Protect Yourself Against Workplace Violence

What you don’t know REALLY can hurt you!

Workplace violence is violence or threat of violence against workers. It can occur in or outside of the workplace and can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide. However it manifests itself, workplace violence is a growing concern for employers and employees nationwide.

Some 2 million American workers are victims of workplace violence each year. Workplace violence can strike anywhere and no one is immune. It is important to remember that even the most respectful environment can experience incidents of violence. Workplace violence can occur in many forms. Violence in the workplace can be caused by a stranger, customer, co-worker, and even by a personal friend or family member.

Although you may not be able to predict the occurrence of workplace violence, there are things as a store owner you can do to minimize your risk of an episode and minimize the damages to your store and employees.

What can you do to protect your business from workplace violence?

- Establish a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence against or by employees, including the consequences of violating the no-tolerance policy.
- Provide education for employees so they know what conduct is not acceptable. Inform them of what to do if they witness or are subjected to workplace violence, as well as, how to recognize, avoid, or diffuse a potentially dangerous situation.
- Secure the workplace. Where appropriate, install video surveillance, extra lighting and alarm systems, and minimize access by outsiders through ID badges, electronic keys and guards.
- Provide drop safes to limit the amount of cash on hand. Keep minimal amounts of cash in registers during evening and late-night hours.
- Equip field staff with cellular phones, noise devices and require them to keep a contact person informed of their location throughout the day.
- Instruct employees not to enter any location where they feel unsafe. Introduce a “buddy system” or provide an escort service or police assistance in potentially dangerous situations at night.
- Vary the person and time when making money drops to the bank (prevent a routine to avoid becoming a target).

The most effective way to protect yourself from workplace violence is to recognize the warning signs and report every incident, no matter how minor. Dismissing a threat as “just talk” may cost lives.

Common situations that result in workplace violence:

- The spouse or partner of an employee is abusive or is in an abusive relationship.
- Rejected suitors, partners involved in a divorce or separation procedures.
- Ex-employees who have been fired or laid off.
- Disgruntled customers.
- Person committing armed robbery.
- Persons involved in gang activities.

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Warning Signs of a Potential Violent Episode

- Sudden and persistent complaining about being treated unfairly.
- Blaming others for personal problems.
- Sudden change in behavior, deterioration of job performance.
- Statement that he or she would like something bad to happen to a supervisor or co-worker.
- Paranoid behavior.
- Sexual harassing or obsessing about a co-worker (sending unwanted gifts, notes, unwanted calling, stalking).
- Alcohol or drug abuse.
- Increased demand of supervisor’s time.
- Talking to oneself.
- Instability in family relationships.
- Financial problems combined with not receiving a promotion or raise.
- Poor relationships with co-workers or management.
- History of violent behavior.
- Previous threats, direct or indirect.
- Presenting and talking about reading material that is violent in nature.
- Carrying a concealed weapon, or flashing one around.
- Refusal to accept criticism about job performance.
- Sudden refusal to comply with rules or refusal to perform duties.
- Inability to control feeling, outbursts of rage, swearing, slamming doors, etc.

What to do. . .

Even a well informed employee may be caught off guard by a threatening situation. The most important thing to do is to stay calm!

By keeping a level head, the situation can be handled more effectively. If the employee loses their cool, it may add stress to an already volatile situation (possibly agitating the aggressor into a more severe response).

If you are faced with a situation that feels threatening, remain calm and maintain eye contact. If someone is clearly upset, try and diffuse the situation by being polite and patient as you listen to them. Often times once someone vents their frustrations, their anger and aggression will pass. If you feel these steps are not effective, discreetly signal a co-worker or a supervisor that you need help.

If you are ever in a situation where you are being threatened by someone with a weapon, staying calm is vital to think clearly to manage the situation. If possible, quietly signal for help. Keep talking to the aggressor, but follow directions so as not to aggravate the person holding the weapon. Never try and grab the weapon! The best thing to do is to watch for a safe chance to escape.

You may be in a situation where you see someone else being threatened – get out of the way and get help as soon as possible!

When in doubt, call for help.
It just may save a life.