

# BASIC TRAINING FOR EMPLOYEES



## WORKPLACE VIOLENCE



# VIOLENCE: WHY PREVENTION IS YOUR JOB

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If your worst nightmare happened, would you be confident that you had done all in your power to prevent it? Workplace violence can be that nightmare. When a workplace shooting occurs, we are all bombarded by media coverage of the tragic incident. You may wonder how such a sudden, random incident of workplace violence could have happened again. You may even think to yourself, “That could never happen here.”

But how many employees at workplaces rocked by tragedy have thought the same thing? Here’s the reality: it can happen *anywhere*. You may *think* you and all your co-workers are one happy family, but you might be missing signals that could alert you to the potential for violence — signals that you can learn to recognize.

However, sometimes violence can strike no matter how observant, vigilant, and well-trained you are. Someone you don’t even know may at any time burst into your workplace firing a gun, seizing hostages, or committing some other violent act. Keep in mind that abusive spouses may also choose the workplace to commit violence.

The point is you never know. This means it pays to be educated and prepared. Think about it as being part of your job. That’s right — it’s part of your *job*. It’s not just your boss’s job and not just the role of law enforcement. Much of the burden of prevention falls on you because as an employee, you’re in a strong position to know if a situation is brewing among your peers that could escalate into violence.

Of course upper management, your supervisor, and the police also play key roles. But you're the one who can alert them that they need to spring into action. You're instrumental in spotting a problem before it blows up, while there's still a chance to prevent violence. That's why your employer gave you this booklet, *Basic Training for Employees: Workplace Violence*. The topic is so important that your employer bought the booklet and expects you to take the time to read through it.

The main purpose of this booklet is to help you recognize workplace violence warning signals and threats when they occur in your workplace and to know what steps you should take after you become aware of it. This booklet will teach you what actions and language you need to watch out for, and after you're finished reading it, put it on your shelf, desk, or work area where you can see it. It'll remind you to keep an eye out for potential workplace violence situations. And when you think something might be a potential threat or signal, look through this booklet to help you decide what to do. (Hint: the answer is usually: "Report the threat or warning sign.")

## **YOUR ROLE IN PREVENTION**

Never underestimate the role you play in preventing workplace violence. After all, you often work very closely with your co-workers, which means you notice changes in their behavior.

You're not expected to be a psychologist, police officer, and rescuer all in one, but you are responsible for helping to keep your workplace safe, and this booklet is designed to help. Through your reading, you'll learn what constitutes workplace violence (hint, it's not just physical violence), signals to watch for, steps to take, and how to help your employer act responsibly.

# DEFINING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Just what is workplace violence? A fact sheet from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) calls it “violence or the threat of violence against workers.” According to OSHA, it can happen “at or outside the workplace and can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide.”

When considering workplace violence, you may have a tendency to think of large acts — such as mass shootings and bombings. But such extreme, headline-grabbing events barely make up the tip of the iceberg. Most incidents are far less dramatic and therefore, harder to recognize as serious threats.



Of course you can easily recognize violent behavior in the form of two employees brawling in the break room. But consider other scenarios:

- ◆ A few employees are sitting in a conference room arguing about a project when one storms out yelling, “You haven’t heard the last of this.”

## **Workplace violence happens more than you would think . . .**

**According to OSHA, each year around two million workers in the United States are victims of workplace violence. Additionally, homicide, workplace violence’s most extreme form, is one of the leading causes of workplace deaths in the United States, especially for women.**

- ◆ A co-worker comes to you and explains that she's been having trouble with her husband, and she's afraid he'll show up at work to hurt her.
- ◆ A longtime bully is trying to scare his co-workers. He hasn't thrown a punch — he hasn't even threatened physical harm — but he never misses an opportunity to use intimidation.
- ◆ You learn of a disgruntled customer's threat to come to your office and "get what's rightfully mine."
- ◆ One of your co-workers stands too close and raises her voice during a heated discussion with another employee.

### **Expect the unexpected**

**The office bully is not the only one who can cause trouble in your workplace. A normally respectable employee can also lose control. Recognize that behavior such as angry shoving or poking another employee in the chest during a heated argument is violence and requires action from you.**

No blood has been shed in the above situations, but they nevertheless signal a call to action. Don't make the mistake of waiting for something more serious to happen to report the situation to your supervisor, HR department, or other appropriate party designated by your employer. Anger can erupt into violence with little

warning. Even if an individual doesn't intend to physically harm anyone else, the workplace is damaged if someone feels threatened.

## **INTIMIDATION AS A WEAPON**

Besides actual violence, be on the lookout for inappropriate voice tone and nonphysical threats. Workplace bullying is

something that has started gaining the attention of employers and the media.

Bullies may think they can't get into serious trouble if they stop short of physical threats, but such an employee is still threatening the security of others, not to mention dragging down productivity. Also, bullying can easily lead to physical violence, with either the original bully or the bully's intended victim as the perpetrator.

Bullies are even more problematic if they are high-level managers or supervisors. They may think they can portray threats as part of their supervisory responsibility. You need to look for cues that signal they have crossed the line. It's one thing for a supervisor to explain discipline and the consequences of not meeting expectations, but it's something else altogether to act with the intent to unnerve a subordinate.

## **What's considered violent behavior?**

**Specific examples of prohibited violent behavior include the following:**

- ◆ **Threatening comments or gestures (even those apparently made in jest);**
- ◆ **Stalking;**
- ◆ **Outbursts such as yelling and hitting or breaking something; and**
- ◆ **Bringing a weapon to work.**

# WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PERPETRATORS

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There are several different types of workplace violence based on *who* commits the violent act. Although you may believe that workplace violence usually involves murderous rampages by disgruntled employees, most violence in the workplace is actually committed by nonemployees. More specifically, most violent injuries and deaths that occur in the workplace are committed by nonemployees as part of some type of criminal act, such as robbery or domestic violence.

Workplace violence perpetrators can include:

- ◆ Strangers (*e.g.*, robberies);
- ◆ Current or former employees;
- ◆ Individuals with personal relationships with employees (*e.g.*, relatives, spouses, ex-spouses, etc.); or
- ◆ Customers, clients, or contractors.

## UNLAWFUL HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE

Federal and state discrimination laws make harassment based on sex, race, religion, national origin, age, or disability illegal. At first, you may wonder what harassment has to do with workplace violence. Unfortunately, there is often a correlation between the two, and illegal harassment may lead to actual violence.

Employees who file harassment claims have often been the victims of threats, intimidation, coercion, and actual physical violence. There are many heinous harassment cases, which