



The Act of Violence

Workplace Violence Among Cops: An ICE Agent Opens Fire

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The February 16 shooting between ICE agents at the federal building in Long Beach, CA illustrates a rare but troubling phenomenon: workplace violence among law enforcement officers. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agent Ezequiel "Zeke" Garcia is said to have shot his supervisor, Kevin Kozak, the office's number two in command, six times. Kozak has survived his wounds. Garcia was involved in a meeting over his performance and was reportedly upset that Kozak had denied his request for a transfer. ICE Agent Perry Woo entered the meeting room and wrestled for Garcia's gun. Woo shot and killed Garcia and ended the deadly confrontation.

Agent Woo did a bold and brave act, which was both necessary, to stop the bloodshed, and certainly troubling to him as well. Having to kill anyone is a horrific, life-changing event for every law enforcement officer. Having to kill a colleague who has just shot the boss is exponentially more difficult to cope with in the aftermath.

And what, do we suppose, was Agent Garcia's plan after he had just nearly killed his supervisor? More murders in the office, followed by his own suicide? It's hard to imagine that a federal agent who has just fired on his supervisor would give up and accept what would be a long federal prison sentence. As after many of these workplace cases, the perpetrator often kills himself, ending a violent trajectory that may not have been part of his original plan, if there ever was one.

Police officers deal with workplace violence incidents every day, either as first-responders to threats by current or former employees; to help employees who are frightened when domestic violence or stalking crosses over from home to work; and sadly, as those who are victims of workplace violence when they are injured or killed in the line of duty. (Law enforcement ranks as one of the most dangerous jobs to be killed by someone, after taxi cab driver and retail store clerk.) Because of their frequent responses to workplace violence threats or acts, they may take the issue in stride, treating it like any other crime problem. Every officer who has worked in the field or in corrections for at least a week has been threatened by people ranging from obnoxious drunks to hardcore gang members. As such, they take these threats for granted, seeing it as "part of the job."

Threats or acts of violence in healthcare settings draw the same response: "What can you do? It's just the nature of this business," say veteran ER staffers. This is wrong because it's unsafe, demoralizing, rationalizing, and sends the wrong messages to the threateners that it's okay. When there are no consequences for the dangerous behaviors or acts of a patient, the whole hospital environment is at risk.

But when the threatener is a cop, the stakes change dramatically. Now we are faced with an armed, tactically-trained employee who may be angry, depressed, violent, vengeful, or driven by various demons ranging from substance abuse to mental illness.

Workplace violence incidents involving homicides are rare in this country. Just over 550 people are murdered while doing their jobs. And while homicides involving cops as the perpetrators are quite rare, they are extremely catastrophic. There have been cases where despondent and rageful officers have shot at their colleagues, who came to arrest them, talk to them, or who just happened to be at the station when the attacker came after a co-worker, supervisor, or ex-spouse.

Most workplace violence incidents involving cops as killers are actually turned inward, as with police suicides. (The number of officers killed in the line of duty each year is about 120 to 150. The number of officers who kill themselves each year is about 180 to 200.)

The reasons for police suicides often center on the themes of loss and the accompanying shame: job or career problems; personal losses; professional status loss of face; money worries; relationship failures (Agent Garcia was said to have been going through a divorce); freedom (pending criminal charges), substance abuse issues (law enforcement is a very alcohol-friendly culture); or serious physical or mental health issues (with depression being very common among suicidal officers). When faced with what they perceive to be unsolvable problems, they may take their own lives.

Most city and county agencies have workplace violence policies that prevent threats, bullying, assaults, or the use of weapons in their facilities. Police supervisors need to apply these same policies to their own employees when it comes to problems like officers brandishing weapons at each other; making threats to harm, like "Try to fire me and I'll kill you!"; or homicide / suicide situations, where the officer feels no hope and may harm himself or others. The priorities should be to deal with the safety issues first, the behavior problems second, and the career consequences third.

Workplace violence involving cops as perpetrators is thankfully rare. But the constant presence of firearms and the potential for murder-suicide by the troubled, depressed, or substance-abusing employee can make for a volatile situation if it's not managed with compassion, assertiveness, and an eye toward the safety of the interveners.

Dr. Steve Albrecht, PHR, CPP, is a San Diego-based speaker and author on high-risk HR and security issues. In 1994, he co-wrote ***Ticking Bombs***, one of the first business books on workplace violence. He worked for the San Diego Police Department for 15 years. He can be reached at drsteve@drstevealbrecht.com