

The right steps to prevent workplace violence

By Ross Astramecki

All organizations, regardless of number of employees, are vulnerable to workplace violence, which can occur in any type of economy. The potential impact of workplace violence can not only destroy employee morale and productivity, but also devastate lives and the company itself.

The University of Georgia released a study that found workplace violence costs the United States \$70 billion annually, with \$64.4 billion attributed to loss in workplace productivity.

How is workplace violence defined? According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), workplace violence is defined as violence or the threat of violence against workers that occurs at or outside the workplace, and it ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide – one of the leading causes of job-related deaths.

A turbulent economy can make matters worse, especially with the unemployment rate still at a very high level and pay cuts and layoffs dampening spirits. Employees are faced with a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety as they worry about job security, financial stability and bills.

Anger, frustration and emotional instability can build and possibly trigger violent behavior. Recently publicized incidents, such as the University of Alabama in Huntsville mass murder, continue to remind us of the horrifying reality of workplace violence. It can happen – anywhere.

Additionally, OSHA reports approximately 2 million American workers are victims of workplace violence annually. In 2008, there was an 18 percent decline in workplace homicides. However, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workplace suicides were up 28 percent to a record high of 251 cases in 2008.

While there are no specific warning signs, there are several steps employers can take to help prevent workplace violence.

Create and implement a safety policy. More than 70 percent of U.S. workplaces do not have a formal program or policy in place that addresses workplace violence, according to a recent “Survey of Workplace Violence Prevention” conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

All companies should have a workplace safety policy and program in place that outlines the company’s policies on harassment and workplace violence, which should include

ASIS International Indonesia Chapter #266

www.asisindonesia.or.id

chapter266@asisindonesia.or.id

ASIS International (ASIS) is the preeminent organization for security professionals, with more than 37,000 members and 270 chapters worldwide. Founded in 1955, ASIS is dedicated to increasing the effectiveness and productivity of security professionals by developing educational programs and materials that address broad security interests, such as the ASIS Annual Seminar and Exhibits, as well as specific security topics

reporting and response procedures. Many companies publish these policies in the employee handbook and place reminders in break rooms or hallways where they are accessible to everyone.

Develop a plan for crisis management. Companies should develop a plan of action that defines the steps to be taken in case of a crisis. Employees and supervisors need to know the appropriate evacuation procedures and the designated safe meeting location. Taking the time to make preparations can help prevent potential chaos, confusion or unnecessary harm.

Take note of the details. If an employee is repeatedly missing deadlines or suddenly withdrawing, do not dismiss it. Trust your instincts when it comes to any change in behavior, particularly an increase in aggression, and heed the warning signs before it is too late. While no one can pinpoint the exact characteristics of potential violent behavior, an unexpected change in behavior can be a red flag and a cry for help.

Keep communication lines open. Maintain an open-door policy and remind employees they are always welcome to talk to supervisors. All employees should be encouraged to immediately report any type of suspicious behavior to a supervisor, whether from a co-worker, manager, vendor or customer. Ensuring confidentiality is key to encouraging employees to come forward with information that could prevent a dangerous event.

Employee training. Supervisors need to know the early warning signs and the appropriate manner in which to manage situations that could escalate into a potentially serious or harmful circumstance.

Encourage employee assistance programs. This is a value-added resource that is often underutilized and overlooked by employers and employees. Sometimes employees may not feel comfortable talking to a supervisor or may need professional counseling. Oftentimes, employees shy away from employee assistance programs because they worry information will be accessible to the employer; however, that is not the case – everything is kept confidential.

It is essential for employers to recognize that workplace violence happens. While no organization can be completely immune to workplace violence, companies can minimize potentially dangerous situations. It is the employer's responsibility to take necessary steps to help provide employees with a safe working environment.