Who’s Training Whom?

Author’s name redacted

Author’s name redacted

Author’s name redacted

**Synopsis**

In this critical incident, Todd had just returned to his office from a HR meeting where workplace safety was the main topic. He recalled a time when he, a seasoned mainframe computer salesman, and Sam, a newly-hired salesperson whom Todd has been assigned to mentor, were on a sales trip. Todd’s job was to help Sam learn about the company. Mostly Todd was to mentor Sam in selling and even dressing appropriately for his new position with the company. They were starting a two-hour drive to Trinidad, Colorado. In an effort to be friendly and get to know Sam, Todd began by asking a simple question to which he received a rather frightening response. Todd was concerned about his safety. This relates to today’s workplace because numerous men and women who have served our country overseas are returning to the jobs they held prior to deployment and many of them are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Research Methods**

This critical incident is a descriptive work. All of the information in the critical incident comes from the experiences of one of the authors.

**Student Learning Objectives**

After reading and studying this case, students will be able to:

1. Outline factors associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the workplace and relate those to Sam’s activities. (Level 2: Comprehension)

2. Explain the relevance of the Americans with Disabilities Act to people like Sam in today’s work environment. (Level 1: Knowledge)

3. Identify and describe the appropriateness of the actions that Todd took to defuse a potential violent situation. (Level 3: Application)

4. Explain the complexity of workplace violence and identify the impact variables at all levels of system aggression. (Level 2: Comprehension and Level 3: Application)

5. (Optional) Design strategies to prevent workplace violence (Level 5: Synthesis)

**Potential Class Use**

The critical incident is best used in a human resources management class when discussing potential workplace violence and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Using this case will require that the instructor discuss post-traumatic stress disorder in advance or have students research the topic.

We believe this case is very engaging for students. Additionally, we think that the case is timely in regard to the numbers of American service personnel returning to the United States after time served abroad in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Questions**

1. Define Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Do Sam’s actions indicate that he may be suffering from PTSD? LO1

2. What is the main purpose of the American’s with Disabilities Act (ADA)? Do you think that Sam has a disability that qualifies under the ADA? Explain. LO2

3. What actions did Todd take to defuse a potentially volatile situation in the workplace? LO3

4. What were some of the key variables that had an impact on the interaction between Todd and Sam. LO4

5. Design strategies to prevent workplace violence. LO5

QUESTIONS WITH SUGGESTED RESPONSES

**1. How would you define PTSD in the workplace? Do Sam’s actions indicate that he may be suffering from PTSD? Why is Sam’s behavior troubling? LO1**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can be defined as a psychological disorder where people suffer from the effects of an extreme traumatic event. Any extreme traumatic event (military combat, violent physical assaults, terrorist attacks, disasters) can initiate the disorder; however, most recently it has been associated with service personnel returning from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Regardless of the cause, PTSD is a reality in the work environment today and employers must be prepared to address the issue and to create a safe work environment.

Sam displays many of the characteristics of PTSD. For example, he appears to be emotionally numb in that he speaks without emotion. Moreover, according to Sam himself, he attacked his wife with a knife during the night. This would indicate that he was dreaming about or reliving some event that had happened to him where he felt he had to defend himself. Additionally, Sam carries around a six-inch hunting knife in his boots. From his comments, one could infer that he has a sense of danger in his daily living. This behavior can be classified as unusual and potentially threatening to the people Sam works with and customers that he encounters through his job. Indeed, Sam stated that being successful in this sales job “might get just as ugly as the situation with my wife.”

**2. What is the main purpose of the American’s with Disabilities Act (ADA)? Do you think that Sam has a disability that qualifies under the ADA? Explain. LO2**

The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990. It prohibits discrimination in employment against individuals with disabilities who can otherwise do the job (Shaller & Rosen, 1991). Any employer with 15 or more employees is covered by this act and therefore cannot discriminate against qualified individuals with regard to work conditions—application procedures, hiring, discharge, compensation, advancement, training, or other terms or conditions of employment (ADA: Simple, Common Sense Principles, 1992). The act also requires that employers make “reasonable accommodations” for employees with physical or mental limitations.

This Act is beneficial in a couple of ways. First, the Act actually increases the labor pool from which employers can select capable, qualified employees by including those with disabilities who can do the work. Another benefit is the Act gives people who are qualified but disabled the opportunity to find and get jobs. The whole psychological benefit of being employed and supporting one’s self is beneficial to society as a whole. Additionally, the positive feelings of self-worth that people with disabilities experience by being employed is a positive factor.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not list the conditions that are considered disabilities. Instead, it proposes a general definition of disability and people are assessed on a case-by-case basis. Under ADA guidelines, if a person has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having an impairment, then that person is protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (EEOC Regulations To . . ., 2011).

From the case, students should be able to determine that Sam has some kind of problem and he states as much during the drive when he says that he has been examined by a “shrink” at the VA hospital who diagnosed Sam with a disorder of some nature. Plus, it does not seem “normal” that a person could say that they could “kill a person silently in seven different ways.” That statement alone would give most people pause. And finally, it appears that his marriage is in disarray due to Sam’s actions. So, for all of these reasons, the authors believe that Sam fulfills the requirements of the Act and would be covered by the ADA if the situation were taking place today.

**3. What actions can an individual take to defuse a potentially volatile situation in the workplace? LO3**

From reading the case, it appears that Todd is able to calm himself in tense situations and hide any apprehension he may feel. Twice during the trip, Todd felt anxious and was able to calm himself. However, the most threatening was when Sam retrieved his knife from his boot, Todd simply asked to see the knife and then he threw it in the trunk of his car. From reading the CI Todd appears calm, although he may not have been so calm inwardly. He has been carrying on a conversation with Sam and Sam apparently felt comfortable with Todd and was opening up to him as Todd listened. From all appearances, Todd handled the situation appropriately.

When dealing with an angry, potentially violent employee, experts suggest some techniques to defuse the situation (Robbins, 2013).

* Make eye contact
* Give the actor your full attention
* Speak in a calm, controlled voice and create a relaxed environment
* Be open and honest
* Let the person talk and get the issue out in the open
* Ask why the person is upset
* Listen.

**4. What were some of the key variable that had an impact on the interaction between Todd and Sam? LO4**

There are no simple solutions to workplace violence. It is a complex issue potentially impacted by variables at every level of system aggregation. The social ecological model can be a useful framework for students to use to understand how variables at each level of system aggregation may have impacted the situation in which Todd found himself.

Beginning in the 1970s, Urie Bronfenbrenner developed and honed an approach that applies socioecological models to human development. Bronfenbrenner’s model defined four major “levels of influence” in which an individual is “nested.” These levels, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, range from the interpersonal realm through macro-cultural influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, pages 22, 25 & 26). While Bronfenbrenner recognized the importance of an individual’s capabilities and attributes he believed that individuals are influenced by systems at multiple levels and that these levels are interdependent. In Bronfenbrenner’s model, “the properties of the person and of the environment, the structure of the environment setting, and the processes taking place with and between them must be viewed as interdependent and analyzed in systems terms” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, page 41).

Bronfenbrenner’s model has influenced how researchers and practitioners in many disciplines draw connections between individual behavior and social settings. It may be useful for the purposes of this analysis, to adapt the social-ecological system levels as follows: the Individual level which includes the pattern of skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes unique to the individual; the Work Group/Team level characterized by team structures, processes, and dynamics – including the role and influence of the local manager; the Organization level defined by the structures, systems, processes, and culture of the organization at large; and, finally the Macro Level which includes the sector, geographic, social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which the organization sits. As Bronfenbrenner emphasized, while each level captures a unique perspective, the levels are interdependent and must be analyzed from a systemic perspective.

Students could be asked to brainstorm the variables that they believe had an impact on the situation and then these could be discussed and categorized using the following matrix. After the variables are identified and categorized, students could discuss interventions that would be effective at each system level. For example, at the organizational level, the development of clear policies for dress code, business travel, etc. would have been useful. At the individual level training related to defusing conflict might be identified.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Perceived Variable** | **Individual** | **Work Group/Team** | **Organizational** | **Macro** |
| Todd made comments that might have escalated the situation | X |  |  |  |
| The organization didn’t have a policy for Todd to follow |  |  | X |  |
| Many individuals were returning from active duty and being quickly assimilated into organizations. | X |  | X | X |

**5. Design strategies to prevent workplace violence. LO5**

One of the most common places for a person to become a victim of violence is the workplace. This violence has become increasingly apparent as stress levels rise and people use violence as a stress-relieving solution to a dispute. Two million cases of violence in the workplace were reported in 2010 (Atkinson, W., 2010). Also problematic is the fact that many employees do not report job-site fights out of fear. Good employees may terminate employment with an organization out of fear of violence and this same fear of violence can keep potentially good workers from applying for a job with a company that has a reputation for violence and hostility.

Experts disagree about what is or is not threatening behavior, which contributes to the problem of violence in the workplace. It is clear that fistfights, slapping, and possessing a gun or knife represents violent behavior. But, what about screaming and shouting or hitting or kicking inanimate objects? Some people would agree that all of the actions listed are evidence of violent behavior, but not of equal magnitude nor deserving of the same disciplinary action.

The best way to address violence in the workplace is to prevent it from happening. However, being prepared is the next best alternative. “Emergency planning is at the core of business operations” (Morton, 2012). Preventing workplace violence can be enhanced by following these steps:

1. Screen potential candidates for violence. Perform a thorough background check to determine past violent acts. Insist on a face-to-face interview to gauge an interviewee’s temperament.

2. Have a tough anti-violence policy. This will send a signal to all that the organization is serious about preventing workplace violence. HR, security, the company attorney and employee representatives should be involved in creating the policy. Additionally the policy should be given to each employee and each employee should sign a document that says they have read the policy. This document should be placed in each employee’s personnel file.

3. Establish a crisis management team. A crisis management team is a group of people who act as help employees know what to do in the event of a crisis. So, they train employees regarding ways to act in the event of a crisis. Again, HR, security, and employees should be represented on this team, in addition to senior management.

4. Train supervisors. The supervisors are the employees’ leaders and work with the employees on a daily basis. These are the people who get to know employees the best and are most likely to see abnormal or erratic behavior on the part of individual employees. Supervisors are the front line of defense for the organization against violence. Generally, people who become violent at work give some warning signs and these are the signs that supervisors must be trained to recognize.

5. Publicize your anti-violence program. Get the word out to all stakeholders about the program and the fact that the organization has a zero-tolerance for violence. Make all people aware of the crisis management team and how to contact team members.

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