Reviews

Work-Related Violence: Assessment and intervention

edited by Phil Leather, Carol Brady, Claire Lawrence,
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Work-related violence has for many years been the great hidden threat to health and safety in the workplace. It is only in the past decade that Health and Safety Agencies and policy makers have begun to grasp the complex issues which lie at the heart of this distressing and increasing phenomenon. It has also taken some time for the scientific community to begin charting the phenomenon, and to develop the beginnings of theories which enable explanation and prediction and which guide interventions.

The editors of this book (who are also among the main contributors) have been at the forefront of the scientific community's response to the issue of workplace violence, and it is both timely and useful that they have produced a volume which provides a summary of both theory and practice in the area.

The great strength of this book is reflected in its two-part structure. The first section develops 'an integrated organisational approach' to work-related violence; this provides a framework for understanding how such violence occurs, and at the same time outlines an approach to developing comprehensive and effective strategies to prevent it where possible, to protect employees from it, and to treat them once it has occurred. The second part of the book turns to practice, and provides examples of violence prevention programmes in workplaces as varied as public houses and schools, while also outlining the principles of practical interventions to reduce work-related violence.

The major barriers to dealing effectively with work-related violence are dealt with in the first part of the book. Difficulties relating to its definition (for example, it is significant and appropriate that the book continually refers to 'work-related' rather than 'workplace' violence), the legal situation, the monitoring of violence, and responding to violence once it has occurred are all comprehensively treated.

The legal context within which work-related violence is dealt with (detailed in a chapter by Leighton) illustrates well why responsible agencies (for example, health and safety agencies, employers) have been relatively tardy in their responses. First, work-related violence is not specifically mentioned or defined in most legal systems; and second, a multiplicity of legal instruments (in the UK, six instruments are in operation) are used to address different facets of the problems caused by work-related violence. In practical terms, this complexity has inhibited the response of all of the parties concerned. However, this chapter provides a lucid account of

legal approaches to the issue which should enhance the basis of current practice.

In the first chapter, Leather et al summarise the research evidence on work-related violence for the purpose of developing an integrated organisational approach to the issue. The crucial feature of this approach is that it identifies three levels of intervention which may be undertaken (organisation, team and individual) and situates these within the context of prevention, timely reaction and rehabilitation. It therefore provides a practical and inclusive framework for developing an effective organisational response to work-related violence which both covers legal obligations and stands every chance of being successful.

Beale contributes a chapter on the importance of monitoring for the development of effective strategies to combat work-related violence. In the past, one of the major weaknesses of organisational responses to workplace-related violence has been a failure adequately to assess and monitor the levels and causes of violence. Beale points to the monitoring process being a cornerstone for effective response, as it provides information which can be used in assessing the causes and prevalence of violence, the existence of at-risk situations and the effectiveness of interventions.

The major themes of an integrated organisational response to work-related violence outlined in the first part of the book are brought together in the three case study examples provided in Part 2. For example, Lawrence et al detail the analysis and responses to violence undertaken by a chain of public houses (a sector where one-sixth of all violent incidents reported in the UK in 1992 took place). The approach taken was to apply a modification of the hazard control cycle, whereby awareness raising and acceptance of the problem precede the assessment of hazard, harm and risk, or the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions. An initial intervention was to establish a comprehensive reporting system, which was followed by the establishment of a formal organisational policy and the provision of training and post-incident support measures. Follow-up research indicated that these policies were broadly successful, for example with customers perceiving improvements in the 'atmosphere' in previously troublesome pubs, and licensees altering their approach to the issue in constructive ways.

This book should be of interest to researchers, students, practitioners and policy makers. This reviewer knows of no single volume which covers all the relevant areas so comprehensively and in such an up-to-date fashion. In addition, it draws upon a wealth of experience to propose a well-founded and practical model to combat work-related violence. It deserves a wide readership, and if it can influence the practice of dealing with workplace violence towards the application of an integrated organisational model, then there is a good chance that rates of work-related violence can be diminished.

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