Workplace Violence and Components of a Psychologically Healthy Workplace

As episodes of workplace-centered violence have increased in the United States, a focus on emotional and mental health matters is more essential than ever. It is imperative for organizations to be proactive about violence prevention and have a plan that is supported by top management and understood by all managers and employees. Employers can take a number of steps in collaboration with a comprehensive violence prevention plan to promote a supportive and safe work environment. This article addresses workplace violence, risk factors and the components of a violence prevention plan as well as the importance of building a psychologically healthy workplace.

by Rod Hart | Aon Hewitt and Denise Heybrock | Aon Hewitt

With millions of workers experiencing the threat of violence or actual violence in the workplace each year, employers increasingly are investing and re-evaluating workplace safety practices. This article addresses workplace violence, risk factors and the components of a violence prevention plan, as well as the importance of building a psychologically healthy workplace.

What Is Workplace Violence?
When defined broadly, workplace violence is considered any type of violence that involves a company employee and often is in the form of acts and threats of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, bullying and other disruptive behaviors.

The first and most common instance of workplace violence is when a criminal outsider victimizes an organization or its employees. Robberies are the most common motive, and employees such as taxi drivers, cashiers or pharmacists are typically affected.

A second type of violence occurs when an employee works as a service provider. Workers in the public sector or employees who carry out inspections or perform
enforcement duties are at a higher risk for this type of violence.

A third type of violence is between an employee and an individual who has a relationship with the organization or is an employee of the organization. Most instances of these types of workforce violence happen among colleagues who work in high-stress situations or during times of workplace uncertainty or turmoil, such as layoffs. Domestic violence is another example of this type of violence.

**Components of a Violence Prevention Plan**

It is imperative for organizations to be proactive about violence prevention and have a plan that is supported by top management and understood by all managers and employees. Each policy should clearly send the message that the organization has zero tolerance for any type of workplace violence. Organizations should consider violence prevention plans as an investment in human capital rather than an expense. These plans enable employers to better address a possible threat of violence in its infancy, potentially saving employees from harm, injury and/or death. It also mitigates the cost of a violent incident—including medical bills, lost workdays and even litigation.

Key features of a best-in-class violence protection strategy include:

- A written violence protection policy that:
  - Provides a concise definition of workplace violence, including examples of unacceptable behaviors, actions and working conditions
  - Accurately describes the consequences of making threats or committing violent acts
  - Encourages reporting of all violent incidents and clearly outlines the reporting process
  - Provides access to a confidential ethics and compliance program
  - States the confidential process of the plan and ensures that employees will not suffer any repercussions for making a report
  - Outlines the company’s commitment to provide resources to victims of violence
  - Lays out the framework for researching and resolving complaints.
- An assessment of existing security measures and a commitment to implement new procedures and policies for increasing the safety of all employees that may include:
  - Physical security measures such as:
    - Locked doors and alarm devices
    - Adequate lighting at entrances, stairwells and parking lots
    - Security guard and/or staff
    - An integrated safety and human resources structure
  - Administrative policies for staff and guests:
    - Guests sign in on arrival
    - Employee identification protocol; key card or badge system.
- Posting of applicable safety laws and policies
- A comprehensive and formal strategy for training and communication provides:
  - Clear guidelines for employees about the organization’s security protocols, preventive measures and warning signs of a possible high-risk situation
  - Knowledge to employees on how to protect themselves and others via instituting the prevention measures put into place
  - Formal recordkeeping systems to help leaders better understand the prevalence of workplace violence at the organization, the types and seriousness of problems and the education needs on the topic within the organization.
- An annual review process in which companies evaluate their safety programs and measures at meetings with their security staff and/or safety planning group.

**Identifying and Assessing Potentially High-Risk Individuals**

One of the most critical components of an organization’s violence protection plan is ensuring that managers have the tools and training to identify and assess potentially high-risk individuals. The Department of Labor has discovered several traits and warning signs of an employee who may be at higher risk for violent behavior, such as:
mental health

- Change in temperament (irritable, impatient and/or negative attitude)
- Mood swings and/or emotional outbursts
- Change in work performance (missing deadlines, lower quality of work, atypically disorganized)
- Withdrawn, absent-minded or preoccupied
- Tardiness and/or absenteeism
- Lack of interest in projects/activities the employee normally had taken pleasure in
- Change in weight/personal hygiene.

If these indicators are present and an individual or manager thinks the employee’s behavior is concerning, there are some initial steps to consider and actions to avoid.

**What Managers Should Do When an Employee Appears to Be Struggling**

- Ask the employee if something is troubling him or her.
- Articulate observations and concerns to the employee in a respectful manner.
- Actively listen without judgment; listening is the most basic way to connect to another person.
- Be supportive.
- Ask if there is anything the manager can do to help support the employee.
- Encourage the employee to seek appropriate professional help.
- Remind the employee of the services available (e.g., employee assistance program (EAP), support groups, physician, financial resources, disability and time off).

The goals in these situations are to be supportive, help employees feel less distress and encourage them to seek further assistance as appropriate.

**What Managers Should Avoid When an Employee Is Struggling**

- Do not minimize the employee’s feelings or concerns. Everyone has a right to his or her feelings.
- Do not belittle the employee or suggest that he or she doesn’t seem to be stressed or depressed, etc.
- Avoid speaking to the employee in a patronizing tone of voice and using overly compassionate looks of concern.
- Do not trivialize the employee’s experience by telling him or her to get a better attitude or put on a happy face. If it were that simple, the employee would have done that.
- Do not try to fix the issues or concerns or counsel the employee. Managers, friends and/or co-workers should know the limits of their roles.

**Creating a Psychologically Healthy Workplace**

Workplace violence incidents can have a large impact on both the employee and employer. Employees are more likely to become disengaged after an incident of workplace violence, and culture and morale often plummet. These aftereffects often lead to increased absenteeism and higher turnover rates, as well as higher health care costs and a decline in worker productivity. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health estimates that workplace violence can cost employers more than $4 billion annually.

One way to prevent or limit workplace violence is to build a culture of psychological health within the organization that encourages and values trust, accountability and flexibility. This includes support for not only employees’ physical and financial health, but also their emotional health.

Employees who struggle to lead emotionally healthy lives often lack good stress-management practices. From stay-at-home moms to high-level corporate executives, the pressure of different roles in the workforce can become destructive to health, productivity and performance if stress is not handled correctly.

Consumers’ primary sources of stress are financial concerns and work-related issues, according to the 2016 Consumer Health Mindset Study conducted by Aon Hewitt, the National Business Group on Health and The Futures Company.

**Barriers to Addressing Emotional Well-Being in the Workplace**

The barriers that prevent individuals and organizations from addressing emotional and/or mental health concerns in the workplace include:

- **Stigma.** Individuals and organizations are concerned with privacy issues around emotional and mental health. People are re-
luctant to disclose a diagnosis of mental illness as they fear they will be considered “weak.” They fear losing their job or being judged for their diagnosis.

- **Liability.** Employers have concerns about digging too deeply into employees’ personal lives. They have a fear of opening up the floodgates or not knowing how to react or handle a situation that may be revealed by the individual.

- **Not tangible.** Some people are uncomfortable talking about emotional health/mental health issues as they feel they are too obscure or too touchy-feely. Some employers believe the impact of addressing mental health can’t be measured. There is no direct return on investment that can be measured.

- **Too costly.** Some employers perceive that emotional health strategies require a large investment. Employers already are making a large investment in physical health initiatives, and emotional health initiatives may cause competing priorities for some employers.

**Factors to Consider When Establishing Emotional Well-Being in the Workplace**

Organizations should keep in mind there is no one correct way to build a culture of psychological health. Employers need to develop a plan that focuses on the issues most relevant to their specific organization and industry sector, as well as their own employees’ needs. In general, elements of a successful emotional well-being strategy should:

- Focus on prevention, promotion and education
  - Understand the organization’s needs and identify potential and existing issues.
  - Develop prevention and management strategies for psychological health or safety issues in the workplace.
  - Have the EAP sponsor an educational drug program.
  - Hold training for managers and employees on mental health first aid.
  * Incorporate an evidence-based approach.

  * Help participants understand the signs and symptoms of a mental health issue.
  * Build confidence in skills to support others. Decrease stigma within the workplace by developing an antistigma campaign designed to address the realities and myths associated with emotional and mental health issues.

- Create an organizational and social culture that:
  - Promotes wellness. The organization understands the role that healthy behavior plays in shaping overall health status.
  - Supports community interests and development
  - Accepts diversity, not just tolerates it.

- Make open communication a priority so employees are:
  - Engaged, involved and feeling like they are contributing to something other than just getting a paycheck
  - Empowered with the opportunity to give feedback
  - Involved in the decision-making process that deals with issues around their role, career path and day-to-day work
  - Heard, respected and valued, regardless of their status.

- Espouse work/life integration, including flexible work schedules and encouraging vacation time.

**Conclusion**

Because of an increase in workplace-centered violence in the United States, a focus on emotional and mental health matters is essential. Employers can take a number of proactive steps in collaboration with a comprehensive violence prevention plan to promote a supportive and safe work environment. Establishing a psychologically healthy workplace that includes a violence prevention plan will help decrease the potential for violence in the workplace. This strategic investment of environmental resources and support will help increase the overall well-being of employees and has the potential to enhance workforce morale, productivity, personal commitment and engagement.
Sources


Mental Health First Aid USA at www.MentalhealthFirstAid.org.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health at www.cdc.gov/niosh.


AUTHORS

Rod Hart, R.N., COHN, FAAOHN, is vice president of health transformation for Aon Hewitt in Portland, Oregon. He previously served as director of health care services for Moda Health Inc. Hart attended St. Cloud State University and attained a nursing degree from Rochester Technical College, a Mayo Clinic-affiliated clinical program. His practice focus areas are occupational and behavioral health.

Denise Heybrock, LCPC, is assistant vice president and licensed clinician on the health transformation team for Aon Hewitt in Chicago, Illinois. She has vast experience in the mental health field, previously operated a mental health private practice and worked at several social service agencies before getting into consulting work. Heybrook attained her master’s degree in counseling and human services from National Louis University. Her practice focus areas are behavioral and mental health.

Reprinted from the First Quarter 2017 issue of BENEFITS QUARTERLY, published by the International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists. With the exception of official Society announcements, the opinions given in articles are those of the authors. The International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists disclaims responsibility for views expressed and statements made in articles published. No further transmission or electronic distribution of this material is permitted without permission. Subscription information can be found at iscebs.org.

©2017 International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists