

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

INTRODUCTION

On any given day, newspapers are filled with stories of disgruntled employees taking out their frustration and anger at work...often with deadly results. Recent studies suggest that one out of every four employees was attacked, threatened or harassed at work in the last year.

This handbook will teach you how to identify different types of violence, their causes, how you can protect yourself and your co-workers, and why reporting workplace violence is extremely important.

AWARENESS: UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Types of Violence

Workplace violence is more commonly thought of as homicide, but there are other forms of workplace violence which include:

- Hitting
- Shoving
- Pushing
- Kicking
- Sexual assaults

Most workplace violence is directed toward a person, usually an employee, supervisor or customer. However, violence directed at the workplace itself, such as vandalism or arson, can also occur.

Workplace violence also includes verbal outbursts and can happen in the form of:

- Threats
- Harassment
- Abuse
- Intimidation

Verbal forms of violence often signal more serious violence to come.

Sources of Violence

Violence can be categorized as either internal or external. Internal violence is violence that comes from within the organization and is perpetrated by current employees or former employees.

However, another common, but often forgotten workplace hazard is violence that comes from outside the organization. This external violence is perpetrated by robbers or customers and is more common among retail establishments such as convenience stores, grocery stores, gas stations and taxi cabs.

Causes of Workplace Violence

Internal

Although it may seem intolerable for there to be any “reason” for workplace violence, in recent years, current and former employees have become frustrated and angry enough to resort to violence.

There are many conditions causing employee frustration and anger:

- An unstable economy
- Widespread job layoff
- A rigid, authoritarian style of management
- Insensitive terminations
- Pressure for increased productivity
- Psychological instability
- Lack of individual responsibility

These conditions can lead to stress, conflicts and possibly workplace violence. Obsessive love affairs and domestic disputes that spill over into the workplace also cause violence.

External

There are conditions which place you at a higher risk of crime and violence from outside the organization:

- If you work alone or in small numbers
- If your work involves exchanging money with the public
- If you work late at night or early in the morning
- If you guard valuable property
- If you work in high crime areas
- If you work with the public

These conditions make you vulnerable to violence out of sheer coincidence. For example, during a robbery, a victim happens to be the person on duty at the convenience store the robber decided to target. The victim doesn't get the money out of the drawer fast enough, so the robber kills him. Often, there is no motive for external violence. It's just senseless.

Customer violence is caused by angry customers who resort to violence when:

- They aren't satisfied with a service or product
- They have to wait
- Mistakes are made
- Promises aren't kept

PREVENTION

Both you and your employer can take steps to prevent workplace violence. Just the fact that your employer has provided this handbook shows that your organization takes the issue of workplace violence very seriously. Your employer should also implement policies and procedures to prevent violence - make sure you follow them.

Individually, you can take action to prevent violence as well. Knowing the warning signs, reporting any violent or potentially violent behavior, learning to effectively deal with stress and conflicts are all ways you can help prevent violence.

KNOWING THE WARNING SIGNS

Most cases of workplace violence don't just happen. The best way to identify potential violence is to recognize warning signs. Perpetrators often leave a series of clues. For example, the postal carrier who killed 14 people in Royal Oaks, Michigan in 1991 had threatened to shoot people after an arbitrator ruled against his labor complaint. The Dearborn gunman was clearly upset over losing a promotion and had voiced his intention to commit violence.

A threat is the clearest indicator that violence will follow. There are three types of threats:

1. **Direct Threats:** “I’ll get even with him.”
2. **Veiled Threats:** “This place would shut down for days if the mainframe crashed and the backup were damaged.”
3. **Conditional Threats:** “If I’m fired, there’ll be hell to pay.”

There are other signs that usually accompany a threat. A potentially violent person:

- Is unusually argumentative
- Doesn’t cooperate well with others
- Has a problem with authority figures
- Frequently blames others for his or her problems
- Displays marked changes in work patterns like tardiness or absenteeism
- Demonstrates extreme or bizarre behavior
- Frequently appears depressed
- Is involved in alcohol or drug abuse
- Has a history of violence

Keep in mind that a potentially violent person may not exhibit all of these signs. Likewise, it’s important not to make a hasty judgment about someone. For example, a co-worker who is having a bad day may appear frustrated, but that does not necessarily mean he or she will return the next day and become violent. Use your common sense, and avoid stereotyping people.

REPORTING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Importance of Reporting

It is crucial that you report any violence - verbal or physical - to your organization. Don’t ignore it. If the perpetrator actually commits the violence he or she threatened, the consequences can be devastating:

- Personal guilt if someone is killed or harmed
- Disciplinary action from your employer
- Loss of life (yours and your co-workers)

Most likely your company has an anti-violence policy. Don’t fear any repercussions from reporting. If your company has a policy, you are only doing your job by following it.

What to Report

Thoroughly report the actual behaviors or threats that were made. Just give the facts - where and when it happened, who witnessed it and what was said. For example, one report might be:

“Dave leaned over, pointed his finger at me and said ‘Bob will soon realize that he can’t treat me like this.’”

Or, another report might be:

“Carl walked up to me, grabbed my arms and threw me against the door and said ‘Why didn’t you cover for me? They docked me three days pay.’”

Documentation

Also, make sure your report is documented. Although it might be someone else's responsibility to do this, take the initiative and make sure it gets done.

Stress Management

Typically, perpetrators of workplace violence have been disgruntled and "stressed out" employees. If you can recognize when you or other employees are stressed and know how to respond, you will be better able to prevent it from escalating.

Stress is a psychological or physical tension created by some action or situation. However, if the stresses of your daily life keep your body in this state of alert all the time, eventually your health can break down.

Try these methods in dealing with stress:

- Talk more often about how you are feeling.
- Build better relationships with people

Remember that exercise, nutrition and the right amount of sleep are equally important in preventing stress.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflicts and problems can be discussed and diffused before harassing or abusive behaviors develop. It is important to solve conflicts so that problems don't escalate into violent behavior. There are several ways to solve conflicts:

- Compromise
- Collaboration
- Avoidance

Compromising on an issue is one way to reach an agreement when parties have competing goals. Each person give ups something in order to meet halfway.

Collaborating on an issue will help you find innovative ways to resolve the conflict. Each person's position is clear, but an alternative solution is achieved.

You may want to avoid responding to the conflict at that particular moment if:

- The conflict is found to be trivial
- Someone else would more effectively resolve the conflict
- Both of you simply need time to cool off

PERSONAL SAFETY TIPS

Dealing with Internal Violence

Of course, the best protection against internal violence is to report *all* threats or behaviors that you believe could lead to an outburst. However, if a situation has gone beyond reporting and you're well-being is threatened, follow these tips:

- Talk the person into calming down
- Empathize and sympathize
- Ask the person what you can do to help him or her
- Make sure they know you understand their position by re-stating what it is they're upset about.

- Focus on the behavior and not the person.
- Definitely call for help when necessary

Dealing with External Violence

Here are some personal safety tips to protect yourself from external violence, no matter what your workplace.

- Don't open the door to a stranger before or after regular business hours
- When you work early or late, let security guards know so they can check on you
- If anyone calls while you're alone in the office, never mention that fact to the caller
- Report any "strange" looking customers to security
- Always notice the appearance of any "strange" customers in case a crisis occurs later
- Build a rapport with customers so you'll be able to distinguish strangers from repeat customers
- Walk to and from your car with another person or a security officer

Other Personal Safety Tips

- Keep purses and other valuables out of sight in your car, when it's parked and when you're driving
- When you approach your car, have your keys in hand ready to unlock the door. Check in, around and under the car before you get in
- Always keep your car doors locked, even when you're in your car
- Don't get on an elevator if you're suspicious of someone on it. If you're in an elevator and a suspicious person gets on, get off! Stand close to the floor-selection buttons and if someone threatens you, press as many buttons as you can. The elevator will stop often and you'll have more chances to escape or get help.
- Avoid stairwells in parking garages. The auto ramp is less isolated, and if you have to scream for help, you're more likely to be heard. Walk as far from parked cars as possible.

Dealing with angry and potentially violent customers:

- Apologize for inconveniences to the customer
- Try to control your emotions
- Empathize and sympathize with customers
- Ignore sarcastic remarks and personal attacks
- Don't argue with customers
- Explain to customers things you can do to help
- Don't accuse customers
- Call for help when necessary

RESPONSE

Handling a Crisis

If you are faced with a customer or employee with a gun, don't resist. If he or she wants your money, give it to him or her.

Most likely your organization has a plan for dealing with crisis, including acts of violence. However, follow these tips if you have been the victim of an attack or have witnessed one:

- Call security or 911 immediately
- Carefully and accurately describe the act and the attacker
- Do not change anything at the scene where the violence occurred
- Do not clean up, reset furniture or touch any objects handled by the attacker

- In the event of rape, do not wash yourself or change clothes until a doctor has completed an exam.

If it is **not** an attack that warrants a call to police, immediately report it to your supervisor or authorities at your workplace.

SUMMARY

Although workplace violence is increasing, you can decrease the odds that you'll be a victim. Keep in mind that verbal threats are as much a form of violence as physical attacks. Don't ignore angry outbursts. Know that workplace stress and conflicts can cause a violent incident. Protect yourself from external or outside violence by following the tips provided.

Most importantly, report any violence that occurs in your workplace. Don't worry about being a "tattle-tale." By informing your supervisors of potentially dangerous individuals, you could save many lives - even your own.