Employee Management: Dealing with Personnel Issues that Bump in the Night

By James Black, IPMA-CP

SOME years back my job brought me in contact with dangerous people. I was involved in negotiating the release of hostages on three occasions and I talked to criminals many times, even while they were in the midst of committing violent crimes. At that time I was a crisis counselor—one of the most experienced suicide prevention hotline counselors in the country.

As my career path shifted, I didn't forget the lessons I learned in crisis counseling. I used this experience when I transitioned into administration and human resources in a very large public sector organization. Because of my counseling experience, I was assigned to resolve a myriad of difficult, "emotionally loaded" personnel situations. I was involved in at least 300 discipline cases, "downsizings" and terminations— all in an adversarial labor relations climate—and in a number of other situations involving disturbed people, alcohol or drug problems that required specialized skills. I worked on several joint investigations involving law enforcement investigators. Twice I was the administrative representative at pre-dawn tactical police raids and was on the scene as heavily armed and armored law enforcement personnel took our employees into custody. I was commended for resolving issues, including highly contentious disciplinary cases, while achieving an extraordinarily low rate of grievances and appeals.

Now, I am a human resources manager at a special district in California. I am no longer qualified to act as a counselor and I don't purport to be one. I don't speak or understand the latest psychological terminology. I am a hands-on HR practitioner and I am no more "touchy-feely" than the next practitioner. From time to time I train HR people on strategies for dealing with adversity and I borrow a few tips from my prior experience. This article includes some tips from my prior career to provide readers with additional tools and improve their comfort level in approaching difficult situations.

The Nuts and Bolts of Your Relationship to Your Employees

It is important to understand the nature and dynamics of your relationship to your employees. When you are in the position of evaluating people or are involved in the process of granting raises, making employment selections or other such activities, you are making decisions that impact an individual's sense of self-worth. When you engage in these tasks you take on certain rewards and risks. The risks are, in most situations, acceptable and normal.

But put simply, HR staff is seen as provider and/or the withhelder of well being. This can lead to primitive emotion, especially in the cases where employees may feel that their livelihood is threatened. Sometimes, given certain individuals and certain conditions, primitive emotion can escalate to aggression. While the risk of actual violence is statistically low, it can increase when other stabilizing forces factors in one's life, like relationships and family, become unbalanced. Career and relationship are the two important stabilizing factors in most lives. When either goes bad, the individual has fewer resources for coping.

So, given my experience, what do I watch for? Among many things, I look for factors that might push someone over the edge—especially the factors in which an employer might legitimately intervene. I have a good idea of how people on the edge sound and what one might expect. I have counseled "edge-dwellers," including one man just hours before he murdered his family. He was likeable, highly successful in his profession (a command-level military officer) and devoted to his family. Even so, it was clear to me that he was headed toward a significant precipice if additional stressors were added into his life, and the stressor was out there—his wife was having an affair.

I energized all of the available resources of the suicide prevention agency, but we were unable to learn his name or prevent a tragedy (caller ID and other such technologies were in their infancy). He skipped his appointments for additional telephone counseling sessions as he had apparently been successful in persuading his wife (they were separated) and son to spend Christmas Eve together as a family. Instead of talking to us, he murdered his wife, son and brother-in-law. While I don't know definitively, I believe I know the factor that pushed him over the edge: I think that he finally and tragically accepted that his wife's love affair was not just a fling.

It was the straw that broke the camel's back. The dynamic is similar in the workplace—especially for men. It is ironic that men can sometimes cope with the loss of a relationship more easily than they can cope with the loss of a job (this happens frequently in alcoholism).

Bosss from Hell

We can all identify Bosses from Hell (BFH) when they are our own superiors. The characteristics that come to mind are loud voices, bullying and personal attacks, along with other demeaning behavior and blaming others for the BFH's own mistakes. I am particularly concerned about the BFH phenomenon. Not only are

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employees of BFH more likely to file complaints, grievances and lawsuits, they might be pushed into aggression by demeaning BFH behavior.

One of my colleagues once told me a story about working for a bully. One day he was approached by a co-worker, “Joe,” who was wearing a three-piece suit, which was very uncharacteristic in the casual business dress environment of this work group. Joe showed my colleague a .45-caliber pistol and said, “I know you will understand I can’t take it anymore. I got to do it to him before he does it to us.”

Joe was talking about shooting his BFH supervisor. My colleague had good instincts, and he listened. After a time he told Joe that he wasn’t in Vietnam anymore and that he needed to think it through—that this approach was not going to help his life and he had a lot of other options that were better, including finding another job.

The last part of this story is something that should motivate us all to intervene in BFH situations: instead of warning the BFH supervisor and co-workers, my colleague admitted that he feigned illness and left work. He called in sick and watched the news for two days, waiting to

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Tips and Techniques for Reducing Adversity

1. When in doubt, talk it out. If an interaction is bothersome, don’t be afraid to talk about it with a trusted, levelheaded colleague(s). If you are embarrassed that your concern may be misguided, talk it over anyway. Denial is a very powerful and natural human quality. A colleague once told me about a strange event that happened while he was interviewing a troublesome employee. While he was talking to this employee, who was slated for layoff, a strange man appeared at the door of my colleague’s office. The troublesome employee pointed at my colleague and said to the stranger, “This is the guy I was telling you about, remember him.”

My colleague was reluctant to talk about it (he said it was silly), but I heard his story and called an impromptu staff meeting. None of the rest of us thought it was silly. Upon investigation, the sheriff didn’t either. The troublesome employee was a wanted criminal with an outstanding warrant for assault and battery.

2. Involve the peer group in the rating when promoting from within. Peer opinions can be particularly useful in ferreting out potential bias from Hell. First obtain permission from the candidates (our unions have not objected after we explain how much we wish employees to have input into a selection) to engage in peer ratings of the promotional candidates. We ask peers to rate colleagues on a series of issues. The rating form typically begins with something like, “In the order I have ranked, these people would make good candidates for promotion to (X) because…” and continues with statements like the following (and a rotating rating matrix of names):

... their work habits are a good example to us all.
... they treat everyone with respect and courtesy.
... they are honest and they will do what is right for the agency even if it is contrary to their own interests.
... they do not let their anger, frustration or other strong emotions interfere with their work.
... they can see both sides of an issue, they are open-minded, and willing to listen.

Not only does this approach give you valuable data on how the candidates are viewed by their peers, it sends a message to the peers that you value their opinions. Moreover, it telegraphs the types of behavior that are taken into consideration in making promotional decisions.

3. Get ratings from supervisors and managers when you are concerned about negative behavior in a work group, or if you are involved in layoffs or adversarial situations, ask the immediate chain-of-command supervisors and managers to rate all of the employees in the group. Ask them to rate the most-to-least-valuable employees, regardless of position or places on your organization chart. Have them rate the employees who are the best role models, positive leaders, best citizens, etc., to the least valuable on the same continuum. Have dialogues with the supervisors about the factors that influenced their ratings (observed behavior and other impressions) with special emphasis on the employees and the behavioral factors observed in the lower rated groups. Involve the supervisors in developing strategies to reward the best behaviors identified and to discourage the counterproductive behaviors.

4. Obtain intelligence before you act. This is particularly important when you are working with work groups with which you are unfamiliar. Ask the supervisors general questions about the groups’ overall morale, whether anyone has undergone recent dramatic changes (remember that spouses, former boyfriends and family members have been responsible for acts of violence at the loved-one’s place of work), etc., and then ask questions like:

“Have any co-workers expressed concern about anyone’s well being?”

“Have any co-workers expressed that they are uncomfortable around anyone?”

5. If you identify disturbing behavior patterns, ask supervisors and potential witnesses direct questions about the identified behavior, including whether anyone felt intimidated or threatened by another’s behavior and to what extent they have been associated with weapons or dangerous situations in the past.

IPMA-HR has developed a Center Series packet related to this topic that includes a document, “Developing an Effective Plan to Prevent Violence in the Workplace,” which suggests the adoption of a no-tolerance policy for threats and the following:

1. Management commitment and employee involvement. This includes goals for workers in small establishments or written programs for larger organizations.

2. Worksite analysis. Identifying high-risk situation through surveys, walkthroughs and reviewing injury/illness data.

3. Hazard prevention and control. This includes changing the physical structure of the workplace to limit access, and administrative work controls to limit violent incidents. This could include physical barriers, alarms, panic buttons and working in teams.

4. Training and education. Educating employees about the risks and ways to protect themselves.

Readers may access information on Workplace Violence III from the HR Center Series at www.ipma-hr.org/files/cpr_wv3.pdf.

—James Black
Keep Your “Organizational Fences” in Good Repair

“Organizational fences” is a term I use to describe the norms of conduct at the workplace and in various work groups. All HR professionals are concerned when the norms of conduct include discriminatory joking or remarks. We put up fences to discourage people from engaging in this conduct. I encourage you to be just as diligent in watching for work groups that tolerate acting out (disruptive behavior), instigating (manipulating others), negative leadership, hazing, aggressive behavior and/or intimidation. These acts might be harbingers of other worse aberrant behavior. Taut organizational fences limit these behaviors before they have a chance to escalate to aggression.

This isn’t to say that work should be all work and no play. The workplace has plenty of room for fun, camaraderie and good humor; it is just that these activities should not come at the price of another’s self-respect. These boundaries should be clear and those who stray beyond the limits should be encouraged back with measured responses. This is particularly important to individuals who are less stable, or those who are involved in situational crises. Please remember that while it is important to have compassion and be humanistic, individuals should be held responsible and accountable for their actions when they cross the fence and engage in dysfunctional workplace behaviors.

I once worked as a counselor in a residential facility for emotionally disturbed adolescents. One of the things that set these kids apart from others was their difficulty in shifting gears and deescalating their behavior when things had gone too far. Among ourselves we described these kids as not having an “off” switch. There are many different types of emotional or psychological impairments that have impaired “off” switches and similar problems with calming down. These employees may be among your most productive and best workers, until the work group behavior strays beyond the bounds of the organizational fences and their focus drifts. For some, once they cross over the norm it is a difficult and painful struggle to readjust. Keep your fences in good repair.

Shifting Perspectives

Human resources professionals are, of necessity, logical, analytical and methodical. It comes with the job. But these functions primarily involve one hemisphere of the brain, the left brain in most people. Sometimes the rational part of the brain does not supply the whole picture. In the case of the Christmas Eve murderer described above, there was nothing in his words that clued me into his risk for violence against others. I was trained to profile and assess risk based upon data, all left-brain functions. According to the profiling information, he was a moderate-high risk for suicide. He did not even admit that he had access to a gun and he said none of the things that might raise one’s concern. But in this case, the caller’s potential for violence was telegraphed not by his words, but in the way he said things — the emotion behind his story. His desperation and denial were evident, but I sensed that primitive emotions lay beyond his words and beyond his control.

We all have the ability to sense risk. If you think about it, you would not be alive if you had not come from a long line of ancestors who were successful at identifying dangerous people. We know it in our feelings, in our guts.

My closing piece of advice is to train yourself to be nimble in shifting perspectives from rational to emotional or “gut” feelings. Both are useful, but learn to be intuitive and trust the feelings when you are worried about the potential for emotionally charged situations. If you have time, sleep on it and talk it over with colleagues. Put your unconscious mind to work on it. Failing that, take deep breaths and close your eyes while you consider. Give yourself a few moments to orient to the darkness and ask yourself questions about the situation. This is a technique that I used on the suicide hotline. I often closed my eyes when concentrating on the voice of a hotline caller and I find that it is still a very useful technique, especially when I mentally “replay” worrisome interactions. When you have considered the situation after shifting perspective, you may gain a totally new insight into how to proceed.

With all of this being said, you are probably at a much greater risk of danger when you stop at a convenience store at night to pick up a quart of milk. You should be assured that it is very likely that a potentially violent person will talk openly to someone and leave reportable clues. It is our job to work hard to create an organizational culture where employees feel responsible to each other, to management and to their elected officials. Challenge your employees to be part of the solution in a workplace that fosters mutual regard and respect.

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