



TIPS, TOOLS & INTELLIGENCE
FOR DEVELOPING TALENT

FEBRUARY 2020
ISSUE 2002

Workplace Violence: Recognize, Prepare, Respond

Donna McEntee



ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT & CULTURE

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: RECOGNIZE, PREPARE, RESPOND

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TD at Work (ISSN 2373-5570, Electronic ISSN 2373-5589, ISBN 978-1-95049-6-853, Electronic eISBN 978-1-95049-6-860) is published monthly by the Association for Talent Development, 1640 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. *TD at Work* is available for subscription in print or digitally. The subscription rate for the Monthly All-Access (12 print and digital issues, plus archive access) is \$119 (ATD national members) and \$159 (nonmembers). The monthly digital subscription rate for 12 issues is \$69 (ATD national members) and \$99 (nonmembers). Periodicals postage paid at Alexandria, Virginia, and additional entries. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *TD at Work*, 1640 King Street Alexandria, VA 22314. Claims for replacement of subscription issues not received must be made within three months of the issue date. Copyright © February 2020 *TD at Work* and ATD. All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems—without the express written permission of the publisher. For permission requests, please go to copyright.com, or contact Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923 (telephone: 978.750.8500, fax: 978.646.8600). ATD Press grants permission for the material on pages 13-14 to be reproduced for personal use.

Note: This issue is intended to provide a general educational background on workplace violence, including active shooter events. An employer's HR department, senior executives, and local law enforcement should develop and maintain appropriate procedures tailored to that employer's unique needs and circumstances. The Association for Talent Development is not providing health, safety, or legal advice relative to workplace violence, mental health, or active shooter scenarios, and nothing contained herein should be relied on as such. ATD expressly disclaims any liability resulting from any such reliance.

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In the unfortunate wake of much-too-frequent mass shootings across the United States, employee safety must be top of mind for organizations of all sizes and industry segments. Active shooter preparedness and training programs are especially critical, because tragedies are occurring in public places like schools, places of worship, malls, city centers, and workplaces. Particularly in places people visit, attend, or work daily, it is sobering to think that personal safety can be at risk in environments that we once considered secure.

According to the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), today 70 percent of all active shooter incidents occur at places of commerce or business or in educational settings, regardless of whether they are open to the public. Because an attack can happen on any seemingly normal day, organizations must have an emergency action plan in place and educate employees on the warning signs of a violent attacker and—more important—what to do in case of an emergency.

Active shooter incidents are highly unpredictable and evolve quickly, making it impossible to prepare for every possible scenario. However, effective training programs that companies reinforce with preparation and drills can make a significant difference and save lives.

In this issue of *TD at Work* (and as shown in Figure 1), based on my almost two decades of experience in safety training, I will detail how to:

- Recognize the warning signs that could lead to workplace violence
- Prepare for an active shooter situation
- Respond to an active shooter situation
- Evaluate training.

Workplace Violence Defined and Explained

Violence in the workplace is becoming increasingly common, with often fatal consequences. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) cites that every year, 2 million American workers report having been victims of workplace violence.

However, this number is likely quite conservative, because many more incidents go unreported. Additionally, homicides account for 10 percent of all occupational fatalities. The number of workplace homicides in the United States reached 500 in 2016—an increase of 86 cases over 2015. And that number is climbing.

On top of the human cost of workplace violence, there are considerable financial impacts on businesses due to absenteeism and lowered productivity. The US Department of Labor estimates that workplace violence results in 1.2 million lost workdays annually and \$55 million in lost wages. Employees are often unsure of what to do in a workplace violence situation or even what legally constitutes workplace violence.

Workplace Bullying vs. Violence

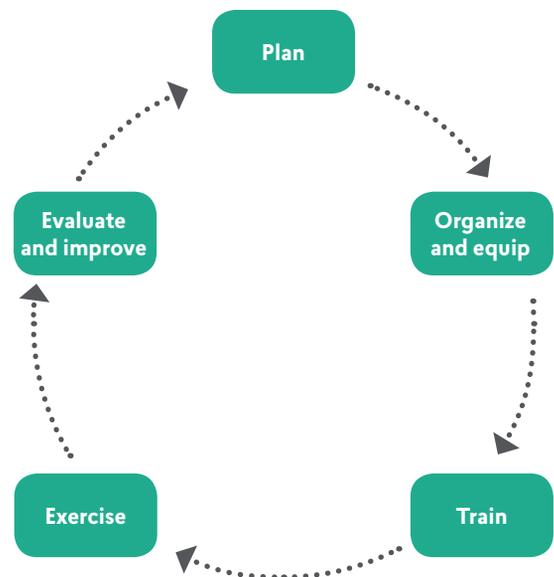
To begin to understand how organizations can prevent workplace violence and mitigate its risk, companies must understand what it is and isn't. *Workplace bullying* and *workplace violence* are often confused and can lead people to misinterpret one for the other.

Workplace bullying is offensive behavior that is systemic and repeated and that involves mistreatment of another individual in the office. It can include public criticism, insults, intimidation, teasing, and spreading of malicious rumors. Bullying can also include physical contact such as kicking, pinching, spitting, tripping, and rude hand gestures.

Workplace violence—as defined by the US National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health—is “violent acts (including physical assaults and threats of assaults) directed towards persons at work or on duty.” Additionally, OSHA defines workplace violence as “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the worksite. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide. It can affect and involve employees, clients, customers and visitors.” Workplace violence doesn't have to result in an injury or act of assault—even the threat of assault is considered violence.

Further, the World Health Organization defines workplace violence as “incidents where staff are abused,

Figure 1. Preparing for a Crisis



threatened, or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, including commuting to and from work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being, or health.” It’s critical to understand those various definitions and that workplace violence can still occur even if it’s not within the parameters of the office or workspace.

Warning Signs

How is it possible to tell the difference between an employee who is going through a rough patch and one who may become violent? Typically, individuals don’t just become violent; rather, they will go through a series of stages that lead to a breaking point.

There are two types of warning signs: personal indicators and aggravating issues. When these warning signs add up, they could lead to violence. Personal indicators include changes in the way an employee is dressed or declines in performance, punctuality, or productivity. Aggravating issues are external factors out of a person’s control that can amplify personal problems or hostile feelings.

Note, single factors are not a clear indicator that an employee may become violent—for example, just because someone is going through a rough period does not necessarily mean they are a potential threat. However, when these factors add up or there is a radical shift in an employee’s personality, managers, other employees, or HR may consider reaching out to the individual. By recognizing the warning signs early, a colleague or manager simply asking, “How’s everything going?” can help de-escalate the individual’s feelings of despair, isolation, and hostility.

The US Department of Labor identifies three tiers of warning signs to help guide situation evaluation and equip responding employees with confidence:

1. **Early warning signs.** The employee acts in an intimidating way or may bully others. Any discourteous, disrespectful, uncooperative, or verbally abusive behaviors are included in this tier.
2. **Escalation of the situation.** The employee argues with customers, vendors, co-workers, or managers. The person may refuse to obey the organization’s policies and procedures or sabotage or steal equipment for revenge. The individual may verbalize wishes to harm co-workers

When warning signs add up, they could lead to violence.

or management by sending threatening notes. Commonly, employees in this tier will see themselves as victims and have a “me against them” attitude.

3. **Further escalation.** The person openly displays intense anger or rage, resulting in suicidal threats, physical fights, destruction of property, or use of weapons to harm or threaten others. This situation usually results in an emergency response.

People in the given situation will have to make a judgment call and take appropriate action if they witness concerning behaviors. Any combination of warning signs at the three levels may be indicative of a potentially violent situation.

Placards in public places such as airports, train stations, and government buildings often urge employees and visitors to help notify authorities of potential safety issues with the statement “See something, say something.” Historically, these notices have related to emergencies such as bomb threats. However, given the increase in public active shooter situations, other workplaces and public places such as malls or large office buildings have begun to enforce similar policies to be on the safe side, considering it better to flag a non-offense than miss a potentially dangerous situation.

Forms of Violence

While there are many forms of workplace violence among co-workers, the one that receives the greatest attention is workplace homicide. Yet, other instances could occur or be a sign of possible future homicide. According to the Department of Labor, some of the most frequently encountered situations among co-workers are:

- using or concealing a weapon
- physically injuring oneself or assaulting another person
- damaging, destroying, or sabotaging property

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