

# Giving dangerous employees socialization, close supervision can avoid problems

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Pictured are M. Ann McFadyen and James Campbell Quick. Credit: UT Arlington

Two UT Arlington management professors argue that employers can prevent workplace violence by keeping dangerous employees positively engaged and closely supervising them to ensure they get the help they need.

James Campbell Quick and M. Ann McFadyen of the College of Business management department analyzed FBI reports, case studies and human resource records to focus on the estimated 1 to 3 percent of [employees](#) prone to workplace acts of aggression, such as homicide, suicide or destruction of property.

The team advances the case for "mindfully observing" employees and found that human resources professionals and supervisors can advance health, wellbeing, and performance while averting danger and violence by identifying and managing high-risk employees, anticipating their needs and providing support and resources.

"The cause of these problems are understandable and predictable," said Quick, a Distinguished Professor of Leadership and Organizational Behavior. "And many times these violent incidents shouldn't be viewed as random or surprises."

The paper, "No Accident: Health, Wellbeing, Performance ... and Danger," is published by the *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*. The two teamed with Oklahoma State University's Debra Nelson on the study. Nelson is the Spears School of Business Associates' Chaired Professor of Business Administration and Distinguished Professor of Management. She also was the 2004 Goolsby Distinguished Visiting Professor.

"Corporations need to plug troubled employees into the social network immediately so they don't store up these negative feelings whenever and wherever they get them," said Quick, who also holds the John and Judy Goolsby-Jacquelyn A. Fouse Endowed Chair in the Goolsby Leadership Academy. Quick also is a distinguished visiting scholar at Lancaster University Management School in the United Kingdom.

College of Business Dean Rachel Croson said this type of research adds

insight for businesses in the real world.

"Businesses often look at these problems only after they occur," Croson said. "This research offers companies action steps they can take to prevent such tragedies from occurring. It not only helps people but could save lives."

McFadyen's role in the research was looking at positive and negative deviant behaviors among employees. Positive deviant acts will often benefit the organization (i.e. going out of one's way to help another). Conversely, negative deviant acts will likely have an adverse impact on the organization and have the potential to put the organization or others in danger.

The study noted that the low intense negative deviant act of incivility is often the starting point of the escalation to more dangerous and violent behavior.

"Incivility toward another includes gossiping, texting in meetings, withholding information, ignoring or simply a general lack of respect or regard for others," McFadyen said. "What is concerning is that incivility is on the rise in the workplace, with the majority of employees reporting that they have been the target of incivility by another."

Research indicates that most organizations have training on ethics and diversity, yet few provide training on incivility.

McFadyen said the study gives guidance on how to train supervisors to recognize and monitor incivility.

"Incivility, left unchecked, may lead to more dangerous acts", McFadyen said, "Research indicates that, while not all acts of incivility lead to violent acts, all violent acts in the workplace were preceded by acts of

incivility."

One challenge, Quick said, is that employees often cannot be pre-screened for these tendencies. He said dangerous employees don't often show the inclination for dangerous behavior during the interview process.

"It's often something that those employees get once they're in a job," Quick said. "That's why socialization and making sure employees air out what's bothering them are two big factors in whether the behavior eventually becomes an incident."

Quick said it's imperative for organizations to keep the employees talking about what it is that's bothering them.

"You can't allow the dangerous employee to bury the issue," Quick said. "And sometimes organizations have a problem in wanting to see the issue come to the surface. Organizations have to admit they be part of the problem."

Quick and the team take actual cases where dangerous employees took action that ended in a wrongful death, sexual assault and management harassment. The team also looked at one positive organizational case where harm and death were averted.

In addition, the study also shows what organizations and people need to do to right themselves after dangerous employees' behavior leads to a violent incident.

Quick said the study outlines a four-step approach if the worse should happen:

- Contain the perpetrator or problem.

- Provide physical and mental caregiving for victims of the incident.
- Encourage forgiveness of the dangerous employee. Forgiveness is not condoning, excusing, denying, minimizing or forgetting a wrong.
- Learning from the dangerous employee's incident.

Provided by University of Texas at Arlington

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