

Workplace Violence: A Manager's Nightmare

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the events that preceded an incident of workplace violence by an employee of a retail store. It also describes the violent actions taken by an employee who had just been discharged and the reactions of other employees, customers, and the store manager. In addition, the paper assesses the selection, orientation, training, and organizational support provided to the new store manager. The paper then assesses the appropriateness of the actions taken by the manager when an employee "lost it" and threw things including a heavy pair of scissors at the manager and went through the store tearing down displays and tossing merchandise and the displays about the store while customers were present. Lastly, the author makes suggestions, based on the literature, for how the manager could have more effectively dealt with this worker's deviant behavior.

BACKGROUND

Cheryl was hired to manage a fabric store which had operated without a manager for three months. A group of four assistant managers ran the store during this period. One of them, Terri, in particular, had hoped to get the job of manager but was not even granted an interview. Cheryl was a talented seamstress and had worked in a number of fabric stores but had never served as a supervisor or manager. When she showed up to work her first day, Terri, was quite rude to her, challenging her ability to manage the group. A few months later, after hearing that Terri was bad-mouthing her and trying to undermine her authority, Cheryl fired Terri. Terri went ballistic, yelling and cursing, throwing things at Cheryl. Next, Terri stomped around the store tearing down clothing displays and tossing them around the store. Cheryl, her employees, and her customers could not believe what they were witnessing and kept their distance from Terri, while wondering what would happen next and how far the situation would escalate. Throughout the ordeal, Cheryl found herself thinking about how she should respond but did not take any action other than to keep her distance from the woman who was throwing a tantrum. Cheryl had never experienced anything like this in the past, had not received any training on how to respond to an incident of workplace violence, nor was there anything in her policies and procedures manual that addressed these situations. The event lasted for approximately 12 minutes and it all seemed so surreal to Cheryl.

ASSESSMENT

The only orientation Cheryl received involved her being informed about the four assistant managers having failed to live up to the district manager's hope that one would rise to the top. Cheryl was also given the opportunity to study the policies and procedures manual and that was the full extent of her orientation. She was not told anything about Terri or the other assistant managers, or the interpersonal dynamics of the organization. Her orientation was unplanned and she had to learn about the organization, her job, and her employees as she went along. The previous manager was not available to provide Terri any training. She asked if she could work in another of the chains store alongside one of its managers but was told that the stores were too far away and it was not practical. Cheryl was left to her own devices to manage the store.

Cheryl had no supervisory or management experience of any kind let alone any at a fabric store. Yes, she had the technical skills (she was an experienced seamstress) and she had worked in a number of fabric stores. Those are important qualities for a fabric store manager. In addition, she appeared to have had a great deal of sales and customer service experience in both fabric and non-fabric organizations. Those too are useful for someone to serve effectively as a fabric store manager. Unfortunately, her qualities may not have been sufficient for her to succeed or may have limited the degree to which she could succeed especially under these circumstances.

Cheryl was very anxious about starting her new job, especially without receiving any training. She equated her situation to learning how to swim by being thrown into the water and she hoped she had the skills to make this opportunity work out well. Cheryl had good cause to feel this way. One could argue that Cheryl was being set up to fail when she was hired without prior managerial experience and there were no plans to provide her training. Unfortunately, her situation is not unusual because too often the goal of hiring managers is to fill a position rather than take the time and make the investment to make sure a qualified individual is hired. “Many times staffing is a hurried process, driven by tight deadlines and calls for expediency” [1]. One way to avoid this tendency is to follow an old HR adage, “hire hard, manage easy” [2, p. 214].

The foregoing aside, given that Cheryl was hired, the appropriate training would have greatly increased her chances for success. Contrary to what the district manager had to say about the feasibility of training, it should have occurred. “Carefully selecting employees doesn’t guarantee they’ll perform effectively. Even high potential employees can’t do their jobs if they don’t know what to do or how to do it” [3, p. 244]. Ideally, Cheryl should have been hired two to four weeks before the departing store manager terminated her employment [2] [3]. She could have worked alongside the manager, observing her every move, learning how things are done at the store, and perhaps most importantly of all, she could have asked all the “dumb” questions she wanted without having to feel embarrassed about it or having to feel her employees thought that she was incompetent. During that time, the manager could have managed Terri’s behaviors and ensured that she treated Cheryl with respect. Had that occurred, Cheryl could have developed more positive working relationships with Terri and the other employees. This training would be costly but instead of looking at it as a cost it should have been viewed as an investment.

As an alternative to training in the same store by the previous manager, Cheryl could have received two to four weeks of training at the chain store that was located 80 miles away. Is 80 miles really prohibitive? Is it truly not practical? Many people drive that distance each day to work. As an alternative to driving, Cheryl could have stayed in a motel four or five days a week for the two to four weeks while she worked alongside a manager in another one of the chain’s stores. As was the case with the first option, the other-store option would have enabled Cheryl to hit the floor running when it came time for her to manage her store and employees.

Cheryl was understandably upset when she was told by one of her employees that Terri was backstabbing Cheryl and plotting to “overthrow” Cheryl as the manager of the store. This behavior constituted insubordination. Insubordination refers to disobedience and/or rebelliousness and it may include public criticism of the boss or participation in an effort to undermine or remove a boss [3, p. 477].

Terri was insubordinate starting the first day when she challenged Cheryl by stating in a mocking manner, "Well manaageeeer, let's see if you can manage us!" That was a direct challenge to Cheryl's authority. As manager, Cheryl had the right to expect that her employees would treat her with respect and perform their jobs as directed to do so. Cheryl should not have had to put up with Terri's shenanigans, disrespect, disloyalty, and efforts to undermine her authority. Ironically, a big part of the problem was Cheryl herself because she had not addressed Terri's misconduct early on. One might understand and accept her decision to let the "let's see if you can manage us" comment slip by, but after that she should have nipped any disrespectful or challenging behaviors off in the bud. After Terri's comment, Cheryl had thought about the need to address that type of behavior right away. The case notes that, "She wondered if this type of behavior from Terri would continue, if it might prove contagious, and if so, what could she do to squelch it from the outset, or at least as close to the outset as she could." Accordingly, Cheryl should have invited Terri into her office to talk about how she perceived Terri's behavior and to let Terri know in no uncertain terms that that behavior could not continue.

After learning of Terri's insubordinate and undermining behaviors, Cheryl acted decisively without consulting anyone about it before deciding upon her course of action. The case did not mention if there was a corporate HR department but if there was Cheryl certainly should have contacted that office and received some advice and direction. In the event that there was no HR unit to contact, Cheryl could have contacted the regional manager and run things by her. If she had, that certainly would have removed any questions she had regarding the possibility that the district manager might overrule her decision and not support her discharge of Terri.

The store should have communicated to its employees that any form of deviance or violence in the workplace will not be tolerated. Many firms include information about workplace violence in their employee policies and procedures manuals and identify some of the prohibited behaviors in the disciplinary sections of the manuals [4]. The fabric chain should have had guidelines for how to deal with violence in the workplace.

In addition, supervisors and managers should be trained on how to respond to violence in the workplace, irrespective of whether the violent behavior is from an employee or a customer. The case was clear that Cheryl received no training nor had she any prior managerial experience. As a result, it is unlikely that she had received any violence in the workplace training.

Managers can predict and avoid many workplace incidents by watching for the warning signs. Organizations should train their supervisors to identify some of the warning signs associated with individuals who are more likely to become disruptive. These include persons who [5]:

- Demonstrates an inability to handle stress
- Demonstrates manipulative behavior
- Complains constantly
- Harbors grudges and often talk about what they may do
- Attempts to intimidate others or gain access to places where they do not belong
- Has a frustrated sense of entitlement for a promotion, for example
- Holds grudges against a coworker or supervisor.

The last three of these warning signs applied to Terri. She not only attempted to physically intimidate Cheryl with her large size. Terri also had a frustrated sense of entitlement for a promotion. In addition, Terri certainly held a grudge against Cheryl from day one and continued to hold that grudge for months.

A few of these warning signs also were demonstrated in the case. Terri was overly confrontational as demonstrated by her statement: "Well manager, let's see if you can manage us!" This statement also exemplifies that Terri was insubordinate. Lastly, Terri also appeared to have a retribution-oriented or get-even attitude as evidenced by her actions to lobby her employees to make Cheryl look bad so that she would quit or be fired.

Although Terri had had no physical altercations at work, had Cheryl been knowledgeable about the warning signs for violence in the workplace perhaps she could have taken some actions to counter the possibility that Terri might become violent.

Cheryl could have responded to Terri's violent behavior in a variety of ways. Possible responses include: trying to calm her down, calling 911, spraying her with mace, evacuating the store, getting help to physically restrain her, doing nothing, among others. Had Cheryl received the right training, she would have learned some techniques to use when dealing with an angry employee.

CONCLUSION

The circumstances surrounding Cheryl's hiring and the lack of organizational support provided by the chain are all too common. Despite research that supports the importance of hiring the right person with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities, and making sure workers are effectively oriented and receive the training necessary for them to effectively perform their jobs, organizations take short cuts. Too often they believe they have to have someone in the job immediately and their primary concern is to minimize costs rather than to take a broader view and recognize that these human resource activities are investments which will reduce costs and result in a positive return on investment.

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