

The Threat of Workplace Violence is all Too Real

By Bert Alicea

The headlines cannot be ignored – it's become all too common to read or hear a news report about tragic incidents of violence in the workplace. In fact, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) estimates that approximately two million Americans are the victims of workplace violence annually. The threat is real, and while no one is immune, there are steps that can help minimize the risk as well as precautions to protect employees should something happen.

Understanding the Threat

While it may be difficult to ever feel truly prepared for a tragedy of this nature, *understanding workplace violence is the first step toward reducing the probability of an incident and keeping organizations and their workforce safe.*

Just what is workplace violence? Workplace violence is considered to be “any action, whether verbal, physical or written, that is intended to cause, or capable of causing, death or serious bodily injury, emotional injury or property damage.” This includes intimidation, disruptive and harassing behaviors, threats, and acts of sabotage, among others.

While active shooter incidents are often the first scenario that comes to mind when thinking of workplace violence – especially considering recent incidents in the news – it can actually encompass a wide range of situations, including:

- Domestic violence;
- Fights between colleagues;
- Angry customers;
- Property damage;
- Written threats; and
- Many others.

According to a recent study from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), of the 160 active shooter incidents that took place from 2000 to 2013, *approximately 80 percent occurred in a workplace.* Workplace violence, including these shootings, impacts two million Americans each year, causing an average of 700 homicides. In addition to the invaluable cost of human life, the annual economic cost of workplace violence is \$121 million.

Outside of the obvious costs, violence in the workplace is a significant occupational hazard for both organizations and their employees, leading to:

- Physical and emotional trauma;
- Poor morale;
- Increased healthcare and workers' compensation costs; and
- Decreased productivity.

So what factors can contribute to a threat of violence in the workplace? *Issues that cause stress also have the potential to lead to violence.* Outside of work, the fragmentation of the family structure, easy access to weaponry, the influence of TV and other media, substance abuse, and financial issues can all tip someone over the edge toward engaging in violence.

Domestic disputes that spill over to the workplace are also a major issue. A whopping 71 percent of HR and security personnel have reported an incident of domestic violence on company property, endangering both the victim and his or her co-workers.

Within the organization, workplace stress, downsizing, feelings of being undervalued or unheard, or rigid management styles can all lead to potential issues. Failed office romances can also create problems.

Identifying the Threat

Knowing some of the factors that can lead to violence is key to identifying potential risks within an organization. So who poses the greatest

risk of violence to organizations? While delusional people are potential threats, more frequently the perpetrator is a disgruntled employee or someone involved in a domestic disturbance that has spilled over into the workplace.

Issues at work such as downsizing or feeling undervalued could be triggers for employees, as well as personal problems like relationship trouble, legal issues or a financial crisis.

Early warning indicators may include:

- Increased absences;
- Deteriorating performance on the job;
- Friction with managers or other employees;
- Change in attitude or appearance;
- Excessive complaints; and even
- Substance abuse at work.

Further, increasing patterns of signals like acting out, crying, throwing objects, or paranoia could indicate the potential for an issue. Anyone experiencing situations such as divorce, loss of a loved one, or other issue may also be experiencing increased stress, which can put someone on edge and increase the probability they could act out. Demonstrating one of these signs is *not* a direct indicator of a threat of violence, but multiple issues *could* point to a potential problem that should be addressed.

In these instances, leadership determines outcomes. Many managers and supervisors may feel challenged to understand issues employees may be experiencing at home while concerned about privacy issues. However, by being supportive of employees, it is possible to have an

Diffusion Techniques for Supervisors

Supervisors can play a big role in helping employees who may be facing stress or challenges that could lead them to act out. By demonstrating support and respect, it's possible to de-escalate potentially violent situations. If at any time a person's behavior starts to escalate beyond your comfort zone, disengage.

The following are five diffusion techniques to incorporate into the EAP's personal conduct with employees to minimize the risk of violence in the workplace:

1. Be an empathetic listener. Encourage the person to talk and acknowledge their feelings (even if you disagree with them!) Try to project calmness and let them know you are there to help them. Don't get caught up in rejecting their demands from the start or coming off cold or hostile. Be aware of nonverbal body cues that could escalate behavior.

2. Focus your attention on the other person. By treating someone with respect and dignity, you can help relieve some of their anger and frustration and make sure they feel heard and understood. Do

not challenge, threaten, or dare the individual as this could escalate the behavior, and do not minimize or sympathize their situation (i.e. it's not that bad/I'm not sure why you are so upset/telling them to calm down).

3. Maintain a relaxed yet attentive posture. Position yourself at a right angle rather than directly in front of the person. Do not pose in challenging stances, such as arms crossed/on hips/finger pointing/excessive stare-downs, or make sudden distracting movements (clicking pen/tapping feet/increasing your own volume). Be aware of your own internal thermostat!!

4. Ask for his/her recommendations. Involve the employee in discussing the problem, and ask them for their suggestions/options in handling it.

5. Maintain consistent communication. Provide ongoing support by communicating frequently and following-up on a regular basis. ■

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open dialogue that can allow for any issues to be addressed together, whether they be work-related or otherwise.

While a non-supportive supervisor may be demeaning or sarcastic to employees and look the other way when someone is experiencing an issue, a *strong supervisor clearly defines expectations and communicates frequently with employees*. If they believe an employee is facing a setback or other challenge, they reach out to offer support, either from HR or other outside resources like an EAP.

Further, they follow through to ensure that employees feel supported and valued. When employees are treated with dignity and respect, they are less likely to act out, minimizing the potential threat to an organization.

Managing the Threat

Even before a potential issue is identified, organizations need to take the necessary steps in order to minimize risk and perhaps prevent incidents of violence. *However, the majority of businesses do not currently have a program or policy in place to address this issue*. Brokers and consultants have the opportunity to help organizations by connecting them with resources and training to ensure all supervisors have the knowledge needed to address potential problems and respond appropriately.

Necessary Steps the EAP can help Implement

When creating a prevention and response program, it is important to consider the following:

❖ **Enforce existing policies** – Enforcing anti-harassment and weapons policies as well as the code of conduct can go a long way toward prevention of violent incidents within the workplace.

❖ **Assess the risk** – Leadership and HR can work together to analyze any previous incidents, determine the current potential for issues and assess preparedness in order to create a plan that fits the specific needs of the organization. Following the initial assessment, periodic reviews should be conducted to determine if any changes should be made to the program.

❖ **Establish policies and procedures** – Consider adopting a zero tolerance policy that has buy-in from all levels of the organization and includes reporting and investigation procedures as well as intervention standards. Ensure this policy is communicated to all employees and posted prominently where people will regularly see it.

❖ **Introduce training** – Both employees and managers should participate in expert-led training to raise awareness and recognition of potential issues, educate on diffusion techniques and appropriate intervention, and understand the policies put in place.

❖ **Create a crisis team** – This cross-disciplinary task force can help establish and review policies, conduct training, connect people with resources and services, and be a first point of contact to investigate or respond to potential issues.

Summary

Many organizations already have access to resources that may be able to help when creating a program to stem workplace violence, including in the event an incident occurs. These resources include HR and security, emergency hotlines, local law enforcement, and *Employee Assistance Programs*.

While it may not always be possible to prevent an act of violence in the workplace, by preparing and planning ahead, it is possible to minimize the risk and protect employees and the organization. ■

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For more information about Health Advocate and the EAP+Work/Life program, visit www.HealthAdvocate.com.

Editor's note: *This article originally appeared on BenefitsPRO and is reused with permission. See <https://www.benefitspro.com/2016/08/11/the-real-threat-of-workplace-violence/?slreturn=20190721111215>.*

Tips for Improving Workplace Safety

Be honest, just how safe is your workplace *really*? Below are some suggestions for improving safety in your workplace.

1. **Conduct a threat assessment.** A threat assessment helps identify a company's potential weaknesses. An assessment should include questions such as the following:

- Do strangers cut through the parking lot for convenience?
- Do other businesses in the area make your workplace more vulnerable? For instance, is there a high degree of crime in the area? Are you next door to a bank that could be robbed?
- Are windows and doors in good working order?
- Do employees wear badges?
- How do employees access the building? With electronic keys or metal keys?
- How often are security codes changed?

2. **Make sure the building and parking lots are well lit.** Often, attackers will use dark or poorly lit areas in and around a building to hide and wait for an opportunity to strike. If employees enter and leave your building before daylight or after dark, be sure they have a well-lit path to and from the building, especially around doorways and in the parking lot. When possible, encourage employees to walk in pairs after dark.

3. **Make security cameras especially visible in potential danger zones.** This includes over doors, in parking lots, at the reception area, anywhere money is handled or stored, and in IT server rooms. When criminals see video surveillance, they can't necessarily tell whether cameras are on, and it might be enough to discourage them from targeting your business.

4. **Encourage employees to report safety concerns.** They might include, but not be limited to:

- Lights that need to be replaced;
- Unsecured machines or rooms containing valuable equipment;
- Domestic issues that have the potential to spill into the workplace; and
- Suspicious behavior, workplace bullying or significant personality changes of other employees or customers.

It's also important for management to *act on* any safety concerns brought to your attention. Nothing kills employee cooperation faster than feeling ignored.

5. **Train employees to recognize potential danger.** Just as staff is trained to spot phishing attacks through unsolicited emails, they should also be trained in workplace safety. Remind them about proper procedures for handling suspicious packages, upset customers, and unauthorized personnel in secure work areas.

As part of manager training, business leaders should be taught to recognize behaviors that can trigger violence, such as bullying, intimidation, and excessive job-related stress.

Managers should also learn about common issues that may lead to violence, such as poor performance reviews, firings, unwelcome changes in a job role, and personal stress outside the workplace. *In each of these cases, the EAP is in a perfect position to help.* ■

Source: Insperity.