

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: DRAWING THE LINE AGAINST EMPLOYEE MISCONDUCT

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The workplace is simply a cross section of society. While there is an expectation that employees will conduct themselves in a positive manner, this is not always the case. The reality is that employees bring to work all of their idiosyncrasies, concerns, biases and inclinations. The potential for a negative interaction in the workplace is exacerbated by the fact that employees come from varied backgrounds and experiences. They will not always relate well to each other. Moreover, there may be personal issues - marital problems, financial concerns, mental health issues - weighing on employees that can result in negative behavior.

The source of workplace violence is not always from a co-worker. Anyone whom an employee comes in contact with while working - clients, customers and vendors - can perpetuate acts of violence.

One of the best preventive measures an employer can take is to create a work environment where it is abundantly clear that violence and other forms of inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated.

Standards of conduct are fairly common in employee handbooks and policy manuals, but it is always a good idea to reinforce them through training and appropriate disciplinary action. By addressing horseplay, harsh words and similar conduct, one can head off negative behavior before it escalates. Threats should not be minimized or dismissed; follow-up and corrective action should take place where appropriate. The job performance of managers and supervisors should be tied to how well the members of their workgroup interact with each other. This will help ensure

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that managers and supervisors are motivated to address and manage interpersonal disputes. Company policies, handbooks and other statements of acceptable conduct should clearly state that negative behavior by nonemployees such as customers and vendors also will not be tolerated.

The effort to enforce appropriate standards should not be new to employers. Companies should already be delineating and enforcing standards to prohibit discrimination or harassment based on protected statuses such as race, age, gender, national origin, disability, etc. If employers can investigate and resolve these issues, then they already have the key processes in place to investigate and resolve potential workplace safety issues.

The risk of workplace violence can't be eliminated totally; however, employers can reduce it significantly by creating a culture of zero tolerance for such misconduct.

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