RISK MITIGATION & WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Overview

Workplace violence is an issue that is beginning to get more attention, but remains underreported and misunderstood. While a handful of shocking and high-profile incidents have the power to capture the public's attention, the vast majority of incidents stay under the public radar. The impact of those incidents take an enormous toll on employees and organizations, inflicting physical and emotional damage on employees, corroding the safety and security of workplaces, and potentially damaging the reputation and bottom line of brands and businesses.

Challenges

The scale and scope of the problem of workplace violence is substantial: The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics conducted a study that found that more than *1.7 million* employees are victims of workplace assaults every year. According to a report issued by the National Institute for the Prevention of Workplace Violence, in the 21st Century, an average of 552 work-related homicides occur annually in the U.S.

Despite these eye-opening numbers, organizations only spend an average of $4.50 per employee annually on workplace violence prevention. This disparity demonstrates the severity of the issue relative to the generally inadequate steps that most companies have taken to mitigate the risk of workplace violence. But it also reveals substantial opportunity for improvement. With the right information, tools and techniques, organizations can make significant strides with respect to workplace violence training, preparation and prevention.

Defining workplace violence

In order to contextualize the scale of the problem and the potential efficacy of various risk mitigation strategies, we first have to define what behaviors fall into the category of workplace violence. The FBI defines workplace violence as "actions or words that endanger or harm another employee or result in other employees having a reasonable belief that they are in danger."

A seminal study on workplace violence conducted by a Critical Incident Response Group at the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime pointed out that the definition of workplace violence extends well beyond traditional high-profile workplace tragedies:

> "Mass murder on the job by disgruntled employees are media-intensive events. However, these mass murders, while serious, are relatively infrequent events. It is the threats, harassment, bullying, domestic violence, stalking, emotional abuse, intimidation, and other forms of behavior and physical violence that, if left unchecked, may result in more serious violent behavior. These are the behaviors that supervisors and managers have to deal with every day."

It is also important to note that this definition encompasses more than actual *physical* violence. The *threat* of violence, intimidation or harassment can have a dramatically adverse effect on the health and well-being of employees, and, ultimately, the cohesiveness and performance of an organization.

Potential impact

While the well-being and personal safety of employees is paramount, the potential impact of workplace violence extends well beyond the immediate damage from a harmful incident or pattern of troubling behavior. Companies with a poor reputation for maintaining a safe, secure and positive work environment are more likely to have trouble attracting and retaining high-quality employees, and are far more likely to be plagued by inefficiency and poor productivity.

With that in mind, the ability of any business to establish and maintain a safe and secure professional environment for its employees is not only a moral obligation, it is a professional necessity. The right preventative measures and proactive steps can yield a substantial ROI for a relative modest investment of resources, creating and maintaining a safe and secure workplace where employee safety, morale and productivity are optimized.

Tactics, tips and techniques

PART 1: Preventative measures and proactive steps

There are a number of constructive steps that decision-makers can take to mitigate, minimize or eliminate the threat of workplace violence and responsibly protect their people and property. Many of the most important of those steps are preventative in nature, taking place both before and during the hiring process:

- There are a number of proven techniques that companies can use to gather more accurate information on the personal traits, behaviors and characteristics of prospective employees

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that extend well beyond standard personal and professional references. Psychometric assessment tests claim to be able to test for integrity and specific personality traits, and polygraph tests are also permitted in certain industries or under specific circumstances (although it should be noted that they are subject to strict standards of use).

- One of the notorious weak spots when it comes to identifying potential bad apples during hiring process is employment verification. Too many companies fail to conduct a thorough review and follow-up of submitted information. That review and verification process often does not extend further than a bare-bones confirmation that the individual did in fact work where they claimed to have worked. Some companies simply check the applicant's information against a basic work-history database. Employers would be wise to engage in a more detailed and diligent verification process to avoid letting potentially dangerous or unstable individuals slip through the cracks. That begins with asking more questions and speaking personally with an applicant's former employer. It is not sufficient to simply talk to HR or Accounting—departments that are more likely to respond with generalities and lack of detail. Employers should conduct a brief supervisor interview, making a point to ask about not only performance, but also enquiring specifically about any personality traits or behaviors that the employee may have exhibited and that the supervisor may have been concerned about.

PART 2: Ongoing safety and security measures

As important as diligent vetting can be during the hiring process, *re-vetting* and *re-screening* programs are equally valuable—albeit much less common. Ongoing safety and security measures include:

- Review the payroll list monthly to screen for criminal convictions and other red flags, and implement a program to review employee social media profiles on an annual basis. Companies would be wise to check and re-check their efforts using detailed post-hiring audits to review the interview process and ensure that background checks were performed appropriately.

- Secure the support of senior leadership to help establish a professional culture where employees are informed and empowered. One of the best ways to ensure that issues are not overlooked, and that initiatives like workplace violence awareness training gain traction, is to appoint someone in the organization to take ownership of this issue. When feasible, appoint a subject-matter expert who can help conduct training, drive awareness, educate employees, break down taboos and ensure that potential concerns do not get lost in the corporate shuffle.

- Create a positive and open atmosphere by institutionalizing workplace violence prevention measures. Create a clear reporting structure, including hotlines and clear chains of communication. Hold exercises and interactive training sessions, including protocols for response in the event of an emergency (make workplace violence prevention training a standard part of overall emergency training). An informed workforce that knows what to look for, is quick to report potential concerns, and has someone reliable they can report to is perhaps the single best preventative measure to mitigate the risk of workplace violence.

Priorities and best practices

In addition to the concrete steps that companies can take to bolster their workplace violence prevention and preparation, there are a number of general best practices that security-minded companies can adhere to in order to optimize and enhance their risk mitigation efforts:

Maintain clear and consistent communication

From an HR perspective, workplace violence is an issue that should be front and center: a priority at all times. While workplace violence is being discussed more often and more openly than in the past, organizations should continue to take steps to ensure that conversation continues, and that that discussion includes and engages employees. One of the reasons that workplace violence has traditionally gone underreported is because of persistent confusion about what specific types of behaviors and activities fall into the category of workplace violence. But even in cases where the dangers of workplace violence are clearly understood, some companies may have a desire to protect their reputation and a corresponding tendency to minimize the impact of incidents. Some employees may also be reluctant to involve employers in a concerning situation, worried about rocking the boat or mistakenly considering the issue to be a personal matter. Clear and consistent communication to employees can clarify much of this confusion and help overcome reluctance or uncertainty.

Balance security and privacy

Anything that poses or even implies a physical/personal threat constitutes workplace violence. Because the category is so broad, companies frequently struggle with deciding exactly how to respond in a reasonable manner. Deciding how to respond involves finding nuanced answers to big and often challenging questions, and often demands a tricky balancing act of security versus privacy. For example, a detailed background check may provide some evidence of a propensity to act in a violent manner, but if an employee has a medical condition or takes medication, medical privacy issues and even Constitutional Rights may become an issue. Decision-makers should consult with a trained HR professional or a professional security and risk mitigation consultant to make sure they are balancing security and privacy appropriately.

Practice awareness, preparation and prevention

When a violent incident does take place, it is almost always the case that signals were evident beforehand—and sometimes those signals were overt. It is exceptionally rare that something happens with no warning whatsoever. With that in mind, it is all the more important to be proactive, to have a program in place year-round, and to implement policies and programs that will minimize exposure and protect employees. Making the relatively modest investment in preparation, training and education is far better than having to react and respond in the wake of a disturbing or tragic event.

Deploy a program that is both holistic and ongoing

Many companies have programs in place that they *think* are effective – a state of affairs that can actually be worse than not having one at all. An effective workplace violence risk mitigation program has to be both holistic and ongoing: a process, rather than a discrete event or a single training session. The best programs are constantly updated, tested, reviewed and revised, with employee education and training a prominent feature.

Professional guidance

Working with an experienced and trusted security partner is one of the best ways to protect employees, brands and businesses from the damage that results from workplace violence. Experienced risk mitigation professionals and security consultants can assist in the design and implementation of everything from front-end measures like screening, to rigorous ongoing reviews and security measures. The best security vendors combine a traditional operational approach (consulting, audits, etc.) with tactical intelligence gathering and active security steps. In some extreme cases, a forensic profiler or psychological expert may be brought in to conduct more in-depth assessments of worrisome employees and provide additional guidance about what can be done to help prevent these types of issues from arising.

Conclusion

While the causes and complications of workplace violence are slowly beginning to be better understood and awareness is growing, current available data strongly suggests that workplace violence issues remain significantly underreported. While sensational and shocking events are often publicized (with a handful of high-profile tragedies garnering a disproportionately high percentage of the media coverage), the more prosaic, but no less troubling, realities of everyday harassment, aggression, and violence continue to quietly and insidiously do damage in professional environments. For brands, businesses, executives and decision makers, raising awareness, educating themselves and their teams, and taking proven, proactive and productive steps to prepare for and prevent workplace violence remains the most effective way to protect both their employees and their professional interests.