

# Preventing Workplace Violence

Workplace or occupational violence has become an increasingly serious problem throughout all segments of our society.

To understand the magnitude or seriousness of workplace violence, consider the following:

- Workplace violence is the fastest growing form of murder in the USA.
- In the United States, 10.25% of men killed at work die of murder while the figure for women is 40.34% — It is the leading cause of workplace death for women (compared to natural causes and accidents).
- According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, each year more than 1,600 people are murdered at work.
- More than 2,000,000 people are assaulted on the job each year and more than 6,000,000 are threatened.

Workplace violence is an increasing phenomenon. Persons used to resolve their differences by talking it out. Now, they often resort to violence as an initial problem-solving technique.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), *federal, state and government workers, who make up about 18% of the total U.S. workforce, account for 30% of all workplace victims.*

## Types of Workplace Violence

There are essentially two primary types or categories of workplace violence that occur.

- **Third Party Intrusion into the Workplace**

According to recent research, *the greatest potential for workplace violence* occurs when a person who is not an employee of the business or company community enters the workplace. This can be the estranged or recently divorced husband, the ex-boyfriend or the emotionally disturbed person.

With increased emphasis upon domestic violence or abuse, an increasing number of persons (usually women) are obtaining emergency protection orders (EPO) or emergency restraining orders (ERO) directed towards persons with whom they have had a domestic relationship or a relationship involving misdirected affection. This situation often spills over into the workplace. According to the BJS (July, 1994), 5% of women victimized at work were attacked by a husband, ex-husband, boyfriend or ex-boyfriend. Thirty-five percent of the time women were attacked by a casual acquaintance and 19% of the time they were attacked by someone well known to them.

- **Disgruntled Employees**

The disgruntled employee usually directs their act(s) of violence towards coworkers, supervisors or managers. *The motive for the act or acts of violence is usually revenge.* The violent employee usually believes:

Something very important has been taken away from them:

- Promotion
- Raise
- Assignment or transfer

Feels the organization has a moral obligation to provide that which was taken away.

If the organization does not give it to him, he is willing to risk everything to strike back.

The violence includes injury to co-workers and him.

## **Miscellaneous Types of Workplace Violence**

Other less frequent types of workplace violence that occur include violence that takes place during the commission of a robbery or other commercial crime (motive — economic gain) and terrorist hate crime. An example of the latter is the criminal who sends bombs or explosive devices through the mail.

## **Profile of Attackers**

The overwhelming majority of workplace violence is caused by men. Persons who have researched numerous cases of workplace violence have developed the following profile of attackers who have been involved in workplace homicide:

- Male
- 35 years or older
- Owns a weapon or weapons
- Has a history of violence against women, children or animals
- Is withdrawn or a loner
- Their job provides self esteem
- Has a history of substance abuse or mental health issues
- Blames others for life's disappointments — externalizes blame
- Poor coping skills and resources
- High probability of military service

## **When Are Employees Under Stress?**

Studies have shown there are particular *times in our lives when the greatest degree of stress is created*. These times are:

- When there is a death in the family
- When undergoing a divorce
- Loss of job
- During a physical move

If a supervisor or co-worker understands when person experience stress in their lives, they can tailor or modify their actions accordingly.

## **“Red Flags” or Warning Signs**

There are a number of “**red flags**” or **warning signs** related to the person who commits an act(s) of workplace violence. They may include the following.

- History of violent behavior
- Fascination with weaponry and/or acts of violence
- Carrying a concealed weapon
- Verbal, nonverbal, or written threats or intimidation
- Obsessive involvement with the job
- Unwanted romantic interest in co-worker
- Paranoid behavior
- Unaccepting of criticism
- Holds a grudge
- Recent family, financial and/or personal problems
- Talks about past killings/violence
- Tests limits of acceptable behavior
- Stress in the workplace such as layoffs, RIFs, and labor disputes
- Little tolerance of others
- Gets away with unacceptable job performance ratings
- Fond of violent films and TV shows
- Non communicator ——— loner
- Extreme reactions to new policies ——— has a hard time with authority figures
- Change in quality of work
- Very neat or very sloppy ——— or sudden change
- Lies, exaggerates or over reacts on a regular basis
- Self-centered or aloof
- Withdrawal of funds
- Irrational beliefs and ideas
- Expressions of a plan to hurt himself or others
- Externalization of blame
- Taking up much of supervisor's time with behavior or performance problems
- Drastic change in belief system
- Displays of unwarranted anger
- Feelings of being victimized
- Intoxication from alcohol or other substances
- Expressions of hopelessness or heightened anxiety
- Productivity and/or attendance problems
- Violence towards inanimate objects
- Steals or sabotages projects or equipment
- Lack of concern for the safety of others

## **At Risk Work Environment**

There are a number of factors within the workplace itself that can contribute to or serve as a catalyst for acts of violence by employees. Among these factors are the following:

- Chronic labor/management disputes
- Frequent grievances filed
- Large number of injury claims
- Under staffing or excessive demands for overtime
- High number of stressed personnel

- Authoritarian Management Approach ——— An aggressive style where management tells employees what and when to do everything. Absolute obedience to management authority is required.
- Polarization between employees and managers ——— The relationship is one of an us versus them syndrome. Management and employees have conflicting or contrasting positions.
- Inconsistencies between employees and managers ——— Employees and management do not share the same work related goals. Management fails to handle employees equally.
- Environmental pressures ——— Pressures from home, financial problems, work schedules or unfair work demands.

## **Personal Conduct to Minimize Workplace Violence**

Follow these suggestions in your daily interactions with people to de-escalate potentially violent situations. If at any time a person's behavior starts to escalate beyond your comfort zone, disengage.

- **Do**

Project calmness: move and speak slowly, quietly and confidently.

Be an empathetic listener: encourage the person to talk and listen patiently.

Focus your attention on the other person to let them know you are interested in what they have to say.

Maintain a relaxed yet attentive posture and position yourself at a right angle rather than directly in front of the other person.

Acknowledge the person's feelings. Indicate that you can see he or she is upset. Ask for small, specific favors such as asking the person to move to a quieter area. Establish ground rules if unreasonable behavior persists. Calmly describe the consequences of any violent behavior.

Use delaying tactics which will give the person time to calm down. For example, offer a drink of water (in a disposable cup).

Be reassuring and point out choices. Break big problems into smaller, more manageable problems.

Accept criticism in a positive way. When a complaint might be true, use statements like "You're probably right" or "It was my fault." If the criticism seems unwarranted, ask clarifying questions.

Ask for his recommendations. Repeat back to him what you feel he is requesting of you.

Arrange yourself so that a visitor cannot block your access to an exit.

- **Do Not**

Use styles of communication which generate hostility such as apathy, brush off, coldness, condescension, and robotism, going strictly by the rules or giving the run-around.

Reject all of a person's demands from the start

Pose in challenging stances such as standing directly opposite someone, hands on hips or crossing your arms

Avoid any physical contact, finger-pointing or long periods of fixed eye contact.

Make sudden movements which can be seen as threatening. Notice the tone, volume and rate of your speech.

Challenge, threaten, or dare the individual. Never belittle the person or make him/her feel foolish.

Criticize or act impatiently toward the agitated individual.

Attempt to bargain with a threatening individual.

Try to make the situation seem less serious than it is.

Make false statements or promises you cannot keep.

Try to impart a lot of technical or complicated information when emotions are high. Take sides or agree with distortions.

Invade the individual's personal space. Make sure there is a space of 3FT to 6FT between you and the person.

## **Ways to Prevent Workplace Violence**

Recommendations how to prevent or minimize workplace violence differ based upon the general type of violence itself.

- **Third Party Intrusion into the Workplace**

This type of potential workplace violence is difficult to plan for and deter because it is frequently unpredictable and infrequent. The following are a series of recommendations how to minimize such occurrences.

### **Staff Members Should Notify**

Although it can be a very sensitive and personal issue, employees should be encouraged to notify their supervisors whenever they experience domestic conflict, abuse or misdirected affection. The supervisor can subsequently be more alert to the intrusion into the workplace by a third party and possibly initiate proactive measures.

If the threat is perceived to be serious or immediate, the supervisor may initiate a threat assessment evaluation.

### **Notify Company Security Department**

When an employee has obtained an emergency protection order directed toward an estranged or recently divorced spouse, ex-boyfriend, family member, etc., the company security department should be notified. The department, in turn, should notify its officers of the emergency protection order. Representatives of the department may meet with the person who has obtained the order and his/her supervisor to plan for contingencies.

**Duress Alarms** ——— A temporary duress alarm may be installed in the workplace of the individual who is threatened. Such an alarm should be centrally monitored at the company security department.

**Escorts** ——— The person who is threatened and/or who has obtained the emergency protection order may be escorted from and to his/her motor vehicle to the workplace by a company security officer.

- **Disgruntled Employees**

There are numerous measures that can be taken to minimize the threat or potential of workplace violence from disgruntled employees.

**Non - Harassment Policy** ——— A clearly written company wide policy should be developed that prohibits intimidation and harassment in the workplace. This policy should be cooperatively developed by the company security department and the human resources (personnel) department. Employees should read and sign this policy.

**Zero Tolerance for Weapons** ——— Companies and businesses should have a consistent, well-publicized policy that allows for zero tolerance for weapons. The policy should apply to all company employees, except company security personnel.

**Encourage Employees to Report Incidents** ——— Employees should be encouraged to report incidents of violence, harassment, intimidation, threatened violence, etc. to their superiors and/or the company security department.

**Employee Training** ——— Employees should be trained to recognize warning signs or “red flags” in the behavior or circumstances of co-workers that may lead to workplace violence.

**Evaluate Employment Procedures** ——— Wherever possible, employment procedures should include a thorough background check of prospective employees. This may include a criminal background check and a previous employment check.

**Advise Employees of Counseling Services** ——— Insure that all employees are advised of available counseling and employee assistance programs that are available.

**Provide A Healthy Work Environment** ——— Provide a work environment that includes benevolent rather than authoritarian management, predictable supervision, value for dignity of the employee and reasonable work demands or requirements.

**Evaluate Security and Emergency Procedures** ——— In cooperation with the local law enforcement agency or security department, evaluate access control, security and emergency response procedures.

**Minimize Workplace Stress** ——— As much as possible to do, work to minimize labor/management disputes, under staffing, unsafe conditions, excessive demands for output or any other factors that contribute to workplace stress

**Provide a Threat Management Plan** ——— When threats or implied threats are reported or made known, the company or business should have a team of professionals that pull together to analyze risk factors and plan a course of action. This team may vary according to the situation, but may include representatives from:

- The Human Resources Department
- The Company Security Department
- Employee Assistance Services
- Company Legal Council
- Senior Company Managers
- Maintenance Department Representatives

The Threat Management Team’s responsibility is to balance the rights of the person who made the threats with the rights of the co-workers or supervisor who may be the object of those threats.

- The person who reports the threat and any witnesses should be interviewed and all information documented in detail. This should include information about what was said, under what circumstances, and the relationship between the person who made the statement and the person who reported it.
- If available ——— possibly through Employee Assistance Services ——— a specialist in assessing potentially violent employees should be contacted to review and evaluate the information.
- If additional investigation or review is warranted, the Threat Management Team should be formed. The Threat Management Team subsequently meets to review all available information about the situation or matter. After a detailed review of the situation, the following questions must be considered:

- Should the person (who made the threat) be offered counseling?
- Should counseling be voluntary or become a condition of further employment?
- Should the person be offered a chance to resign?

If the Threat Management Team decides the person is an immediate danger to himself/herself or others, the questions to consider include the following:

Should criminal prosecution take place?

How will the company or business handle the individual’s separation from the institution? Will the separation be temporary or permanent? What is the basis for the decision? Is it defensible?

What types of attacks might the person make?

Should the company or business seek a temporary restraining order?

What should the scope of added or special security be, and for how long should it be in place? What indicators will allow the company or business to lower the level of security in the future?

## **Threat Management Planning**

- Establish a Threat Management Team to direct efforts to prevent violence.
- Train managers, supervisors and employees about the potential of violence and the profile of the perpetrators.
- Establish written policies about the warning signs and what to do if the signs are observed.
- Train managers and supervisors how to handle terminations, layoffs and downsizing in the most humane and sensitive manner.
- Establish investigative procedures for handling reports of threats.
- Establish procedures for action after a threat assessment has been completed.

## **Model Policy for Workplace Threats and Violence**

Nothing is more important to a company or business than the safety and security of its employees. Threats, threatening behavior, or acts of violence against employees, visitors, guest, or other individuals by anyone on company property will not be tolerated. Violations of this policy will lead to disciplinary action which may include dismissal, arrest and prosecution.

Any person who makes substantial threats, exhibits threatening behavior, or engages in violent acts on company property shall be removed from the premises as quickly as safety permits, and shall remain off the company premises pending the outcome of an investigation. The company will initiate an appropriate response. This response may include, but is not limited to, suspension and/or termination of any employment relationship, reassignment of job duties, suspension or termination of employment, and/or criminal prosecution of the person or persons involved.

No existing company policy, practice, or procedure should be interpreted to prohibit decisions designed to prevent a threat from being carried out, a violent act from occurring or a life threatening situation from developing.

All company personnel are responsible for notifying the supervisory or management representative designated below of any threats which they have witnessed, received, or have been told that another person has witnessed or received. Even without an actual threat, personnel should also report any behavior they have witnessed which they regard as threatening or violent when that behavior is job related or might be carried out on a company controlled site, or is connected to company employment. Employees are responsible for making this report regardless of the relationship between the individual who initiated the threat or threatening behavior and the person or persons who were threatened or were the focus of the threatening behavior. If the designated management representative is not available, personnel should report the threat to their supervisor or another member of the management team.

All individuals who apply for or obtain a protective or restraining order which list company locations as being protected areas, must provide to the designated management representative a copy of the petition and declarations used to seek the order, a copy of any temporary protective or restraining order which is granted, and a copy of any protective or restraining order which is made permanent.

The company understands the sensitivity of the information requested and has developed confidentiality procedures which recognize and respect the privacy of the reporting employee(s). The designated management representative is:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Threat Incident Report**

Company policy should require employees to report all threats or incidents of violent behavior which they observe or are informed about to the Designated Management Representative (DMR). The DMR should take the steps necessary to complete a threat incident report as quickly as possible, including private interview of the victim(s) and witness(es). The report will be used by Threat Management Team to assess the safety of the workplace, and to decide upon a plan of action. The following facts should be included in the threat incident report:

- Name of the threat-maker and his/her relationship to the company and to the recipient.
- Name(s) of the victims or potential victims
- When and where the incident occurred
- What happened immediately prior to the incident
- The specific language of the threat
- Any physical conduct that would substantiate an intention to follow through on the threat
- How the threat-maker appeared (physically and emotionally)
- Names of others who were directly involved and any actions they took
- How the incident ended
- Names of witnesses
- What happened to the threat-maker after the incident
- What happened to the other employees directly involved after the incident
- Names of any supervisory staff involved and how they responded
- What event(s) triggered the incident
- Any history leading up to the incident
- The steps which have been taken to ensure that the threat will not be carried out
- Suggestions for preventing workplace violence in the future

Elements of the threat incident report and any subsequent actions relating to the incident should be recorded in a tracking system for use by the DMR and the Threat Management Team. Such systems range from simple card files to commercially available relational databases. The tracking system as well as all investigative files should be kept secure and maintained separately from other records.

