

Workplace Violence [printable version]

Lesson Content

Understanding Workplace Violence

Introduction

To be able to handle potential or actual incidents of workplace violence, supervisors and coworkers must understand what workplace violence is, why it may occur, and who may perpetrate it.

Self-test

How much do you really know about violence in the workplace? Take this quiz to assess your understanding. On a separate sheet of paper, write "True" or "False" for each statement. Then compare your answers with the answers below.

Statement	True or False
1. Cracking down on employees is the best way to prevent workplace violence.	
2. Drug and alcohol use can be a warning sign of workplace violence.	
3. Employees who commit a violent act give up all their rights as employees.	
4. It is impossible to tell which employee might suddenly snap and become violent.	
5. People who work with the public are at greater risk for workplace violence.	
6. Poor management styles can trigger an increase in workplace violence.	
7. You should always try to disarm a person who has a gun or weapon.	
8. Proper hiring procedures are an important factor in controlling workplace violence.	
9. The best way to respond to a potentially violent situation is to wait and allow a cooling-off period for a few days.	
10. Training people about workplace violence may encourage the potentially violent employee.	
11. Workplace violence is defined as any behavior that results in a person being injured.	

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12. Workplace violence is the number one, non-medical, cause of death for women in the workplace.

Answers to self-test

Statement	True or False
1. Cracking down on employees is the best way to prevent workplace violence. Violence is more likely to erupt where management is authoritarian and unresponsive to employee needs or where other bad management practices are present.	False
2. Drug and alcohol use can be a warning sign of workplace violence.	True
3. Employees who commit a violent act give up all their rights as employees. Even violent employees have rights.	False
4. It is impossible to tell which employee might suddenly snap and become violent. There are almost always warning signs.	False
5. People who work with the public are at greater risk for workplace violence.	True
6. Poor management styles can trigger an increase in workplace violence.	True
7. You should always try to disarm a person who has a gun or weapon. Never expose yourself to danger. Don't be a hero. Hide and call 911 or security personnel when it's safe to do so.	False
8. Proper hiring procedures are an important factor in controlling workplace violence.	True
9. The best way to respond to a potentially violent situation is to wait and allow a cooling-off period for a few days. Always respond to problem situations immediately.	False
10. Training people about workplace violence may encourage the potentially violent employee. Proper training is an essential element of violence prevention in the workplace.	False

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11. Workplace violence is defined as any behavior that results in a person being injured. Workplace violence also includes any behavior or actions that threaten other people or property, or that cause another person to feel unsafe.	False
12. Workplace violence is the number one, non-medical, cause of death for women in the workplace.	True

Common myths

The following are some common myths about workplace violence:

- Workplace violence is committed by people who suddenly snap under pressure.
- Most workplace violence is committed by disgruntled employees.
- Most situations will resolve themselves if given a cooling off period.
- If we learn to recognize the potentially violent employee, we can stop workplace violence.

Effects of stress

Workplace violence is the ultimate expression of occupational stress, and experts agree that warning signs that go unrecognized precede most incidents of workplace violence. While it may not be possible or appropriate to know what personal problems may be affecting workers, we all have a general understanding of life's stresses and demands. Whether they are related to personal relationships, family issues, economic hardships, or problems at work, people don't leave these issues at home when they come to work, and they do not leave their work-related problems in their desks or lockers when they go home.

National statistics

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found the following:

- An average of 20 workers are murdered each week in the United States (U.S.).
- In addition, an estimated 1 million workers are victims of nonfatal workplace assaults each year.

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- Homicide is the second leading cause of death on the job, second only to motor vehicle crashes.
- Homicide is the leading cause of workplace death among females.
- Coworkers or former coworkers commit 9 percent of workplace homicides.
- 76 percent of all workplace homicides are committed with a firearm.

Recognizing Potential Problems

Introduction

In addition to understanding what workplace violence is, supervisors and coworkers must be able to recognize behaviors that may lead to violence.

Possible indicators

The indicators listed below identify behaviors that might precede an incident of workplace violence. While the list is not all-inclusive and the behavior may not always lead to an incident, the list may serve to alert a supervisor or coworker to a potential problem. Signs and symptoms of a potentially violent employee include the following:

- Being emotionally unstable, such as needing to blame others
- Not accepting responsibility for things that go wrong
- Having few friends
- Holding grudges for unreasonable lengths of time
- Feeling entitled to everything and anything
- Placing unreasonable demands on supervisor's time
- Having few interests outside of work
- Overreacting to criticism or becoming belligerent
- Exhibiting erratic or aggressive behavior
- Not handling everyday stressors very well
- Exhibiting psychological disorders such as the following:

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- Severe depression
- Anxiety and job stress
- Panic disorders
- Paranoia about people's motives

Other possible indicators

Supervisors and coworkers should also be aware of other possible indicators of a potentially violent person. The following are additional indicators:

- Intimidating, harassing, bullying, and belligerent or other inappropriate and aggressive behavior
- Having numerous conflicts with customers, coworkers, or supervisors
- Bringing a weapon to the workplace
- Making inappropriate references to guns, or making idle threats about using a weapon to harm someone
- Showing fascination with incidents of workplace violence
- Indicating approval of the use of violence to resolve a problem
- Indicating identification with perpetrators of workplace homicides
- Indicating desperation (over family, financial, and other personal problems) to the point of contemplating suicide

Types of Violence

Introduction

There are three types of identified violence: threats, harassments, and physical intimidation. In this section, we will discuss these types of violence in the workplace.

Threats

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“Sticks and stones” may break bones, but words do hurt! The following are examples of threats:

- Racial slurs
- Sexual innuendos
- Deliberate, hurtful, or repeated verbal mistreatment
- Direct, conditional, or veiled verbal threat
- Obscene language

Harassments

The following are examples of harassments:

- Verbal abuse
- Gestures (body language)
- Unwanted sexual advances
- Stalking

Physical intimidation

The following are examples of physical intimidation:

- Assaults—kicking, hitting, biting
- Impeding or blocking movement
- Touching or other inappropriate contact
- Displaying a weapon
- Showing the intent to injure a person

Contributing Factors

Introduction

Several factors, elements, and social/cultural conditions contribute to workplace violence. These include individual, environmental, and social factors, as well as unwanted change.

Individual factors

The following are characteristics or factors about an individual that may contribute to workplace violence:

- Violent history

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- Membership in a hate group (severe prejudice)
- Romantic obsession
- Pathological blaming
- Obsessive interest in weapons

Environmental factors

The following are environmental factors that may contribute to workplace violence:

- Highly authoritarian management style
- Unpredictable or inconsistent supervision and job role ambiguity
- Lack of employee participation in the decision making process
- Existence of hostile or threatening work environment
- Acceptance of disrespectful behavior
- Frequent invasion of privacy
- Lack of training in conflict resolution and communication skills

Social factors

The following are social factors that may contribute to workplace violence. The employee may

- view himself or herself as a victim
- experience adverse economic/financial conditions
- experience a change in financial status, or
- be unable to cope and accept change.

Change

The following are examples of how changes may contribute to workplace violence:

- Unwelcomed change
 - Downsizing and/or layoffs
 - Reorganizations
 - Restructuring and reengineering
 - Job uncertainty
 - The need to balance job and family stressors
- Difficulty in coping and managing change
 - Lack of trust, respect, or support
 - Personal or family adjustments
 - Inability to accept change
 - Lack of job skills, education, or training

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Effects of Domestic Violence

Introduction

Often what starts at home spills over into the workplace. Spousal assault at work is common because the workplace is the one place where the victim can usually be found. Employees can change phone numbers and move, but most cannot just switch jobs to avoid a stalker.

Recognizing domestic violence

Recognition of behaviors that are part of domestic violence is not always easy, even for victims themselves. This is, in part, because domestic violence is much more than physical abuse. Many victims who live in danger and fear have never been physically assaulted.

Unfortunately, most supervisors and coworkers do not recognize the signs of domestic violence until too late. The most obvious are visible signs such as burns, bruises, broken limbs, or wearing long sleeves in hot weather. In addition, the victim becomes evasive and secretive; self-confidence and self-esteem are very low; and absenteeism usually increases.

Checklist of behaviors

The following checklist of behaviors may help you decide if someone you know is being abused by a spouse or partner. Below are questions a supervisor, coworker, or employee may consider to determine if domestic violence exists.

Does the spouse or partner . . .

- V**erbally insult, demean, or threaten the person?
- I**solate the person from friends, family, or other people?
- O**rganize schedules to follow or harass the person?
- L**imit the person's mobility or access to money?
- E**xplode into a rage and physically or sexually assault the person?
- N**egate the person's word, abilities, ideas, and actions?
- C**hoke, punch, slap, kick, or otherwise hurt the person?
- E**xcuse each attack and promise to stop?

Agency liability

In the case of domestic violence or stalking, the potential liability exposure to the agency is often greater because someone working with that person is usually aware of the conflict between the employee and the person intent on revenge.

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Once on notice, however, the manager is obligated to take reasonable precautions to protect the employee and his or her coworkers.

Preventing Workplace Violence

Introduction

In addition to understanding workplace violence and recognizing behaviors of a potentially violent employee, managers and supervisors may also need to develop strategies to prevent workplace violence.

Environmental designs

There are several environmental designs that may prevent workplace violence:

- Physical separation—In several industries, physical separation of workers from customers, clients, and the general public through the use of enclosures has been effective. The height and depth of counters may protect workers, since they introduce physical distance between workers and potential attackers. However, when devising environmental strategies, consideration also must be given to the continued ease of conducting business. A safety device that increases frustration for workers or for customers, clients, or patients may be self-defeating.
- Visibility and lighting—Good visibility and lighting are important environmental design considerations. Making high-risk areas such as parking lots visible to more people and installing good external lighting should decrease the risk of workplace assaults.
- Access to and egress from the workplace—The number of entrances and exits, the ease with which non-employees can gain access to work areas, and the number of areas where potential attackers can hide are issues that should be addressed. This issue has implications for the design of buildings and parking areas, landscaping, and other areas that workers must use during a work shift.

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- Security devices—Security devices may reduce the risk for assaults against workers and facilitate the identification and apprehension of perpetrators. Such devices include closed-circuit cameras, alarms, two-way mirrors, card-key access systems, panic-bar doors locked from the outside only, and trouble lights or geographic locating devices in mobile workplaces such as delivery trucks.

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Administrative controls and policies

Administrative policies and controls can do much to prevent workplace violence:

- Staffing plans and work practices—Managers and supervisors should review staffing plans and work practices such as prohibiting unsupervised movement within and between areas. Security experts have also suggested the use of security guards or receptionists to screen persons entering the workplace and controlling access to actual work areas.
- Policies and procedures for assessing and reporting threats—Policies and procedures for assessing and reporting threats clearly indicate a zero tolerance of workplace violence. In addition, they allow employers to track and assess threats and violent incidents in the workplace and provide mechanisms by which incidents can be reported and handled. This information allows an agency to assess whether prevention strategies are appropriate and effective. These policies should also include the following:
 - Guidance on recognizing the potential for violence
 - Methods for defusing or de-escalating potentially violent situations
 - Instruction about the use of security devices and protective equipment
 - Procedures for obtaining medical care and psychological support following violent incidents

Training

The use of training is a critical component of any violence prevention strategy. Training assists managers, supervisors, and employees in finding and using resources to minimize the potential for violence and in implementing anti-violence initiatives. In addition, training employees in nonviolent response and conflict resolution may reduce the risk that volatile situations will escalate to physical violence. Training should not be regarded as the sole prevention strategy but as one component of a comprehensive approach to reducing workplace violence.

Reporting Workplace Violence

Introduction

A timely, accurate report of potential or actual workplace violence is a critical component of any prevention program.

Failure to report

Failure to report potential problems is, perhaps, the biggest obstacle to overcome in dealing with potential violence in the workplace. Employees may not be quick to report violent or potentially violent acts for the following reasons:

- A belief that the employee really did not mean what he or she said
- A belief that, by ignoring the threat, it will go away
- A belief that the incident is an isolated one and will pass with time
- A fear that reporting the incident will be viewed as “overreacting” or trying to get a coworker in trouble
- A desire to not get involved

While these excuses may have been accepted in the past, failure to report an incident can no longer be condoned or tolerated. Supervisors and employees who become aware of actual or potential problems must address the situation through proper reporting and action. Failure to do so places an unnecessary risk on the workforce as a whole. Further, reporting a problem may assist a troubled individual get needed help. It is better to err on the side of safety than to risk having a situation turn violent.

Reporting signs of potential workplace violence

In a potentially violent situation, the longer you wait to intervene, the poorer are the chances of preventing a violent act. If you observe behavior that you believe may turn violent, follow these specific reporting procedures:

- Alert your supervisor, another supervisor, or your local Security Control Center.
- Make a complete, written record of any threats, remarks, or observations of the harassing, disruptive, or bizarre behavior.

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- Provide the written record to your supervisor for use by the Security Control Center.

Reporting an actual incident

If you observe an incident of workplace violence that is imminent or in progress, follow these procedures:

- Call your local Security Control Center.
- As briefly and calmly as possible, describe what is happening and where it is happening.
- Let the Security Control Center know if emergency medical assistance appears necessary.
- Attempt to clear the immediate area of anyone not directly involved in the incident.
- If possible, separate the people involved but do not, under any circumstances, expose yourself or others to risk of harm or injury.
- Send someone to the building entrance, stairwell, and/or elevator nearest the incident to direct those responding to the incident.
- Alert your supervisor after the incident is over, if this has not already occurred.
- Make a complete, written record of the incident for use by the Security Control Center.

Handling telephone threats

Telephone threats often follow physical incidents of workplace violence and should be taken as seriously as physical threats. Follow these guidelines in handling telephone threats:

- Keep calm.
- Keep talking; do not hang up.
- Signal a coworker to listen on an extension.
- Ask the caller to repeat the message and write it down.

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- Repeat questions, if necessary.
- For a bomb threat, ask where the bomb is and when it is set to go off.
- Listen for background noises and write down a description.
- Write down whether the caller is male or female, pitch of voice, accent, and anything else that may assist authorities.
- Try to get the person's name, exact location, and telephone number.
- Signal a coworker to immediately call the Security Control Center.
- Notify your immediate supervisor.

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.

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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.

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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.

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- 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.

Conclusion

Everyone deserves a safe workplace. Even the most subtle forms of aggression in the workplace are harmful to employee morale and are unacceptable because workplace violence affects all of us. Its burden is borne not only by victims of violence but also by their coworkers, their families, the Agency, and by every worker at risk of violent assault—in other words, by virtually all of us.

As a supervisor, you can do your part—without being an expert on workplace violence prevention—by promoting respectful treatment of everyone by everyone. Treating people with respect is one of the best ways of preventing workplace violence.