

Workplace Violence Prevention and the Threat Assessment Team

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Abstract:

University campuses unfortunately not exempt from the same type of workplace violence that occurs across the United States. On the Florida State University Campus, a Crisis Response Team has existed for approximately 15 years. This team is a joint effort between the Psychology and the University Police Departments. Their primary responsibility is to respond to individuals when they are in crisis or when their behaviors are of an immediate concern to persons around them. This team has the authority to intervene to defuse a situation or even make involuntary commitments to a psychiatric facility for up to 72-hours in accordance with Florida law.

While the Crisis Response Team could respond to an immediate concern, there was no mechanism in place for addressing concerns of staff employees, faculty, administrators, and students in regards to potential violence of other employees, students, or guests. To address this concern, the University administration, in 1999, appointed a committee to rewrite the University Workplace Violence Guidelines and create a Threat Assessment Team.

Introduction of the Organization:

The Florida State University, a large state institution of higher education, employs approximately 10,000 individuals. Like most large organizations, the employee population is comprised of individuals who represent a cross-section of the general work force. Many of these individuals are employees with many years of valuable and dedicated service to the University. A responsibility of the University is to provide, to the greatest extent possible, a positive and safe working environment free from physical threats, intimidation, and harassment.

Statement of the problem:

In 1999, out of concern for increasing violence occurring on academic campuses across the country, the University created a Threat Assessment Team (TAT). Although there had been a variety of teams or committees created over the years to address a wide variety of safety and mental health concerns of the campus community, no one group or department had been charged with pre-emptive intervention when a potentially threatening situation was building. The University senior administration, in an effort to correct this situation, established a Threat Assessment Team, to assess potentially threatening behaviors and act proactively while adhering to state and federal laws and respecting the rights of all individuals involved.

When an individual became alarmed by the behaviors of an employee, student, or guest, they can contact the University Police Department and request assistance. The Chief, or his Shift Commander in the Chief's absence, would make a determination as to the most appropriate level of intervention necessary to address the concern. The Crisis Response Team would take action to address immediate safety matters whereas the Threat Assessment Team would be referred those matters involving potential future safety matters. In looking at future safety concerns, the University was taking a proactive stance to ward off possible violent situations and providing a safer environment in which to work, live, and study.

Design:

The Threat Assessment Team is a collaborative effort. For administrative purposes, the Threat Assessment Team falls under the Employee Assistance Program while functionally, team meetings are routinely called by the Chief of Police. The Threat Assessment Team is composed of four standing members and other people determined to be necessary to make a thorough situational evaluation and take the necessary corrective action. The TAT members include:

- The Chief of the University Police Department (standing member)
- The Director of the Employee Assistance Program (standing member)
- The Assistant Vice-President for Human Resources (standing member)
- General Counsel (standing member)
- The Dean or VP of the area in which the individual of concern works or attends classes
- The Director or Department Chair of the area in which the individual works or attends classes.
- The immediate supervisor (if any) of the individual of concern

If an individual has an immediate concern, they are encouraged to contact the Police Department directly. However, in many cases, either the HR Department or the EAP is made aware of a potentially threatening situation and calls for a TAT meeting. Prior to the actual TAT meeting, the Police Department will conduct a criminal history check of the individual while the Human Resources Department brings together the individual's personnel records. During the meetings, the EAP Director serves as a mental health and human behavior consultant and the General Counsel provides legal guidance. Immediate supervisors, Vice-presidents, Deans, Directors, Department Chairs present provide information as to their immediate concerns and the concerned individual's behaviors that they consider troubling. The situation is discussed with a view of intervening at the most appropriate level to protect all parties while respecting the rights and dignity of the individual.

The role of the TAT is an advisory one, with final decisions resting with the appropriate VP, Dean, Director, or Department Chair.

Implementation:

The TAT was created out of the belief that it is more effective and prudent to take pre-emptive action than to respond to a violent action. The TAT was created by the President at the recommendation of the Workplace Violence Task Force. The membership is kept to only 4 standing members with additional members invited in to address the concerns regarding specific individuals.

The TAT functionally reports to the Chief of Police, which allows law enforcement personnel to make an immediate assessment as to the proper response necessary to address the situation. Administratively, the TAT is a function of the EAP, thereby maintaining the confidentiality of the records and protecting the dignity of the individuals about whom concern has been raised. Because the TAT is advisory in nature, no public access is considered appropriate. Any action, which will be subject to open record laws, will be initiated by the appropriate department and will be in accordance with current statutes.

Retrospect:

The TAT has been a strong collaborative effort that has functioned well and exceeded initial expectations of potential use. Considering that no formal policies or procedures were present when this Team was formed, it quickly evolved into a frequently used service by supervisors and administrators from across the campus. It has provided effective interventions and has probably been effective in preventing some degree of workplace violence.

In retrospect, it would have been beneficial to have used an established protocol from the beginning. Several protocols are currently on the market and these are currently being evaluated by the TAT standing members. Another difficulty is making the scope of the services known to the many supervisors, managers, and administrators across the campus. In spite of the lack of publicity

however, the team has been called into frequent meetings and has provided valuable recommendations.

It is difficult to determine the financial savings or human cost to the student and employee populations or the University. However, if only one violent situation can be avoided or one life saved, or one lawsuit avoided, the effort will not have been in vain. However, the actual costs associated with the TAT operations are no more than the cost of an individual's time to serve on any University Committee.