

Insights, News & Events

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: KEEPING EMPLOYEES SAFE

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Cartoonists shot at work in Paris. Teachers killed while trying to protect their students in Newtown, Connecticut. A CEO shot in the head and stomach by a recently demoted employee in Illinois. News reports are filled with horrific tragedies occurring in workplaces around the world.

Did any of those employees go to work in the morning expecting that day to be their last? Was there anything their employers could have done to prevent the violence that befell their workers? Being proactive now may help you avoid a violent episode at your workplace, and be prepared to handle a crisis should one occur.

How Bad Is It?

Many employers may be tempted to ignore the possibility that violence could erupt at their business, but statistics suggest that workplace violence is more widespread than we'd like to think. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) estimates that nearly two million U.S. workers report having been a victim of workplace violence each year. OSHA further suggests that many other violent incidents occur in American workplaces but go unreported.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 753 workers were killed in the U.S. in 2013 due to violence, including 397 homicides and 270 suicides. This means that employers need to be concerned about employee deaths not only from occupational accidents and exposures, but also from intentional, violent acts by disgruntled current or former employees and outsiders.

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How should you minimize the potential for violent conduct in your workplace? Both you and your employees can take a number of proactive measures intended to keep violence at bay.

Implement a Zero-Tolerance Policy

A key to helping prevent and curb workplace violence is to implement a policy that informs employees that violent behavior will not be tolerated and what they should do if violence occurs. Draft a detailed policy on how your company defines workplace violence and the consequences that employees will face if they engage in violent behavior.

Train Employees and Managers

Train your employees to pay close attention to unusual or suspicious behavior, such as strangers hanging around your building or coworkers talking constantly about guns, bombs, or other weapons. Require employees to report any kind of verbal or physical threat so that it can be investigated and dealt with before it is acted upon. Make it clear that employees should err on the side of caution and not fear retaliation for inquiring about suspicious behavior or filing an internal report.

Train managers and supervisors on proper handling of potentially violent encounters. Make sure that all altercations, even pushing and shoving among workers, is reported, documented, and investigated so that small incidents don't escalate. Know when to call security personnel and even law enforcement to help handle violent incidents.

Add Security Measures

Whether violence comes from an insider or someone outside your organization, adding security measures can help protect your business and your employees. Some proactive measures to consider include locking all nonpublic areas of your workplace with keycard access for authorized employees, installing security cameras at all entrances, and hiring security guards. Consider bringing in a professional security company to identify your vulnerabilities and recommend preventive resources that might make your organization more secure.

Practice Crisis-Management Procedures

Just like a fire drill, it's important for your employees to know what to do and where to go in case a violent situation occurs. Be sure to train employees on your procedures

annually and conduct drills to reinforce what they've learned. Again, consider getting input from professional security experts when designing your procedures.

Provide an EAP or Stress Management Assistance

Workplace demands can often turn a calm employee into a stressed-out powder keg just waiting to explode. Take steps to address employee stress, negativity, and mistrust before it pushes someone past their limit. Keep lines of communication open and offer an employee assistance program to help folks deal with their feelings and concerns. When major changes in your workplace occur, such as restructuring, demotions or downsizing, consider bringing in professionals who are trained to help workers deal with such changes. As always, be sure to work with your human resources department and legal counsel to ensure your compliance with local and federal laws.

Being Prepared is Key

Dealing with workplace violence is never easy nor foolproof. But you can help your organization and your employees minimize potential violence through proper policies, training and forethought. We hope you never experience violence in your workplace but if you do, prior preparation will be key in handling it correctly.

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