Hard Facts About The “Soft Stuff”

The Business Case for Taking Action on Stress and Aggression

Partially funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation

August 2002
VA Facilities Participating

11 Pilot Sites
- VAMROC Sioux Falls
- VAMROC Fargo
- VHA Minneapolis MC
- VHA Black Hills
- VHA St Cloud MC
- VHA St. Paul RO
- VBA Milwaukee RO
- VBA Chicago RO
- VBA Des Moines RO
- VBA Phoenix RO
- NCA Houston

Project Team

15 Comparison Sites
- VAMROC Togus
- VAMROC White River Junction
- VBA Wilmington
- VBA Detroit RO
- VBA Louisville RO
- VBA Decatur RO
- VBA Manchester RO
- VBA Boise RO
- VBA Portland RO
- VBA Spokane MC
- VBA Coatesville MC
- VBA Pittsburgh RO
- NCA San Juaquin
- NCA Massachusetts
- VBA Montgomery RO
- VBA Pittsburgh RO

Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
VBA + VHA = VA Medical/Regional Office Center (VAMROC)
National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
Data Collection

Workplace Aggression Questionnaire
- Measures the nature (form) and relative frequency (duration & persistence) of aggression
- Identifies the source of aggression (i.e., supervisor, co-worker, subordinate, customer-client, other)
- Assesses perceptions of the causes of aggression
- Measures the degree of harm inflicted
- Identifies individual responses to aggression

Employee Satisfaction Survey
- 96 Question Extracted From the 1997 One VA Survey
- Key questions selected from larger survey
- We now believe that approximately 60 questions would provide the same data
Source of Aggression: All Facilities

- Supervisor: 35%
- Coworker: 44%
- Customer: 12%
- Subordinate: 5%
- Other: 4%

n = 4,790
Who are the Aggressors?

Source of Aggression

Source: Pilot Sites vs. Comparison Sites

Who are the Aggressors?
Bullying: Persistent Patterns of Aggression within VA

- 1-5 Events weekly/daily: 29%
- 6+ Events weekly/daily: 7%
- No aggression: 6%
- Less than weekly/daily: 58%

Bullied: 36%
Frequency of Aggression: Pilot vs. Comparison Sites

Bullied

Percentage

Frequency of Aggression

All Va  Pilot  Comparison

No aggression  Less than weekly/daily  1-5 Events weekly/daily  6+ Events weekly/daily
Reporting Behaviors to Supervisor or Union Official as a Function of Persistence of Aggression
Confronting the Person(s) Involved as a Function of Persistence of Aggression

Confronting the Person(s) Involved as a Function of Persistence of Aggression

Frequency of Aggression

No Aggression
Less than weekly/daily
1-5 Events weekly/daily
6+ Events weekly/daily

Confronted
Yes
No
No Aggression
Less than weekly/daily
1-5 Events weekly/daily
6+ Events weekly/daily

Yes
No

NOTE:
Seldom do people file formal complaints

Filing Formal Grievance/Complaint as a Function of Persistence of Aggression

EVEN WHEN BEHAVIORS OCCUR OFTEN & PERSIST OVER TIME
## Intentions to Quit and Age

**Q91 – I am considering leaving this organization**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th># Respond.</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>1409</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1-5 Aggressive Events Weekly/Daily Plotted Against Respondents’ Age

Age Groups Experiencing The Most Aggression in The 1-5 Events Weekly/Daily Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Series1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>-2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Incidents Reported in Project Survey vs. OWCP Violence Claims Filed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS (OWCP Related) Sorted by Frequency</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>Been sworn at in a hostile manner</td>
<td>1499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105</td>
<td>Been subjected to obscene or hostile gestures</td>
<td>1010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110</td>
<td>Been yelled at or shouted at in a hostile manner</td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
<td>Been kicked, bitten, or spat on</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143</td>
<td>Had someone hit you with an object</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>149</td>
<td>Been threatened with physical harm</td>
<td>605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150</td>
<td>Been pushed, shoved, thrown, or bumped into with unnecessary force</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151</td>
<td>Been raped or sexually assaulted</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152</td>
<td>Been assaulted with a weapon or other dangerous object</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>6170</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Incidents Reported in Project Survey vs. OWCP Violence Claims Filed**
Aggression & Stress Learning Window

What We Know

- Non-physical/emotional forms of aggression occur frequently in work settings.
- Unjust, disrespectful/rude behavior is strongly linked to aggression.
- Employees overestimate the personal causes of aggression and underestimate the social and situational causes.
What We Know

- Respondents reporting higher levels of overall aggression:
  - are less satisfied on the job
  - report higher levels of perceived injustice
  - experience greater levels of stress
  - are more likely to feel bothered by such behavior
  - report greater intentions to quit
Aggression & Stress Learning Window

What We Know

- Persistent patterns of workplace aggression have an adverse impact on employee and organizational performance, are associated with EEO & OWCP claims, and are associated with employee withdrawal behavior (i.e. absence, lateness, turnover)
What We Know
About Aggression & Stress in the Workplace & Employee Satisfaction

- High-involvement, “empowered” work climate is strongly associated with lower stress and aggression and higher employee satisfaction.
- A major portion of the impact of the work climate cluster on employee satisfaction acts through perceptions of fairness and workload obstacles.
- Increased employee satisfaction improves business results.
A one STD increase in Work Climate causes a 55 increase in Satisfaction.

The Power of Work Climate

WORK-DESIGN/CLIMATE

INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION

CREATIVITY & IMPROVEMENT

INvolvement & InFLUENCE

GOAL ALIGNMENT

DEVELOPMENT

SUPervisory supportiveness

WORKLOAD & STRUCTURAL FACTORS

A one STD increase in Work Climate causes a 55 increase in Satisfaction

PAY

EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

.24

PERCEIVED QUALITY

.21

PAY

EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

.55

The Power of Work Climate
### WHAT IS WORK CLIMATE?
Derived From Analysis of 1997, 1999 & 2000 Employee Survey Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-Order Factor/Scale</th>
<th>Central item(s) to scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IN Volvement &amp; Influence</td>
<td>Efforts to get opinions; Employees involved in improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity &amp; Improvement</td>
<td>New ways encouraged: Sup open to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Alignment</td>
<td>Mgrs let employees know how their work contributes to org goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information &amp; Communication</td>
<td>Kept informed about job and about organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Trust &amp; Supportiveness</td>
<td>Trust between employees and supervisors; Supervisors help and support employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill Development</td>
<td>Get training to enhance performance and career opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload &amp; Structural Factors</td>
<td>Workload is reasonable; Minimum interruptions and “red tape”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Disciplinary actions and disputes are handled fairly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Work Climate Effects on Aggression, Stress & Satisfaction

**Work Climate**

- Information & Communication
- Creativity & Improvement
- Involvement & Influence
- Goal Alignment
- Development
- Supervisory Supportiveness

**Workload & Structural Factors**

- Stress
  - 24% of variance explained

**Respect & Fairness**

- Employee Satisfaction
  - 53% explained

**Aggression**

- 33% explained
Does Employee Satisfaction Matter?

1 Std increase in WORK CLIMATE from a mean of 2.89 to 3.02

= increase in EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION from mean 3.24 to 3.36

= -.23 STD REDUCTION IN COST
  or
  - $128.38 Per Unique Patient
  or
  -$400,300,000 Across VHA
What We Know About Aggression and Stress in the Workplace and Employee Satisfaction

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- Increased employee satisfaction improves business results.
Using Local Teams To Act on Survey Data

Partially funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation
Selecting Action Team Members

1. Facilities volunteered to join the project after the Project Team briefed them on the project’s objectives.
   - Both management and the union had to agree.
   - Either party can withdraw the facility from the project.

2. Management and the Union jointly selected Action Team Members using the following criteria:
   - Credibility with employees and leadership
   - High potential for success
   - Action-orientation
   - Varied backgrounds
   - Committed to learning
   - Good communication skills
Just-In-Time Training and Initial Actions

3. The Project Team trained the Action Teams on:
   - The way to ask questions about the data they would receive, and
   - Learning practices that would help them work and learn together. (KEY)

4. Each team had a team leader and a learning coach.

5. The Action Teams provided the Project Team with input into the original survey.

6. The Action Teams prepared the facility for the taking the survey by briefing employees on project goals and survey process. (KEY)
7. The academic researchers received completed surveys and provided results to the teams.
   - Conference with all action team members to release initial data and reinforce previously training
   - Action Teams received facility descriptive statistics for each survey question (means, frequency distribution and standard deviations), comparison data for the other pilot sites, & some causal models (KEY)
   - Action Teams requested data analysis of facility level data from the academic partners

8. Action Teams briefed employees on the survey results. (KEY)
Acting on Survey Results

9. Action teams examined and discussed the data and suggested possible areas of intervention
   - In some cases, the Project Team asked questions to test the assumptions underlying the suggested intervention

10. The Action Teams are in various stages of the analysis, identification, and implementation process.

11. The Project and Action Teams will re-administer the survey in November 2002 to help evaluate results.
Variety of Learning Practices

**HARVESTING LEARNING**

Each participant uses a different color Post It & describes the incidents that they perceive as critical in the project.

**INQUIRY, or ASKING**

**LADDER OF INFERENCE**

- I act on my beliefs.
- I adopt beliefs.
- I draw conclusions.
- I make assumptions based on the meanings I add.
- I add meanings based on my personal history and experience.
- I select data to “see.”
- I filter in order to simplify.

**LEARNING WINDOW**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT I KNOW &amp; WHY I KNOW IT</th>
<th>WHAT I THINK I KNOW &amp; WHAT I NEED TO DISCOVER IN ORDER TO KNOW IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHAT I KNOW I DO NOT KNOW</td>
<td>I MUST BE OPEN TO WHAT I DO NOT EXPECT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**REFLECTION**

A technique that slows us down so we can think about, assess, and evaluate the flow of ideas, events, and behaviors.

- Where are we?
- How did we get here?
- What worked?
- What didn’t work?
- Is there anything we should change?
- Is there anything we can learn from what has happened?

**STOP AND REFLECT**

...a group caution light

- “I would rate my contribution to our group as...”
- “I would rate my self this way because...”
- “My suggestions for improving our group’s effectiveness are...”
- “I would rate our group’s effectiveness as...”
- “I would rate us this way because...”
Our Local Action Team Process Is an Important Product

What We Know

- Feedback to the workforce on the survey results is important
  - The Action Teams received survey data within 60 days following the survey
- Face time is important – virtual interactions are insufficient
- For many Action Teams, their use of the learning practices in meetings and activities created a special space that has had a positive impact on relationships
  - The process of creating this special reflective communicative space is critical to explaining the successes of project to date
- Individual Action Team members are using some learning practices in other settings
Our Local Action Team Process Is an Important Product!

What We Think We Know

- The larger VA culture has trained employees not to act without permission
- “Do you see a number as an answer or as posing a question?”
- The power in the data may lie in the conversation about the data rather than in the data itself
- Mixing quantitative data with qualitative data, including stories about what is going on at a facility offers greater opportunities for action
- Using the learning practices changes individual and group behaviors
- Integrating learning into work activities is critical to understanding the project dynamics and action team activities
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Action Team - Examples of Interventions

- Employee Briefings on the Survey
- Flake-Off
- The Rover
- FISH
- Newsletters