



Supervisors' Safety Update

Ideas and Strategies for Leaders



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VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE – ANTICIPATE & PREPARE

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control

A WORKPLACE SAFETY THREAT

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has labeled the rise in workplace violence a “significant” public health issue – and they predict the increase will continue. Many employees don’t feel safe on the job any more. And it’s not because they work in highly hazardous industries, but because they fear becoming the subject of crime or violence at work.

The courts increasingly hold employers responsible for maintaining a safe workplace. Among other things, this means “employers must not minimize or ignore threats of violence in the workplace.” Multiple lawsuits have been filed against managers who ignored jobsite threats of violence that resulted in serious injury or death. Out-of-court settlements are common and often amount to millions of dollars in these suits.

At present, OSHA has no specific standard on this issue. However, under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the employer has an obligation to address all safety & health issues, including workplace violence under the General Duty Clause. The General Duty Clause states that: “Each employer shall furnish to each of his employees employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees.” (OSH Act of 1970 5(a)(1)). The first citation of this nature took place in late 1993, encouraging employers to develop workplace violence prevention programs.

Workers readily accept responsibility for their own safety and security at home. However, they feel it’s the employer’s duty to provide an environment that’s safe when at work. Studies have shown that employees have a feeling of helplessness and betrayal when a violent incident happens at work.

For all these reasons, SEABRIGHT urges managers and supervisors to think seriously about this issue. There are no simple answers, but there *are* ways to anticipate and potentially avoid violence in your own workplace. Such incidents may not be as frequent as eye, hand, or back injuries, but if they *do* happen, they tend to be severe in terms of physical and psychological harm to both workers and the company.

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HOW BAD IS THIS PROBLEM?

Incidents of work-related violence were virtually unheard of until the 1970's. Since then, they have more than tripled. According to recent studies, workplace homicide is now the third leading cause of fatal occupational injury in the United States. **According to the BLS Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, there were 674 workplace homicides in 2000, accounting for 11% of the total 5,915 fatal work injuries in the United States.** The leading motive for workplace homicide is robbery. Another growing statistic is the number of bosses killed at work. This number has doubled over the past 10 years, with 3-4 per month now slain by disgruntled workers or ex-workers.

The National Crime Victimization Survey reveals that between 1993 and 1999 in the United States, an average of 1.7 million violent victimizations per year were committed against persons who were at work or on duty. Violence involved physical attacks, threats by deadly weapons, or harassment. Most incidents were fist fights, but 17% involved guns. The most vulnerable workers are those on evening or night shifts and those who handle money in retail stores, eating establishments and taxicabs. No work environment is immune, however. Some companies are exploring every aspect of their operations – from employment and management procedures to lighting and physical plant security – seeking ways to stop this insanity.

WHAT IS BEHIND THE RISING TREND?

Sociologists and criminal experts tell us the increase can be attributed to several general factors – and in many cases, a combination of these. Some of the more probable reasons:

An increasingly violent society: In 1991, there were more homicides committed in the U.S. than in any other year in history – and the workplace is part of this society. Are television and movies destructive models? Are broken families the cause? Are drugs to blame? Or do we have an ineffective court system? No one has a simple answer.

High unemployment rates: When unemployment rates rise, studies have shown that a 1% increase in these rates correlates with a 6.7% increase in homicides and property crimes. Loss of income and opportunity may create unbearable frustrations, resentments and desperate action in some people.

Loss of community: With the decline of neighborhoods, mobility for new jobs and the breakdown of community, many people feel lonely and isolated. If work has become the focal point for a person's life, the threat of a job loss can threaten the loss of everything meaningful. This can be devastating to some personalities. Violent individuals are often found to be loners with little or no family or social support.

Easy access to firearms: Guns are easy to procure in the U.S. and are involved in *3 out of every 4* workplace homicides according to NIOSH. Individuals who might not dare assault another person physically, for fear of losing the battle, may find more certain power in a gun.

Industrial instability and stress: Worldwide economic competition, layoffs and downsizing have made workers more insecure about their jobs and their future – which is shown to be a precursor to potential workplace violence. Factors that increase worker stress levels include changes in work hours, titles and positions, and the need to take on additional duties to compensate for workforce reductions. Such occupational demands, added to personal problems, may push individuals to a breaking point.

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Lack of awareness: Workplace homicide has long been seen as a law enforcement issue, rather than a health and safety issue. As a result, prevention measures have not been implemented at most worksites, and the problem has worsened. Few managers realize that the underlying causes of workplace violence can be environmental, organizational, or personal – and the employer *can* control many of these factors.

HOW CAN COMPANIES ANTICIPATE AND PREPARE?

Today, many companies are taking a closer look at this problem, realizing that any violent intrusion into the workplace leaves a heavy mark. The important thing is to be prepared, to anticipate early warning signs and to take all threats seriously. Experts warn that if individuals explode or make threats, and are *ignored*, they may feel they have permission to go to the next level. Many of the following strategies for prevention not only reflect sound management practices, but may also help ensure a safe workplace for your employees.

1. **Policies:** Develop and communicate effective policies to protect employees from harassment.
2. **Security:** Review and strengthen security procedures, without impeding customer access.
3. **Hiring:** Utilize all legal, practical screening strategies, such as checking references and accessing public records, to indicate potentially troubled individuals.
4. **Hotline:** Establish a 24-hour hot line, where employees can report threats or concerns about their safety – anonymously if they desire.
5. **Conflicts:** Establish policies for handling grievances, and train both supervisors and employees in how to resolve conflicts.
6. **Crisis Plan:** Consider organizing a Threat Assessment Team, composed of key personnel, to evaluate threats received and decide whether to call in law enforcement authorities.
7. **EAP:** Establish an Employee Assistance Program, or locate nearby professionals that can provide counseling on substance abuse, addiction, marriage, financial and legal matters for troubled employees.
8. **Layoffs:** Do what you can to soften the blow of a layoff. Show respect and offer job or financial counseling for employees who have been laid off or fired.
9. **Supervisors:** Train supervisors on how to recognize signs of a troubled employee and how to develop “antennae” that sense early warning signs.

WHAT IS THE SUPERVISOR’S ROLE?

Robert Pater, Executive Director of Strategic Safety Associations, in Portland, Oregon, advises taking care of worker problems and conflicts “at as low a level as possible.” He tells supervisors to take action immediately when a threat is discovered. “Don’t wait until it becomes a mountain...deal with a molehill.” Pater suggests, “If you see certain behaviors – angry outbursts or complete withdrawal – ask the person if he or she is okay. Talk in a caring way. It’s amazing what a difference that can make.”

But in most cases, supervisors can’t be expected to function as counselors or psychologists. They *can* help identify early symptoms in troubled employees, however. Backed by company policies and procedures, they should then seek the support of higher management, to determine what steps should be taken. Studies show that white males, 35-45 years of age are most frequently associated with violence at the workplace, but there are also multiple indicators that supervisors can watch for. The checklist below should be emphasized during supervisor training sessions.

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Research of over 200 incidents of workplace violence revealed that prior to each case, the suspect exhibited one or more of the following symptoms:

- Increased use of alcohol and/or illegal drugs
- Unexplained increase in absenteeism
- Noticeable decrease in attention to appearance and hygiene
- Depression and withdrawal
- Explosive outbursts of anger or rage without provocation
- Threats or verbal abuse directed at co-workers and supervisors
- Repeated comments that indicate suicidal tendencies
- Frequent, vague physical complaints
- Noticeably unstable emotional responses
- Behavior which is suspect of paranoia
- Preoccupation with previous incidents of violence
- Increased mood swings
- Being chronically disgruntled and taking criticism poorly
- Having a plan to “solve all problems”
- Resistance and overreaction to changes in procedures
- Repeated violations of company policies
- Keen interest and unsolicited comments about firearms and other dangerous weapons
- Empathy with individuals committing violence
- Fascination with violent and/or sexually explicit movies or publications
- Escalation of domestic problems
- Large withdrawals from or closure of his/her account in the company credit union

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Research further showed that employees and co-workers had observed one or more of the above symptoms prior to violence, but considered them insignificant or just “weird” behavior. If there had been briefings on symptom recognition and how to report such information, violent outcomes might have been avoided. Seminars or workshops should help employees understand that reporting potentially dangerous behavior is not “ratting” on a co-worker, but is in the best interest of all, including the offender. Only then can appropriate action be taken and help be provided for the troubled employee.

VIOLENCE CAN BE PREVENTED

There is evidence to suggest that workplace violence is largely preventable. According to a 1993 study by the Northwestern National Life Insurance Company, employees in companies with effective grievance, security, and harassment policies reported fewer incidents of violence or harassment. They also experienced fewer stress-related illnesses and more satisfaction with their jobs. However, only one in four companies is said to have a policy or program to deal with workplace violence.

It makes good sense for a company, large or small, to have a workplace violence prevention program in place, with supervisors trained to recognize critical symptoms. Jurg W. Mattman, a nationally recognized expert on occupational violence and personal security argues, “This protects the employees, avoids costly litigation, preserves the company’s reputation, improves the bottom line, but most of all is morally and ethically the right thing to do. After all, everybody who earns a living has a right to a safe and secure work environment.” SEABRIGHT agrees.

For further guidelines on developing violence policies or procedures, see the following references:

- U.S. Dept. of Labor - <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/index.html>
- National Institute for Occupational health - <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/violenpg.html>
- The National Center for Prevention of Workplace Violence - <http://www.workplaceviolence911.com/>