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Conflict De-Escalation: Workplace Training

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Abstract

This paper considers the use of de-escalation techniques to manage aggressive behaviours such as challenging behaviours, behaviours of concern, verbal abuse, threats and threatening behaviours, and physical assault from a workplace perspective. The techniques are presented as training requirements for a program to develop competency and confidence in de-escalation practices. Training in this area should cover a range of performance and knowledge requirements inclusive of sources of anger and aggression and how they can lead to violence, undertaking situational risk assessment, use of de-escalation techniques, and self-care.

Keywords

Workplace Violence, De-Escalation, Conflict, Training, Managing Aggression

1. Introduction

Any person in any workplace could be exposed to actual or potential violence; however some occupations are more likely than others to be at risk of exposure to incidents that may result in violence. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), workplace violence is defined as violence or the threat of physical violence against workers (United States Department of Labor, 2020). Safe Work Australia (2020) defines that “work-related violence can be any incident where a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work”. It can occur at the workplace, or anywhere an individual is performing their job away from the work site, and can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide and can affect and involve employees, clients, customers and visitors. Depending on the occupation, this can also include community members. OSHA also notes that employees working alone, working late at night, or working in high-crime areas, are all more likely to be subjected to an act of violence (United States Department of

Labor, 2020).

Safe Work Australia (2020) reflects that data indicates workers in a range of industries are more likely to experience work-related violence. These industries are health care and social assistance, public administration and safety and education and training. A number of occupations are identified as such inclusive of nurses, doctors, paramedics, residential carers, police officers, protective service offices, prison guards, welfare support workers, teachers and teachers' aides (*Safe Work Australia, 2020*).

Taylor (2014) suggests that conflict is inevitable, and can occur in many forms, occurring at any time there is a trial of strength between two opposing parties and principles. As such, conflict can occur whenever two people do not agree with each other and the disagreement leads to frustration which can then escalate rapidly into anger. Where the anger is not treated, it can worsen to aggression and violence or other forms of irrational behaviour. Work-related violence can harm both the person it is directed at, and anyone witnessing it, both physically and psychologically. All effort must be made to prevent workplace violence to eliminate such harm. *Lowry (2016)* identifies that dealing with people who are angry can be difficult, particularly for those with little experience of doing so in a way that defuses the situation. Any activity, including training that helps workers deal with anger can contribute to minimising harm. *United States Department of Labor (2020)* recognise that training and education are key factors in responding to violence in the workplace.

Workplace violence is considered from the perspective of causes and mechanisms by which it escalates such that volatile situations can firstly be identified and subsequently de-escalated.

2. Method

Skiba (2020) identified that the corrections workforce needs to rely on individual cognitive skills and emotional intelligence to build rapport and sympathy with offenders in order to communicate effectively and resolve or de-escalate conflicts. The concepts of de-escalation of conflict presented in that study are extended within the current study with a broader application. This includes specification of de-escalation practices that are relevant to a wide variety of workplaces where workers are exposed to work-related violence hazards or hostile behaviour.

An explanatory research method, as described by *Blackstone (2012)* and *De-Carlo (2018)*, is utilised to explain and describe the use of de-escalation techniques. The research commences with general ideas related to conflict situations and de-escalation and synthesises these concepts into training requirements. This approach utilises secondary research through consideration of available relevant literature. The research method employed herein gathers information by means of literature review to collect information about the problem which requires in-depth analysis, as is an applicable approach particularly in social

science sectors.

3. Discussion

3.1 Sources of Anger, Conflict and Violence

Safe Work Australia (2020) identify that hazards for work-related violence can include working alone, in isolation or in a remote area with the inability to call for assistance, working offsite or in the community and working in unpredictable environments. They can also exist where workers are handling valuable or restricted items, for example cash, firearms or medicines, and providing care to people who are distressed, confused, afraid, ill or affected by drugs and alcohol. Safe Work Australia further note that enforcement activities, such the activities of police, prison officers or parking inspectors, provide additional work-related violence hazards. These job roles are more likely to encounter angry individuals and understanding sources of anger is central in developing an ability to de-escalate conflict situations for these workers.

People can become angry for a variety of reasons, and the way it is manifested varies between individuals and situations (Lowry, 2016). Anger can lead to conflict and conflict to violence, although violence is not seen as an inevitable consequence or accompaniment of conflict even though it is a possible outcome (Mulligan, 1999).

Emotion can be understood as indicative of met or unmet needs and anger can be an expression of an unmet need (Mulligan, 1999). Positive emotions are indicative of met needs and negative emotions indicative of unmet needs. Mulligan (1999) finds that the need most often associated with anger indicates a lack of, or blocked choice or freedom. Lowry (2016: p. 5) concurs with:

“The cause of anger is almost always an unmet need—for control, information, to be listened to, to feel safe or to be pain-free; it may have psychological antecedents or be triggered by fear”.

Individuals can become angry when someone impedes or interferes with them meeting their goals (Donohoe & Kolt, cited in Mulligan, 1999). Physiologically, when an individual gets angry, they get a surge of catecholamines, which include neurotransmitters such as dopamine, epinephrine (adrenaline) and norepinephrine (noradrenaline). The result being increased heart rate and blood flow to our hands and muscles which builds up the individual’s energy, preparing them to attack or defend, fight or take flight (Mulligan, 1999; Scott, 2020). Catecholamines are a part of the body’s stress response, which can be vital in a fight-or-flight response to a perceived threat. In a conflict situation, both parties to the conflict can experience a surge in catecholamines. Mulligan (1999) outlines that it is important to understand the physiological dimension of the anger experience such that in a conflict situation, workers do not become “confused or overtaken by its ferocity or distortion”. An individual who is overwhelmed by the physiological response may not be well placed to de-escalate a conflict situa-

tion. An understanding of these responses allows a worker to more effectively consider their range of choices and options for handling both the anger and the conflict. Workers need to develop the emotional competence to be aware of, own and manage their emotional responses.

From a sociological perspective, Mulligan (1999) notes that compromise, marginalisation, suppression of differences and even exclusion both overt and covert can lead feelings of a loss of identity, hopelessness, apathy, depression, anger and alienation from mainstream society. Mulligan further recognises that failure to work through conflicts arising out of natural differences often means that such conflict is recycled in various forms of oppression and retaliation, escalation and de-escalation and often punctuated by sporadic outbursts of aggression or violence. Social settings, on this basis, can also contribute to anger, leading to conflict and potential violence. There are many sources of anger that can be transferred into conflict in a workplace context, and given the range of sources, there is a degree of inevitability in workplace conflict. As stated by Mulligan (1999) when people enter a conflict, or have the potential for conflict, they assume they have the ability to affect one another's thoughts and or behaviours and try to do so.

Rank and privilege, or asymmetric power balance, complicates conflict and can also lead to escalation in conflict. Rank stem from a range of sources including social rank defined by relative powers and privileges are supported by social norms, localised or situated rank, as specific to an individual's position in that situation, and psychological or spiritual rank, as gained from life experiences. In a work situation, local rank issues are the most prominent. Organisations have hierarchies, and people with more authority will have higher rank.

Mulligan (1999) illuminates:

“Power imbalance or rank creates conflict and provokes anger because those with higher rank are often unaware of their oppressive use of their rank or power, can act with impunity in a way which impedes or interferes with the needs of others and often ignore, marginalise or exclude those with lower power or rank”.

Mulligan outlines that often those in high power or rank are unaware of the privilege which comes with their position and often abuse it provoking anger, revenge and retaliation from the excluded or marginalised. An asymmetric power balance can affect the way that people interact with each other and how safe they feel with each other. Likewise, it can affect the way that people conflict with each other.

Emotional intelligence development, as outlined by Skiba (2020), contributes to the identification of an individual's state and their potential responses to a given situation. Application of emotional intelligence facilitates demonstration of a high level of empathy and contribute to reading other people's emotions. This ability allows them to show concern for others and makes a positive contribution toward de-escalation.

3.2. Recognising Conflict Escalation

Aside from recognising anger, workers must also be able to recognise where anger is escalating to conflict. Mulligan (1999) defines escalating anger as “a series of sequential provocations which trigger increasing levels of excitation, each building on the one that went before, and which recede or dissipate slowly”.

Anticipation of potential conflict is an important aspect for preparing to manage a situation. Verbal and non-verbal cues may be present that a situation is escalating, and these must be recognised. Recognition requires identifying the signs that may be indicating escalation and these can include behaviours such as an individual clenching their fists or tightening and untightening their jaw, sudden changes in body language or tone used during a conversation, pacing or fidgeting, changes in type of eye contact, postural changes and disruptive behaviours. Disruptive behaviours can include, for example, yelling, bullying, using offensive language, and actively defying or refusing to comply with rules.

Security Magazine (2015) refers to an interview with Jim Sawyer, Director of Security Services for Seattle Children’s Hospital, to break these cues into verbal and non-verbal. Verbal threats, as Sawyer identifies, include threats (direct, veiled or conditional), boasting of prior violence, bragging about losing control, increases in pitch that can indicate that the person’s throat is tightening, repetition in word use or parroting or echoing, yelling, screaming, forced speech, slurred speech and talk of doing harm. Another verbal indicator can be a nervous laugh or laughing at inappropriate times, which Sawyer states is a way for the body to shed emotions. The non-verbal signs can include a violation of personal space, making fists and finger pointing, face flushing, breathing heavily, flared nostrils and refusing to make eye contact. This can also include behaviours such as blocking egress.

As Individual’s thoughts in the build-up trigger more intense anger, reason tends to get blocked out and there is little consideration of consequences which can then culminate into rage (Mulligan, 1999). This rage can include displaced or transferred anger from other events and experiences even unconnected to the current parties to the conflict at hand. Maiese (2003) informs that escalation refers to an increase in the intensity of a conflict and in the severity of tactics used in pursuing it. Maiese suggests that escalation is driven by changes within each of the parties to the conflict situation and new patterns of interaction between them. Escalation is likely where one or the other party demonstrates an increase in emotions like anger or frustration or where either party feels threatened. When an individual is in a stage of rage, any angry defence, self-justification, or personalised attack on the traits of the individual are likely to escalate the conflict.

3.3. De-Escalation Processes

The Seattle Police Department Manual defines de-escalation as:

“Taking action to stabilize the situation and reduce the immediacy of the

threat so that more time, options, and resources are available to resolve the situation. The goal of de-escalation is to gain the voluntary compliance of subjects, when feasible, and thereby reduce or eliminate the necessity to use physical force” (Best, 2019, s8.050).

De-escalation can be seen as more than temporary stabilisation and in many circumstances as undertaking action as necessary to take a volatile or violent situation and making it less volatile or violent. Richards (2007) suggests that the term de-escalation generally refers to the act of moving from a state of high tension to a state of reduced tension. When an individual de-escalates a crisis, they conduct an intervention that will assist the individual in crisis in regaining control emotionally and resolve or reduce the crisis to a manageable state (Olivia, Morgan, & Compton, 2010).

De-escalation is a way using of verbal and non-verbal techniques to defuse potentially dangerous behaviour from people who are highly agitated, frustrated, angry, fearful or intoxicated. Taylor (2014) recognises that there are a multitude of factors involved in identifying, de-escalating and managing conflict situations. In order to initiate a de-escalation process, an individual must first calm themselves prior to engaging with the other party. Other keys include maintaining an awareness of the situation and environment, presenting as non-threatening, making a personal connection, actively listening to the other party, creating hope and seeking agreement from the other party.

Taylor (2014), referring to security industry practices, outlines an “Observe, Orientation, Decision and Action” loop in de-escalation processes. Observation in this context refers to situational awareness and an appreciation of the situation in totality. Orientation calls for consideration of all the information that has been gathered about the conflict and comparing it to the individual’s training, experiences and their knowledge. Decisions can then be made as to the best course of action accounting for the situation and orientation, and finally action can be taken. The action taken will result in some reaction or change in circumstances which recommences the loop.

Techniques such as effective listening can allow an irate person to “flood,” which is a means of purging angry energy (Ringer, 2017). Use of acknowledgement can relay understanding what a person is meaning or feeling, which in turn, facilitates validation of the other party’s emotions. The objective in this case being, as suggested by Ringer (2017), to confirm the legitimacy of the emotion, but not the behaviour. Ringer also notes that some job roles involve enforcing conditions, and consequences for breaking those conditions. Those in these positions may fall into a challenging posture with those breaking the rules or conditions. Presenting choices involves defining conditions and consequences rather than being threatening. This can make the other party aware that they have a choice in how they handle their behaviour.

Glasl (1982) outlines a model of escalation in nine descending stages, in which the first three stages are described as “win-win situations”. Stages four to six are

identified as “win-lose”, where only one party to the conflict can still win. The final stages, seven to nine, are noted as “lose-lose” situations. In these stages, there are only losers and in the end it only remains important to destroy the opponent, even at the price of losing everything yourself (Glasl, 1982). The model shows how parties in conflict lose the ability to co-operate in a constructive manner as their successive and mutual experiences are break down. During de-escalation, the escalation levels presented by Glasl help to assess in which phase of the conflict the parties currently are. This assessment can facilitate decision making with regard to which conflict handling method should be used, or whether this conflict can still be resolved. This approach ties into the orientation aspect as described by Taylor (2014).

De-escalation techniques, as a brief exemplary summary, can include implementation of listening to what the issue is and what the person’s concerns are, offering reflective comments to indicate their concerns are heard, allowing the person to release their frustration and waiting until they have released their frustration and explained how they are feeling. They can also include body language such as inclining the head slightly, to show listening and provide a non-threatening posture, nodding to confirm listening and understanding and expressing empathy to show understanding. There are also a range of behaviors that should be avoided such as getting loud or trying to yell over a screaming person, responding to abusive questions, touching the person as agitated people may misinterpret physical contact as hostile or threatening, arguing or trying to convince and constant eye contact which does not allow the person to break their gaze and look away.

It should be however noted that, where a situation continues to escalate and de-escalation is not possible, or ineffective, individuals must have a plan to protect themselves should the worst case scenario unfold. This includes establishing how do they escape, defend their life, or protect other colleagues. Ranalli (2019) notes that law enforcement encounters are not straightforward and are often particularly challenging when involving people with mental health issues or those who are otherwise emotionally disturbed. This can include medical conditions, mental impairment, developmental disability, physical limitation, language barrier, drug interaction or behavioural crisis (Santa Monica Police Department, 2020). These situations require a deeper understanding of the mental health conditions that may exist and may require specialist intervention or further training. Ranalli (2019) concludes that de-escalation should be used when appropriate and possible. It is critical for workers to identify discretionary time, cause of risk, and who is at risk when determining the proper plan of action.

3.4. De-Escalation Training

Education and training have been identified as “key elements of any workplace violence prevention program” (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2015). Training in de-escalating conflict situations can form the basis of practic-

es to prevent harm for all the parties involved in the conflict. An effective training program allows individuals to develop the skills and knowledge to potentially de-escalate and resolve a conflict in a wide range of workplace situations.

There are two aspects to managing conflict situations related to communication (Mulligan, 1999). The first relates to avoid threatening the identity, needs, rights and values of the other party. The second relates to management and regulation of responses to the danger or threat. Mulligan (1999) notes that both aspects are critical to the escalation and de-escalation of conflict. Any training related to conflict de-escalation must focus on effective communication techniques as a foundation.

This training program should be designed in a manner to develop the skills and knowledge required to use communication techniques to de-escalate a conflict situation. Specifically, at the completion of the training program, participants should be able to:

- Recognise and discuss the importance of anticipating risk and reducing the likelihood of aggression.
- Identify and recognise sources of anger.
- Describe and identify the physiological responses to anger.
- Define de-escalation.
- Describe Glasl's Nine-Stage Model of Conflict Escalation.
- Utilise effective communication techniques.
- Identify effects of cultural aspects on communication.
- Maintain self-control.
- Avoid use of escalating behaviours.
- Estimate level of conflict and degree of risk.
- Maintain situational awareness, including proxemics and spatial awareness.
- Identify situations requiring assistance and support and request assistance promptly.
- Show empathy and compassion.
- Utilise empathetic listening.
- Describe concepts and influence of rank and privilege.
- Use of language and concepts appropriate to cultural differences.
- Outline techniques for debriefing and the importance of worker self-care.

4. Conclusion

Use of de-escalation techniques can in effect improve worker safety for those in occupations exposed to hazards related to work-related violence and for individuals in crisis. Upon completion of de-escalation skills training, workers should be able to demonstrate the required competencies to prioritise their safety, use dynamic risk assessment, communication, avoidance and de-escalation strategies to reduce risks of harm during incidents involving aggressive behaviours, and make informed decisions when exposed to aggressive behaviours including challenging behaviours, behaviours of concern, verbal abuse, threats and threat-

ening behaviours, and physical assault. These findings are generally applicable to de-escalation in a potential conflict situation between two individuals, and application of de-escalation in group situations, or where third parties add to the conflict, may require further training beyond basic de-escalation techniques. Future research may be required in this regard.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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