

STEMMING A VIOLENT TIDE

BY MABLE SMITH-PITTMAN

A California father of seven was fired as an airline ticket agent. The agent smuggled a .44 magnum aboard a flight carrying the supervisor who had fired him. After the plane was airborne, the estranged agent shot his former boss, the pilot and the co-pilot, causing a crash that took the lives of 43 passengers, including both the agent and the supervisor.

A civilian employee at Fort Knox, Kentucky, had been passed over for a promotion. Before killing himself, the employee shot and killed three civilian co-workers, including his boss, and critically wounded two others.

A technician quit his job because of the difficulty of working for a woman. He subsequently sneaked back inside his fiber-optics lab, pulled out a 9-mm semiautomatic pistol and began to fire at workers, who ducked or fled or sought shelter by curling up in closets and file cabinets. By the time he had finished the grim work, two were dead and two were injured. The technician walked upstairs to an office and shot himself in the head.

Workplace anger is not new. Traditionally, however, violence in the workplace was an aberration, such an uncommon occurrence that it captured neither the attention of managers nor the general public. Recently, of course, that's changed. Anyone watching television, reading the newspaper or listening to drive-time radio can hear stories of this or that worker run amok, armed and dangerous, out to hurt those who have hurt him (indeed, nearly all violent workplace incidents are instigated by males). We now take for granted that work-related frustration can quickly escalate into major outbursts of violence.

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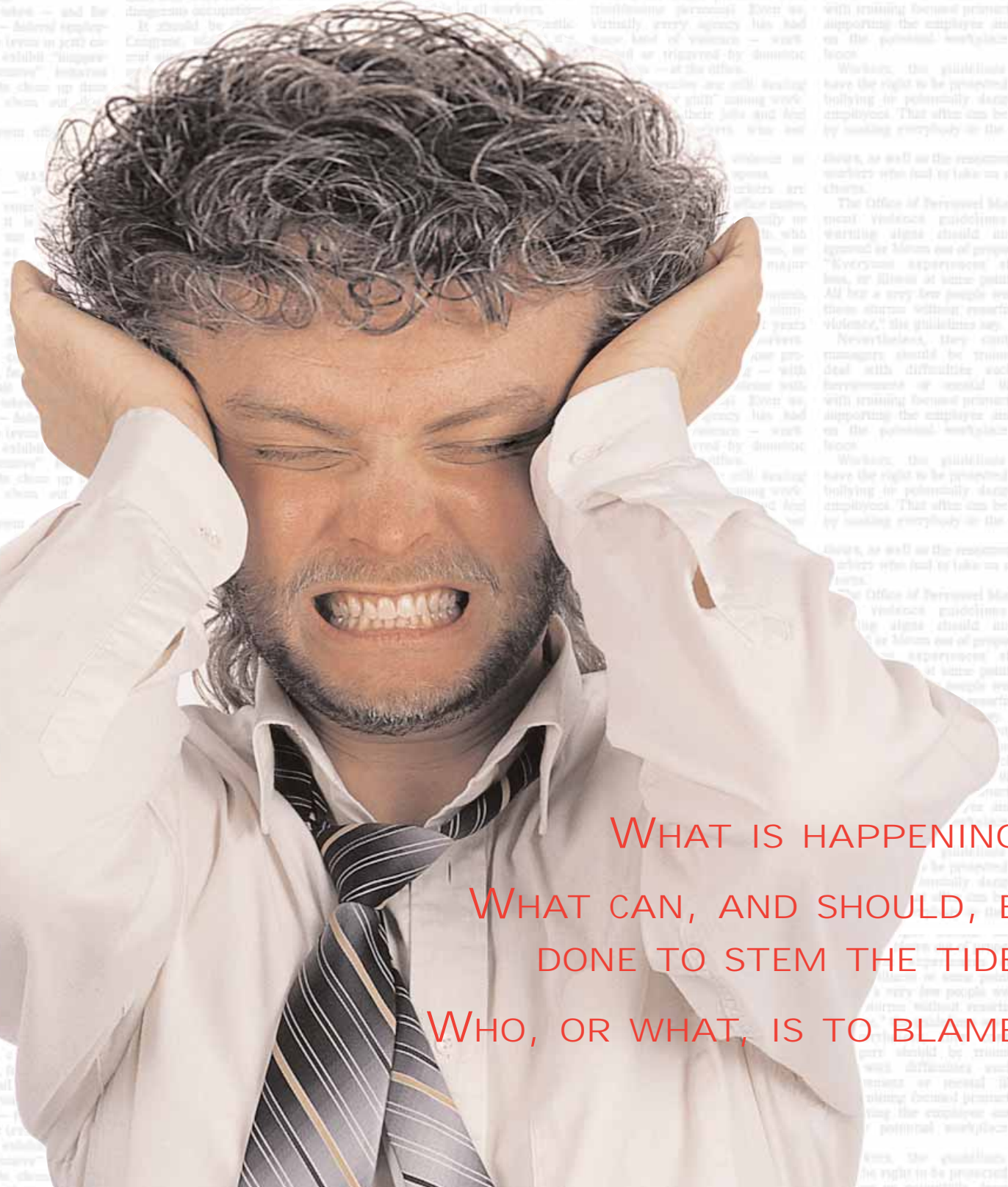
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WHAT IS HAPPENING?
WHAT CAN, AND SHOULD, BE
DONE TO STEM THE TIDE?
WHO, OR WHAT, IS TO BLAME?

SOUR WORK, SULLEN WORKERS

Most people can become angry, even enraged, without expressing themselves physically or through violent acts. Effective anger management can be learned in the home, at school or in the course of normal human maturation. Despite training and intervention, however, not all are capable of such self-control.

Not a few current workers grew to adulthood knowing little, if anything, about how to manage anger. Some were latchkey kids or grew up in dysfunctional, unsupportive environments with poor role models. Such people tend to turn to the workplace for the emotional comfort they crave. Unfortunately, these days, the workplace isn't able to provide such support. Most businesses are set up to make a profit; inasmuch as workers contribute to the bottom line, they are valued and appreciated. But that is the extent of the commitment.

In the culture in which we live, nearly everyone defines themselves partially or wholly by the professions they practice and the jobs they occupy. Indeed, it can be argued that the near-deification of work is a social problem. By investing work with the passion that previous generations saved for religious expression, contemporary workers run a severe risk to their emotional well-being if their jobs are put at risk for any reason. Any threat can be quickly perceived as an immediate and direct threat to the self.

The causes of intense workplace anger are several. One primary reason is the end of lifetime employment and security. Downsizing, restructuring and reengineering are turning workplaces upside down, causing workers to become frustrated, scared and, in some cases, enraged. These days, once someone loses a job, it's difficult to find a comparable one.

In earlier decades, the vast majority of workers who lost their jobs could easily find equivalent ones. Not so now. According to studies done of job loss in the 1990s, fully 90 percent of terminated workers can expect severe difficulty in finding new employment. Compounding the problem are the common insensitivities practiced during downsizing and layoffs.

Furthermore, the impersonal aspects of organizational structure enable and abet dominant supervisors, preventing employees from expressing injustice, frustration and anger.

Toxic companies are controlled through a culture of suppression and fear, creating an environment where mistreatment at the hands of supervisors or coworkers is a daily occurrence. Such environments enhance the potential for anger and aggression for people with low self-esteem and emotional difficulties.

PROFILE OF THE EXPLOSION

Violence directed at employers almost always follows a set sequence. It begins with a traumatic experience, such as a job termination, or a series of minor events such as reprimands and negative performance reviews or the imminent threat of suspension or firing. This, in turn, creates the perception of an unsolvable threat to self. Intense and chronic emotional tension or anxiety follows.

The traumatized employee, rather than acknowledging self-deficits or shortcomings, then projects responsibility for the situation onto others, externalizing blame. The person's thinking turns inward and becomes increasingly egocentric. Self-protection and self-preservation become the only concerns. From this perspective, violence seems to be the only way out. Following a period of internal conflict, which may be prolonged, the person attempts or commits a violent act.

The typical profile of a violence-prone employee is that of a male armed-forces veteran who has a quick temper on a short fuse. He suffers from low self-esteem, paranoia or depression and is a loner who resents authority. He blames co-workers, management or other third parties for any problem that arises. There is often drug or alcohol abuse, a record of criminal assault or a fascination with weapons. The likelihood of instigating violence accelerates in the face of unresolved conflict and frustration at home or at work.

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STEPS TOWARD A SOLUTION

Workers are not commodities nor are they pawns. Their feelings must be acknowledged and they should receive the same personal consideration as do executives and supervisory staff. Despite unrelenting economic pressure, all businesses and institutions should treat employees with dignity and respect. As part of this policy, employers should maintain and encourage open communication with a "no consequences" policy that encourages people to say what is on their minds without fear of reprisal.

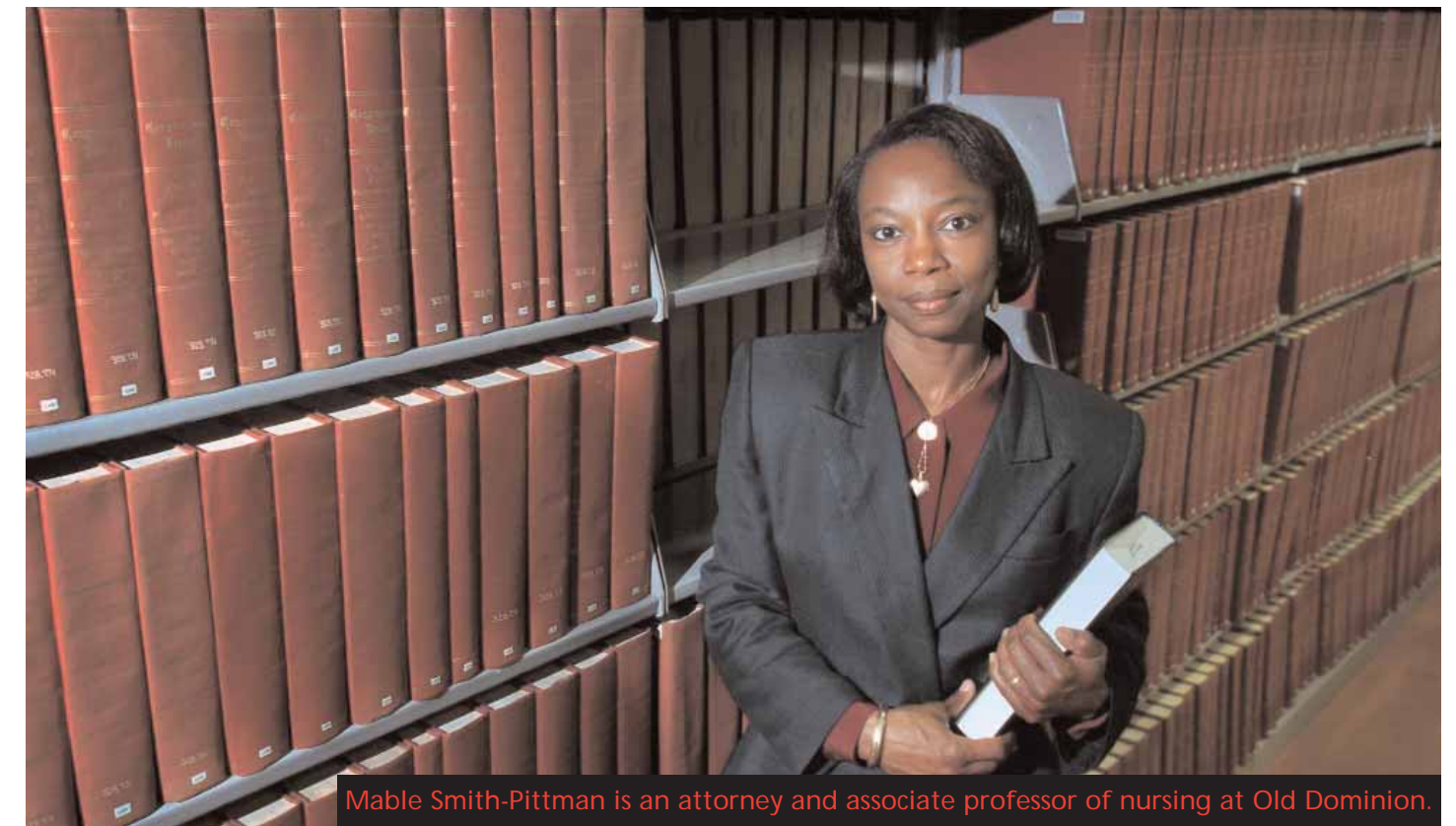
For their part, managers and supervisors should be alert for potential situational and behavioral problems, particularly when screening job candidates. Co-workers are usually the first to recognize that something is wrong but are often hesitant to get involved or do not see actions taken when they report their concerns.

Employers should create and enforce a "zero tolerance" workplace violence policy: one that prohibits harassment of any kind, threats of violence, intimidation and weapon possession on company premises, and one that elicits quick and appropriate response when any maladaptive behavior first

emerges. Managers should take practical steps, which include the creation of special forms and reporting mechanisms for violent incidents, as well as the establishment of a hotline and a confidential procedure for disgruntled and satisfied employees alike that permits the timely reporting of threats, belligerence and other inappropriate conduct. Employers should also assess the security of buildings, which includes good lighting and one primary entryway/exit as examples of a well-planned environment that can deter acts of violence.

Although employers should not hesitate to discharge violent workers, managerial personnel should exercise common sense in every situation. For example, one should never fire workers on Fridays or at the beginnings of holidays. Better to release employees so they can at least talk (however briefly) with managers or co-workers, obtain more information or start a job search. Again, the rule of respect applies.

Death or injury should not occur in the workplace, nor should workplace violence become so commonplace in our society that it is accepted as a cost of doing business. But it will remain unless those whose job it is to create and maintain employment make profound and lasting change in attitudes and procedures.



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