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Internal security

Here's how to address workplace violence issue

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, *For Small Business Times*

Question: Are you familiar with the issue of workplace violence? Could you offer some information about this issue? What procedures should be followed for a company to address this threat?

Answer: Since its inception in 1970, ensuring safe workplaces for America's workers has been the primary purpose of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Indeed, under OSHA, employers have a "general duty" to provide employees with work and a workplace free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm."

Generally speaking, workplace violence has been accepted as falling under this "general duty clause" when workplace hazards:

- Create a "significant risk" to employees other than a "freakish or utterly implausible occurrence or circumstances."
- Are known to the employer and are considered to be hazards in the employer's business or industry.
- Are ones in which the employer can reasonably be expected to prevent.

Workplace violence is different than other job-related safety threats because rather than involving "things" such as machinery, chemicals, work processes, etc., it involves an act perpetrated by another person. In that sense, it varies from the subject matter with which OSHA is normally concerned. OSHA has defined the following categories of individuals who may commit violent acts in the workplace or while an individual is performing his/her job:

- An individual that has no legitimate relationship with an employee or the employer (e.g., an intruder, a robber).
- An employee or ex-employee.

- An individual that is or has been a client, customer, contractor, vendor, or other legitimate relationship with the employer.
- An individual that has an intimate, family or other relationship with an employee.

It is important to note that violence in the workplace exacts an expensive toll on American business every year. Current estimates by researchers suggest that lawsuits stemming from negligence cost employers an average of \$500,000 for out-of-court settlements and \$3 million for cases that go to trial.

Additionally, in the wake of such incidents, employers may see spikes in their worker's compensation and medical insurance rates.

Finally, perhaps the most significant costs that attach to workplace violence are those that may not be initially apparent — costs having to do with decreased productivity, lower employee morale and job satisfaction, poorer attendance and increased turnover.

All of those can combine to impact a company's competitive position.

While certain cases have gathered a lot of attention from the media, any workplace has the potential for violence to be visited upon it. It does not seem to matter if the organization is large or small or involved in manufacturing a product or offering a service. Under the right circumstances, any workplace can be the setting of a violent act. In this reference, the "right circumstances" pertain to an interaction among these three factors:

- An individual possesses violent predispositions.
- Conditions trigger the individual to see violence as the "way out."
- A setting facilitates or permits the violence (or does not stop it from occurring).

In terms of specific risk, the most important variable appears to be the kind of work an individual does. Research suggests that up to 85% of workplace homicides involve employees who deal directly with money matters (e.g., cashiers) or provide services to clients, customers or others.

What can you, as an employer, do to effectively confront work-

place violence? Perhaps the most important thing you can do is to simply recognize that this serious threat exists and that you need to do something about it.

A recent survey by Gallup found that just 25% of respondents indicated they had had any training in threat assessment. To the extent that the results of this poll can be generalized, that means that when it comes to preventing violent acts from occurring, very few managers know what to look for and/or what to do once the warning signs have been identified.

So, the first thing to do is to open your eyes. Beyond that, here are some concrete actions that researchers suggest you can take:

- Establish a workplace violence prevention committee. Participants should be a cross-section of functional areas including human resources, legal, safety, public relations/marketing, management and union representation (if applicable).
- Establish a workplace violence “zero incident” policy. The committee’s first order of business should be to target for elimination all “at-risk” behaviors at both the individual and organizational levels.
- Incorporate a “no weapons in the workplace” provision. Establish that no weapons will be allowed in the workplace and that under no circumstances may employees possess a weapon while on duty.
- Research the nature of the risk to your organization. Evaluate the factors that attach to the business of the organization, its industry, geographic location, etc.
- Conduct periodic violence threat assessments. Examine organizational practices (e.g., terminating employees via e-mail) that may foment violent acts.
- Enhance physical security. Scrutinize the organization’s practices having to do with physical access, parking lot surveillance, etc.
- Synchronize personnel, safety, and security policies. These

areas of company policy need to be closely related to create a comprehensive workplace violence prevention effort.

- Create an emergency protocol. Make sure you have an up-to-date emergency response plan in place and that you have established a working relationship with the local police department.
- Augment hiring procedures. Check for inclinations of violence by using background checks and verification of all candidate-provided information.
- Promote your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAPs exist to counsel employees regarding various health and life issues, including those that relate to violence. If you have an EAP, make sure people know about it and use it. Be sure your managers know how to make an effective EAP referral.
- Provide ongoing training for all employees. All employees should learn about the warning signs of violence and what to do about them.

In the final analysis, we live in an era where threats of violence are increasingly prevalent. Confronted with acts of terror and political instability around the world, we fear for our nation. Confronted with acts of violence at our schools and work settings, we fear for our children, our families and our friends. We yearn for safety and security. Accordingly, as a responsible manager for your organization, you must examine the issues that surround the threat of workplace violence.



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