

Workplace Violence: Prevention and Preparation

Violence and harassment in the workplace affects millions of employees worldwide. Any company, regardless of size or sector, can be affected by workplace violence. It is the responsibility of every employer to ensure a safe workplace for its employees. Learn more about the warning signs, appropriate responses and ways to prevent workplace violence.

What is workplace violence?

Workplace violence is any act of physical violence, threats of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening or disruptive behavior that occurs at the worksite. An abusive employee, manager, supervisor, co-worker, customer, family member or stranger can initiate workplace violence. It can affect or involve employees, visitors, contractors or vendors.

Any number of events can trigger workplace violence. Such events do not necessarily need to be work-related; in fact, some non-work-related situations, such as domestic violence, relationship issues, financial stress or displaced rage, can lead to violence in the workplace.

Regardless of the cause or the perpetrator, workplace violence is highly detrimental to the safety of a workplace. It should never be accepted or tolerated. While there is no way to predict human behavior and no specific profile of a potentially dangerous individual, there are warning signs that can be observed. In fact, the best way to prevent workplace violence is to identify problems early and deal with them immediately, as they occur.

Your Role In Dealing With Workplace Violence

It would be simple if, within a workplace, detecting the threat of potential violence was one person's responsibility. However, it is rare that one individual interacts with every employee on a daily basis, enough to identify inappropriate behavior. For this reason, detecting and preventing workplace violence is the responsibility of everyone within an organization.

If you encounter a violent event in the workplace, do not confront the threatening individual. Instead, immediately contact your supervisor or your human resources department.

As an employee of an organization, you can help by:

- Becoming familiar with any policies regarding workplace violence
- Reporting any strangers
- Being aware of any threats, physical or verbal, or disruptive behavior of individuals and reporting them immediately
- Taking all threats seriously and reporting them immediately

Management of an organization has additional responsibilities. As part of management, prepare yourself for a potentially violent situation by:

- Informing all employees of workplace violence policies and procedures
- Ensuring that special-need employees have assistance during emergency evacuation situations
- Responding to potential threats and escalating situations immediately
- Taking all threats seriously

- Checking employees' backgrounds prior to hiring
- Developing updated emergency procedures

Identifying Potentially Threatening Situations

If you ever have concerns about a situation that may turn violent, alert a supervisor immediately. Keep in mind that it is better to err on the side of safety than to risk having a situation escalate. The following may be indicators of potential workplace violence situations:

- Intimidating, harassing, bullying, belligerent and other inappropriate or aggressive behavior
- Recurring or numerous conflicts with customers, co-workers or supervisors
- Presence of a weapon in the workplace (unless necessary for the job)
- Making inappropriate references to guns, weapons or violence, or making idle threats about using a weapon to harm someone
- Desperation over family, financial and other personal problems
- Mention of suicide or homicide
- Extreme changes in behavior

If you have noticed a subordinate, co-worker or customer showing any signs of the above indicators, take the following steps:

- If you are a co-worker, report your observations to the person's supervisor immediately. If the threat is coming from a customer, notify your supervisor immediately.
- If it is your subordinate, speak to the employee to determine what may be causing the problem. Consult with the human-resources staff to determine the next steps.
- If it is your supervisor, notify his or her manager or the human resources department.

It is very important to respond appropriately. Do not overreact, yet do not ignore a situation. Managers should discuss the situation with human resources to determine the best way to handle the situation.

Additionally, be aware of interpersonal conflicts within the workplace. Seemingly insignificant interpersonal conflicts may erupt into difficult situations. Keep the situation under control by attempting to resolve problems immediately.

Resources

- National Security Council: www.nsc.org/work-safety/safety-topics/workplace-violence
- Occupational Safety & Health Administration: www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/index.html
- U.S. Department of Labor: www.dol.gov

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