

## Effective Strategies for Dealing with Violence in the Workplace

by Kimberly Matlon, JD  
COO, R&A Crisis Management Services

Violence in the workplace is more prevalent than most of us can imagine. Here are some things to think about.

What is the likelihood that someone in your workplace is abused at home? Given today's domestic violence statistics, the probability is pretty high. Could that abuse pore over into the workplace? Could that employee be receiving excessive, harassing telephone calls from his or her spouse that is affecting his or her ability to work? Could that employee's spouse be waiting for him or her in the parking lot after hours? Could that escalate into a situation that is out of control, where the spouse threatens the employee on your property?

Do you ever have an employee work late to meet a deadline? Imagine, she's the only one left in the office, which she has left a thousand times on her own. As she reaches her car, exhausted, she fumbles for her keys. As she unlocks her door, she is surprised by a man who was crouching beside the car. He proceeds to rape her and leave her to be found by the security guard as he makes his rounds of the parking lot.

What about the customer who comes to your office, frustrated by the outcome of the project you worked on? He shows up, armed, and holds your employees hostage before injuring some, killing others, and then himself.

What about the disgruntled ex-employee who comes back, wanting to "get even" with the person who fired him, or worse, the fellow employees who "got him fired?"

What happens when that extremist environmental group that was peacefully picketing your facility suddenly turns violent and you have civil unrest on your hands?

And, what about the employee working at your gas station, late at night who is held up at gun point? Or, the customer who is attacked in your dressing room while trying on new clothes on her lunch hour?

These are just a few examples of the types of workplace violence that exist today. Are you prepared to deal with these situations? If not, use the suggestions below to help you begin to formulate a plan for incorporating workplace violence into your overall business continuity plan.

### Understanding Dangerous Behavior

In her book, *Risky Business: Managing Employee Violence in the Workplace*, Lynne McClure states that “ignorance of risk will not protect anyone from dangerous behavior at work. Nor will it protect you from the responsibility of managing the risk.”<sup>1</sup> Here is a brief look at the eight categories of high-risk behavior that McClure suggests may indicate a need for management intervention:

- Actor: Look for yelling, shouting, slamming doors, etc. This is an employee who often acts out his or her anger and frustration.
- Fragmentor: Look for constant blame-shifting. This is an employee who takes no responsibility for his or her own actions, nor does he or she see any consequences to his or her behavior.
- Me-First: Look for someone who has a blatant disregard for those around him or her. This is an employee who does what he or she wants, regardless of the negative impacts on others.
- Mixed-Messenger: Look for frequent passive-aggressive behavior. This is an employee who talks positively and acts negatively.
- Wooden-Stick: Look for someone unwilling to deal with change. This is an employee who is rigid, inflexible, and controlling.
- Escape-Artist: Look for addictive personality issues. This is an employee who deals with stress by excessive lying or gambling, drug or alcohol abuse.
- Shocker: Look for sudden changes in behavior such as someone with good attendance suddenly failing to show up for work. This is an employee who suddenly acts out of character or suddenly becomes extreme in his or her behavior.
- Stranger: Look for odd behaviors. This is an employee who is distant, lacks normal social skills, or shows obsessive behaviors.

### Preventing Pessimism

Workplace violence can stem from workplace pessimism. Use the following tips to reduce negativity in the workplace:

- Give plenty of recognition. People are less likely to feel pessimistic when they feel their work is being valued.
- Don't punish all for violations of a few.
- Provide adequate leadership to help employees understand the direction of the company and feel as though they are part of the whole.
- Treat people fairly and consistently as adults.
- Make opportunities for people to express their opinions about company policies and procedures.

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<sup>1</sup> McClure, L.F. , *Risky Business: Managing Employee Violence in the Workplace*, Haworth Press, Inc., 1996

### Dealing with Violent People

Whether it's a disgruntled employee, an unhappy customer, or a total stranger, here are some suggestions on dealing with a potentially violent person:

- Be calm, patient, empathetic, and encouraging.
- Give the person your full attention.
- Ask questions.
- Acknowledge feelings.
- Use active listening skills.
- Be reassuring.
- Arrange yourself so that your exit is not blocked.
- Try to have a third party present if you can anticipate the situation may escalate.
- Ask for small, specific favors (i.e. "Could we please move over there?")
- Use delay tactics to give the person time to "cool down."
- Accept criticism positively.
- Don't immediately reject all of the employee's demands.
- Avoid physical contact, threatening gestures, finger-pointing, or long periods of eye-contact.
- Don't make sudden movements.
- Never challenge or dare.
- Never belittle.
- Don't take the situation or comments personally.
- Don't show anger or fear.
- Show respect. Don't patronize.
- If behavior continues, set guidelines and boundaries.

### Parking Lot / Garage Safety

Train your personnel to be safe in and around their vehicles as they come to and from your property by following some of these suggestions:

- Be alert and aware of your surroundings when approaching your car. It is a good idea to have your keys out and ready, as well.
- Avoid parking in an unlit, isolated area. You never know when you're going to have to work late and walk back to your car alone.
- If you become a victim of car-jacking – give up your car and get out as quickly as possible.
- Always have your cell phone on, easily accessible, and fully charged.
- If you are approached or attacked, make as much noise as possible to create attention. Scream. Honk your horn. Do anything to make noise.
- If you feel insecure and unsafe, find an escort to walk you to your car.

### Elevator Safety

Train your employees that even within the perceived safety of your building, they need to remain aware.

- Look at the people already in the elevator before entering. Don't get in if someone makes you feel uneasy.
- Stand near the controls.
- Sound the alarm if threatened and hit as many floor buttons as possible. Get off at the next available floor if there are people on the floor.
- Get off the elevator if someone who makes you feel uneasy gets on, or you are left alone with someone who makes you feel uneasy.
- Let other passengers push their floor buttons before you do.

### Employee Travel Safety

Many professionals travel frequently for business. If your employee is on business and something happens, you could potentially be held liable. Encourage and train your employees to be safe when they travel, to protect both themselves, and the interest of your company.

- Choose the right hotel. Don't hesitate to contact a hotel that you are considering staying at and asking them about their security procedures. Find out if the neighborhood is safe, and one that you will feel comfortable in.
- Choose the right room. Try to stay in a room that is in or near the main building, that faces the lobby (views are great, but windows and balconies can be dangerous), that is near the emergency exit, but is not near stairwells, vending machines or other "gathering" areas.
- Once you are in your room, check to make sure that all doors and windows close and lock properly. If they do not, ask to be moved.
- Know where your key or keycard is at all times.
- When you leave your room, lock all luggage and put anything of value into the hotel's safe. Leave the television or radio on.
- If you bring a vehicle, park as close to the hotel as possible.
- When you're in a crowded space, try not to use your cell phone or other mobile devices. Keep an eye on your belongings at all times. Be aware.

### Special Tips for Retail Establishments

Retail establishments have additional risks, especially if they are open late at night. Below are some OSHA recommendations to help reduce risk to your employees.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Recommendations for Workplace Violence Prevention Programs in Late-Night Retail Establishments*, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, OSHA 3153, 1998

- Improve visibility so that employees have an unobstructed view of the street. Keep signs low or high so there is good visibility into the store. Customer service or cash management areas should be visible from outside the store. Keep shelving low.
- Maintain adequate lighting inside and outside the store.
- Use fences or other structures to force the flow of traffic into highly visible areas.
- Use drop safes.
- Install video surveillance equipment.
- Put height markers on the doors to assist with descriptions.
- Use door detectors.
- Install physical barriers.
- Limit or restrict areas of customer access.

In addition, train your staff to protect themselves, and the safety of their customers, by following these suggestions:

- Staff and supervise dressing room areas.
- Here are suggestions if your employees are in a violent situation:
  - Stay calm.
  - Don't argue.
  - Don't stare.
  - Speak before moving.
  - Don't go with the perpetrator.
- Ensure that there is an adequate amount of staffing and a mix of skill levels at all times.

Violence in the workplace can happen. And, it can happen at your place of business. Be prepared by knowing your employees and their normal behavior, training personnel to report unusual behavior, training personnel on safety behaviors, and give potentially violent personnel a place where they can turn for help.

Taking a few steps can prevent a truly horrific event from happening in your workplace, and prevent your business from becoming tomorrow's headline.

To learn more details about the human aspect to business continuity planning, listen in to "Continuity Talk," our three-part Focusing on the Workforce series begins October 16, 2007. For more information on the "Continuity Talk" podcasting service, email us at [info@raconsulting.net](mailto:info@raconsulting.net), or visit <http://blog.continuity123.com>.

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