# 26 Preventing Insider-Initiated Workplace Violence

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> *Gunman Kills 6 Co-workers, Dies In Shootout With Police: A man killed six employees at the Chicago auto parts supply warehouse, where he had been fired six months ago, before he was killed in a shootout with police as they stormed the building.... One employee escaped with his hands tied behind his back. Another arrived at work as the crime was being committed and was able to escape. (Retrieved on August 27, 2003, from www.cnn.com/2003/US/Midwest/08/27/chicago.shooting/index.html)*

Workplace aggression and violence is a growing concern for organizations. Given the serious nature of aggression and violence in the workplace, organizations need to act proactively to prevent workplace aggression. What can organizations do to ensure that aggression does not occur? Are there steps that organizations can take to prevent violent actions and reactions from employees? This chapter will examine such questions and attempt to provide some suggestions and strategies to help organizations prevent insider-initiated aggression (hereafter, *insider aggression*).

*Violence* is defined in a number of different ways. In its strictest sense, it is a physical act against another human being (e.g., pushing, hitting, and killing); however, *psychological aggression,* such as threatening behavior, may also produce similar stress-related outcomes. *Aggression* is more broadly defined as a behavior performed by an individual that harms (physically or psychologically) another individual (Jenkins, 1996). Therefore, this

chapter uses a definition of *aggression* that includes both physical and psychological aggression (Jenkins, 1996; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002).

As noted in an earlier chapter, aggression has been categorized into four types, depending on the assailant's relationship to the workplace (Injury Prevention Research Center [IPRC], 2001). In the first type of aggression, the assailant has no formal relationship to the organization and only enters the workplace to commit a crime (e.g., robbery). With the second type of aggression, the assailant is the recipient of current or past services provided by the organization. For instance, the assailant may be a patient at a mental institution, a prisoner at a penitentiary, or a customer at a clothing store. In the third type, the assailant has a legitimate employment relationship with the organization. This type of aggression consists of aggression between employees, from an employee toward a subordinate, or from an employee toward a supervisor. Finally, in the last type of aggression, the assailant has some relationship with an employee of the company. For instance, the assailant may be a spouse or partner, and he or she enters the work environment to commit the violent act against his or her partner.

Aggression perpetrated by a criminal or by a client or customer is associated with certain occupations and industries (California Occupational Safety and Health Administration [Cal/OSHA], 1995). Criminal acts resulting in aggression are prevalent in organizations that carry cash on hand, such as banks, and organizations that have minimal staff and operate late at night, such as convenience stores, and the taxi industry (Castillo & Jenkins, 1994). To deter such aggression, organizations should ensure that they have good internal controls and security measures that are visible to potential assailants. They should keep a minimum amount of cash on hand, use safes that are time-lock controlled, display a video surveillance camera, and ensure that at least two people are scheduled to work at any given time whenever possible. Additionally, managers and staff must be trained on what to do when faced with a violent situation. The organization should ensure that the safety of the employee is the top priority when training managers on how to deal with potentially violent situations (see Chapter 12).

Aggression from organizational outsiders such as customers and patients is often also associated with particular industries. Because such aggression is initiated by recipients of services offered by the organization, any organization that serves dangerous or unstable individuals may be at higher risk. Some of these organizations include the police force, mental institutions, medical care providers, and alcohol and drug treatment providers (Cal/OSHA, 1995). Although this type of aggression may be more predictable, it is difficult to control, given the nature of the businesses in question. In many outsider aggression situations, dealing with potentially violent people is part of regular job responsibilities, and workers are aware of the risks; however, it is important to note that violence is not restricted to such industries. Customers and other members of the public may also become verbally or physically aggressive when dissatisfied with organizational products or services. To help prevent this type of aggression, organizations must take similar security measures and ensure that they have a safety program with well-defined procedures. In addition, conflict

resolution and self-defense training programs are particularly important for this type of aggression because employees may hold high-risk jobs and therefore have higher exposure to potentially violent individuals. Police officers, for example, tend to have fewer injuries than people in most other occupations because of their extensive training in dealing with such situations. The type of safety program and security plan will vary depending on the industry. In Chapter 12, LeBlanc, Dupré, and Barling discuss some strategies for preventing these first two types of aggression.

Aggression perpetrated by an individual who is associated with an employee, such as a disgruntled spouse, is not associated with a particular type of industry. With this type of aggression, a spouse or partner enters the workplace to commit an act of aggression against a partner, and as such, it can occur in any industry. Threats of violence in this category have the highest risk of being carried out (Braverman, 1999). All employees in a work environment are in danger when one employee is threatened; therefore, it is the responsibility of the employer to take action to protect them. Managers must make employees aware that such threats affect the safety of all employees, and any employee facing such threats should immediately make management aware of the situation. Organizations can then address the threats by increasing security measures, applying for restraining orders, and enforcing them (Braverman, 1999).

Although outsider-initiated aggression is of obvious importance, this chapter focuses on insider aggression or aggression initiated by employees and managers of the organization. Insider aggression is the least prevalent of the four types; however, in this form of aggression, the organizational setting or a particular work-related situation, such as organizational injustice, may be a key contributing factor to the act (e.g., Barling, 1996; Braverman, 1999; Martinko & Zellars, 1998). Such situations are at least to some degree within the control of the organization (O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996); therefore, it is important to consider the situations that may lead to such aggression in order to understand how to take proactive measures to prevent it.

# Prevalence and Incidents of Workplace Aggression

Although there is a relationship between the type of service provided and aggression perpetrated by a customer, client, or criminal, insider aggression is not believed to be associated with a specific type of organization or industry (Cal/OSHA, 1995). This type of aggression can occur in any organization for a number of reasons, some of which will be discussed in the next section. Due to the sometimes shocking nature of this type of aggression, insider aggression receives a great deal of media attention. Headlines like the one in the opening quote sensationalize these acts of aggression, creating the false perception that such aggression occurs more often than it does. Estimates vary across different studies and across time; however, according

to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), aggression perpetrated in the act of committing a crime is the most prevalent, with deaths caused by this form of aggression representing approximately 75% of total workplace homicides in 1992. The Injury Prevention Research Centre (IPRC) at the University of Iowa suggests the current percentage of such homicides may be as high as 85% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1998, as cited in IPRC, 2001), and Sygnatur and Toscano (2000) suggest that it may be as low as 60%. In contrast, estimates of insider aggression range from only 6% to 15% of total workplace homicides (see Braverman, 1999; Sygnatur & Toscano, 2000). Although insider aggression may be the least prevalent cause of workplace deaths, when psychological aggression is taken into account, vastly larger numbers of employees are probably affected by insider aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1998).

Although these data suggest that insider aggression should be the least of our concerns, four important factors suggest otherwise. First, recent changes in the workplace, such as downsizing and increased workforce diversity, have led to an increase in insider workplace aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1998). Second, these data reflect violent forms of aggression only, whereas psychological aggression is a much more frequent occurrence. Third, research suggests that insider aggression is often caused by an interaction between individual characteristics of the aggressor (e.g., trait anger) (Douglas & Martinko, 2001) and workplace factors (Braverman, 1999; Inness, Barling, & Turner, 2005), such as workplace injustice, abusive supervision, and over-control. Indeed, Chapters 3 and 6 outline several workplace predictors of insider aggression, suggesting that there may be a number of actions the organization can take to prevent this type of workplace aggression. Fourth, there are data (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002) that suggest that insider aggression has direct (rather than mediated) effects on personal outcomes, so the prevention of this form of aggression may be particularly salient for individuals.

In the next section, we address the three factors that interact to predict workplace aggression: the individual, the situation, and the organizational context (Braverman, 1999). We do so to draw attention to the specific options the organization can undertake. The remaining sections will propose a model for the prevention of workplace aggression, suggesting specific points of intervention and tactics for proactively preventing workplace aggression.

# The Individual, the Situation, and the Setting _____

Workplace aggression is the result of an interaction between three factors: the individual, the situation, and the setting (Braverman, 1999).

## The Individual

Researchers have attempted to provide a profile of the potentially dangerous worker; however, several issues plague the use of profiles in aggression

prevention. First, the brevity of the selection process makes it very difficult to assess whether an individual possesses the characteristics of a typical profile. Such factors as alcohol consumption, previous exposure to aggression (Greenberg & Barling, 1999), self-esteem (Inness et al., 2005), trait anger, attribution style, negative affectivity, attitudes toward revenge, and self-control (Douglas & Martinko, 2001) are related to workplace aggression; however, it is difficult for organizations to determine whether potential employees possess many of these characteristics. Although many selection processes are rigorous, the likelihood that a potential job candidate will admit to possessing these characteristics is very low, given that such characteristics are not perceived to be socially acceptable. In addition, just because potential employees possess some of these characteristics, it does not necessarily follow that they will become violent. Therefore, even if an organization were able to determine whether prospective employees hold some of these characteristics, they might well be excluding potentially good employees based on an improbable outcome.

Second, the privacy rights of each individual make it difficult for organizations to determine whether potential employees may be predisposed to violent tendencies. Although organizations would be prudent to conduct a thorough reference check on employees and to look for indirect cues (i.e., what the reference is not saying) to determine potential problems, it is often difficult to obtain references from past employers. Fear of lawsuits has left employers reluctant to provide negative references for employees (Howard, 2001; Sovereign, 1994).

In summary, profiles are too vague and difficult to obtain to be a useful tool for aggression prevention. Given that profiling decisions derive from assumptions about possible future behaviors based on individual characteristics and limited information, they are simply a poor organizational policy that potentially violates the privacy rights of applicants. Given the severe limitations involved with profiling, an organization has little control over the individual predictors of workplace aggression.

## The Situation

Although the organization has little control over the individual attributes that may predict aggression, it has a great deal of control over the situational factors that may lead to workplace aggression. Situational factors refer to specific occurrences that lead to loss, humiliation, or exclusion from others (Braverman, 1999) within the organization. These situational factors are *stressors*, or objective environmental characteristics that may lead to the subjective state known as *stress* (Pratt & Barling, 1988). For instance, when layoffs are imminent, job insecurity is likely to increase. In a situation in which an employee who is predisposed to violent tendencies experiences heightened stressors, an aggressive outcome could result.

Situational factors that have been demonstrated to lead to aggressive behavior include job-related stressors (e.g., Chen & Spector, 1992; Fox &

Spector, 1999; Glomb, 2002), surveillance (Greenberg & Barling, 1999), abusive supervision (Inness et al., 2005), supervisory overcontrol (Dupré, 2004), and organizational injustice (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999). Subsequent sections will briefly describe each of these and consider possible actions and strategies for prevention.

### The Organizational Context (Setting)

Although certain individuals may be predisposed to aggressive behavior and may find themselves in situations that cause higher levels of stress, aggression cannot occur unless the organization permits it to occur (Braverman, 1999). Employees often give repeated warnings that they will commit a violent act; they often voice their concerns or feelings of perceived unfairness before they engage in such acts; and they ask for restitution before they commit violent acts. Only after their attempts to achieve a favorable outcome fail do they fulfill their promise of aggression. Indeed, some research (e.g., Dupré, 2004) suggests that aggression may be the result of escalating forms of aggression. As such, organizations have repeated opportunities to disarm the employee before he or she carries out a threat of violence. Organizations should therefore ensure that policies are in place to deal with grievances as well as threats of aggression when they occur.

Research has also shown that perceived organizational sanctions are negatively associated with sexual harassment (Drekker & Barling, 1998) and aggression (Dupré, 2004; Fox & Spector, 1999). Organizations may be able to discourage aggression by outlining a formal policy that is associated with sanctions for aggressive behavior (Dupré, 2004). The next section will address in more detail how organizations can ensure that their organizational setting is not conducive to aggression.

## Situational Predictors of Workplace Aggression _____

Although there is still a paucity of research on the causes of aggression in the workplace, some interesting recent evidence suggests that different organization-specific predictors may lead to different targets within insider aggression. For instance, a study by Greenberg and Barling (1999) found that employee-on-supervisor aggression was predicted by procedural injustice and workplace surveillance. Those who felt that they were being watched by various monitoring devices (e.g., punch cards, timed lunches) were more likely to act aggressively toward a supervisor. In addition, employees who held perceptions of procedural injustice were more likely to aggress against their supervisor. Similarly, in a study that attempted to compare individual and workplace predictors of aggression, Inness et al. (2005) found that abusive supervision predicted aggression against the supervisor only in the job in which it occurred (i.e., it was highly situation specific). In contrast, person-specific behaviors

such as history of aggression and alcohol consumption predict employee-on-employee aggression (Greenberg & Barling, 1999). Finally, in a meta-analysis of the predictors of workplace aggression, Hershcovis et al. (in press) found that abusive supervision and interactional injustice were much stronger predictors of supervisor-targeted aggression than coworker-targeted aggression, and trait anger was a stronger predictor of interpersonal aggression than organizational aggression.

## Organizational Injustice

*Organizational injustice* is concerned with the lack of fairness of outcomes, processes, and interactions within the organization. At least three types of justice have been studied in relation to aggression: distributive, procedural, and interactional. Research has found that *distributive justice*, which is concerned with the fairness of outcomes, has some relationship (albeit weak) with workplace aggression (Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Hershcovis et al., 2004). Interestingly, Hershcovis et al. (2004) found that distributive injustice was related to coworker-targeted, but not supervisor-targeted, workplace aggression. This finding suggests that through social comparison, employees may become envious of coworkers whose input/output ratio is higher than their own, leading them to become aggressive toward their coworkers. Previous research has found that envy associated with unfavorable work outcomes is positively related to aggression (Cohen-Charash, Mueller, & Goldman, 2004).

*Procedural justice* is defined as the individual's perception of the fairness of the process that leads to decisions about how to allocate various organizational outcomes (Leventhal, 1980). There is some evidence to suggest that procedural justice predicts aggression. A number of individual studies (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluck, 1999) have found that procedural justice is associated with workplace aggression; however, in a meta-analysis of the predictors of aggression, Hershcovis et al. (in press) found that after controlling for other predictor variables the main effect between procedural injustice and workplace aggression became insignificant. Hershcovis et al. (in press) suggest that existing operationalizations of workplace aggression may confound results. In particular, studies often include multiple targets (supervisor, coworker, and organization) in their measures of aggression (e.g., Skarlicki et al., 1999) or do not specify the target at all (e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Because aggression is likely to be target-specific, ambiguous operationalization may lead to incorrect conclusions for both distributive and procedural injustice.

Of the three types of injustice studied, by far the strongest predictor of aggression is interactional injustice (Hershcovis et al., in press). *Interactional injustice* is concerned with the quality of interactional treatment received during the enactment of procedures (Bies & Moag, 1986).

Research in retaliatory behavior found that when interactional justice was high, the interaction between procedural and distributive justice did not predict retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). That is, high interactional justice counteracted the negative effects of low procedural and distributive justice; however, when interactional justice was low, the interaction between distributive and procedural injustice produced strong retaliatory outcomes. Other researchers have also shown that interactional injustice leads to negative behaviors such as employee theft (Greenberg, 1993), which may be considered a form of organization-targeted aggression. In addition, although Skarlicki and Folger (1997) measured covert forms of retaliation such as taking supplies home, damaging equipment, and spreading rumors, they argue that these behaviors may lead to more direct forms of retaliation such as aggression. This is consistent with the *escalation of aggression hypothesis,* which suggests that aggression may start with relatively minor behaviors but subsequently develop into more serious forms of aggression or violence (Dupré, 2004).

## Abusive Supervision, Surveillance, and Control

Preliminary evidence suggests that the manner in which leaders supervise their employees may contribute to aggressive responses, and this has critical implications for prevention. Dupré (2004) found that employees are more likely to aggress against supervisors who tend to overcontrol their employees through pressures to work at a certain pace or in a certain way. Similarly, Greenberg and Barling (1999) found that surveillance predicted aggression against supervisors. The marital aggression literature similarly finds that overcontrol may lead to violent responses. Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Heyman, O'Leary, and Lawrence (1999) found that spouses in unhappy aggressive marriages felt more controlled than spouses in unhappy nonaggressive marriages.

Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors toward employees. Abusive supervision also predicts aggression against the supervisor (Hershcovis et al., in press; Inness et al., 2005). In a study that examined moonlighters, or individuals who worked in two different jobs, Inness et al. (2005) investigated whether individuals who were aggressive in one organization were also aggressive in the other. The study was an attempt to disentangle individual and organizational predictors of aggression. They found that among people who had more than one supervisor, abusive supervision predicted more variance in aggression only against the abusive supervisor.

## Role Stressors

Role stressors also significantly predict workplace aggression (Beehr & Glazer, 2004). Role stressors include environmental demands, constraints, and

events that affect the ability of individuals to meet their roles (Beehr & Glazer, 2004). Three role stressors have been studied in relation to aggression, namely role ambiguity, role overload, and role conflict.

*Role ambiguity* is the lack of specificity and predictability regarding an employee's job functions and responsibilities (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). In a study of 2,117 employees working in various industries, Einarsen, Raknes, and Matthiesen (1994) found that role ambiguity was positively associated with workplace bullying. Other researchers (e.g., Bedeian, Armenakis, & Curran, 1980; Chen & Spector, 1992) also found that role ambiguity was positively associated with aggression.

*Role overload* reflects the inability to fulfill work expectations in the time available (Kahn, 1980). The evidence is mixed regarding the relationship between role overload and aggression. Einarsen et al. (1994) found a significant positive relationship between role overload and bullying, whereas Chen and Spector (1992) found no relationship between aggression and work overload.

*Role conflict* is defined as two or more sets of incompatible demands concerning an employee's work (Beehr, 1995; Beehr & Glazer, 2004). Of the three role stressors, role conflict has the strongest association with workplace aggression (Hershcovis et al., 2004). Chen and Spector (1992) found that role conflict was positively related to sabotage and interpersonal aggression, as well as hostility and complaints; and Einarsen et al. (1994) found a positive relationship between bullying and role conflict.

## Job Insecurity

A final situational predictor of workplace aggression is job insecurity. Studies have found that job insecurity is positively associated with aggression (e.g., Baron & Neuman, 1998); however, Greenberg and Barling (1999) argued and found that job insecurity should predict aggression against the supervisor but not the subordinate, because the supervisor is responsible for the job security of an employee.

The research on situational predictors suggests that individuals do not tend to act aggressively; rather, they *react* aggressively. That is, aggression is target-specific (Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Hershcovis et al., in press), such that employees attribute a perceived transgression to a particular target and aggress against that target as a retaliatory act. Given this knowledge, certain steps can be taken to limit and prevent workplace aggression and violence.

# _____ Escalation of Aggression: Points of Prevention

As noted in the preceding sections, organizations have limited control over the individual predictors of aggression but can control situations that may

trigger aggression and the settings that enable it. It bears repeating that insider aggression is very infrequent. In general, there are at least three points at which the organization can act proactively to prevent a violent outcome.

There is some limited evidence to show that aggression escalates. In a study that investigated aggression against supervisors, Dupré (2004) found strong support for the notion that over time less serious forms of aggression escalate to more serious forms, such as violence. Research from the marital aggression literature (e.g., Murphy & O'Leary, 1989) also suggests that aggression does not occur immediately. Rather, a series of exchanges lead to an escalation process that ultimately results in aggression.

Figure 26.1 suggests a model for understanding the progression and prevention of workplace aggression. The model suggests an escalation effect that begins with a situational predictor, which leads to an expression of discontent and a request for restitution and ends with an act of violence. The left side of the model indicates the opportunities for primary prevention whereas the right side of the model indicates opportunities for secondary prevention designed to respond to possible threats of aggression. Organizations can take three key proactive measures to prevent violence: (a) eliminate the situational predictor, (b) create a transparent and nonthreatening environment, and (c) prevent aggressive acts. Reactive responses include (a) investigating
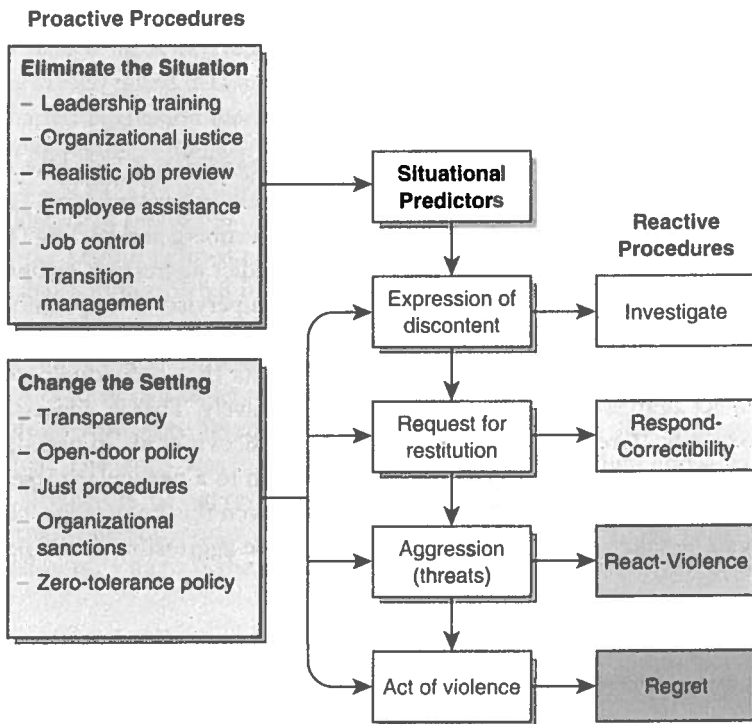


**Figure 26.1**    Preventing Escalation of Aggression

expressions of discontent, (b) responding to requests for restitution, (c) reacting to aggression, and (d) regretting the outcome.

# _____ Proactive Procedures: Eliminating the Situation

The most proactive measure that an organization can take to prevent aggression involves eliminating the situational predictors that lead to aggression. This section will discuss strategies for increasing perceptions of justice, improving leadership skills, reducing role stressors, and minimizing job insecurity.

## Enhancing Organizational Justice

Although interactional injustice has the strongest relationship with workplace aggression, both distributive and procedural injustice have main effects with workplace aggression. In addition, as noted earlier, the interaction between distributive and procedural injustice is strongly associated with workplace aggression when interactional injustice is low (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Therefore, to prevent workplace aggression and violence, it is important to pay attention to all forms of injustice.

### Distributive Justice

*Distributive justice* is a comparative process in which employees compare their inputs and outcomes with a comparable other. Organizations that ensure fair procedures are more likely to arrive at organizational outcomes that are distributively just. Because procedures that are applied consistently, ethically, and without bias are likely to result in distributions that are fair across people, ensuring procedural justice is an effective way to also ensure distributive justice; however, comparative information is not always available; therefore, employees may form their own expectations about distributions such as wage increases based on knowledge using their own inputs. Mueller, Iverson, and Jo (1999) argued that people will be more likely to perceive the organization as distributively fair when expectations regarding desired outcomes are met. They found that met expectations were positively related to perceptions of distributive justice.

Based on these findings, managers may wish to manage the expectations of employees by ensuring transparent communication regarding potential outcomes. For instance, employees who received a 5% wage increases in past years may expect the same increase in future years, assuming the same level of inputs (e.g., effort, time, and skill); however, external factors beyond the control of the individual may result in reduced earnings for the organization in a given year. When such contingencies occur, requiring the organization to cut costs, it would be important to communicate potential reductions in annual wage reviews. Such information allows employees to revise their expectations, thereby

mitigating negative responses; and Shaw, Wild, and Colquitt (2003) have shown that providing adequate explanations can limit retribution by 43%.

## Procedural Justice

Leventhal (1980) argued that *procedural justice* comprises six factors. The first is *accuracy*, or basing decisions on accurate information. The second is *bias-suppression*, which requires that managers remain impartial when making organizational decisions. The third factor is *consistency*, which requires that organizations treat employees the same across people and across time. The fourth factor is *voice*, or the ability of employees to participate in important decisions that affect them. Voice has been identified as one of the most crucial aspects of procedural justice (Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990) because employees who are given the opportunity to participate are more likely to feel a part of the decision process and are therefore more likely to buy into the process (Leventhal, 1980). Fifth is the *ethicality principle,* which suggests that all decisions should be based on prevailing ethical principles (e.g., equity, need, or equality). Sixth and finally, a fair system must *allow for the correction of mistakes.*

These factors of procedural justice are particularly important when an organization is making decisions of importance to employees (e.g., performance appraisals, promotions). Allowing employee participation in the evaluation process, for example, will help employees recognize their weaknesses and show them where they need to improve in order to achieve valued outcomes. In addition, organizations should ensure that policies for making decisions that affect employees are transparent. *Internal transparency,* defined as the visibility of organizational processes and procedures that affect employees, ensures that employees are aware of what they need to do in order to achieve a certain outcome. Because greater transparency will lead to fewer surprises regarding decisions that relate to employees, transparency should help mitigate aggressive responses.

## Interactional Justice

*Interactional justice* is concerned with the content of interactions between employees and supervisors (Bies & Moag, 1986) and is the strongest predictor of the three types of justice studied in the aggression literature (Hershcovis et al., in press; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). There are two components of interactional justice: explanation and communication. The *explanation* component, known as *informational justice* (Colquitt, 2001), requires that managers provide employees with adequate explanations for decisions that affect them. Jones (2004) found that informational justice was negatively related to both retaliatory intent and aggression against the supervisor. As such, one way to reduce aggression is for managers to provide reasonable and complete explanations for decisions that affect employees. If an employee does not get a wage increase, for example, managers should ensure that they provide

reasons why. The explanation should include adequate information and data to support the decision (e.g., employee evaluations and expectations), as well as a plan to help the employee achieve a wage increase next year.

Simply providing an explanation is insufficient, however. The manner in which the explanation is *communicated* is equally important. Jones (2004) examined the communication content (interpersonal justice) and explanation (informational justice) components of interactional justice separately and found that interpersonal justice accounted for more variance than informational justice (though both were significant) in explaining aggression against the supervisor. Therefore, managers should ensure that they treat employees with respect and dignity, particularly when communicating bad news.

Finally, because there is a strong positive correlation between procedural justice and interactional justice (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001), improving procedural justice will also improve interactional injustice and vice versa. For instance, when managers encourage participation in the decision processes that affect employees (procedural justice), they also communicate to employees that they respect and value employee input (interactional justice).

Often, interactional justice is a function of good leadership. Good leaders treat employees with respect and dignity and encourage participation because such treatment generally encourages more positive responses from employees. Therefore, another way to improve justice perceptions is to improve organizational leadership through leadership training programs.

## Leadership

The situational predictors outlined earlier suggest a common theme, namely poor leadership, which includes procedural, distributive, and interactional injustice, overcontrol, abusive supervision, job insecurity, and role stressors (Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2004). All these predictors are indicators of poor leadership skills and suggest that leadership training may be a critical proactive step to deterring aggression. Research has shown that leadership is amenable to training (Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Kelloway, Barling, & Helleur, 2000).

There are a number of different theories of leadership in the organizational behavior literature. A discussion of the virtues of different definitions of leadership is beyond the scope of this chapter; therefore, the chapter will focus on two theories of leadership. The first, *leader-member exchange (LMX) theory*, emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the leadership relationship. The reason for the focus on LMX is that the quality of the exchange relationship seems to manifest itself in the situational predictors of aggression. For instance, abusive, disrespectful, or unfair treatment may characterize low-quality leadership, with aggression becoming the reciprocal response. The second, *transformational leadership*, focuses on managing change by the leader within an organization. Some of the most serious decisions that managers make are with regard to change, and the communication of such change is critical to how subordinates deal with such change.

### Leader-Member Exchange: Managing Relationships

*LMX theory* is concerned with the quality of the dyadic leader/follower relationship. LMX suggests that leaders develop a unique, individualized relationship with subordinates and that the quality of the relationship will have important implications for attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Dienesch and Liden (1986) proposed three dimensions of LMX: contribution, loyalty, and affect. They defined *contribution* as the perception of the amount and quality of work each party contributes toward the common goal. *Loyalty* reflects the extent to which the leader and subordinate are loyal to one another, and *affect* refers to the mutual affection the leader and follower feel for each other. Liden and Maslyn (1998) found that a fourth factor emerged from their model, which they identified as *professional respect* or the perception of the degree to which each member of the dyad is respected within or outside the organization.

Although no research has been conducted on LMX and aggression in particular, some research has examined the relationship between LMX and retaliation (Townsend, Phillips, & Elkins, 2000). This study found that LMX was negatively related to retaliation, which included some aggressive acts such as damaging company property, such that high-quality relationships led to lower levels of retaliation. Wayne, Shore, and Liden (1997) found that high LMX employees perceive their organizations as more supportive than do low LMX employees. This suggests that training managers to maintain high-quality relationships with their employees may well be important.

Although the dimensions of high-quality leadership have been proposed, LMX says little about the specific steps needed to promote a high-quality relationship. Indeed, the notion of *quality* is difficult to define and therefore may be difficult to train. Some key characteristics of high-quality relationships may include fostering mutual support, mutual respect, mutual trust, and mutual loyalty. The key term in LMX leadership is *mutual*, which emphasizes the mutuality of leader/subordinate relationships. Managers who are learning to supervise employees must be trained early on that leadership is in fact an exchange relationship. To gain respect, support, trust, and loyalty, managers must act accordingly with their employees. Managers who are abusive or unjust do not demonstrate the respect and support required for high-quality relationships and thus do not gain trust or loyalty from their employees.

### Transformational Leadership: Managing Change

*Transformational leadership* also emphasizes the reciprocal role of leaders and is characterized by four key components: inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation. *Inspirational motivation* involves charismatic communication of a vision for the organization, using symbols and emotion to gain employee confidence and buy-in to the vision (Bass, 1985; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). *Idealized influence* includes behaviors such as leading by example and

demonstrating high ethical standards. *Individualized consideration* is concerned with providing support and encouragement to employees and coaching them in an effort to develop their skills and to help them succeed. Finally, *intellectual stimulation* is intended to challenge problem-solving skills and encourage subordinates to perceive problems and solutions in different ways. A number of studies have shown that transformational leadership leads to higher satisfaction with the supervisor (Koh, Steers, & Terborg, 1995), higher organizational commitment (Bycio, Hackett, & Allen, 1995; Koh et al., 1995), and performance (Howell & Avolio, 1993). Research also shows that training managers on transformational leadership effectively leads to higher organizational commitment, leader perceptions, and performance (Barling et al., 1996).

Transformational leadership has a potentially important role in managing change because such leadership, when successful, engenders support from organizational members. Organizational change, which often includes increased diversity, restructuring, layoffs, job insecurity, and new technology, has been associated with aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1998). Managers who receive transformational leadership training may develop better communication skills that help employees understand the reasons for change and, ultimately, generate support for such change.

Although studies have not directly examined the relationship between transformational leadership and aggression, Pillai, Schriesheim, and Williams (1999) showed a main effect of transformational leadership on justice perceptions. They found that transformational leadership was positively associated with both distributive and procedural justice and that procedural justice mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors. Because both procedural and distributive *in*justice have been positively associated with aggression against the supervisor (Greenberg & Barling, 1999), it is reasonable to suggest that transformational leadership will negatively relate to aggression against the supervisor.

Training in either LMX or transformational leadership may also help address issues of interactional fairness because both theories of leadership emphasize the mutuality of the leader/follower relationship. The loyalty and affect components of LMX and the individualized consideration component of transformational leadership are concerned with providing support to employees. Such support implicitly suggests that high-quality interpersonal treatment, characterized by respect and integrity, are necessary components of high-quality leadership.

## Reducing Role Stressors

Role stressors derive from poor leadership; therefore, many of the same strategies would be relevant for reducing role stressors. Individuals may also have different tolerances for role stressors and abusive supervision. What one

employee may perceive as a stressor, another employee may consider a challenge; however, there are certain actions an organization can take to prevent employees from experiencing role stress. As suggested by the International Labour Organization (ILO), work design is important for reducing tension and avoiding workplace aggression. Organizations can reduce role overload by ensuring that staffing levels are appropriate and working hours are not excessive ILO, 2000). Role ambiguity and conflict can be reduced by ensuring tasks are clearly defined and employees receive the same information from all supervisors.

The degree of control employees have over their work may also reduce role stressors. Dupré (2004) showed that overcontrol by a supervisor is positively associated with workplace aggression, suggesting that greater job control may also be negatively related to workplace aggression. Job control has been suggested as a moderator between role stressors and job strain (Spector, 2002). Karasek's (1979) job demands-control theory predicts that people who do not have job control will be less able to cope with job stress. There has been mixed support for the ability of job control to moderate the stressor/strain relationship (Beehr & Glazer, 2004). Beehr (1976) found that autonomy over one's work moderates the relationship between role ambiguity and depression; however, other researchers have found that job control does not moderate the stressor/strain relationship (e.g., O'Driscoll & Beehr, 2000).

Schaubroeck and Merritt (1997) tested the three-way interaction between self-efficacy, job control, and job demands to determine whether employees with higher self-efficacy are better able to use job control to cope with job demands. They found support for this prediction, suggesting that organizations that provide greater autonomy to employees should work to enhance their self-efficacy. When employees believe they can do a good job, having control over their job mitigates the effects of high job demands on stress outcomes.

## Job Insecurity: Managing Transition

Job loss is an extremely traumatic experience for employees. Jahoda (1979) argued that work fills a variety of functions for employees that are critical to their identity and well-being. Work provides a shared experience with others, allows contact with people outside the family, defines a metagoal in life, suggests aspects of status, and imposes a time structure for employees. In a study of workers who had lost their jobs, Fineman (1983) similarly found that the loss of a job meant far more than just the loss of remuneration; it resulted in personal disorientation that challenged the individuals' understanding of their own identity. As such, it is critical for organizations to recognize the magnitude of loss such an experience has for employees and take proactive measures to help employees through the process, whatever the reason for the termination.

In terms of the decision to lay off, it is critical to implement such decisions with dignity and respect, consistent with the discussion of interactional justice

mentioned previously. Similarly, the decision to lay off employees should be made using transparent and procedurally just decision criteria. Hemingway and Conte (2003) found that consistency of implementing layoffs and an unbiased layoff policy were key predictors of perceived fairness in layoff policies. Similarly, the size of the severance package was positively associated with justice perceptions (Hemingway & Conte, 2003). Procedural justice and transparency in the layoff process is critical, as it enables employees to gauge whether they should begin preparing for the possibility of job loss. Advance warning allows employees an opportunity to maintain control over their transition, enabling them to cope better with imminent unemployment.

A second important step is for organizations to ease the layoff process as much as possible for the employee. Waxman (1995) recommends several specific steps to help make the layoff process as dignified as possible. He suggest that although some companies immediately confiscate keys and have a security guard escort employees out due to security concerns, this process is demeaning and is likely to increase the likelihood of a hostile reaction. Waxman (1995) argues that organizations should instead allow employees the time to say good-bye to coworkers and to take their time clearing out their belongings. More important, he suggests that the manager who is terminating the employment relationship should provide specific details about the severance package, the procedures for termination, unemployment benefits, and outplacement services. Such information communicates to the employees that the organization cares about their well-being and also provides the employee with some guidance on how to take action rather than leaving them at a loss about how to proceed.

Finally, it is likely that employees who are provided with a reasonable explanation for the layoff are less likely to become aggressive, although no research exists on the effects of explanation on perceptions of justice among employees being laid off. *Informational justice* is defined as the accuracy and quality of explanations employees receive regarding procedures (Kernan & Hanges, 2002). Kernan and Hanges examined the effects of informational justice on *survivors* of layoffs and found that explanations increased trust in management. Shaw et al. (2003) found that employees who were provided with an adequate explanation for a negative outcome held higher justice perceptions than those who did not receive an adequate explanation. Waxman (1995) emphasizes that explanations should focus on the behavioral aspects of the employees' performance and avoid personal issues.

## Proactive Prevention: Changing the Setting

Despite efforts to prevent them, some of the situational predictors outlined above may occur despite organizational efforts to prevent them. In addition, as we outlined earlier, situational predictors are not the only antecedents to aggression; individual predictors also contribute to aggressive acts. As such, organizations must consider the aspects of the organizational context (or setting) that could help prevent aggression.

## Transparent Policies and Organizational Sanctions

A number of researchers have recommended that organizations implement an organizational policy on aggression as one potential preventative technique (Braverman, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1993; Howard, 2001). Recent research has demonstrated that organizational tolerance of aggression and organizational policies on aggression are related to workplace aggression (Schat, 2004). In particular, Schat found that employees report lower levels of supervisor aggression in organizations that communicate and enforce a workplace aggression policy. Schat also found a positive relationship between supervisor tolerance for aggression and employee reports of aggressive behavior. This suggests that the attitude of the supervisor is critical in setting the example for acceptable behavior. Therefore, a clearly communicated policy of workplace aggression is an important first step for proactive prevention of workplace aggression.

Such a policy, if transparent, would ensure that employees are aware of the organization's position regarding aggression and the process that should be taken if a threat of aggression occurs. A transparent aggression policy should include a *clear* and *visible*

definition of aggression,

statement about the organization's policy regarding aggression,

set of guidelines for how policy violations are to be reported,

set of procedures about how reports of violations will be handled,

process for investigated charges of policy violation, and

set of specific sanctions that will follow if the policy is violated.

The most important aspect of transparency is clear and visible communication. Clarity is important as it ensures that there can be no misunderstanding of the meaning of the definition of aggression, the policy, the process, or the sanctions; however, clarity alone is insufficient, because clear policies that employees never see will be ineffective. The visibility of the definition, policy, sanctions, and process is also necessary.

In order for employees to understand and adhere to a policy on aggression, they must understand what *aggression* means. The academic literature is fraught with definitional inconsistencies and disagreements (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996), so an organization should not assume that the meaning of *aggression* is obvious to employees. Management of the organization must decide what definition of *aggression* they deem to be appropriate and communicate this definition clearly to employees, ensuring that all aspects of the definition are addressed (i.e., physical and sexual harassment, psychological harassment). Once a definition is agreed on, a zero-tolerance policy should be devised and a process for investigation

articulated (Braverman, 1999). This policy should include specific sanctions that are agreed on by management.

To ensure greater visibility, organizations should include a discussion about the aggression policy in their training program and policy manual for all new employees. Managers should also ensure that they provide reasonable explanations about why they are setting a particular policy. Greenberg (1994) found that when managers provided lots of information related to a new smoking ban policy, employees who were smokers were more accepting of the ban than when they were not given adequate information. In addition, managers should receive aggression and violence training that deals in particular with the process of addressing a complaint about aggression. Informed managers who are properly trained will help ensure a coordinated response that serves to mitigate escalation and protect employees (Braverman, 1999).

A key difficulty with the implementation of aggression policies is that managers may be reluctant to take action against employees who they believe might become aggressive or violent (Braverman, 1999). Managers often fear that taking action will instigate an aggressive act. Neglecting to take action threatens the safety of employees and exacerbates the situation because distraught employees usually want to see that some action is being taken to address their concerns.

## Reactive Prevention

### Expression of Discontent and Requests for Restitution

As noted earlier, employees often indicate that they are unhappy with a process or a situation before they take action (Braverman, 1999). As such, an organization can mitigate acts of aggression by ensuring that they have fair procedures in place for investigating, addressing, and correcting the conditions that fostered the expressions of discontent. Kuzmits (2001) warns never to ignore employee grievances. Such expressions of discontent are a possible warning that a situational predictor has occurred, and the organization can still take action to address the issue.

On occasion, managers may mistakenly violate one or more of the first five factors of procedural justice discussed earlier. Such a violation may be one situational predictor that leads to an expression of discontent, which may escalate to aggression. The final factor suggested by Leventhal (1980) is *correctibility*, which enables biased, inaccurate, unethical, or inconsistent decisions to be investigated and corrected if they are determined to be errors. When employees express discontent over a decision or a process, organizations must have a process in place whereby the situation can be investigated and corrected. Such a system should involve the participation of the employee and should be completely transparent to the employee so that he or she is aware of the process that will be used to investigate their complaint.

The employee must be told what is being done, how it is being done, and how long it will take for the management to arrive at a decision. When employees perceive that the organization is taking their complaints seriously, they will be more likely to perceive the process as fair and will be less likely to escalate toward aggression.

## Aggression: Reacting to Threats

If the preventative measures outlined in the previous sections are adhered to, organizations should not have to react to acts of aggression because such acts are unlikely to occur. Unfortunately, many organizations, particularly those that have never been faced with aggression in the workplace, do not proactively implement policies and training because the possibility of aggression or violence is not even on the horizon. Acts of aggression, including verbal threats to carry out violence, yelling, and other nonphysical threatening behavior are strong signals that the organization *must* take seriously. Management must immediately react to reports of such threats according to the training they received. In particular, it is crucial that the offender be directly confronted, told about the threat, and told exactly what will be done to investigate this threat.

Braverman (1999) suggests that reactions to threats are often ignored either because managers believe the threats will not be carried through or because of fear that reacting to the threats will instigate a violent response. Ignoring threats is likely to lead an organization to the final reactive procedure for dealing with aggression, *regret.* Once a violent action has occurred, a different set of procedures, discussed in Chapter 21, must be taken. Organizations can avoid such negative outcomes by taking a proactive stance on violence prevention to ensure a safe environment for all organizational members.

# Future Research

The study of any infrequent occurrence (e.g., injuries, workplace violence) creates difficulties for research, and this is particularly so when examining how to prevent such occurrences. As noted in this chapter, however, the organization has a strong hand in contributing to acts of workplace aggression; therefore, it is the responsibility of organizational behavior researchers to determine the best strategies for preventing such aggression. Future research should specifically focus on proactive measures to determine whether they help mitigate workplace aggression. We argued that transparent organizational policies, adequate explanations for layoffs, realistic job previews, increased workplace control, fair procedures, and training

on transformational and transactional leadership would help eliminate situational predictors. Many of these strategies have not been empirically examined. In addition, although limited exploratory work has been conducted (Howard, 2001), we do not yet know whether workplace aggression training and policies mitigate aggressive acts. Past research has focused on understanding the key predictors of aggression. Such research has revealed that preventable situational factors that are under the control of the organization predict aggression. The more important question of how to eliminate such predictors has yet to receive research attention.

## Epilogue

Prevention of workplace aggression is an understudied topic. This chapter provided many suggestions on how an organization can go about preventing workplace aggression; however, research in this area is needed in order to determine which strategies for aggression prevention are most effective. This chapter provided a number of avenues for future research. First, researchers should examine which proactive strategies are most effective in preventing the situational predictors of workplace aggression. There is some evidence that leadership training improves subordinate perceptions of the leader (e.g., Barling et al., 1996); however, there have been no studies that examine whether realistic job previews reduce the experience of role stressors. Similarly, the research on job control and the reduction of role stressors is contradictory. Further research should examine whether greater autonomy leads to lower levels of stress and ultimately lower levels of workplace aggression. Second, researchers should examine whether the use of transparent policies are effective in mitigating workplace aggression. Third, although much research has examined the effects of layoffs on survivors, few studies examine how layoffs affect those being laid off. Research should examine the effects of transition programs to determine whether such programs are associated with higher perceptions of fairness. Do employees who are provided with information related to social assistance and job placement programs have more positive feelings toward the organization after being laid off? Finally, researchers should try to understand which damage control (reactive) procedures are effective in mitigating workplace aggression after a situational predictor has occurred. After identifying injustice or poor leadership, how should managers react to correct the problem? Do fair procedures and the provision for correctibility stem the escalation of aggression? Research addressing these important questions would help managers determine which strategies work best for the prevention of workplace aggression.

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