Reviews

Averting Aggression: Safety at Work with Adolescents and Adults

by Owen Booker

Lyme Regis: Russell House (1999) ISBN 1 898924 56 2
(140 pages, £15.45)

Reviewed by Claire Lawrence

Violence faced by those at work continues to be a matter of concern. This book aims to ~~for~~ offer a set of practical steps that employees and organisations can take to deal with the reality of aggression and violence from customers, clients and the organisation itself. The book certainly offers some salient points and covers a lot of ground. However, the overall result is disappointing and at worst contradictory and confusing.

The book is organised in two sections. The first deals with interpersonal violence, and the second with a less commonly addressed issue: the organisational environment, covering organisational cultures and work routines. Whilst both of these two issues are important, dealing with both in such a brief book was ambitious, and the author does not manage his self-imposed structure particularly well.

Looking at the positives in this book, and there are many, the author clearly has a feel for what it is like to be at the sharp end, and this empathetic style will certainly be welcomed by those who have been subjected to aggression at work, or are anxious about victimisation. In addition, the author emphasises early in the book that aggressive individuals are generally ordinary people who are facing difficult circumstances. He also emphasises that often 'ordinary actions' can cause harm, particularly when they are not thought through with the needs of the customer or client to the fore. Booker also identifies the high expectations people have of public services as a cause for increased discontentment as the expectations are not met, resulting in aggression and hostility. At a time when customer service is emphasised across private and public sector organisations, yet simultaneously zero tolerance is a frequent response to hostility from the service users, this point is pertinent. Finally, the second section dealing with the role of the organisation in aggressive and bullying activities is interesting and offers food for thought.

Overall, however, the book has some serious flaws. First, its brevity means that at times the author is prone to writing in note form. When guiding people about ways to deal with violent and aggressive events, the need to be accurate and clear is paramount, as misinterpretation can have devastating results. Some of the 'explanatory notes' within the first section of the book, in particular I feel may leave less experienced readers with multiple interpretations of the advice being given.

Second, some of the advice is contradictory. For example, Booker rightly discusses the problem of dealing with one's own anger and fear when managing an aggressive client or customer; however, the recommended ways in which anger should be dealt with differ from page to page. During an aggressive encounter, the reader is variously advised to 'safely release some anger',

‘play-act your anger’, and ‘take time out to compose oneself’. Advising individuals to play-act anger or release some anger can be a very dangerous thing to do. Similarly, the author advises ignoring an aggressive or disruptive individual (a strategy which is also riddled with problems), and then later emphasises the need to make contact with aggressive individuals using body language signals and humour, stating ‘no one likes to be ignored’. Some of the advice therefore could be potentially inflammatory.

Other problems include a general lack of research support offered for the advice given and positions taken in this book. Whilst I am aware that this is a practitioners’ tool, and not an academic text, a lack of evidence for these ‘tried and tested’ techniques underlies a lack of consistency throughout the book. Booker seems much more at home when writing about scenarios faced by those working with adolescents and adults with learning difficulties. Had the book been written with this group in mind, the contradictory nature of the text might have been avoided.

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