

Prevent violence with good hiring, training, supervision

by James Campbell Quick

Most incidents of workplace violence could have been prevented. A supportive workplace, in fact, is one that works daily to keep violence at bay, using a three-stage strategy of primary, secondary and third-level prevention.

Primary: Establish norms

HR leaders can practice “primary prevention” to remove conditions that might cause people to violently retaliate against the company, their bosses or co-workers. Primary prevention relies on good selection, good training and good supervision.

Good selection: You can’t weed out every potentially violent employee, but you can select employees with the right skills and abilities, and place them in the right jobs. That helps prevent workplace incidents born of employees’ frustration.

Good training: Every new employee should be “socialized” through systematic onboarding. Train them on the norms and expectations of the workplace, from the importance of punctuality to how much you value open, clear communication. That provides a clear sense of how people need to behave at work.

Good supervision: Managers need to learn how to mindfully observe their employees. I’m not talking about controlling them; that’s counterproductive because it saps motivation. Most employees—aware of the norms and standards that allow them to meet work expectations—know how to regulate their own behavior.

But bosses are responsible for ensuring that staff members adhere to ethical and appropriate norms. They need to be aware of which employees display frustration, pent-up anger or a tendency to act out. And they need to be willing to take action when someone does act out.

This isn’t about turning supervisors into psychologists. However, they can be triage agents empowered to refer employees to an employee assistance plan or other organization that can offer the support and guidance they need to stay out of trouble.

Secondary: Preventing escalation

The goal of secondary prevention is to prevent low-grade problems from becoming violent crises.

During training on cultural norms, don’t shy away from discussions about things that might seem like potential triggers of workplace violence: intolerance for co-workers from different generations, resentment of colleagues or groups that seem to “get away” with too much, misunderstandings between employees from different ethnic backgrounds.

Teach supervisors to watch for simmering problems. Let managers know it's OK to check in with someone having an off day to ask how things are going. This allows them to be aware of personal problems that could result in workplace outbreaks.

Third level: When crisis erupts

People act out when they've just had enough. Usually, work or family issues spur workplace violence, leading to yelling, pushing or turning a work tool into a weapon.

After a violent incident, four things need to happen:

1. **Isolate the employee** who caused it. Bring in security if necessary to ensure safety.
2. **Provide care.** Address the medical and psychological needs of victims and witnesses.
3. **Forgive.** Identify what caused a violent incident, but avoid assigning blame. Forgiving an employee who hurt others or a supervisor who overlooked the warning signs starts the healing. Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning, legitimizing or forgetting. It means responding to a crisis with generosity and graciousness.
4. **Develop resilience.** People can bounce back from workplace violence. Victims and witnesses often refer to tragedy in their lives as a wake-up call that gave them an opportunity to rethink things in their lives and go in a better direction. Examine what the organization and its people can learn from every incident.

James Campbell Quick is professor of leadership and organizational behavior at the University of Texas at Arlington. Contact him at JQuick@uta.edu.