Workplace Mass Murder: Lessons Learned

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It was about 72 degrees in Honolulu, the skies were clear, and the trade winds were light at 7:45 a.m. on November 2, 1999.

Byran Uyesugi, who works for a copy machine company, uncharacteristically arrives early at work. Beneath his aloha shirt is a 9mm Glock semiautomatic containing 17 rounds of ammunition. He also has two extra clips of bullets under that aloha shirt, one containing 17 cartridges and the other containing nine.

Uyesugi is scheduled to attend a meeting of his workgroup, the agenda of which was to discuss the equalization of workload. After the meeting, he is to begin training on the repair and maintenance of a new copy machine, one that he previously expressed a strong desire to avoid.

Walking through the building's second floor, he notices the location of employees in different rooms. Uyesugi then leaves the building to retrieve his laptop from his company van. On returning to the second floor, he places his laptop on a copy machine and enters a room where he shoots two coworkers, but intentionally leaves another unharmed.

Byran Uyesugi then goes to the meeting room, where he shoots three more coworkers. As he dodges chairs thrown by the remaining two colleagues in the room, Uyesugi reloads with one of his auxiliary clips, and then executes these men. He purposely does not shoot another coworker who is in the lunchroom across the hall. However, on his way out of the building, he shoots and misses another fleeing associate. Later, police find 28 spent shell casings, of which 25 bullets struck the seven slain men who had been fathers, brothers, sons, and friends to many.

Uyesugi calmly leaves the office building, enters his work van, and drives to the Makiki Nature Reserve. By 10:00 A.M., police arrive at the scene. Nearly five hours later, negotiators convince him to surrender.

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Byran Uyesugi represents many things to different people in Hawaii. He may be seen by some as The Devil. Or a criminal. Or as a person afflicted with mental illness. As we near the 10th anniversary of his horrific acts of workplace violence, to me he represents a teachable moment. It is time to discuss lessons that organizations can learn from this incident, and from Byran Uyesugi's previous 15 years with his employer. As will be seen, his organization had tried to do the right thing for him and for his coworkers, but horror struck despite their efforts.

Uyesugi was hired in 1984 as a technician who maintained and repaired copy machines. Within five years, customers started to complain about his attitude, and how they felt intimidated by him and blamed for things beyond their control.

In September 1993, a customer complained to Uyesugi about a machine that continuously needed repair. After leaving this customer's building, he went to another office tower and kicked an elevator door. Security cameras caught him committing the property destruction and charges were filed.

Around this time, Uyesugi challenged a coworker to fight after a disagreement about the cleanliness of a copy machine.

Faced with mounting concerns, Byran Uyesugi's employer acted in the interest of safety. Human resource professionals investigated the situation and contacted the company's regional security manager. They understood that Uyesugi alleged that coworkers placed "bugs" in his machines in order to make them malfunction and make him look bad. They were aware that he expressed the need to "bash skulls." They knew he had a collection of firearms which he didn't carry with him because he feared that he may use them to defend himself against coworkers. They knew of reports that Uyesugi said "I'm being set up again. I'm going to have to kill him." "I'm going to kill that sucker."

In October 1993, Uyesugi was interviewed by management. He delusionally attributed his kicking of the elevator on frustration resulting from a mainland corporate attorney's alleged manipulation of his parts inventory. Furthermore, he maintained that he was under surveillance and a manager had a spy network. Uyesugi reported that he regularly found listening and surveillance devices in his vehicle and home, placed there by federal agents and police. He reported that several coworkers were sabotaging the machines that he serviced, and that another coworker slandered him at clubs where he belonged.

Faced with considerable evidence of grossly disordered thought and behavior, and guided by a mainland psychological consultant, Uyesugi's company assembled as team of people to confront him. In addition to local and mainland managers, a local psychiatrist was present. At this intervention, Uyesugi was offered a choice: Either be fired or placed on paid administrative leave during which time he would be evaluated at a hospital's psychiatric ward.

Uyesugi was hospitalized for six days, and subjected to psychological and psychiatric assessment. He freely reported the delusional ideas previously noted. The professionals found that he has "no insight" into his condition. He was diagnosed with a severe and typically intractable form of mental illness, and judged not to be an imminent risk to anyone. No medications were given, and no psychiatric determination was made about whether he was safe to return to work. Uyesugi was discharged from the hospital and instructed to report to an outpatient psychiatrist, where the decision would be made regarding his return to work.

As instructed, the next day Byran Uyesugi reported for outpatient psychiatric care, and the psychiatrist sought to establish a therapeutic relationship. Three sessions eventually were concluded, and consultations with Uyesugi's managers were held. In early November 1993, the psychiatrist appeared to release Uyesugi for return to work. A new chapter in Byran Uyesugi's employment history started on 11/15/93, when he returned to servicing copy machines.

After failing to show for an appointment with his psychiatrist in early December, the psychiatrist called Uyesugi and convinced him to reschedule. Uyesugi claimed that the earliest he could meet was the last day in January 1994. At this therapy session, Uyesugi continued to discuss employees sabotaging his work and giving him defective parts, and that managers refused to help him. He left his psychiatrist's office without rescheduling another appointment. Several days later, the psychiatrist advised the employer to treat Uyesugi with respect to company standards.

After Uyesugi's return to work, he continued to complain that others were sabotaging his machines. Once again, he made threatening comments to coworkers, including saying if he ever got fired, he would "take care of those . . . guys, I'll shoot them." Coworkers were afraid of him.

By 1995, customer complaints about Uyesugi's behavior were transmitted to managers. One requested that he not work at their site. Another spoke of his "abrupt and annoyed" attitude. As a result of these

complaints, Uyesugi was placed on three months probation. He passed the probationary period, but renewed customer complaints again were received in 1999.

In September 1999, meetings were held of Uyesugi's workgroup, and the disparity of workload was discussed. Uyesugi's performance dramatically fell below that of his colleagues.

On 11/1/99, Byran Uyesugi was notified that he would begin training the next day on a new copy machine. He went home furious about this, and he ruminated about the sabotage that he continued to experience. From a safety box in his company van, where for the past few years he had kept his Glock firearm, he retrieved his weapon, brought it inside his home, and prepared himself for the next morning.

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Byran Uyesugi's company did many things right in handling the challenges presented by this very disturbed employee. They sought counsel from human resource and safety professionals. They retained a mainland expert who suggested an intervention whose goal would be Uyesugi's hospitalization and treatment. They brought him to the hospital and ensured that he sought outpatient treatment when he was released. Only after consulting with the outpatient psychiatrist, they returned him to work believing that he was not a danger to others. For nearly six years to the date of his return, there was no violent act, save for reports of some indirect threats.

Despite this very intensive effort by his employer, Byran Uyesugi became a mass murderer. What, if anything, could have been done differently to change the course of history? While this question is second-guessing, it allows that the Uyesugi Incident to become a teachable moment. In asking what managerial responses could have been different, we do not excuse Uyesugi or blame his company. We learn. Hopefully, we prevent a recurrence.

Five Critical Questions Presented by the Uyesugi Incident

Should he have been Terminated?

Many organizations have a "Zero Tolerance Policy" with respect to workplace violence, including threats and behavior. I've never been a great fan of labeling a policy like this, because the mere fear that one might be automatically terminated for a perceived minor transgression could spur a prone worker into more dramatic action. Rather, I favor clear rules of conduct, with employees responsible for reporting all threats and violent behavior, and managers responsible for investigating misconduct and taking appropriate disciplinary action that *could* include termination for offenders.

Termination of a potentially violent employee is best considered after an assessment of the situation, including the risks and benefits of termination versus some other course of action. Termination does not necessarily end the threat, as a case in California revealed.

In February 1996, Phuoc Bui, a worker in Packard Bell's Sacramento headquarters, was terminated on a Friday after distributing literature urging coworkers to engage in armed rebellion against supervisors. The next Monday, former employee Bui returned to the plant and discharged 40 bullets from his 9mm

pistol. Like Uyesugi, he also carried extra clips of ammunition. Unlike Uyesugi, no one was struck by his bullets.

The Bui and Uyesugi cases illustrate the dangers either of a premature termination or the failure to terminate. The middle ground position is to engage in the detailed assessment and management of threat, and once an organization decides that termination is the desired outcome, to develop and implement a plan that minimizes the risk to the organization and its employees. In the Uyesugi case, had termination been the goal, having his weapons relinquished as part of a severance agreement would have been a critical component of the plan.

Was there an Inspection of his Company Vehicle?

Byran Uyesugi kept his firearm in his company vehicle for several years. Some organizations that have company vehicles regularly and randomly inspect them, making sure that there are no extraneous items kept within. If Uyesugi provides us with any clear guidance, there should be policies regarding "for-cause" and random inspections of company vehicles for illegal objects such as guns and drugs, or other items of concern. If your organization has vehicles, do you know whether one of your employees is carrying a "rape kit" in the back of it? Or weapons?

Why was there no Independent Evaluation of Risk to Return to Work?

Byran Uyesugi was hospitalized for evaluation and any necessary treatment. Despite the compulsory nature of his admission from his and the employer's perspective, from the hospital's position, he was a voluntary patient. After his discharge from the hospital, he also was the voluntary outpatient of his psychiatrist. Both hospital and outpatient psychiatrists were obligated to respect the rights and freedoms of their patient, to do no harm to him, to offer treatment to him, and to limit communications about him unless freed from confidentiality by written waiver.

Missing in the plan to assess and manage Uyesugi was an independent evaluation of his risk to return to work. Independent medical and psychological evaluations (Fitness for Duty examinations; Violence Risk Assessments) are commonly performed to document the presence of conditions and whether those conditions might interfere with job-related duties. Obtaining an independent evaluation allows for the opinion of a specialist who is duty bound only to report the facts of the case and provide requested guidance. An independent threat assessment of an employee allows the organization to assess risks and plan accordingly. In Uyesugi's case, an independent evaluation presumably would have concerned itself with the question of Uyesugi's unabated delusions and violent ideation, and questioned whether he could safely be returned under those conditions. Additionally, this evaluation would have addressed conditions under which he might have returned to work.

Why was there not a Return to Work Plan?

Perhaps because there was not an unbiased threat assessment and an analysis of factors that would mitigate the risk of Uyesugi's return, there was no detailed threat management plan that contemplated such a return. What could have been included in a plan?

First, Uyesugi's mental illness required continued attention, and it would have been important for him to have remained under psychiatric treatment until clinically discharged. Given his specific type of

mental illness, it is highly unlikely that he would have ever been discharged from care. A return to work plan would have required that Uyesugi agree to continued treatment.

Second, associated with the requirement for continued treatment, requiring Uyesugi to allow his psychiatrist to release information to the company would have been a critical plan component. Once a waiver was signed, the company would be in a position to know whether appointments were being kept, progress made, and other factors leading to a current appraisal of risk level.

Third, continuous monitoring by supervisors ensures that return to work conditions are met and developmental goals are achieved. An immediate supervisor and second-level manager should have been regularly reviewing compliance with goals, his work performance, attendance at mandated treatment, and asking him if he was continuing to be "mistreated" by coworkers and others. Such actions by supervisors, including being alert to Uyesugi's coworkers' and concerns, would have signaled the continuing presence of potential threat.

Why was he allowed to return to work still in possession of Firearms?

Within his organization, Byran Uyesugi was widely known to have a collection of firearms. In fact, he possessed 24 handguns, rifles and shotguns. While many employees are law-abiding owners of firearms, presenting no risk to coworkers, Byran Uyesugi represented a special case. Not only did he possess firearms, he had an intractable paranoid delusions that in his case were associated with violent ideation. Hawaii law actually restricts possession of firearms in those who have severe mental illness.

No effort was made to ensure that Uyesugi's access to weapons were restricted prior to return to work. Making continued employment conditional upon first relinquishing his weapons would have been the single most important part of the threat management plan. Furthermore, measures to limit the likelihood that he could reacquire firearms could have been implemented. While there is no guarantee that a determined person could not find a way to reacquire weapons, limiting access to firearms in a potentially violent employee can be a critical component in a safety plan.

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A decade has passed since Byran Uyesugi callously killed his coworkers despite very well-intentioned efforts on the behalf of his organization to divert him from violence.

It would be shameful if this event failed to spur change in the ways organizations manage potential threats of violence. This did not happen in Hawaii, where we are fortunate that in 2001, a grant by the Hawaii Community Foundation enabled the Department of the Attorney General to empanel a Workplace Violence Working Group Committee. Due to the efforts of that group, general guidelines for managing potential threats in the workplace exist. An electronic version is available at http://hawaii.gov/ag/cpja/quicklinks/workplace_violence/ This is a document that should be reviewed and used as a starting place for organizations to ask the question: "What are we doing to prevent violence and ensure the safety of our workplace?" Please have someone in your organization review it, and let the legacy of the Uyesugi Incident be that workplaces across Hawaii are safer places for all.

This article was is reprinted with permission by Pacific Business News. Dr. Farkas is a clinical and forensic psychologist, human resources consultant, and former reserve police officer. He consults on employee behavior issues and workplace violence prevention, and is the only Hawaii psychologist with membership in the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals. More information is available by visiting www.garyfarkas.com