

# What's The Frequency, Kenneth? How An R.E.M. Song Can Teach Workplace Violence Lessons

Insights

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What can the connection between legendary rock band R.E.M. and veteran reporter Dan Rather tell us about workplace safety? Most readers probably didn't realize these two well-known figures had anything in common, nor would they have guessed it relates to safety. Yet a 1986 attack on Rather while he was walking alone to his Manhattan apartment linked the former *CBS Evening News* anchor to a band from Athens, Georgia forever, and the story might help you consider some techniques to protect your employees from danger.

## Bizarre Workplace Violence Incident Leads To Hit Song

"What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" one of R.E.M.'s most recognized hits, was released on the band's 1994 album "Monster." It peaked at No. 21 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart and was the first song to debut at No. 1 on Billboard's Modern Rock Tracks list. The song refers to a 1986 incident in New York City involving an attack on Dan Rather by two men, with details of the event in lyrics such as:

*"What's the frequency, Kenneth?" . . .*

*You said that irony was the shackles of youth*

*You wore a shirt of violent green, uh-huh*

*I never understood the frequency, uh-huh*

The assailants confronted the defenseless Rather as he was walking home alone and attacked the reporter on the sidewalk and then in a building lobby, all the while repeating the words: "Kenneth, what is the frequency?" Apparently, Rather's attackers, who wrongly believed his name was Kenneth, thought that they were being brainwashed by the news media and wanted to know the frequency used by Rather's television station to control their minds. American society was fascinated by the unusual attack, particularly by the attackers' bizarre words, which also inspired a popular alt-rock band from Georgia to write the now infamous track.

The assault remained largely unresolved until it took a tragic turn years later when, in September 1994, one of Rather's attackers shot and killed an NBC stagehand who was working alone outside a television studio in New York. The attacker was attempting to force himself into the NBC building to, *again*, learn the network's "brainwashing" frequency so he could stop it. After seeing a photo of the assailant, Rather was able to confirm that the 1994 murderer had been one of his attackers.

## **Working Alone Presents Safety Concerns**

The assault on Rather and the murder of the NBC stagehand occurred because their occupations made them targets, and in the case of the NBC stagehand, his isolation in an unsecured location outside of his workplace was a factor that led to his death. Unfortunately, these attacks are not isolated examples; employees who work alone, including those who provide services outdoors or at customer sites that are remote or unsecured, are attacked or murdered on a regular basis.

The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) says that nearly 2 million employees become victims of workplace violence each year and, on average, more than 400 individuals are murdered at work. Although any employee can be the victim of workplace violence, OSHA identifies the workers at the highest risk to be those working at night, alone or small groups, delivery workers, and others who have high contact with the public.

Given the recent increase in this type of workplace violence, employers should take proactive steps to protect employees from such incidents. Valuable lessons can be gleaned from the What's-The-Frequency-Kenneth attacks on how to take additional precautions to protect employees who work alone, the most critical being:

### ***1. “Locked Out, Numb, Not Up To Speed”***

#### **Reassess The Potential Dangers Of Working Alone**

In a perfect world, employers would not assign employees like Rather or the NBC stagehand to work alone or in unsecured areas. However, hotels, media outlets, restaurants, and other workplaces present unique security challenges because they are—and by nature, must be—easily accessible by the public. An intruder likely will not have to knock down a locked door, struggle with a security guard, or otherwise breach a security threshold to obtain access to your employees. Working late shifts or After Hours often presents similar problems, as those shifts frequently involve smaller or one-person crews.

If your business requires employees to work under similar circumstances, consider the following questions and make adjustments where needed:

- Do you have employees making deliveries or going to guests' rooms unaccompanied, and if so, how will they protect themselves if attacked?
- Have entrances and exits been professionally assessed for security issues?
- Do your management and HR teams know when they should be concerned about potentially dangerous customer or client behavior and how to address it?
- Are your employees trained on how to deal with violence directed at them while working alone?

Given the rise of workplace violence in recent years, now is the time to address these issues. In short, you should conduct a hazard assessment for workplace violence risks, and then provide your

employees with the protective measures needed to eliminate or reduce exposure to any potential hazards.

## **2. “Tunnel Vision From The Outsider’s Screen”**

### **Install Video Surveillance, Additional Exterior Lights, And Alarm Systems**

If employees are required to work outside at any time, and especially during the evening, ensure the property is well-lit and that a surveillance system is installed. Remember, R.E.M. songs Camera and Photograph can provide the opportunity to alert your employees to a potential source of danger, or at a minimum, capture an incident.

Installing signage indicating the premises are under constant surveillance is a well-established deterrent. Train workers on how to report any suspicious behavior and notify management if a trespasser is identified. Install alarm systems in your buildings as well as fenced areas. Don’t hesitate to contact law enforcement if needed.

## **3. “Butterfly Decal, Rearview Mirror, Dogging The Scene”**

### **Provide Cell Phones And Maintain Company Vehicles**

Provide a company cell phone to any employee working alone, including those who engage in frequent business travel. Retrain these employees on who to contact in the case of an emergency and reinforce the principle that law enforcement—not management—should be contacted *first* in the event of potential bodily harm.

When employees are traveling in company-owned cars, trucks, or vans, ensure the vehicles receive regular maintenance to minimize breakdowns. Being stranded on the roadway could create a potentially hazardous situation for your employees, so take steps to make sure your workers can Drive home safely.

## **Conclusion**

The attacks on Rather and the NBC employee were tragic events. The notoriety they gained through the R.E.M. hit, however, gives us a frequent reminder of the violence that can occur when employees are defenseless and alone. Although no perfect response to the recent increase in workplace violence is available, you should begin taking steps to avoid violent situations and minimize risk to your employees.

Rather (no pun intended) than take a reactive approach to workplace violence, you should consider acting proactively in an effort to avoid these incidents altogether. We recommend implementing a pre-mortem analysis of what could go wrong instead of waiting for a what-went-wrong review after the fact. After all, instead of Everybody Hurts, we want everyone to go home Shiny Happy People.

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