someone go with the employee from the intervention meeting to the place where treatment will be provided.** The threatening employee should be accompanied at all times until the individual is stabilized by the treatment provider or admitted into a hospital.
2. **Use the possibility of a return to work as leverage to get the employee into treatment.** The employee can be told that complete cooperation is the only way a return to work will be considered. The employee should sign a release that permits the treatment provider to communicate treatment progress, level of cooperation, and the projected outcome of treatment.

Restate the agreement and summarize follow-up actions.

● Providing Psychological Help

3. **Define the conditions that make a return to work possible.** The treatment provider should complete and sign a fitness-for-duty form and offer a positive report on the employee's cooperation before return to work is considered. If a return to work is approved, the company should schedule the return and provide written conditions of employment.
4. **Encourage the employee to complete the full treatment program.** For example, the company might agree to finance continued treatment.

Reentry Issues

Questions to consider before the employee returns to work after treatment include:

- ◆ How will the employee be welcomed back?
- ◆ What will be done to address any safety issues connected with the employee's return?
- ◆ What about "rumor control"? What will be said to other employees regarding the rehabilitated employee's return?
Note: Ask the employee what he or she wants to have said.
- ◆ Consider a possible debriefing session with previously threatened employees or those apprehensive about the rehabilitated employee's return. Note: If appropriate, consider having the employee's treatment team present at the debriefing to reinforce the legitimacy of rehabilitation.

The goal of an intervention is rehabilitation.

Possible Outcomes of Intervention

The goal of an intervention is rehabilitation. When interventions work, they are a wonderful testament to the win/win ideal—the company salvages a valued worker and the affected employee is grateful for the obvious care shown by the organization. Even with a "zero tolerance" policy in place, the intervention represents an excellent opportunity to demonstrate active caring and a strong safety culture at work.

However, successful treatment does not guarantee that an employee will be able to return to work. Consider the outcomes of these two cases.

- A print shop employee who had threatened to harm coworkers received some much-needed therapy. At the end of his successful rehabilitation, however, the shop's manager was presented with a petition from fellow employees stating flatly that if this employee were allowed to return to work, they would all resign immediately.
- A computer service technician, who had become highly agitated, suicidal, and depressed, threatened to drive his truck through the front of the office building and "mow people down." He was confronted and eventually escorted to a hospital program for immediate treatment. After six weeks of successful rehabilitation and proper medication, this employee returned from his medical leave. He was welcomed back with cards, gifts, and a whole stack of work orders that were ceremoniously handed to him to show how much he was missed.

Chapter Summary

An intervention is a planned confrontation, usually by a team of individuals, that results in a prescribed course of treatment aimed at helping an individual.

Consider intervening when:

- ◆ A threatening employee has a treatable mental condition.
- ◆ Direct confrontation about troubling behavior is unlikely to be successful.
- ◆ The offending employee is psychologically disturbed or under stress.
- ◆ A volatile employee needs to be stabilized before a planned termination.

● Providing Psychological Help

While you should never play armchair psychologist, certain behaviors may give you cause for concern:

- ◆ Poor or deficient interpersonal skills
- ◆ Emotional instability or unpredictability
- ◆ Thought disorders or extreme perceptions
- ◆ Presence of depression or anxiety
- ◆ Evidence of self-destructive behavior

Mandatory referrals are appropriate if an employee may harm himself or others. Any therapeutic rehabilitation must be handled with care to minimize the stigma of getting mental help.

The S.A.F.E. steps for intervention are:

- ◆ Security and structure in the intervention meeting
- ◆ Action and accountability
- ◆ Fair but firm communication
- ◆ Exiting expectations

During an intervention, be prepared to cope with defensive statements by:

- ◆ Focusing on behavior, not labels.
- ◆ Empathizing, but sticking to task.
- ◆ Redefining your intent and supporting the employee's dignity.
- ◆ Affirming an employee's wish to handle the problem himself, but sticking to the plan.
- ◆ Affirming the employee's choice of cooperation or termination.

Self-Check: Chapter Five Review

Indicate whether you think the following statements are true or false. Answers may be found on page 129.



1. Under no circumstances may an employer make a referral mandatory for an employee.
2. If threatening behavior may be caused by a treatable mental disability, the employer is obligated to explore whether the disability can be accommodated.
3. Attitudes described by the three Hs (Helpless, Hapless, and Hopeless) are potential indicators of depression.
4. The goal of an effective intervention is referral, not rehabilitation.
5. The power of choice is a strong support for an employee's dignity.

Chapter *Six*

Terminating Without Being Terminated Yourself

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Identify four situations which favor termination of threatening or violent employees.
- ▶ Explain how to secure and structure a termination meeting by applying the S.A.F.E. steps.
- ▶ State the importance of using written terms as part of the termination process.
- ▶ Describe the importance of follow-up monitoring and ongoing assessment after termination.

Terminating an employee is a difficult task even under the most favorable of circumstances. But what if you're faced with firing an employee described as "disgruntled," "problematic," "intimidating," "distraught," or "unbalanced"?

- I once consulted with a prominent software development company whose senior VP had a fascination with weaponry: he had a second job working in a gun shop; bronzed shell casings were mounted on his desk plaque; *Guns & Ammo* magazine was prominently displayed on his credenza; paper targets on his office wall proudly displayed his marksmanship; he carried a gun in his car and even slept with a gun! This vice president did not get along well with the company president and had made several veiled threats toward him. Eventually, the president was told by the board of directors he had to fire several employees, including the VP.

Terminating a potentially dangerous employee poses a dilemma: firing a threatening individual may remove a danger or provoke the violence you're trying to avoid. Furthermore, the company loses virtually all control and leverage over terminated employees. And how will references be handled?

When to Consider Termination

Termination is not a perfect solution. However, it should be considered when an employee:

- ◆ Has a repeated history of hostility and intimidation. If a person habitually and flagrantly disregards your workplace violence policy, that person will probably continue to do so. Note: If an employee has a treatable mental condition that produced the erratic (threatening) behavior, and if the condition can be controlled through medication or other treatment, then termination may significantly increase the risk of ADA liability.
- ◆ Has not honored the conditions agreed upon during earlier interventions.
- ◆ Commits an act that requires immediate termination, as defined in your workplace violence policy. Examples might include bringing a gun into the office, willful acts of sabotage, or entering a highly secured area with a fraudulent badge or false credentials.
- ◆ Is so dangerous, despite attempts at rehabilitation, that the company is liable for negligent retention if the employee remains on the premises.

When termination is necessary, delay makes the situation worse in two major ways. Avoidance sends the message that management is weak and intimidation pays off. Delay also increases the potential for violence because when dismissal finally occurs, it is seen as unfair and inconsistent with the inaction that preceded the termination. In the first year after being laid off, employees are six times more likely to commit violent acts than are workers whose jobs are intact (Catalano, 1994).

**When
termination is
necessary,
delay makes
the situation
worse.**

● Terminating Without Being Terminated Yourself

Employees who feel that they have gotten by with serious infractions can be particularly bitter when they are eventually fired.

- Marcus, a cook, had given a country club almost four years of good, fairly reliable work as a kitchen assistant and cook. However, Marcus periodically blew up at his coworkers. He would curse them and occasionally shove them. He also let others know that he would “cut” anybody who crossed him. The club manager had mixed feelings about Marcus. While the cook was willing to work for low wages, the manager feared his volatility. The last straw came when Marcus argued with the club’s accountant about some overtime. He wrestled the accountant down to the ground and threatened to “cap her” (kill her). The club manager now had to fire Marcus.

Someone suggested that the manager perform a background check on Marcus as part of the preparation for termination. The criminal check turned up several undisclosed charges for assault and battery and a conviction for a misdemeanor. Instead of terminating Marcus for his threatening behavior, the club manager fired Marcus for lying on his job application.

Marcus was livid at what he regarded as a “technicality.” He felt his lie was justified in order to get the job, a job to which he had given four years of his life. He complained that his background hadn’t mattered to anybody until now. Marcus took his anger out on the accountant. He stalked her and was arrested in her driveway with a knife in his possession.

Termination is clearly the defusing strategy of choice when others’ ongoing safety is at issue.

Termination is clearly the defusing strategy of choice when:

- ◆ Others’ ongoing safety is an issue.
- ◆ Access to the workplace needs to be restricted.
- ◆ The threatening individual needs permanent separation from the “provocative” triggers of the work site.

The Termination Process

Terminating a threatening employee needs to be treated as a process, a series of steps that are monitored and assessed as the employee transitions out of the company. Attending counseling, not coming back to the work site, using outplacement services, etc., are all important forms of leverage and control to exert on an exiting employee.

If termination is used as a firm and immediate intervention for threatening behavior, it generally will not escalate violence potential. True, many acts of violence are committed by people reacting to their termination. But millions are laid off yearly without incident. Exiting employees who become violent have often felt belittled, humiliated, or ignored.

- At a trucking company where an ex-driver was threatening his manager's life, the manager's parting shot during the termination meeting was, "You guys are a dime a dozen." This direct assault on the employee's personal dignity, even in a well-deserved dismissal, was dangerously provocative. The employee may be leaving his job, but he shouldn't have to leave his dignity behind.

Supporting an employee's dignity and self-esteem during the termination process is a powerful inhibitor of potential violence and retaliation.

- A shipping company decided to close down a distribution hub where John had been manager for almost 10 years. All 20 employees would be affected, but the company had a particular concern about John. Not only had he had been vocal about past "reorganizations," he distrusted management and had a combative relationship with his own boss, Jeannette. When the topic of closing offices had come up in the past, John told his boss, "Well, if you ever decided to downsize me, you can bet I would do some real harm."

Support the employee's dignity and self-esteem during the termination process.

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To his credit, John took care of “his people.” Though somewhat autocratic and paternalistic in his approach, he acted as their advocate and frequently called himself “captain of the ship.” On the day the termination was announced, the company approached John first. After telling him of his own termination, they asked him to help announce the termination of his department “out of respect for him and for his leadership role.” John was given an opportunity to go “down with his ship.” The appeal to his loyalty to “his people” worked beautifully because John’s dignity was upheld.

Try to give the terminated employee choices.

One of the unavoidable impacts of termination is that the employee perceives he or she has no choice in the matter. In some circumstances, a resignation option might give the employee the opportunity to leave voluntarily. This choice supports the employee’s dignity.

Here’s a sample resignation script that might be delivered to the employee.

- “You’ve been with us for over three years; although you’ve done some good things for us, the overall relationship just isn’t working out. The company has done a lot of reflecting about your relationship with us, and we’d like to offer you the opportunity to voluntarily resign so that you can find a work setting that’s better for you. If you do resign, we’ll help you out in the following ways [list benefits]. We think this is best for you so you can find a better situation.”
- If the employee rejects the resignation inducement: “Well, the company is less than satisfied with our working relationship. As you know, we took some disciplinary action earlier regarding the violation of our company’s no-violence policy. After reviewing subsequent documented evidence, we must now discuss your termination from the company.”

Take a Moment

Respond to the following questions regarding termination considerations. Answers are on page 129.



1. List three conditions that indicate you should terminate an employee:

2. What are the effects of delaying termination?

3. Describe two conditions that tend to reduce the possibility that the termination process will provoke violence:

The S.A.F.E. Termination Meeting

The S.A.F.E. steps to termination are:

- ◆ Security and structure in the termination meeting.
- ◆ Action and accountability
- ◆ Fair but firm communication
- ◆ Exiting expectations

Security and Structure in the Termination Meeting

Anticipated meetings should be held in settings that are relatively easy to secure if backup is needed. The format also needs to be structured so that the purpose of the meeting is accomplished.

1. **Carefully consider the time and date for the termination meeting.**

If possible, schedule the termination meeting soon, but avoid dates that have symbolic significance to the employee. Some clients have inadvertently scheduled terminations during an employee's vacation, on the employee's anniversary with the company, even on Halloween. Avoid birthdays of the employee or the employee's near relatives and anniversaries of significant dates such as hire date, wedding, holidays, family deaths, and divorce.

Don't announce the termination meeting ahead of time.

- ◆ Don't announce the termination meeting ahead of time. Advance warning may give the employee time to plan some kind of dramatic or retaliatory response.
- ◆ Schedule the termination meeting at the end of the employee's customary work week and at the end of the customary work day. With a potentially violent employee, this affords several dignity and safety advantages:
 - When the meeting is over, fewer coworkers will be present and the security escort out of the building will be less visible.
 - Spontaneous confrontations with coworkers or potential targets will be less likely.
 - The sudden absence of work structure will not be as provocative with the weekend approaching.

2. **Conduct the meeting face-to-face.**

Terminations by letter are impersonal and insulting. The employee is deprived of an opportunity to ask questions or ventilate anger. Employees terminated by mail typically feel that "they didn't even care enough about me to give me the news face-to-face." They might also find an impersonal

termination provocative: “They were too scared to deal with me in person; well, I’m not going to let them get away with that.” Additionally, a face-to-face meeting gives you an excellent opportunity to observe, assess, and document the employee’s reactions.

3. **Have at least two people present in the termination meeting.**

The presence of an additional person signals the seriousness of the situation, provides an additional witness, and helps the lead person stay on track.

Have at least two people present in the termination meeting.

- ◆ No one who was or is a target of the threatening employee should attend the meeting.
- ◆ Whenever possible, the lead person should outrank the employee’s supervisor. A manager brings additional authority into the meeting. Because this person is removed from immediate day-to-day issues, her presence may preempt fruitless rehashing of the termination decision.
- ◆ The second person should be someone who might function as a buffer by clarifying concerns and supporting both parties. Someone from Human Resources is appropriate. If the second person is from security, that person should be in plain clothes and take a nonconfrontational approach. Note: Having two or three people present is probably ideal; having more may make the employee may feel that the company is “ganging up” on her.
- ◆ Avoid small talk or chitchat. After recognizing your employee’s presence, launch right into the meeting.
 - “Carl, thanks for being here on such short notice. This is _____ from Human Resources. She’s joining me because this is a very serious meeting.”

4. **Choose the meeting site carefully.**

Conduct the termination meeting in a room where the employee can enter and exit without a great deal of exposure to others so that potential humiliation is prevented. Neutral

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meeting places (company conference room, training room, etc.) are better than the boss's office or some other personal turf. With employees who travel a lot, consider meeting at airport hospitality rooms if gun security is a great concern, since screening for weapons is routine.

5. **Prepare the meeting room.**

- ◆ Remove any breakable or throwable objects, such as expensive art objects, mirrors, and glass vases. Even heavy-duty coasters can cause injury if the employee should become uncontrollably aggressive.
- ◆ Observe the physical layout of the room. Is there a quick exit path? Are there obstacles that could protect you if the employee should charge at you?

Arrange for
backup
security.

6. **Arrange for backup security.**

Choose a meeting place that can be easily monitored by backup security, perhaps by speakerphone. Arrange a signal for security to enter the room. Consider these questions:

- ◆ If there is a reasonable suspicion of a concealed firearm, are they to “pat down” the subject? Look through her purse? Look through the employee's locker or desk?
- ◆ Are they to intervene if the employee storms out of the meeting?
- ◆ If there are physical threats, when and how should the employee be subdued? Would there be circumstances when force is warranted? If so, what would provoke the use of that force?
- ◆ What if the employee refuses to leave the building? Is there an emergency evacuation plan in place?

7. **Rehearse your script to stay focused on the meeting's purpose.**

- “This is a very serious meeting. Due to the documented threats of violence that you have made in the recent past, we're placed in a position of potentially serious legal consequences and employee morale problems. For these

reasons, it is necessary that we terminate your employment with the company based upon violation of our policy (reference policy title or number). To assist you during this transition, the company has outlined several guidelines and supportive measures related to your employment termination. We feel it's best for you and for us if you find another place to work, an environment that will be a better fit for you."

Take a Moment

Please read the following statements regarding termination and indicate whether you think the statement is true (T) or false (F). Answers are on page 129.



- _____ 1. During the termination meeting, it is valuable to have security present to demonstrate a strong presence.
- _____ 2. It's best to terminate someone early in the workday so the employee can go home and deal with the emotional aftermath.
- _____ 3. Employees should be given some sort of "early warning" of their impending termination so they can get prepared emotionally.
- _____ 4. Never terminate an employee on Friday (end of the work week).
- _____ 5. In all situations, it's best to have the most immediate supervisor or manager conducting the termination meeting.
- _____ 6. You should terminate potentially dangerous employees by telephone or by registered mail.

Action and Accountability in the Termination Meeting

The planned confrontation should be based on the need to deal with policy violations. One of the most useful tools in avoiding or minimizing confrontation in the termination meeting is a carefully written document that contains explicit “terms and conditions.” (Blythe, Shockley, and Paulk, 1998)

1. **A written terms and conditions statement should be used at every termination meeting.**

- ◆ Written statements can be carefully edited and reviewed to avoid provocative wording.
- ◆ Written statements are less likely to be misunderstood than verbal comments.
- ◆ Impersonal written documents provide a focus and help avoid a free-flowing verbal exchange.
- ◆ Putting the decision in writing conveys a sense of finality, thus reducing the impulsive tendency to negotiate or argue.

■ “We’ve prepared a written statement about your pay schedule, status of your benefits, and expectations at this time. We’ve written it down to provide clarity and to prevent any misunderstandings. Let’s read through this together.”

Offer post-termination benefits and support.

2. **Plan for and offer a number of posttermination benefits and discretionary support.** Offering some forward-looking provisions can minimize the employee’s feeling that he is being dumped and forgotten. Investing in the departing employee’s future is an investment in your own safety.

- ◆ Providing outplacement demonstrates your concern for the employee. Getting reemployed quickly tends to inhibit aggression and retaliation. Note: Many outplacement firms will send a consultant on-site to meet with your affected employee immediately after termination; however, security may prefer to have the consultant contact the employee by phone instead.
- ◆ Let the employee know if you will not contest a claim for unemployment. (“We’ll do our best to make sure you have as much financial support as possible.”)

- ◆ Be generous with severance pay, benefits continuation, and calculations for final salary payments. While money has never been known to be a powerful motivator, the perceived lack of generosity or financial support can be inflammatory.
- ◆ Whenever possible, mail payments to the employee's home so he will have no reason to come on-site. Also, distribute money over time instead of in a lump sum—this subtly encourages the employee to avoid biting the hand that pays him.

Fair but Firm Communication in the Termination Meeting

Hearing the word *termination* may trigger an immediate defensive reaction. The employee may argue, beg, or threaten to get you to change your mind. However, the termination meeting is not a bargaining or negotiating session. Its purpose is to communicate your decision to terminate an employee.

- The martial arts suggest several communication strategies for termination meetings. In karate, punches are met with blocks and counterpunches; in jujitsu, however, punches are exploited—the opponent is pulled through his punch, which exhausts his energy and momentum.

Consider these “verbal judo” techniques.

The termination meeting is not a bargaining or negotiating session.

Employee's Reaction	Strategic Response
The employee tries to get you to change your mind.	Stay calm and repeat your message like a broken record: “Carl, the termination decision has been made and is not negotiable. What I want to do now is review the next steps with you.”
The employee gets angry.	Stay calm: avoid argument and don't return a threat or challenge.

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Employee's Reaction	Strategic Response
The employee gets angry. <i>(continued)</i>	Stick to the purpose of the meeting: "Your feelings are understandable, but they're not going to change the outcome of this meeting. (Pause) We need to continue."
The employee makes a threat.	Evaluate commitment level: "Whoa, time out . . . what do you mean by that remark?" Take threats made at the end of the meeting seriously.
The employee is silent or uncommunicative.	Use silence. Ask, "Do you understand what I've just read?" Use repetition, with added emphasis. Give the employee written terms and conditions.
The employee wants to talk with your boss, the CEO, a lawyer, or the union representative.	Invite the employee to do so after your meeting is complete. Remind the employee that all relevant parties have approved of the termination and that contacting them will not alter management's decision.
The employee gets physical.	Signal backup security. Don't challenge back. Maintain a safe distance. Get out of the meeting room.
The employee refuses to leave.	Ask for cooperation: "I really need you to leave now; your presence is causing disruption and discomfort for everyone." Have security escort the employee out.

Responding to Threats

The timing of any threat made during the termination meeting is important, according to violence expert Gavin deBecker. If a threat is made as an opening ploy, it's probably safe to regard it as part of the emotionalism of the moment. However, a threat made after you've presented the terms of the termination signals a stronger intention to do harm. Even with this type of threat, try to calmly defuse the employee's aggression.

- "Your anger is understandable, but we hope you're not serious about what you're saying right now. If you are, you may jeopardize the benefits we're offering you, and we may have to take immediate legal action. Please reconsider what you're saying."

Take a Moment

Match the description of behaviors or situations associated with termination to the appropriate statements. Answers are on page 130.

- A. Stay calm and unflappable.
- B. Check for commitment level and timing of the remark.
- C. Invite the employee to do so after the meeting.
- D. Maintain your safe "reactionary gap."
- E. Check to see if the employee understands what you've said.

- _____ 1. What if the employee makes a threatening remark during the termination meeting?
- _____ 2. What if the employee gets physical?
- _____ 3. What if the employee is silent or uncommunicative?
- _____ 4. What if the employee wants to have an attorney review the terms and conditions of the termination?
- _____ 5. What if the employee gets angry?



State your expectations and follow-up actions at the end of the meeting.

Exiting Expectations in the Termination Meeting

It is important to state your expectations and follow-up actions at the end of the meeting. A restatement of the agreement should occur along with any final warnings (if appropriate). Explain how any follow-up monitoring will occur.

1. **Coordinate the employee's termination and disengagement with the company as quickly and seamlessly as possible.**

A swift, complete break may be more difficult in the short term, but it is more merciful to all parties in the long run because it provides finality. An unambiguous signal that it's over allows transition and healing to begin. In case of legal challenge, it is prudent to have written policy provisions that define the process of separation from the company (see Chapter One).

2. **Collect any company equipment or property in the employee's possession.** Examples include company IDs, credit or calling cards, access passes, parking cards, and company manuals. Arrange for large items, such as a company car, tools, or equipment, to be picked up. Note: Some situations may require changes in locks or access codes.

3. **Make a decision on how you want the employee to collect his personal effects.**

- ◆ If security risks are assessed as great, have security collect and pack effects for mailing to the exiting employee. Note: Having anyone touch personal items without permission is provocative and potentially humiliating, but necessary when an employee may have a weapon in his locker or desk.
- ◆ If security risks are assessed as moderate, consider having security accompany the exiting employee while he collects and packs his effects. ("We're sorry, but it's company policy that I accompany you. May I help you?")

4. **Escort the terminated employee from the work site or to transportation.** This unavoidable blow to personal dignity can be minimized by handling the escort with courtesy and tact. Choose an exit itinerary that minimizes the chance of being observed or meeting other employees.

For Your Information

Legal Caveat: As a general rule, the employer should escort every involuntarily terminated employee off the company premises, not just those suspected of being potentially violent. This policy reduces defamation by conduct liability. The itinerary should be as inconspicuous as possible, and the escort should not make any statements to the terminated employee within earshot of other employees (*Georgia Bar Journal*, 1995).



Follow-Up After the Termination Meeting

You breathe a sigh of relief. The termination meeting went pretty well, security was adequate, and the threatening employee was escorted off the property never to haunt you again. But before you consider the termination process complete, remember the man who jumped out of a 50-story window. As he passed each floor on his way down, he kept saying, “So far, so good!”

The termination process for a threatening employee does not end with the termination meeting. A potentially violent employee can pose an ongoing threat to a former employer. In fact, some of the most infamous workplace shootings occurred months, even years, after the employee’s termination. Your company’s greatest vulnerability to violence is most often after the termination day itself.

Termination virtually eliminates the company’s control and leverage over an ex-employee. Two strategies can compensate for this lack of leverage.

- ◆ Follow-up monitoring and assessment is absolutely critical with threatening or potentially violent ex-employees.
 - Will a posttermination meeting, such as a grievance hearing, be secured?

Follow-up monitoring and assessment is absolutely critical with threatening or potentially violent ex-employees.

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- Will certain individuals need extra security on or off the job? How long will such security continue?
- Is private surveillance appropriate for a period of time to be aware of the employee's whereabouts and actions?
- Are there warning flags the company needs to be aware of for security planning? For example, has the ex-employee run out of money, and is he blaming the company for his problems?
- How will affected employees be warned if the terminated employee should suddenly show up?

- When a large retail store had terminated an employee for intimidating others, they felt they had done a good job of separating this troublemaker from their store. They paid him for unused vacation time, promised not to contest his application for unemployment benefits, and even expedited his pension check.

Four months after his termination, however, the former employee began hanging around outside the store. Private investigators learned that he had not gotten a new job, that he had purchased two high-powered rifles within recent weeks, that he had discontinued medication for a psychiatric condition, and that he had just been released from a three-day jail sentence for disorderly conduct and reckless behavior in a local indoor pistol range.

- ◆ **Designate an employee contact from the company.**
A nonthreatening individual from the company, such as someone from Human Resources, might call the ex-employee and explain that he or she will be the ex-employee's contact person. The contact's role is to make sure that the employee is receiving benefits and to respond to any other concerns.

Designating a liaison provides:

- A much-needed opportunity for the employee to regain a sense of control. Termination meetings are brief by design, so the employee has little opportunity to speak. Most people don't express themselves well during a highly emotional event such as termination, so there is a strong psychological need for closure and the opportunity to express opinions and feelings.

- A chance for the employer to assess and defuse potential aggression. The liaison can assess the ex-employee's mood state, concerns and worries, and whether he is looking forward or fixated on the past.
- Another opportunity to document the threatening employee's behavior and language. The liaison can take notes on the employee's attitude and any questions or concerns that need follow-up.

For Your Information

Consider employing a threat assessment professional or workplace violence consultant to conduct an ongoing series of posttermination interviews with the terminated individual. In a technique developed by Bruce Blythe of Crisis Management International, Inc. this professional is introduced to the ex-employee as an "outside human relations consultant" whose role is to make sure the separated employee is being treated fairly and is getting everything that is due him or her. The professional consultant can continue to monitor and perhaps defuse any potentially threatening situations that might arise. Such monitoring also gives early warning of potential danger from the ex-employee.

Placing a terminated employee in an outplacement program is another potentially good monitoring mechanism. Ask the outplacement company to provide you with frequent feedback on the displaced employee's attitude, commitment to job search, chances of getting a new job, etc.



Chapter Summary

Termination is not a perfect solution. Terminated employees may react violently, and the company loses control and leverage over potentially dangerous individuals. However, termination should be considered when an employee:

- ◆ Has a repeated history of hostility and intimidation.
- ◆ Has not honored the conditions agreed upon during earlier interventions.
- ◆ Commits an act that requires immediate termination, as defined in your workplace violence policy.

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- ◆ Is so dangerous that the company is liable for negligent retention if the employee remains on the premises.

Termination generally will not provoke violence if it is used as a firm and immediate intervention for threatening behavior and if an employee's dignity and self-esteem are supported during the termination process.

When applying the S.A.F.E. steps to termination, it is particularly important to secure and structure the termination meeting.

- ◆ Carefully consider the time and date for the termination meeting.
- ◆ Conduct the meeting face-to-face.
- ◆ Have at least two people present at the meeting.
- ◆ Choose the meeting site carefully.
- ◆ Prepare the meeting room carefully.
- ◆ Arrange for backup security.
- ◆ Rehearse your script to stay focused on the meeting's purpose.

A written terms-and-conditions statement should be used at every termination meeting. This statement covers pay schedule, benefits status, and expectations. Be generous with post-termination benefits, such as outplacement and severance pay. Edit the document so that it is nonprovocative and a clear statement of your final decision.

The termination process is not over after the termination meeting. Potentially dangerous individuals should be monitored after termination. Extra security may be needed for individuals who have been their targets. A designated employee contact can help a terminated employee make the transition to a new job, while assessing and defusing potential aggression.

Self-Check: Chapter Six Review

Answers to these questions appear on page 130.



1. In the first year after being laid off, employees are _____ times more likely to commit violent acts than are workers whose jobs are intact.
2. Supporting an employee's _____ during the termination process is a powerful inhibitor of violence and retaliation.
3. Threats made at the _____ of the termination meeting signal a strong intention to do harm.
4. One way to monitor potentially dangerous individuals is to designate an _____.
5. List three reasons why post-termination contact with a dismissed employee is a good idea:

Are You Prepared to Defuse Anger, Hostility, and Threats of Violence?

Place a check in the box by each statement that accurately describes your present knowledge. Compare your results to the pretest to measure what you've learned.

- ☐ I have a clear understanding of the kinds of stimuli that can trigger anger in others.
- ☐ I know which threats to take seriously and which to ignore.
- ☐ I can describe the three phases of violence escalation and the key features of each phase.
- ☐ I know how to defuse anger in its early stages.
- ☐ I know how and when to involve outside professional resources, such as the police, EAP, psychiatrists, security, etc., to help with threatening individuals.
- ☐ I understand and can use various defusing strategies to prevent or reduce potential violence in employees.
- ☐ I know how and when to confront potentially dangerous employees and discipline them appropriately.
- ☐ I know how to orchestrate a psychiatric intervention with a potentially dangerous employee who has emotional problems.
- ☐ I know how to terminate a threatening individual while maintaining a good level of control over that person's behavior so he or she won't retaliate.
- ☐ I can describe the S.A.F.E. confrontation model and how it operates in reducing potential violence.

Answers to Selected Exercises

Chapter One

Take a Moment (page 12)

1. True—Experts estimate that up to 98 percent of violent episodes could have been prevented by good communication skills.
2. False—The most common form of workplace violence is verbal threats.
3. True.
4. True.
5. False—Employer may terminate employees for threatening conduct.

Take a Moment (page 15)

1. AA.
2. TB.
3. IH.
4. IH.
5. TB.

Take a Moment (page 16)

Examples of statements that should be included in a workplace violence policy include:

1. All threats will be taken seriously.
2. Investigation into incidents will occur.
3. Firearms are prohibited on company property.
4. All incidents of threats or violent behavior should be reported immediately.
5. Employees who have obtained restraining orders or protective orders should let management know about these orders.

Take a Moment (page 22)

When describing a threatening situation, avoid these types of statements:

1. Attitudinal statements.
2. Emotional labels (amateur diagnoses).
3. Inferences.
4. Others' hearsay.
5. Unsubstantiated facts.

Chapter Review (page 24)

1. True.
2. False—Robbery is the primary cause of workplace homicide.
3. True.
4. False—Intimidating or harassing behavior is typically nonverbal; it may also be more subtle than a direct verbal threat.
5. True.
6. False—Documentation should include specific behavioral descriptions of the incident, not speculation.

Chapter Two

Take a Moment (page 32)

1. Manipulative threat.
2. Veiled threat.
3. Pure threat.
4. Direct threat.

Take a Moment (page 37)

1. ↑; 2. ↓; 3. ↓; 4. ↑; 5. ↑.

Take a Moment (page 39)

1. Trigger phase: an incident is perceived as unfair; a judgment of injustice is made; someone else is blamed for the problem; autonomic nervous system arousal intensifies behavior (such as shouting); anger arousal diminishes the ability to think rationally.
2. Escalation phase: behavior becomes more coercive; verbal threats may be made; thinking becomes simplistic; verbal abuse is easier than rational thinking.
3. Crisis phase: a destructive solution is contemplated; punishment is seen as more effective than a verbal resolution; strong sense of moral indignation and self-righteousness is felt; violence may be attempted.

Chapter Review (page 44)

1. True.
2. False—Loss of choice or perceived control is a disinhibitor.
3. False—Venting tends to create more feelings of anger.
4. False—A verbal threat is one of the most important “warning signals” of potential violence and should not be ignored.
5. True.
6. False—“I hope your life insurance is paid up” is an indirect threat.
7. True.
8. True.

Chapter Three

Take a Moment (page 48)

The supervisor might have separated the employees and gotten them to an area where each could calm down. Having the angry employees sit down and offering a cool, noncaffeinated beverage would also help them cool down.

Take a Moment (page 55)

1. D.
2. A.
3. C.
4. B.

Take a Moment (page 55)

1. ↓ ; 2. ↑ ; 3. ↑ ; 4. ↓ ; 5. ↓.

Take a Moment (page 58)

1. D.
2. B.
3. A.
4. C.

Take a Moment (page 62)

Recommended uses of distance include statements 2, 3, and 5. The other statements should read:

1. Approach an aggressor at a 45° angle.
4. Never touch an aggressor, except in self-defense.
6. Keep your hands by your side, with the palms open.
7. Any communication should be brief and used for momentary diversion.

Chapter Review (page 64)

1. C—Defuse.
2. C—Defuse.
3. D—Distance.
4. B—Deflect.
5. C—Defuse.
6. A—De-escalate.
7. D—Distance.
8. B—Deflect.

Chapter Four

Take a Moment (page 69)

1. R; 2. T; 3. R; 4. T; 5. R.

Take a Moment (page 70)

The answer includes any three of these circumstances:

- Company policy allows an offending employee to be retained after rehabilitation or a final warning.
- The threatening conduct was an isolated incident, or there was no real intent of injury.
- The offending employee is basically stable and is causing no further problems.
- A specific trigger can be dealt with through problem solving or conflict resolution.

Take a Moment (page 73)

A sample script for confronting an employee who is intimidating coworkers might be: “I need to discuss a very serious matter with you. I have documented evidence that you have violated our policy against threatening conduct and intimidating behavior. A number of people in the office feel intimidated and frightened by your behavior. You may not intend for them to be frightened, but we have to take this documented intimidation seriously. I would like to avoid more serious discipline because you are a good employee, but if this behavior does not change immediately, we will have to discuss immediate termination. I have several plans for correction I want to cover with you . . .”

Take a Moment (page 80)

1. True.
2. False—Silence is a nonprovocative communications tool; you might let the employee ventilate, complain, or disagree while you silently wait.
3. True.
4. False—Using we is an explicit reminder that disciplinary action reflects the company’s initiative.
5. True.

Chapter Review (page 83)

1. a. S—Security and structure in the meeting.
b. A—Action and accountability.
c. F—Firm and fair communication.
d. E—Exiting expectations.
2. An appropriate response to individuals who rationalize or minimize their threatening conduct is to state that you take ALL instances of threatening behavior or remarks very seriously. Confront individuals who make nonverbal threats about the fear they inspire in others; tell them that intimidation is as important as verbal threats and will be addressed appropriately.
3. Any three of the following options might be used: referral to some appropriate employee-development program; short-term suspension or decision-making leave; Employee Assistance Program referral; job reevaluation/reassignment;

frequent, intensive “coaching” sessions; or an alternative dispute resolution or mediation process.

Chapter Five

Take a Moment (page 86)

Situations 1, 3, and 4 would probably all benefit from a structured intervention; situation 2 appears to be threatening behavior without apparent psychiatric disturbance.

Take a Moment (page 90)

1. E—Evidence of self-destructive behavior
2. B—Emotional instability/unpredictability
3. A—Poor or deficient interpersonal/social skills
4. C—Thought disorders or extreme perceptions
5. D—Presence of depression or anxiety

Take a Moment (page 96–97)

Possible responses to defensive statements include:

1. “We’re not saying you’re a weirdo, and we all have problems sometimes, but your behavior lately has caused a number of people concern—we want to get you some help now.”
2. “It may not have worked for you in the past, but we’ve put a lot of energy and time into getting you the best resource we can find—we’re confident it will help you with your present situation.”
3. “We’re not trying to be insulting, but we’re committed to getting you help and want to be very straightforward in talking with you about that.”
4. “We all do have problems at times, and you may feel like blaming us. However, we’re very concerned about what we’ve observed in you lately, and we strongly feel that you need to get some help now—we’re here to help with that.”
5. “You are welcome to evaluate whatever option you wish, but we have to tell you that that does not change our decision to take your current situation seriously and get you what we think is valuable help.”

Chapter Review (page 101)

1. False—An employer may make a mandatory referral if an employee is believed to be a danger to himself or others.
2. True.
3. True.
4. False—The goal of an effective referral is rehabilitation.
5. True.

Chapter Six

Take a Moment (page 107)

1. Termination is clearly the defusing strategy of choice when
 - a. others' ongoing safety is at issue.
 - b. access to the workplace needs to be restricted.
 - c. the threatening individual needs permanent separation from the "provocative" triggers of the work site.
2. Delaying termination makes things worse in two major ways—it inadvertently communicates the message that intimidation pays off, and it adds to the employee's illusion that nothing will get him fired.
3. Research shows that if termination is used as a firm and immediate intervention for threatening behavior, it will generally not escalate violence potential; supporting an employee's dignity and self-esteem during the termination process is a powerful inhibitor for potential violence and retaliation.

Take a Moment (page 111)

1. False—A strong security presence might actually communicate fear or provoke a violent response.
2. False—It is better to terminate a potentially violent employee when few people are around.
3. False—A threatening employee who is forewarned about termination may plan violence.
4. False—Termination toward the end of the work week is generally safer.
5. False—Supervisors who have been threatened should not conduct the meeting; also, someone higher in authority might be less confrontational.
6. False—Despite safety concerns, face-to-face meetings afford more dignity considerations to the person being terminated.

Take a Moment (page 115)

1. B
2. D
3. E
4. C
5. A.

Chapter Review (page 121)

1. In the first year after being laid off, employees are six times more likely to commit violent acts than are workers whose jobs are intact.
2. Supporting an employee's dignity and self-respect during the termination process is a powerful inhibitor of violence and retaliation.
3. Threats made at the end of the termination meeting signal a strong intention to do harm.
4. One way to monitor potentially dangerous individuals is to designate an employee contact.
5. Posttermination contact with a dismissed employee is a good idea for any three of these reasons. It provides:
 - a. Support during the transition out of the company.
 - b. Closure for the employee.
 - c. An opportunity to assess and defuse potential violence.
 - d. A chance to prepare for likely attacks.
 - e. An opportunity to document the threatening employee's language and behavior.

Appendixes

Appendix A

Sample Violence Policy

Our company is committed to a safe working environment, free of harassment, intimidation, and physical harm. All of our employees have a right to work in a safe environment and share the responsibility for assuring that right.

Our company has taken a zero tolerance position on violence and threats of violence. (Threats are any comments or behaviors that would be interpreted by a reasonable person as an intent to do harm to employees or to property.) Any employee who violates this policy may be subject to disciplinary action up to and including termination.

You must let someone know if you believe you have been the target of violence or threats of violence, or if you have witnessed violent or threatening conduct by another employee. (Speak to your manager or call our 24-hour business conduct line.) All reports of threats are confidential and will be shared only with those who have a need to know. All reports are taken seriously and will be investigated thoroughly.

Our company prohibits physical assaults, fights, threatening comments, intimidation, harassment, or the intentional destruction of any company property or merchandise. Under no circumstances should employees bring weapons, firearms, explosives, or other threatening devices onto company property. This includes company parking lots, company vehicles, and any place where you engage in official company business.

Our company also feels deep concern for those who might be affected by domestic violence, abuse, and stalking. Those who feel threatened by spousal abuse or who know of others who might be a target of domestic violence have an obligation to notify management in order to protect the threatened individual and other employees in our work environment.

A special Threat Response Team (TRT) has been formed to help management investigate reports, assess and evaluate risks, and take action to remedy potentially violent situations.

Our company wishes to prevent workplace violence and believes that the proactive steps outlined above will promote a safer workplace for all employees.

Appendix B

Identifying and Evaluating Outside Threat Assessment Experts

Crisis management experts or threat consultants are experts in:

- ◆ Assessing threats
- ◆ Understanding the psychology of violence
- ◆ Coordinating the legal, security, and psychological elements of a threat management plan

While there are many excellent consultants in the area of workplace violence, some firms and individuals that claim expertise actually possess little. Consider these questions when you hire a consultant on workplace violence.

- ◆ **History of the firm**
 - How many years have you been in business?
 - Do you specialize in threat and crisis management?
 - Do you have a real depth of experience, or is workplace violence consulting a recent sideline?
- ◆ **Staff training and expertise**
 - What professional organizations, such as Trauma Counseling and Forensic Psychology, do your consultants belong to?
 - What is the size and quality of your network of consultants? How do you recruit and train them? How many cases have they handled?
 - Can you supply references from clients or professional peers?
- ◆ **Special technologies or assessment methods**
 - How do you go about assessing potential violence?
 - Do you employ any unique or special interventive technologies?
 - What investigative approaches do you use?
 - What specific information can we expect from you?

◆ Legal exposure and liability

- Is your contract explicit on such matters as negligence, liability, and indemnification?
- Do you consult with legal counsel? If so, whom?
Describe this firm's background in employment law.
- What disclaimers do you make?

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