Preventing Violence in the Workplace

Incidents involving workplace violence have spiked across a variety of industries, resulting in fatal and life-changing outcomes, including:

- One employee struck another in the face, fracturing the cheekbone in an argument over work assignments.

- A hotel employee working alone, was attacked and killed by someone claiming to be a guest.

- A restaurant employee was shot during an attempted robbery while on break outside the building.

- Two EMS workers were attacked while treating a patient when called to what turned out to be a domestic violence situation.
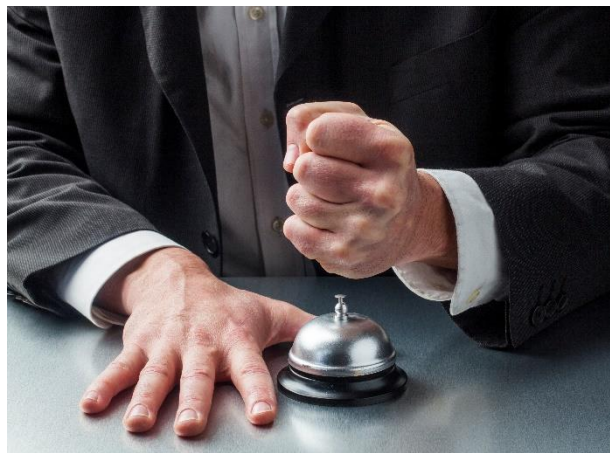
Image Source: iStock.com

These situations can arise from random acts or crimes of opportunity, but also can involve former employees, disgruntled employees, conflicts in and out of the workplace, personal problems with a significant other, financial stressors, mental health behaviors, substance abuse, or any combination that trigger the event. Further complicating the issue is that violent incidents can involve someone with a past history of violent encounters or they could be someone who would otherwise not be expected to react in such a manner.   One of the foundations of our *N3L3*® philosophy is that we cannot rely on the past to always predict the future – and in the case of workplace violence this is often the reality because these incidents are very rare for any individual organization.

Understanding Workplace Violence

Workplace violence includes robberies, threats, and verbal and physical assaults. Recent workplace violence has stemmed from a variety of causes. Some have been the result of employees enforcing government issued orders, company rules or policies; for example mask requirements during the pandemic. There has also been a rise in what would be considered just random acts of violence: and the employee by nature of their work duties becomes the recipient of the violence – crime of opportunity. Regardless if these threats and assaults come from strangers, customers or co-workers, they have a high likelihood of resulting in fatal and life-changing outcomes.

The target of these events can be an individual or an entire organization. They can be premeditated or just an act of opportunity. While these incidents often seem to come from out of nowhere, we can often identify weaknesses in our defenses after the fact that could have prevented or reduced the impact of the event. Understanding, recognizing, and implementing control strategies as well as providing employees with the knowledge and training to act accordingly will assist in reducing this fatal and life-changing exposure potential.

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Tips to Protect Your Employees:

- **Workplace Violence Prevention Policy –** A strong workplace violence prevention policy is a safeguard for your workers. The policy should include: straightforward definition of what workplace violence is considered to be by the employer, strict prohibition against that type of conduct in the workplace, clear examples of prohibited conduct, encouragement to report unusual activity, well-defined procedures for reporting threats or acts of violence, and expected response (i.e. do not engage further, call the police. Do not be the hero.). The policy may also include a coded threat level message that would communicate (i.e. phone, intercom, radio, etc.) the level of threat by using code word system that the employees are trained to recognize, but does not tip off the aggressor like the use of "code yellow, code red, etc.".

- **Understand the Exposure –** Recognizing exposures and implementing controls can be a life-saving strategy. Understanding the process can allow the organization to prepare for a violent attack. Recognize the work areas, processes, and accepted practices that may create or increase opportunities for violence including: parking lots, break areas, trash handling, cash handling, deliveries, propping doors, etc.

- **Safety & Security –** Evaluate interior and exterior safety and security. The past does not predict the future, just because you haven't had an issue in the past does not mean that one could not happen in the future.

  - Avoid situations where employees are working alone. There is better safety in numbers.
  - Evaluate security cameras or alarm systems to ensure they are operational, they cover all areas, and are visible to deter potential violence.
  - Keep doors that could compromise the safety and security of employees locked at all times. Do not prop doors open that should remain locked (for deliveries, guest loading, foyer/vestibule, etc.). Prohibit tail-gating by patrons or visitors where multiple persons enter secured doors on a single swipe of one person's access card.
  - Provide employees with access to fixed and/or portable panic buttons.
  - Identify an area for valuable items, such as purses, wallets and electronics. The ideal location would be out of sight.
  - Examine interior and exterior lighting. Verify there is good lighting inside buildings, on exterior grounds in the parking lots, pathways to the dumpster area, etc.
  - Maintain grounds regularly to minimize "hiding" places, particularly between the doors and where employees park.
  - Place mirrors at blind corners where someone could hide.
  - Formalized procedures for handling cash – limiting cash on hand, such as random drop times, time delay safes, use of non-descript deposit bags, more than one person involved in transporting cash, 3rd party pick up, rotating persons and routes for deposits, daytime only transports of cash, etc.
  - Avoid the use of ear buds and other devices which would prevent you from being aware of persons walking up to you that are not in your immediate field of vision.

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- **Workplace Violence Training** – Conduct training on how to recognize, avoid, and respond to potentially violent situations. Training may include:

  - How to recognize verbal and nonverbal warning cues of possible violence. Verbal indications may include an individual speaking loudly or swearing. Non-verbal indications may include clenched fists, deep and rapid breathing, fixed stares, pacing, among other behaviors.
  - Understanding the coded threat level system and how it is communicated at the facility.
  - How to appropriately respond to potentially violent or active violence situations. This could include remaining calm, giving the irate individual personal space, politely removing other individuals in the same area, refraining from arguing and using supportive body language.
  - Maintaining a safe reactionary distance from an aggressor so you can flee if they start to advance toward you. Don't let another individual crowd your personal space. A good rule of thumb is 6 feet or more.
  - How to report concerns or unusual behavior.
  - Active shooter training that prepares employees in the event of an intruder or active shooter arriving on-site. Drills should be conducted periodically to exercise and evaluate worker's knowledge of procedures. Drills and role-play activities should also include other potential violent situations and not just for active shooters.
  - Procedures on what do to if a situation appears to be escalating, such as reporting to a manager, calling security, or even calling 911 and identification of nearby exits.

- **Awareness & Support** – Encourage workers to be attentive and offer support to coworkers or customers involved in a threatening or violent situation. Management should regularly communicate with workers to check in regarding stress levels and general wellbeing. Employees should be encouraged to report any issues to management regarding co-workers behaviors that may contribute to a threatening, harassing or violent event. Management should have training and procedures in place on how to manage a situation with an aggressive and potentially violent employee.

- **Signage** – Signage can help deter crime or violence in two ways. First, it can indicate company policy regarding items such as weapons so employees and patrons know the expectations should they enter. Secondly, signage indicating security measures such as security cameras or time-access safes may discourage a violent act.

Image Source: iStock.com

For More Information:

Homeland Security: School and Workplace Violence- Best practices and trainings
https://www.dhs.gov/school-and-workplace-violence

FEMA "Workplace Security Awareness Training"
https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-906

FEMA "Active Shooter: What You Can Do" Training
https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-907

Department of Labor Workplace Violence Program
https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/centers-offices/human-resources-center/policies/workplace-violence-program

OSHA Workplace Violence Overview & Resources
https://www.osha.gov/workplace-violence

NIOSH/ CDC Occupation Violence Information & Resources
https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/violence/default.html