

Prevention

Overview

One major component of any workplace violence program is prevention. The topics in the previous sections, such as program development and union involvement, are important parts of a workplace violence prevention program. This section will focus on **additional** measures that can be taken to reduce the risk of violent behavior.

Warning Signs of Violence

The first question many people ask when starting to develop a workplace violence prevention program is, *How can we identify potentially violent individuals?* It is understandable that people want to know this — and that “early warning signs” and “profiles” of potentially violent employees are in much of the literature on the subject of workplace violence. It would save time and solve problems if managers could figure out ahead of time what behaviors and personality traits are predictive of future violent actions.

Indicators of potentially violent behavior

No one can predict human behavior and there is no specific “profile” of a potentially dangerous individual. However, indicators of increased risk of violent behavior are available. These indicators have been identified by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Profiling and Behavioral Assessment Unit in its analysis of past incidents of workplace violence. These are some of the indicators:

- ◆ Direct or veiled threats of harm;
- ◆ Intimidating, belligerent, harassing, bullying, or other inappropriate and aggressive behavior;
- ◆ Numerous conflicts with supervisors and other employees;
- ◆ Bringing a weapon to the workplace, brandishing a weapon in the workplace, making inappropriate references to guns, or fascination with weapons;
- ◆ Statements showing fascination with incidents of workplace violence, statements indicating approval of the use of violence to resolve a problem, or statements indicating identification with perpetrators of workplace homicides;

Warning Signs of Violence (continued)

- ◆ Statements indicating desperation (over family, financial, and other personal problems) to the point of contemplating suicide;
- ◆ Drug/alcohol abuse; and
- ◆ Extreme changes in behaviors.

Each of these behaviors is a clear sign that something is wrong. **None should be ignored.** By identifying the problem and dealing with it appropriately, managers may be able to prevent violence from happening. Agency planning groups should ensure that the appropriate staff member (or an incident response team) is prepared to assist supervisors and other employees in dealing with such situations. Some behaviors require immediate police or security involvement, others constitute actionable misconduct and require disciplinary action, and others indicate an immediate need for an Employee Assistance Program referral.

On the other hand, it is seldom (if ever) advisable to rely on what are inappropriately referred to as “profiles” or “early warning signs” to predict violent behavior. “Profiles” often suggest that people with certain characteristics, such as “loners” and “men in their forties,” are potentially violent. This kind of categorization will not help you to predict violence, and it can lead to unfair and destructive stereotyping of employees.

The same can be said of reliance on “early warning signs” that include descriptions of problem situations such as “in therapy,” “has had a death in the family,” “suffers from mental illness,” or “facing a RIF (reduction in force).” Everyone experiences stress, loss, or illness at some point in life. All but a very few people weather these storms without resorting to violence. Managers should, of course, be trained to deal with the kinds of difficulties mentioned here, such as bereavement or mental illness. However, this training should focus on supporting the employee in the workplace, and not in the context of, or on the potential for, workplace violence.

Training

Training is a critical component of any prevention strategy. Training is necessary for employees, supervisors, and the staff members of each office that may be involved in responding to an incident of workplace violence.

Training (continued)

Training sessions conducted by the agency's Employee Assistance Program, Security, and Employee Relations staffs are particularly helpful, enabling employees to get to know experts within the agency who can help them when potentially violent situations arise. Employees and supervisors seek assistance at a much earlier stage when they personally know the agency officials who can help them. The following are types of training that have proved effective in preventing violence and other threatening behavior.

Providing appropriate training informs employees that management will take threats seriously, encourages employees to report incidents, and demonstrates management's commitment to deal with reported incidents.

Employee training

All employees should know how to report incidents of violent, intimidating, threatening and other disruptive behavior. All employees should also be provided with phone numbers for quick reference during a crisis or an emergency. In addition, workplace violence prevention training for employees may also include topics such as:

- ◆ Explanation of the agency's workplace violence policy;
- ◆ Encouragement to report incidents;
- ◆ Ways of preventing or diffusing volatile situations or aggressive behavior;
- ◆ How to deal with hostile persons;
- ◆ Managing anger;
- ◆ Techniques and skills to resolve conflicts;
- ◆ Stress management, relaxation techniques, wellness training;
- ◆ Security procedures, e.g., the location and operation of safety devices such as alarm systems;

Training (continued)

- ◆ Personal security measures; and
- ◆ Programs operating within the agency that can assist employees in resolving conflicts, e.g., the Employee Assistance Program, the ombudsman, and mediation.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommends that employees in health care and social services organizations should receive formal instruction on the specific safety and security hazards associated with their particular job or facility. Detailed information is available in OSHA's *Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Health Care and Social Service Workers* (see page 147 for website and ordering information).

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) also discusses the importance of training that is tailored to the specific risks in the employee's workplace. NIOSH's publication *Violence in the Workplace: Risk Factors and Prevention Strategies* discusses clearly identifiable workplace risk factors, such as dealing with the public, and emphasizes that training will be more useful and credible when it addresses risk factors specific to job tasks or locations (see page 145 for website and ordering information).

Supervisory training

In addition to the training suggested above, special attention should be paid to general supervisory training. The same approaches that create a healthy, productive workplace can also help prevent potentially violent situations. It is important that supervisory training include basic leadership skills such as setting clear standards, addressing employee problems promptly, and using the probationary period, performance counseling, discipline, and other management tools conscientiously. These interventions can keep difficult situations from turning into major problems. Supervisors don't need to be experts on violent behavior; what is needed is a willingness to seek advice from the experts.

Some agencies include training on workplace violence as part of general supervisory training, some conduct separate training sessions on workplace violence, and some include it in crisis management training. Whichever approach is taken, supervisory training should cover:

Training (continued)

- ◆ Ways to encourage employees to report incidents in which they feel threatened for **any** reason by **anyone** inside or outside the organization,
- ◆ Skills in behaving compassionately and supportively towards employees who report incidents,
- ◆ Skills in taking disciplinary actions,
- ◆ Basic skills in handling crisis situations,
- ◆ Basic emergency procedures, and
- ◆ How to ensure that appropriate screening of pre-employment references has been done.

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Incident response team training

The members of the incident response team need to be competent in their own professions **and** they need to know when to call for outside resources. Participating in programs and training sessions sponsored by government and professional organizations, reading professional journals and other literature, and networking with others in the profession are all helpful in dealing with workplace violence situations.

Team members also need to understand enough about each other’s professions to allow them to work together effectively. Response team training should allow discussion of policies, legal constraints, technical vocabulary, and other considerations that each profession brings to the interdisciplinary group. Part III of this handbook is intended to introduce team members to key issues in professions other than their own.

Training (continued)

Much of the incident response team training can be accomplished by practicing responses to different scenarios of workplace violence. The case studies in Part II of this handbook are intended for this purpose. Practice exercises can help the staff understand each other's responses to various situations so that there is no confusion or misunderstanding during an actual incident. In addition, practice exercises can prepare the staff to conduct the supervisory training suggested above.

Use practice exercises to see how the incident response team would deal with different situations.

The team members also need to consult regularly with other personnel within the organization who may be involved in dealing with potentially violent situations. Those who are consulted on an *ad hoc* basis should receive some appropriate training as well.

Pre-Employment Screening

Pre-employment screening is an important part of workplace violence prevention. Prior to hiring an employee, the agency should check with its servicing personnel office and legal office, if necessary, to determine what pre-employment screening techniques (such as interview questions, background and reference checks, and drug testing) are appropriate for the position under consideration and are consistent with Federal laws and regulations.

Security Measures

Maintaining a physically safe work place is part of any good prevention program. Agency facilities use a variety of security measures to help ensure safety. These include:

- ◆ Employee photo identification badges;
- ◆ On-site guard services and/or individually coded card keys for access to buildings and areas within buildings according to individual needs; and

Security Measures (continued)

- ◆ Guard force assistance in registering, badging, and directing visitors in larger facilities.

Part III, Section 5 contains additional suggestions for preventive security measures and resources for obtaining additional information.

Weapons Prohibition

Possession or use of firearms and other dangerous weapons on a Federally owned or leased facility, including grounds, parking lots and buildings, is illegal. 18 USC Section 930 (a) and (b) state:

“Whoever knowingly possesses or causes to be present a firearm or other dangerous weapon in a Federal facility, or attempts to do so, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than 1 year, or both.”
(Certain exceptions apply. See 18 USC Section 930(c).)

“Whoever with intent that a firearm or other dangerous weapon be used in the commission of a crime, knowingly possesses or causes to be present such firearm or dangerous weapon, in a Federal facility, or attempts to do so, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than five years, or both.”

It is important to post signs of the prohibition against weapons at the entrances to Federal buildings. Agency employees should be trained to report suspected violations immediately to a building security official, a supervisor, or other appropriate authority.

Using Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) as a Preventive Strategy

Some agencies use ombudsman programs, facilitation, mediation, and other methods of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) as preventive strategies in their workplace violence programs. ADR approaches often involve a neutral third party who can assist disputing parties resolve disagreements. ADR is most helpful in workplace violence programs at the point when a problem first surfaces, i.e., before an employee’s conduct rises to a level that warrants a disciplinary action.

Using ADR as a Preventive Strategy (continued)

Ombudsmen

The following is a short description of some ADR techniques that agencies have found useful in dealing with potential workplace violence problems at the very earliest stages.

Ombudsmen are individuals who rely on a number of techniques to resolve workplace disputes. These techniques include counseling, mediating, conciliating, and fact-finding. Usually, when an ombudsman receives a complaint, he or she interviews the parties, reviews available information and policies, and offers options to the disputants. Typically, ombudsmen do not impose solutions. The effectiveness of the ombudsman lies in his or her problem-solving ability. Generally, an individual not accepting an option offered by the ombudsman is free to pursue a remedy using another forum for dispute resolution.

Facilitation

Facilitation techniques improve the flow of information in a meeting between parties to a dispute. The term “facilitator” is often used interchangeably with the term “mediator,” but a facilitator does not typically become as involved in the substantive issues as does a mediator. The facilitator focuses more on the process involved in resolving a matter. Facilitation is most appropriate when the intensity of the parties’ emotions about the issues in dispute are low to moderate, the parties or issues are not extremely polarized, or the parties have enough trust in each other that they can work together to develop a mutually acceptable solution.

Mediation

Mediation uses an impartial and neutral third party who has no decision-making authority. The objective of this intervention is to assist the parties to voluntarily reach an acceptable resolution of issues in dispute. Mediation is useful in highly polarized disputes where the parties have either been unable to initiate a productive dialogue, or in cases where the parties have been talking and have reached a seemingly insurmountable impasse.

A mediator, like a facilitator, makes primarily procedural suggestions regarding how parties can reach agreement. Occasionally, a mediator may suggest some substantive options as a means of encouraging the parties to expand the range of

Using ADR as a Preventive Strategy (continued)

Interest-Based Problem Solving

possible resolutions under consideration. A mediator often works with the parties individually to explore acceptable resolution options or to develop proposals that might move the parties closer to resolution.

Interest-Based Problem Solving is a technique that creates effective solutions while improving the relationship between the parties. The process separates the person from the problem, explores all interests to define issues clearly, brainstorms possibilities and opportunities, and uses some mutually agreed upon standard to reach a solution. It is often used in collective bargaining between labor and management in place of traditional, position-based bargaining. However, as a technique, it can be effectively applied in many contexts where two or more parties are seeking to reach agreement.

Peer Review

Peer Review is a problem solving process in which an employee takes a dispute to a panel of fellow employees and managers for a decision. The decision may or may not be binding on the employee and/or the employer, depending on the conditions of the particular process. If it is not binding on the employee, he or she would be able to seek relief in traditional forums for dispute resolution if dissatisfied with the decision under peer review. The principal objective of the method is to resolve disputes early before they become formal complaints or grievances.

For a resource about these and other alternative dispute resolution techniques, see page 145.

