

## When People do Bad Things to Each Other

By Kathy Mckee

It was an extraordinary day in the early 1980's. It began with a visit to my brother in the hospital where he was not expected to recover from a disease akin to San Joaquin Valley fever - which for some reason had crossed the blood brain barrier. Next, I had to go into the office in downtown Los Angeles for a couple of hours, leave early to attend my eldest son's graduation from junior high, and then we were off to Baja California to go camping for a long weekend. It had been a very trying morning, and was about to get worse in a big way.

When I sat down at my desk, I noticed a large envelope marked Urgent, opened it to find an unexpected resignation from one of the Human Resources staff. I called him in to see me. To my surprise he began ranting and raving about how my boss reminded him of his Commanding Officer in Vietnam ten years ago, how he had wanted to kill *him* during the war, and since my boss looked like him and acted like him, he wanted to "Throw him out the window and kill him." Rather than do that, he felt he needed to leave the job. His behavior in my office was startling. Staff members were walking by my office to make sure I was all right.

I agreed he should resign, and said we'd pay him through his notice period, but I asked that he leave as soon as possible *today*. He calmed down and we had a reasonable conversation. I advised that he go to the Veteran's Administration hospital in Westwood, and seek help immediately. This was before Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was known for what it really is. He was grateful for the idea, and said he would. He then asked me to go to lunch with him, and when I said I couldn't due to my son's graduation, he became enraged again, blocking the door. I was frightened. . When he realized what he was doing, he calmed down and agreed he would leave.

This incident was upsetting to the entire group of 30 employees who liked working with this staff member. But we didn't know then what we know today about PTSD and as the executive in charge, it did not occur to me to seek help for my staff who were unnerved by this incident. Later in this article, I will say more about Post Trauma debriefing.

Segue to 2006... A former Postal worker in Goleta California decided to drive from New Mexico to Goleta, gained admittance to the parking lot of the postal processing facility by following a car, parked hers, calmly walked into the facility and shot and killed six people at close range and then killed herself. "Police later identified a seventh victim dead in a condominium complex in Goleta, California where the shooter once lived.

According to media reports, the Postal Service had forced her to retire in 2003 because of her worsening mental illness. Her choice of victims may have also been racially motivated; she had a previous history of racial prejudice, and tried to obtain a business license for a newspaper of her own ideas, called *The Racist*

*Press*, in New Mexico. This incident is believed to be the “deadliest workplace shooting ever carried out in the United States by a woman.”<sup>1</sup>

In the first instance, my subordinate traumatized a small group of employees , albeit briefly, and in spite of no counseling, they recovered quickly with little loss of productivity. In the second instance, not only were all Postal workers on the night shift traumatized, the facility was closed for a while impacting all employees in that facility as well as other postal facilities and branch offices in the Santa Barbara/South coast area.

The US Postal Service provided Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (counseling) to all affected. But what about the communities of Goleta and the City of Santa Barbara and other communities in close proximity? . It was tragic. The murdered victims were well known in the community and the ripple of shock waves spread far . HR managers in several organizations sought grief counselors to help employees who knew the victims directly OR indirectly.. It took more than a “Village” to help several thousand people deal with their sense of loss, terror and fear that this could happen again. Counselors, churches and friends did their best to assuage the agony of the senseless killing in our community. Memorial services were held annually for a while until the pain had receded.

From simple loud and angry arguments, to push and shove fights, to restraining orders against family members, and shootings in the workplace, organizations deal with violence somewhere every day. It can be employees, visitors, vendors or customers causing the problems. What steps are you taking to prepare for and protect all of these parties as well as the business at hand? Business failure increases dramatically after a workplace trauma.

And, whatever happened to my employee suffering from PTSD? He went to the VA hospital, was diagnosed and treated. And then a wonderful thing happened to him: he was asked by the VA to become a group leader and help other vets suffering PTSD work through their trauma.

**Working both sides of the PTSD/Critical Incident Stress Debriefing issues.** We become stressed for a variety of reasons. The causes can derive from slight anxiety or pressure to full-blown emotional/psychological trauma. Each of us reacts differently to the same situation. For example, for one student, getting a B in a class may be mildly upsetting, an “oh, darn” reaction, while for others, a B can mean the end of the world, loss of scholarship or fellowship possibilities or not becoming a Phi Beta Kappa. The “Oh darn” person may cope with the disappointment and move on without help, while the other student may become extremely depressed, and need psychological counseling to let go and move on.

In the late 80’s First Interstate Bancorp’s headquarters building in downtown Los Angeles caught on fire, four floors in the 62 story structure were burned out, and 3,000 employees were displaced for several months. Reactions ranged from mild anger and frustration over not having access to computers and files for a few days, to rage, fear, sadness and a deep sense of loss. We now know this amalgamation of symptoms as *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia

In retail banking, customer service staff (tellers) face the public in a very risky job; robbers come in with notes and guns and ask for money. This results in a traumatized employee. Great use therefore is made of Employee Assistance and its capacity for psychological counseling. In the 80's we called this *Trauma Counseling*; today it is known as *Critical Incident Stress Debriefing*.

When the fire occurred, we contacted an expert in this field, Dr. Mory Framer, and together we established a counseling program for all employees, and a training program for managers to help them identify employees who were suffering trauma, counsel them on their behavior, and then send them to see an Employee Assistance counselor.

Here are some of the symptoms an employer might see in an employee suffering from an emotional/psychological shock<sup>2</sup>:

- 1) **Absenteeism, including:** Unauthorized leave; excessive sick leave Friday and/or Monday absences (could be related to increased alcohol or drug usage or job search); repeated absences of 2 to 4 days; Excessive tardiness, especially on Monday mornings or when returning from lunch (again, may be substance abuse); often leaving work early; peculiar and increasingly improbable excuses for absences; higher absenteeism rate than other employees for colds, flu, gastritis, and so forth (and consequently more claims on health insurance).
- 2) **“On-the-job absenteeism:** continually absent from work station more than the job requires; makes frequent trips to water fountain or bathroom; takes long coffee breaks, searches the web or is physically ill on job.
- 3) **High accident rate** including accidents on the job or accidents off the job but affecting job performance.
- 4) **Difficulty concentrating,** e.g., work seems to require a greater effort; jobs take more time or hand tremor occurs when concentrating.
- 5) **Confusion** e.g., has difficulty in recalling instructions and details of work assignments; has increasing difficulty in dealing with complex assignments; has difficulty recalling own mistakes.
- 6) **Variable work patterns,** for instance alternate periods of very high and low productivity.
- 7) **Inflexibility—does not change easily.** Your requests for change may present a threat because the employee's control of his or her present job duties and responsibilities allows him or her to hide low job performance. The inability to make routine changes could also indicate a high tension level or another serious problem.
- 8) **Coming or returning to work in an obviously atypical condition,** which may indicate a substance abuse or serious domestic problem.
- 9) **Generally lowered job efficiency:** misses deadlines; makes mistakes due to inattention or poor judgment; wastes more material; makes bad decisions; receives complaints from customers, or has improbable excuses for poor job performance.

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<sup>2</sup> Leading People Through disasters, McKee/Guthridge, Berret-Kohler, 2006

**10) Poor personal relationships on the job** such as friction in employee relationships, usually resulting in decreased job performance and efficiency.

**11) Possible alcoholism, drug addiction or acute mental illness**, as indicated by overreacting to real or imagined criticism; wide swings in morale; borrows money from coworkers; compiles complaints from coworkers; has unreasonable resentments or begins to avoid associates.

If an organization is faced with violence in the workplace, having counseling resources at the ready can be of enormous help to employees who are emotionally upset by the incident, and find it difficult to concentrate on work. Recovery from these types of emotional blows can be immediate or lengthy depending on the individual. There is no one speed at which those affected recover.

*Kathryn McKee, SPHR* is co-author of *“Leading People Through Disasters”* which is based in part on her experiences with three earthquakes, the building fire, the Rodney King riots and the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. She was Senior Vice President Human Resources for First Interstate Limited when the 707 Building burned.