

## GUEST COLUMN

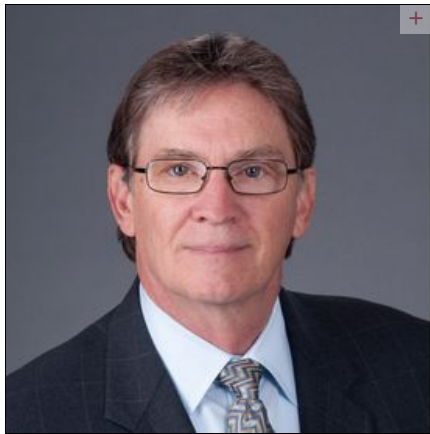
**Rethink workplace violence**

Posted: 2:00 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 2, 2015

By Marc McElhaney

We have witnessed yet again another tragic workplace violence event with the recent deaths of the television reporters. There will be many pundits who will attempt to answer the who, what and why questions — and try to assign blame or attribute this to a specific cause that will allow us to return to work.

The bottom line is human behavior is complex and difficult to predict with precision. And I am stating this as someone who has handled these issues as a threat assessment professional and workplace violence specialist.



Dr. Marc McElhaney, president and CEO of Atlanta-based Critical Response Associates, is the author of "Aggression in the Workplace: Preventing and ... [Read More](#)

Whereas we cannot always precisely predict behavior, we can identify individuals who represent a risk, and organizations can develop a response process that will allow them to safely manage these events before guns are drawn.

The term "workplace violence" has become so frightful, it freezes us into a kind of easy denial. Underlying this inaction are often two incorrect assumptions: that individuals who commit these acts either fit a particular profile, or are so crazed or "evil" that they will be immediately recognizable; and when confronted with this, we will be able to take short-term security action to ensure our safety.

In my practice, we rarely refer to "workplace violence" any more, preferring that our clients focus on what we call "high-risk behavior." This term can apply to a variety of behaviors that can be of concern, but let's take three examples: the suicidal individual (virtually all of the more tragic workplace violence events have involved those who were

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suicidal); the severely mentally ill (I am not implying mental illness automatically results in violence, but many types of mental illness are factors); and domestic abuse, which represents 24 to 35 percent of workplace violence.

Let's look at the statistics:

— 4.6 percent of the population — approximately 1 in 20 people — report an attempted suicide in their lifetime.

— 5.8 percent are annually diagnosed with a “serious” mental illness.

— 33 percent of women in our country report a history of physical violence by an intimate partner, and 74 percent state some abuse and harassment occurred at work.

So, is it possible you can have individuals in your organization who fall into high-risk categories? How can you not?

The safest response to high-risk behavior is rarely simply walking someone out the door, calling law enforcement or referring employees to a random mental health professional. The company must, in careful consideration and sometimes in consultation with experts, assess the situation well enough to prepare a response plan that considers long-term risks. All too often, one reads about an ex-employee who returns long after termination to enact revenge due to the perception of how he or she was treated.

The good news is every organization can incorporate a systemic, four-step program that is easily implemented and cost-effective, and that will help identify those at risk and establish a responsible and effective response process. Our program involves establishing policy; training an internal threat management team; educating human resources and other critical personnel, and implementing an employee awareness program.

Most importantly, this will require a shift in leadership's perspective, a “recalibration” from the assumption that high-risk behavior is a random, occasional problem that can rely on a reactive, “security” response. Leadership must recognize this represents a core safety concern that should be addressed as an integral part of doing business to protect your employees and bottom line.

*Dr. Marc McElhaney, president and CEO of Atlanta-based Critical Response Associates, is the author of “Aggression in the Workplace: Preventing and Managing High-Risk Behavior.”*

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