

Workplace Case Study Report

Angry Customer: Davis

D·PREP
SAFETY DIVISION

TRAINING
OUTPOST

Case Details

Davis works at the counter of a fast-food restaurant in an economically depressed town with a high crime rate. There have been increased conflicts with customers related to their entitled behavior, which has left the restaurant short-staffed. On an evening shift, about fifteen minutes to closing, Davis is working with Jamila, managing the drive-through and helping with the front counter. Jamila is two weeks into the job and just coming off her training period.

A customer insults Davis for getting his order wrong and throws the bag of food across the counter at him. When Davis tells them to leave, the customer and their two friends knock over the fountain drink cups and straws, insult Davis, and tell him they will be waiting outside for him after closing. Davis makes a report about the incident and calls the police. Police drive by twice over the next hour as Davis and the other few employees are closing. The customers drive off and do not return. Davis calms Jamila, who is visibly upset by what happened, and confides in Davis that she is going to look for a new job.

Davis is frustrated about the entire incident and posts on his social media account. The next day, Carlos, the store manager, gets a call from the corporate human resources office to inform him that Davis made a post threatening company management and that they recommend termination.



What are some of the primary risks you see in this case? Name the two separate threats.

The first concern is the physical assault by the customer on Davis. This included throwing the bag of food, yelling, and vague threats. When asked to leave, he threw cups and straws around in frustration. The second threat came through Davis's social media post concerning his frustrations toward management.

What type of assessment(s) would be best in this scenario (psychological, triage, violence risk, threat assessment)?

Triage assessments of the customer's threat and Davis's social media threat would be reasonable to help organize the case details. Little is known about the customer who engaged in yelling and throwing objects around the store. A more detailed violence risk assessment may be useful with Davis, but a triage assessment may be sufficient for both threats and behaviors, given the affective and impulsive nature of the interactions.

Would you characterize the threats as transient or substantive in nature? What questions would you need to ask to help with this appraisal? Would you consider this case behavior as more hunting or howling?

The initial threat and throwing behavior from the customer seems more emotionally driven, affective, and howling in nature, leaning toward a hypothesis of a transient threat. This might change if we are able to learn more about the customer or his history (e.g., has the customer done this before, does he have access to weapons, has he met Davis previously, and were there other considerations such as race or ethnicity that entered the case?) Davis's threat on social media seems to have similar transient qualities and would appear to be more affective and howling in nature at first assessment.

Would this case be better understood as an affective or targeted violence motivation?

The customer's behavior seems driven by an affective violence pathway. The immediacy of his anger and the tit-for-tat response when throwing objects after being asked to leave the store led to that initial hypothesis in the case. Davis's tweet also feels impulsive and affective in nature, a response to the growing frustration around the lack of support from management to complete his work.

Using the metaphor example of "touching all the parts of the elephant," what parts of this case should we include to gain a better context?

There are several additional areas that should be explored in this case. In terms of the customer threat, it would be reasonable to consider previous behavior, finding their name from a CCTV license plate check and/or police report/investigation, and determining if he has been at the store before or lives nearby. For Davis's threat, a better understanding of what led to the social media post, conversations with people who know him from HR or a management relationship, and a review of past behavior in his position would be helpful, as would an exploration into his claims that the store is understaffed and stays open too late in an unsafe area. In both cases, conducting a wants/warrants review or open-source social media review could also be useful in determining any additional risk.

How might you have handled the case differently?

The quick termination at the end of the case is certainly cause for concern. Many companies misinterpret a zero-tolerance policy and move toward decisive action under the false hope this will address the problem. In a case like this, the company loses access to Davis, his perspective on this event, and his ability to be part of a solution moving forward. Additionally, calling the police to file a report about the customer's behavior, perhaps accessing CCTV to capture their license plate, would have been recommended to better document what occurred. It would be helpful to have a company policy that requires an employee to call an administrator or higher-positioned manager on-call during any violent incident to receive support and guidance around the next steps. If there had been a policy in place that required Davis to call, hearing from management may have helped Davis understand that the company would be taking action to support him, and prevented him from reacting on social media like he did.

What other facts would help complete an assessment and engage in risk mitigation planning?

More details about Davis's history at the company and his frustrations related to feeling isolated and understaffed would help gain context related to the potential risk. Likewise, using a slower process prior to termination would provide the company's HR and leadership a chance to reflect and adopt a more effective risk management plan. Separating Davis before conducting a threat assessment leaves many unanswered questions and the potential for future problems.

While you consider risk or escalation factors on one side of the see-saw, what might be some supportive, stabilizing, or protective factors on the other side?

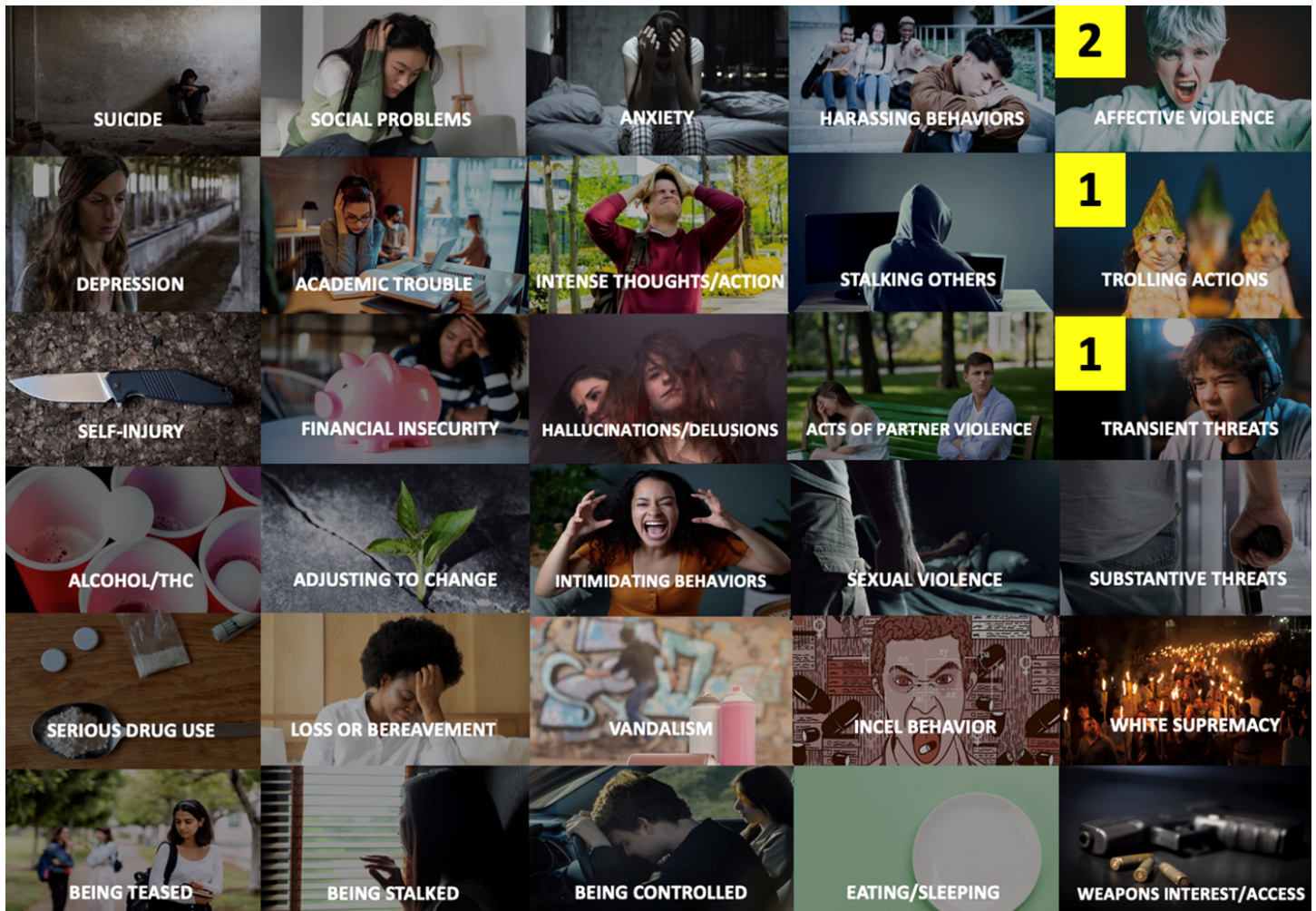
Knowing more about Davis's history related to his personal support system, how long he has been at the company, career goals, previous supervision review, and opportunities for promotions and growth within the company could all provide a better context.

What general level of risk would you assign to the case (low, moderate, high)?

The initial threat of yelling and throwing things at Davis would be a moderate risk. While this kind of poor customer behavior often occurs, understanding if this had happened before and involving law enforcement would help detect a pattern with this customer, and determine if he presents a larger and/or future risk to the store. Davis's threat would be considered low, given the lack of fixation/focus, actionability, or lethality toward the target. Based on what we know, our starting hypothesis would be this threat is more transient in nature.

Pathways Scoring – Customer Threat

MODERATE



Pathways Interventions

Trolling Actions

- Identify areas of difficulty (social, workload, etc.)
- Discuss social and HR implications of their behavior
- Explore alternative behaviors and ways to support them

Affective Violence

- Set clear conduct limits and monitor for compliance
- Assess the need for HR involvement, stay-away orders, and limits
- Consider emergency contact notification

Transient Threats

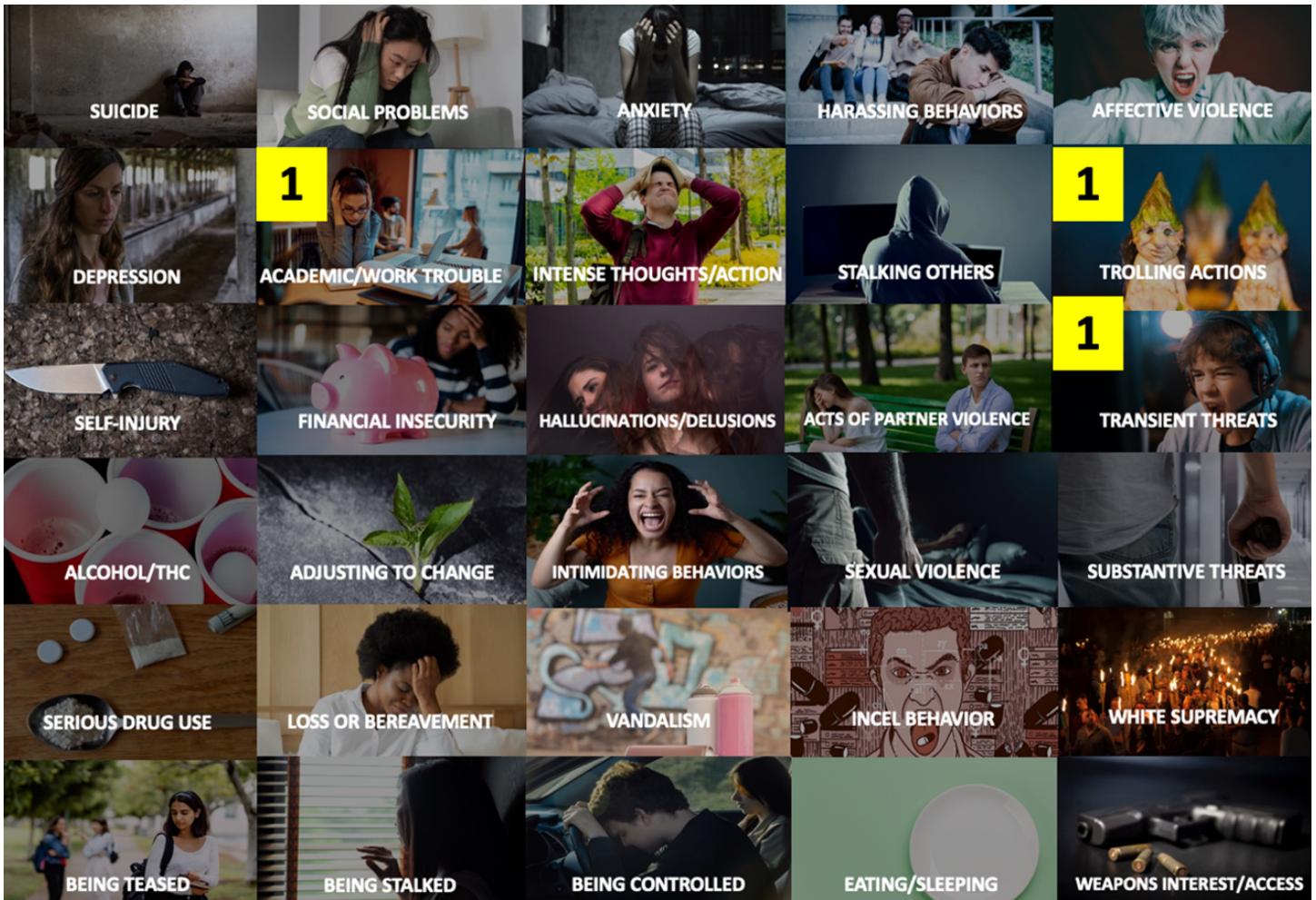
- Explore stressors and identify escalation triggers
- Connect the individual to supports and resources
- Consider the HR process to address their behaviors

Summary from Pathways

Not much is known about the man who yelled at Davis and threw the items. Many of the interventions rely on the ability to have some future relationship with the customer and address their behavior. As this is not possible, Pathways provides a triage assessment based on incomplete information. Even with the lack of details, we start with a hypothesis that this behavior is affective (impulsive) violence directed at Davis, driven by trolling and transient threat tendencies. This assessment will be updated as new information becomes available.

Pathways Scoring – Social Media Threat

LOW



Pathways Interventions

Work Performance

- Offer support, normalization, and advice/guidance
- Consider a referral to HR/supervisor
- Consider a referral to counseling or EAP
- Explore goals and strategies for improvement

Trolling Actions

- Identify areas of difficulty (social, workload, etc.)
- Discuss social and HR implications of their behavior
- Explore alternative behaviors and ways to support them

Transient Threats

- Explore stressors and identify escalation triggers
- Connect the individual to supports and resources
- Consider the HR process to address their behaviors

Summary from Pathways

There is little evidence Davis had any intent of acting on the threat made over social media. A reasonable hypothesis is the threat was made based on his frustration at the lack of support provided by management. Understanding more of the contextual environmental concerns would be helpful to better determine the potential risk. Expecting Davis to comply with the company's social media policy and following the expectation that all employees avoid making threats are reasonable expectations to set for him. Immediate termination limits the company's ability to gain Davis's observations related to the details of the altercation that occurred. A better approach would be to conduct a more detailed threat assessment/violence risk assessment and work with Davis within a PIP or HR process around the concerning behaviors.