

# 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 alternative rock band R.E.M. and veteran reporter Dan Rather tell us about workplace safety? Most probably didn't even realize these two popular culture figures had anything in common, or would ever guess 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 rock band from Athens, Georgia forever, and the story might help you consider helpful 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*. The song peaked at number 21 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, and was the first song to debut at number one on the *Billboard* Modern Rock Tracks list. The song's title refers to an incident in New York City in 1986 involving a bizarre attack on Rather by two men, and the lyrics include lines such as these:

*"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, who confronted the defenseless Rather as he was walking home alone, attacked the reporter on a sidewalk and then in a building lobby, all the while repeating the same words: "Kenneth, what is the frequency?" Apparently, Rather's attackers not only wrongly believed his name was Kenneth, but also 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, and especially the attackers' bizarre words, which inspired an emerging alt-rock band from Georgia to write the now infamous track.

The bizarre assault remained largely unresolved until it took a tragic turn years later when, in September 1994, one of Rather's attackers later fatally 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*, attempt to learn a 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 was one of his attackers.

### **Working Alone Presents Safety Concerns**

Rather was assaulted and the NBC employee murdered because of their occupation, and in the case of the NBC stagehand, his isolation in an unsecured location outside of his workplace led to his death. Unfortunately, these attacks are not isolated examples of violence on individuals performing their job while working alone. Employees who work alone, including those who provide services outside or at remote or unsecured customer sites are attacked or murdered on a regular basis.

The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) claims that nearly 2 million employees are victims of workplace violence each year and, on average, over 400 workers are murdered at work. Although any employee can be the victim of workplace violence, OSHA identifies the following workers as at high risk of workplace violence: 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. Employers can glean valuable lessons from the What's-The-Frequency-Kenneth attacks to learn how to take additional precautions to protect employees who work alone, like the following:

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

In a perfect world, employers would not have employees like Rather or the NBC stagehand working alone or in unsecured areas. However, hotels, media outlets, restaurants, and other workplaces present unique security challenges because they are—and by their 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 they frequently involved smaller or one-person crews.

If your business involves any of these industries, consider the following 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 you had entrances and exits 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 the potential hazard.

- **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 that the property is well-lit and that a surveillance system is installed. Remember, R.E.M. songs Camera and Photograph can be the difference in alerting your employees to a potential source of danger, or at a minimum, capturing an incident.

Installing signage indicating that 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 to both your buildings and fenced areas. Don't hesitate to contact law enforcement if needed.

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

All employees working alone, including those who engage in frequent business travel, should be provided a company cell phone. Retrain these employees on who to contact in the case of an emergency and reinforce the principle that law enforcement—and 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 that regular maintenance is conducted on the vehicles to minimize breakdowns due to mechanical failure. 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 Rather and NBC attacks were tragic events. The notoriety they gained through the R.E.M. hit, however, gives us a constant 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 currently available, you should begin taking steps to avoid violent situations and minimize the 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. 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, we want everyone to go home Shiny Happy People.

## **Related People**





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