



## Workplace Violence Prevention

The physical workplace, whether it is a school, office, fire house, hospital, or other, should be a place of learning, collaboration, and productivity. It is where employees, managers, and executives come together to show their talents and achieve a common goal together each day. The physical workplace, however, is being challenged with instances of violence, both from outside and within the employees who work together.

Various shooting tragedies within physical workplaces in the U.S. have continued to dominate headlines. While workplace violence is nothing new, trends are pointing to workplace violence growing more frequent and dangerous.

Workplace Violence is defined as any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It can include:

- Criminal intent
- Customer/client
- Worker on worker
- Personal relationship

It is crucial as a leader to be mindful of the risks that a potential tragedy in your workplace could present to your managers and employees. Preparation is important to help minimize the risks of a particular event happening. There are items you can do right away to prepare your employees and managers for any potential risks.

### **Proactive Strategies to address Workplace Violence:**

- Create an environment in which employees feel safe
- Be specific with policies: generic clauses in handbook won't suffice
- Identify resources
- Collaborate and coordinate to create safe work environments
- Build trust
- Assess threats and assist employees in trouble
- Encourage communication with employees
- Carefully screen candidates to hire
- Look for patterns of troubling behavior
- Train supervisors to recognize shifts in behavior such as the following:
  - A decrease in attention to appearance and hygiene
  - An increase in severe mood swings and unstable, emotional responses



- An increase in paranoid behaviors
- An increase in empathy for those who commit acts of violence
- An increase in comments about firearms and other dangerous weapons
- Encourage your managers to be observant of life changes for employees, which can include the following:
  - A divorce
  - A death in the family
  - Financial problems such as high personal debt or bankruptcy
  - Substance abuse that is getting worse and signs are showing at work
  - Depression or mental illness that are getting worse and signs are showing at work
- Get to know your employees
- Look for concerning social media posts or comments
- Consider using virtual meetings for situations such as disciplinary events or dismissals

There are various tipping points that can incite violence from an employee, but none is more dangerous than the termination of an employee. Be sure to educate your managers on careful, non-personal terminations that are free of humiliation for the employee. Key tips for safe terminations include:

- If an employee is being hostile, have them work from home until a termination can be given remotely through a virtual meeting.
- If a termination needs to be done in person, don't parade the employee through the office after a termination. Be mindful of the actions after the termination conversation and ensure the employee can leave securely.
- If a termination needs to be done in person, be prepared before the termination with security coverage, if needed.
- Eliminate access to computer systems and the physical office space directly after a termination.
- Use verbiage in the termination such as 'this is your last day at the company,' followed with non-personal aspects of the next steps of the termination. Be straight to the point and don't highlight items that could spur anger in the employee.

As the leader of an organization, you want to create an environment that encourages feedback so that you hear of a problem before it gets worse. This includes the following:



- Establish a routine or regular one-on-one meetings between managers and employees, with a frequency that is bi-weekly or weekly, to make sure there is continuous communication and opportunity for providing feedback.
- Ensure there are no penalties for coming forward to report suspicious activity from an employee.
- Listen to issues and do an investigation of the complaint about the employee or bring in an outside consultant to do an employee investigation.
- Ensure any issues that are brought forward are kept confidential.

There are soft skills that can be taught and reinforced with your managers to ensure a safer workplace for your employees. Flex HR can bring a consultant to train your managers to ensure they are leading with empathy and care toward employees, while also spotting any potential problems in the physical workplace. Flex HR consultants can also do employee investigations that remain confidential. Consultants are trained to listen and highlight key issues and provide solutions that help to minimize the risks of workplace violence.

You will also want to identify the elements of an emergency evacuation plan. These could include:

- Develop, communicate, and practice your emergency evacuation plan
- Ensure your building has at least two evacuation routes
- Post evacuation routes throughout the building in conspicuous areas
- Include first responders in your training exercises
- Be aware of indications of workplace violence and respond accordingly

The challenges of the workplace have always been varied, complex, and constantly changing. Leaders can take proactive and thoughtful actions to prevent any threats of violence to their employees and to ensure these situations never occur.

## Look out for



Work situations that may push the emotionally unstable to violence include:

- Discipline
- Professional disappointments
- Grudges – Co-workers and Supervisors
- Loss of job or fear of losing a job
- Perceived unfairness/inconsistencies by management



Personal situations to watch for that could lead to violence at work include:

- Emotional problems or mental illness
- Alcohol/chemical abuse
- Jealousy, revenge, and similar reactions to rejection by a spouse or partner
- Inability to cope with overwhelming personal, financial, and/or health problems

