The real threat of workplace violence

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The headlines cannot be ignored: It’s become all too common to read or hear a news report about tragic incidents of violence in the workplace.

In fact, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) estimates that approximately two million Americans are the victims of workplace violence annually. The threat is real, and while no one is immune, there are steps that can help minimize the risk as well as precautions to protect employees should something happen.

Understanding the threat

While it may be difficult to ever feel truly prepared for something of this nature, understanding workplace violence is the first step toward reducing the probability of an incident and keeping organizations and their workforce safe.

Workplace violence is considered to be any action, whether verbal, physical or written, that is intended to cause, or capable of causing, death or serious bodily injury, emotional injury, or property damage. This includes intimidation, disruptive and harassing behaviors, threats, and acts of sabotage, among others.

While active shooter incidents are often the first scenario that comes to mind when thinking of workplace violence, especially considering recent incidents in the news, it can encompass a wide range of situations, including domestic violence, fights between colleagues, angry customers, property damage, written threats, and many others.

According to a recent study from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, of the 160 active shooter incidents that occurred from 2000 to 2013, approximately 80 percent happened in a workplace. Workplace violence, including these shootings, impacts two million Americans each year, causing an average of 700 homicides. In addition to the invaluable cost of human life, the annual economic cost of workplace violence is $121 million.

Outside of the obvious costs, violence in the workplace is a significant occupational hazard for both organizations and their employees, leading to physical and emotional trauma, poor morale, increased health care and workers’ compensation costs, and decreased productivity, among others.

So what factors can contribute to a threat of violence in the workplace? Issues that cause stress also have the potential to lead to violence. Outside of work, the fragmentation of the family structure, easy access to weaponry, TV and other media, substance abuse, and financial issues can all tip someone over the edge toward violence.
Domestic disputes that spill over to the workplace are also a major issue. Seventy-one percent of HR and security personnel have reported an incident of domestic violence on company property, endangering both the victim and his or her coworkers.

Within the organization, workplace stress, downsizing, feelings of being undervalued or unheard, or rigid management styles can all lead to potential issues. Failed office romances can also create problems.

**Identifying the threat**

Knowing some of the factors that can lead to violence is key to identifying potential risks within an organization. So who poses the greatest risk of violence to organizations? While random, delusional people are potential threats, more frequently the perpetrator is a disgruntled employee or someone involved in a domestic disturbance that has spilled over into the workplace. Issues at work such as downsizing or feeling undervalued could be triggers for employees, as well as personal problems like relationship trouble, legal issues or a financial crisis.

Early warning indicators may include increased absences, deteriorating performance on the job, friction with managers or other employees, a change in attitude or appearance, excessive complaints or even substance abuse at work. Further, increasing patterns of signals like acting out, crying, throwing objects, or paranoia could indicate the potential for an issue.

Anyone experiencing situations such as divorce, loss of a loved one, or another issue may also be experiencing increased stress, which can put someone on edge and increase the probability they could act out. Demonstrating one of these signs is not a direct indicator of a threat of violence, but multiple issues could point to a potential problem that should be addressed.

In these instances, leadership determines outcomes. Many managers and supervisors may feel challenged to understand issues employees may be experiencing at home while concerned about privacy issues. However, by being supportive of employees, it is possible to have an open dialogue that can allow for any issues to be addressed together, whether they be work-related or otherwise.

While a non-supportive supervisor may be demeaning or sarcastic to employees and look the other way when someone is experiencing an issue, a strong supervisor clearly defines expectations and communicates frequently with employees.

If they believe an employee is facing a set-back or challenge, they reach out to offer support, either from HR or other outside resources like an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Further, they follow-through to ensure that employees feel supported and valued. When employees are treated with dignity and respect, they are less likely to act out, minimizing the potential threat to an organization.

**Managing the threat**

Even before a potential issue is identified, organizations need to take the time to prepare in order to minimize risk and perhaps prevent incidents of violence. However, the majority of businesses do not currently have a program or policy in place to address this issue. Brokers and consultants have the opportunity to help organizations by connecting them with resources and training to ensure all supervisors have the knowledge needed to address potential problems and respond appropriately.

When creating a prevention and response program, it is important to consider the following:

- Enforce existing policies: Enforcing anti-harassment and weapons policies as well as the code of conduct can go a long way toward prevention of violent incidents within the workplace.
- Assess the risk: Leadership and HR can work together to analyze any previous incidents, determine the current potential for issues and assess preparedness in order to create a plan that fits the specific needs.
of the organization. Following the initial assessment, periodic reviews should be conducted to determine if any changes should be made to the program.

- Establish policies and procedures: Consider adopting a zero tolerance policy that has buy-in from all levels of the organization and includes reporting and investigation procedures as well as intervention standards. Ensure this policy is communicated to all employees and posted prominently where people will regularly see it.

- Introduce training: Both employees and managers should participate in expert-led training to raise awareness and recognition of potential issues, educate on diffusion techniques and appropriate intervention, and understand the policies put in place.

- Create a crisis team: This cross-disciplinary task force can help establish and review policies, conduct training, connect people with resources and services, and be a first point of contact to investigate or respond to potential issues.

Many organizations already have access to resources that may be able to help when creating a program and in the event an incident occurs, including HR and security, emergency hotlines, local law enforcement, and Employee Assistance Programs.

While it may not always be possible to prevent an act of violence in the workplace, by preparing and planning ahead, it is possible to minimize the risk and protect employees and the organization.