

Warning Signs of Potential Workplace Violence

According to the Occupational Safety Health Administration (OSHA), workplace violence is defined as violence or the threat of violence against workers. It can occur at or outside the workplace and can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide and is one of the leading causes of job-related deaths. Employers are responsible for providing a safe work place for their workers.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), workplace violence falls into four categories: criminal intent, customer/client, worker-on-worker and personal relationship, which overwhelmingly targets women.

The most common factor leading to workplace violence is the prevalence of stress. Stressed individuals often feel powerless and focus on the workplace as the cause of their problems – whether from job loss or unhappiness with the workplace conditions. Revenge is often the offender’s motivation.

Employers should be proactive in their approach to workplace violence. This includes creating policies prohibiting weapons and violence in the workplace, providing active shooter training, implementing a violence free workplace policy and training managers to recognize warning signs or escalating behaviors.

Potential Warnings Signs of a Violent Employee

Warning signs can be immediate or can occur gradually over time. It is important to monitor negative behavior changes as this may be a sign of worsened mood and desperation. Employers should be aware of potential warning signs, such as employees who:

- Perceives self as being treated unfairly and/or humiliated.
- Believes there are unfulfilled promises, i.e. waiting for a promotion or a raise that hasn’t happened
- Shows signs of mental instability
- Blames others for problems
- Unexplained absenteeism
- Has strained work relationships and isolates self from others or suddenly becomes a loner
- Inability to manage feelings; outbursts of swearing or slamming doors
- Stated wishes for leadership to be hurt or die
- Has recently been disciplined and did not respond well to it
- Has a history at work of engaging in verbal abuse/fighting and/or uses insulting language
- Displays contempt for other workers
- Appears to be moody or withdrawn
- Displays suicidal ideations
- Under a high amount of personal stress
- Displays paranoia
- Has an attitude of intimidation
- Has an obsession with weapons
- Has no job security
- Has a history of substance abuse (including the abuse of prescription drugs)

The following is a list of verbal and non-verbal physical indicators of distress and anger:

Clenched fists

Angry yelling

Slamming doors
Throwing objects or tools
Getting too close – invading another’s personal space
Heavy or fast breathing
Shaking or trembling
Threatening movements

Sweating
Foul language
Finger pointing

Employers should be aware of these behaviors and be proactive in handling employees who exhibit them. Train your employees to say something if they see something in the workplace that could lead to violence.

Having a good security system with cameras and alarms that can alert individuals quickly may prevent a violent situation from escalating further.

If employees need professional help, it is best to refer them to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) so they may get the assistance they need. If an employee is behaving violently in the workplace, call 911.