

HOW TO PREVENT WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Although the number of workplace homicides in the 21st century is down, the number of nonfatal violent incidents has remained steady at just under two million a year. That number could decline, says W. Barry Nixon, executive director of the National Institute for Prevention of Workplace Violence, if businesses embraced a proactive approach to violence prevention. “We help organizations put together a workplace-violence or threat-assessment team that is cross-functional. We help them develop a comprehensive policy that sets the tone and framework for prevention, and put into place an infrastructure that starts with the employment process.”

Components of the infrastructure include:

- An effective Employee Assistance Program,
- A law enforcement protocol for quick response,
- A crisis response plan,
- A critical incident debriefing process, and
- A training program targeted to employees and managers.

DON'T IGNORE THE SIGNS

Nixon says too many employers get into a cycle of trouble by ignoring early warning signs. “The earlier you start, the more likely you are to prevent an escalation to violence. If, for example, you see that bullying is going on, intercede.” A well-developed program of employee relations is key to knowing what’s going on with your workforce and where pockets of potential trouble may lie.

Warning signs can include strange or bizarre behavior, an obsessive attitude toward work, altercations with co-workers, paranoid or very strong reactions to normal announcements and changes, an inability to accept routine feedback, and an unusual interest in the killing power of weapons. In every violent episode, there is an individual who has accepted psychologically that violence is an acceptable way to deal with situations and a stressful event, such as an argument at home or a job demotion.

SELECTION QUESTIONS

Prevention should ideally start during the hiring stage. Nixon recommends employers ask key questions, including:

- Are there any full-time, regular positions in the past five years that have been omitted from the application?
- Have you ever been disciplined or discharged for fighting with, injuring, or harassing another individual?
- Describe something in your work experience that demonstrates your ability to handle stressful situations.
- Describe a situation you have encountered in which a conflict arose and how you handled it.
- Describe your last two or three performance reviews, including accomplishments and areas needing development.
- Describe a situation in which you confronted a co-worker or supervisor and how you handled it.
- Describe a situation in which you got angry and how you responded.
- When you encounter argumentative or hard-to-deal-with people, what do you do?
- How do you feel when someone intimidates you?
- How would you handle a supervisor who approaches you in front of co-workers and belittles you?
- What type of people do you have the most trouble getting along with?
- Describe a situation in which you felt you were treated unfairly and how you handled it.
- What are some of your hot buttons—what ticks you off?
- What has a supervisor done that made you angry?

For more information, visit the National Institute for Prevention of Workplace Violence website at <http://www.workplaceviolence911.com>.

