



Preventing and Dealing with Workplace Violence

Excerpts from “The Brown Bagger”

Violence in the workplace is an increasingly pressing issue for employees. As the pace of our lives quickens and demands and pressures increase, we find that people are not always able to cope effectively. The increased stress and pressure can result in people becoming frustrated, angry and potentially violent. Even issues that have no connection to workplace stress can erupt at work, requiring coworkers to respond.

Where does violence in the workplace come from? Are some environments more violent than others? Here are some numbers.

The US Department of Justice reports annual figures on workplace violence:

- 396,000 aggravated assaults
- 51,000 rapes and sexual assaults
- 84,000 robberies and
- Over 1,000 homicides in the workplace each year

Violence can come from a number of sources in the workplace. The first, most obvious source of violence is the public. Businesses that have a lot of contact with the public are at increased risk of experiencing a violent incident. A second important source of violence in the workplace comes from co-workers. In these cases, the violence is often the culmination of frustration coming from perceived unfairness or unsolvable problems in the workplace. The employee may eventually feel that a violent act may be the only way to be heard or may be the only way out. Finally, an employee’s family member can bring violence into the workplace and the specific employee who is the intended target may not be the only victim of the violent act.

#2 - What Causes Someone to Become Aggressive or Violent?

In a word...frustration. People don’t typically just snap. Often a violent incident is the culmination of many days or weeks of unanswered frustration. A person may try a number of very appropriate strategies to deal with a concern but see little or no improvement in their situation. Often their frustration is a reasonable response to a particularly challenging situation. Conflict triggers include:

- Deadlines and pressures
- Unresolved accumulated gripes
- Changes and expectations of the employee out of their “comfort zone”
- Increased responsibility
- Loss of a role, loss of security
- Withholding recognition or rewards
- Feeling threatened by others
- Lack of clear communication
- Breach of trust, inconsistency in dealing with workplace issues
- Perception of unfairness

Employees may deal effectively with many conflict triggers but over time, if these issues are not addressed, they may find it more difficult to cope appropriately. As stress increases at work, conflict becomes more likely. The more conflict employees must cope with, the greater potential for aggression and violence.

#3 - Violence in the Workplace

In the early stages, violence in the workplace can be subtle. Treatment of others in an inappropriate or demeaning way is frequently the beginning of a pattern that can escalate to physical violence. Violence is often an attempt to gain or regain control. Behavior in these circumstances can be understood on a continuum.

-----Continuum of Aggression-----
intimidation
provoking of anger
rough language
exterior force
violence

Individuals may intimidate others with verbal threats, non-verbal messages such as tone of voice, angry eye contact and invasion of others' personal space. Provocative behaviors can show up as the perpetrator tries to blame his/her own anger on circumstances or other individuals in the workplace. Rough language may follow, including derogatory descriptions of generalized groups of others such as all the folks working in "that other department". Indirect physical force like slamming doors and pounding furniture can be the next manifestation of aggression followed by direct violence. At this final stage, anger and egocentrism interfere with rational problem solving. The primary concern for others in the workplace at this point is **SAFETY!**

#4 – How to Handle Violence or Threats of Violence in the Workplace

Keep your eyes and ears open. When you first notice signs along the continuum of aggression try to intervene. The earlier the situation is addressed, the better. If you aren't comfortable dealing with a person who appears aggressive, formulate a plan. Is a manager or supervisor available? Does anyone in the office have experience and confidence in dealing with these types of situations? Know where your resources are and don't be afraid to ask for help! Try to stay calm. Situations are more likely to escalate if both parties get emotional. Listen to the other person's concerns and let them know you are listening. Don't impose your personal values on them. Verbalize your own concerns specifically and factually and let the person know your boundaries. Offer to provide help. If the individual continues to escalate step away from the situation if you can and get help if you need it.

#5 – Final Thoughts about Managing Aggression in the Workplace

There are many effective ways to address aggression in the workplace. Safety of the premises is one area that can also have a great impact. If employees have individual offices, care should be taken to furnish them giving the employee an opportunity for an escape route should a violent co-worker or customer confront them. Care and attention in the physical set up of the organization can prevent opportunity for violence against any particular person. Parking lots and external lighting are also important. Are doors locked after business hours? Who keeps track of individuals entering and leaving your business? Something as simple as a visitor's log at your public entrance can be very effective.

The atmosphere, in which you work is full of challenges, deadlines, pressures and uncertainties. We need to learn to cope effectively with these challenges and we need to understand how to deal with individuals who cannot deal effectively with these challenges. A professional atmosphere that is based on respect and consideration is a good foundation for a safe workplace.

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