

Manager and Supervisor Responsibilities

Introduction

The roles of the supervisor and manager in workplace violence prevention, reporting, and response cannot be understated. Supervisors and managers are the first line of defense. Their behavior and management style affect their office or section. By exhibiting or allowing certain behaviors, a supervisor or manager may contribute to a hostile or unhealthy work environment.

Legal issues

In addition to legal and regulatory obligations for the Agency to provide a safe and secure work environment for its employees, landmark legal cases have added additional responsibilities. Supervisors must avoid negligent supervision and negligent retention. Failing to carry out supervisory responsibilities for monitoring employee conduct or performance may be considered negligence. Retaining an employee after becoming aware of the employee's unsuitability and failing to act on that knowledge **is** negligent.

In recent years, workplace violence litigation has dramatically increased. For example, the U.S. Postal Service paid out \$4.25 million as the result of one shooting.

Checklist

Managers and supervisors should ask whether any of the following questions apply to their workplace.

Is/Are there . . .

- a high rate of injuries?
- an authoritarian or insensitive management approach?
- disrespectful treatment of employees or allowance of disrespectful conduct?
- public chastisement of employees?
- frequent grievances filed by employees?
- preferential treatment of some employees?
- unclear job descriptions, goals, and expectations?
- rules and discipline applied inconsistently?
- a high-stress work environment?
- employees regularly treated like cogs in a wheel?
- understaffing and/or forced overtime?
- lack of job security?
- constant bickering between coworkers?
- inconsistent or unpredictable supervisory behavior?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, you may have a problem!

Recognizing signs of an emerging problem

Managers and supervisors must be aware of signs that may represent an emerging personal or family problem. The following are a few signs:

- An employee's job performance deteriorates, when previously it had been satisfactory.
- An employee has deteriorating interoffice relationships, especially a marked change in behavior.
- An employee is chronically absent or late.
- An employee's personal grooming habits deteriorate.

Steps for handling emerging problems

Supervisors are responsible for documenting work performance—the positive points as well as the negative ones—and should take immediate steps in confronting performance and/or conduct problems.

1. Observe and document—The supervisor should be aware of and document an employee's deteriorating performance and/or conduct problems.
2. Intervene—After observing and documenting, the supervisor should intervene by having an informal talk about the specific areas of concern. The intervention is based solely on job performance or conduct problems and should focus on specific behaviors or performance outcomes that are below organizational standards.

The supervisory role is to focus on work issues and **not** to diagnose personal problems that may be affecting an employee's performance. The supervisor should indicate a concern and a desire to help the employee resolve the problem and advise the employee that counseling assistance is available. Together, the employee and supervisor should decide on a plan of action to resolve difficulties.

3. Refer—The supervisor should refer the employee to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for assistance. The supervisor can arrange for the appointment with an EAP counselor and can give the appointment information to the employee at the time of the intervention interview.
4. Follow up—The supervisor should follow up with the employee to determine progress in resolving deficiencies.

Diffusing anger

When an employee becomes dangerously angry, a supervisor's response can do much to defuse that anger and avert a possibly violent situation. Knowing what to do and what not to do can save lives.

1. **Assess the situation.** Ask bystanders to leave the area.
2. **Stay calm.** Speak in a calm, soothing manner, but stay alert. Above all else, avoid getting angry or showing fright.
3. **Reassure the employee.** Ask the employee what's troubling him or her.
4. **Avoid being judgmental about the employee's behavior.**
5. **Get the employee to talk.** Talking is the best thing an agitated person can do. Often an employee will "talk" the aggression out.
6. **Keep your arms low.** Try to maintain a non-threatening appearance.
7. **Stay at least 5 feet away from the angry person.** Give the employee some space.
8. **Maintain eye contact and actively listen to what the person is saying.**
9. **Stay alert to changes in behavior.** Never let your guard down.
10. **Take control of the situation slowly.**
11. **Know when to get help.** Work out a procedure with other employees or supervisors in advance to deal with violent situations.
12. **Follow up.** Once the situation is diffused, follow up with counseling through EAP or other referral avenues. Additionally, warn the employee that DLA has a zero-tolerance policy and, while the employee's concerns may be valid, threats and violence are grounds for termination.

DLA's Violence in the Workplace Program

Despite doing everything right, there may come a time when an agency is confronted with a violent incident. All DLA activities have established a program and a team to respond to reported incidents of workplace violence and suspected workplace violence situations. The program provides an integrated system of services and procedures to achieve

- prevention of traumatic stress
- mitigation of stress effects
- intervention to assist in the recovery from traumatic stress
- restoration to normal function, and
- maintenance of employee health and welfare.