Take these 6 steps to defuse a volatile confrontation

**Issue:** Workplace violence claims about 2 million victims each year.

**Risk:** The resulting injuries and trauma translate to $13.5 billion in medical costs and 1.75 million days of work lost each year.

**Action:** Defuse potentially violent situations by taking the six steps detailed below.

WASHINGTON, D.C., If you haven't confronted violence in your workplace, it's only a matter of time, says former FBI agent Gary Sheppard.

"The problem is so pervasive that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has classified workplace violence as a national epidemic," Sheppard told HR managers and security officers attending the National Summit on Security here last month. In fact, he said, the Justice Department now considers the workplace the most dangerous place to be in America.

Despite common belief, though, most physical and verbal attacks emanate from customers and strangers, not current or former employees, said Sheppard, now executive VP of Prudential Associates, a Maryland-based security-consulting firm.

HR departments can be a flash point for angry workers. If you're confronted with someone threatening violence, Sheppard advocates these six steps:

1. Try to understand the person's mind-set. "In the overwhelming number of cases, the person just wants fairness," Sheppard says.
2. Practice 'active listening' by rephrasing what the person has said and asking clarifying, open-ended questions.
3. Act calmly, even if you're ready to jump out of your skin, and never embarrass or verbally attack the person.
4. Let the person vent. Many times, that alone is enough to calm him or her. "Visualize a big balloon that's about to burst," Sheppard said. "must be gradually deflated rather than punctured."
5. Allow the person to suggest a solution. "It may surprise you that the person's suggestion may be very reasonable," Sheppard says.
6. Switch the focus toward what you can do. You may be able to call on additional resources to help solve the person's problem, such as an employee assistance program.

"If your organization hasn't experienced this issue yet, be glad," Sheppard says. "Do not, however, be content."