

Work is not always a safe place to be

By Timothy Dimoff

Disgruntled employees, workplace bullies, active-shooter situations, illegal drug use, ex-spouses and dissatisfied clients – all can be found in a random sampling of the 2 million people affected by workplace violence in the United States, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Of course, of the millions of reported cases, there are many more that go unreported; workplace violence includes any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.

From demeaning jokes to sexual innuendos to genuine fear of shots fired at work, hiring managers and their bosses need to understand these problems of human nature and know how to react. In my decades of experience with law enforcement and as a security entrepreneur, I've seen the evolution of workplace violence and management often do not know how to respond.

Here are some tips for conflict resolution and prevention:

- Inadequate use of hiring tools: Know who you're hiring. I can't emphasize this enough; this is the age of information, yet potential employees often provide falsified or misleading details. With so many candidates and so much information available today, employers often overlook useful tools in a hurry-up effort to maintain productivity with a premature hire. There are many resources, including drug testing acknowledgment and consent forms; fully understanding laws including the Fair Labor Standards Act, equal employment opportunity guidelines and military leave guidelines; and

simply knowing how to ask revealing questions to applicants.

- Workplace intimidation and cyberbullying: Bullying is not exclusive to the schoolyard; it can follow adults into the workplace, and even home via email, texts and social media. The first and best thing employers can do is prevention, and you do that by creating a positive and fair company culture. Next, implement a zero tolerance policy for bullying; encourage employees to document and report bullying, and take those accusations seriously. Hold occasional staff meetings so that employees are taught to recognize signs of bullying and everyone is reminded of the zero tolerance policy.

- Gun violence: It can happen at what appear to be the most secure places in the world, and it can happen to the most innocent among us. Nidal Hasan, the U.S. Army psychiatrist turned jihadi, shot 13 fellow soldiers to death at Fort Hood, Texas. Twenty first-graders at Sandy Hook Elementary School never had the chance to become second-graders. We hear story after story about shootings in movie theaters, parking lots and neighborhoods. Train managers to recognize and attempt to de-escalate the situation, which can include talking to the potential aggressor in an empathetic, non-judgmental way. Fail that, there are situations for which heroes are necessary.

- Violence against women: Homicide is the leading cause of death for women in the workplace, according to OSHA. Of the 4,547 fatal workplace injuries that occurred in the United States in 2010, 506 were workplace homicides. Once again, this comes down to a zero tolerance policy for bullying and sexual harassment, applicable to all workers, patients, clients, visitors, contractors, and anyone else who may come in contact with company personnel, such as an ex-spouse. A well-designed on-site security protocol can significantly reduce the risk of severe violence.

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