Violence in the Workplace

Do you worry about violence in your workplace?

News accounts of violent events have many workplaces considering what they can do to be prepared for a possible incident. While you can't control every risk, being aware of conditions that could result in violence may help you create a safer workplace for everyone.

A situation that ends in violence rarely starts with an incident that requires the intervention of security or police. Often there is a pattern of recognizable behavior indicating that a risk is present. In many instances, this begins with angry behavior from an employee, customer, or vendor, such as:

- Persistent and increasingly intense complaints about co-workers or management.
- Unwillingness to take responsibility for errors, conflicts, or behavior concerns. Instead, the individual blames others.
- Verbal outbursts, temper tantrums, slammed doors, angry swearing, or threatening statements.
- Other employees feeling uncomfortable or apprehensive about the individual’s volatile or unpredictable behavior. At this stage, these worries may not yet have been reported to management.

Early intervention may help to redirect these behaviors into a more productive pattern. (See "How Do I Say That?" on page three for guidelines on how to address this concern.) However, in some instances, an employee may move beyond anger to actual threatening behavior. Common signs that it has escalated include:

- Threatening physical gestures such as pretending to point a handgun at someone.
- Overt threats of harm toward others or destruction of property.
- Stalking or repeated unwanted contacts, such as harassing phone calls, text messages, or unwelcome visits to a team member’s home.

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Communication of conditional intent, such as saying, “If Jane touches my stuff, I’ll shoot her.”

Should you become aware of any of these behaviors, follow company policy and contact HR to report your concerns. HR will help you determine appropriate disciplinary action and coordinate any other steps that need to be taken to ensure the safety of the workplace. LifeMatters can also provide consultation and assistance.

Less obvious, but of equal concern, is an employee who is struggling with domestic abuse. A significant number of violent incidents in the workplace are perpetrated by domestic partners rather than employees themselves. If an employee reports she or he is in a domestic abuse situation, this should be cause for concern, not only for that individual, but for the workplace as a whole.

If there is a situation that puts life or property at risk, it’s important to follow company policy and take swift action. Steps to take include:

- If there is an imminent risk of physical harm, immediately warn those in danger and call 911.
- Notify others in accordance with company policy. This may include your immediate supervisor or a designated company representative, security, or local law enforcement.
- After the crisis has passed, contact Human Resources and LifeMatters regarding next steps. These may include a performance referral and/or disciplinary action if the perpetrator is an employee. HR and LifeMatters can also help with offering resources to those affected by the violent behavior.

There is no way to predict if your workplace will be affected by a violent incident. However, there are many steps you can take to create a safer workplace. These include:

- Knowing and enforcing company policies regarding harassment, domestic violence, and violent behaviors at work.
- Encouraging employees to immediately report any harassing, threatening, or violent behavior to management.
- Working with HR to provide resources to employees who may be facing difficult personal situations, such as domestic violence, divorce, or depression or another illness.
- Treating employees with respect and fairness and creating the expectation that all team members do the same.
- Monitoring your own behavior while under stress and looking for constructive ways to deal with feelings of anger or frustration.
- Addressing worries about violence after incidents in the news and discussing ways to maintain a culture of safety with your team.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can help address any concerns about violent behavior in the workplace. Consultation Specialists are available to discuss concerns about an individual’s behavior or risks to your work group as a whole. Call anytime.
How Do I Say That?
Preventing Violence

Are you concerned that an employee may be engaging in aggressive behavior that could escalate into violence? These steps will help you address the situation:

1. **Document.** Write down not just what you have observed, but any incidents that have been reported to you. Include as much detail as possible in your documentation. Keep the information on a need-to-know basis until you have spoken with HR and other company resources.

2. **Consult with Human Resources.** Review company policies and discuss the situation with HR, security, and other appropriate company resources. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is also available to discuss the situation and review next steps.

3. **Schedule a private meeting with the employee.** Outline the problematic behaviors and make it clear that they are not acceptable within the workplace.

   **Sample language:** 
   
   "[State behavior] is inappropriate and could put others at risk. It's important that everyone feel safe in our workplace."

4. **Listen.** Ask the individual for his or her perspective on the event. If the employee indicates that the behavior was a reaction to another’s provocation (such as bullying behavior), commit to investigating the situation.

   **Sample language:** 
   "Thank you for telling me about [other employee’s behavior]. I will look into that situation. In the meantime, we need to focus on addressing your behavior."

5. **Outline expectations.** Be clear about expectations for the employee’s behavior moving forward and the implications if he or she engages in the behavior again.

   **Sample language:** 
   "A repeat of [state problematic behavior] will result in disciplinary action."  
   (Consult with Human Resources regarding what next steps would be appropriate prior to the meeting.)

6. **Make a referral to LifeMatters.** Explain that LifeMatters can help address anger, stress, or any other issue impacting the employee’s behavior at work. If
you are making a performance referral, make it clear that LifeMatters is available to assist the employee with returning her or his performance to acceptable levels.

**Sample language:** “LifeMatters can help you cope with feelings of anger or frustration. They can even be a sounding board if you’re simply having a bad day. I urge you to call so they can help you get back on track here at work.”

7. **Follow up.** Check in with the employee to address any concerns and provide additional guidance about appropriate behavior at work. If the employee’s inappropriate actions were directed at a particular individual, check in with that person to make certain no more incidents have occurred. Consult with Human Resources if you have additional concerns or prior to taking any disciplinary action.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to help you address any concerns regarding violence, whether it’s a specific concern about an employee or other person coming onto the worksite or just a general reaction to media reports about violent incidents. Help is available 24/7/365.

**Management Consultation**

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- Confronting an employee about performance issues
- An employee’s personal problem
- Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- Your own personal concerns
- Any other work-related issue

LifeMatters offers professional management consultation when you need it, as often as you need it. Call anytime.

Call the LifeMatters® by Empathia Management Consultation Service toll-free anytime. **1-800-367-7474**

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