Workplace violence: recognizing it, responding to it

Violence and/or aggression in the workplace can take many forms. Therefore, it's important to remember that violence isn't limited to physical injury or assault.



The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health (CCOH) suggests that workplace violence includes "any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment"; examples are:

Threatening behaviour. Shaking fists, destroying property or throwing objects.

Verbal or written threats. Any expression of an intent to inflict harm.

- **Harassment.** Any behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms or verbally abuses a person and that is known or would be expected to be unwelcome. This includes words, gestures, intimidation, bullying, or other inappropriate activities.
- **Verbal abuse.** Swearing, insults or condescending language.
- **Physical attacks.** Hitting, shoving, pushing or kicking.

Acts of aggression can originate with co-workers at all levels of the organization, or they can be initiated by customers, suppliers, or total strangers, depending on the type of workplace. Work-related violence may also occur off-site, at business meetings (e.g., conferences, trade shows) or at work-related social functions.

Is Workplace Rage on the Rise?

With the downturn in the economy and the subsequent downsizing, organizational restructuring has taken its toll on employee morale and caused increased stress and uncertainty. The result is that workplace rage is on the rise. A study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) found that Canadian workers are more likely to be assaulted in their workplace than American workers. In fact, Canada ranks number four in the world for workplace violence.

What are the warning signs of aggression?

It is difficult to generalize about who might be capable of violence in the workplace. However, those who commit acts of workplace aggression or violence are usually people with a history of confrontational behaviour at work. They may also be suffering from an undiagnosed mental or emotional instability. This can cause the development of obsessions, usually about work, or romantic obsessions.

Can we predict the potential for violence?

There are some indicators that can help assess an individual's potential for violence. These include:

- A violent past (e.g., assault charges, fights at work, etc.)
- Substance abuse (drugs, alcohol) problems
- Mental health issues
- Use or ownership of weapons
- Signs of pent up frustration or rage
- Self-esteem issues
- A "loner"

Workplace risk factors

Although violence may erupt in any workplace, certain types of jobs and/or work environments put some employees more at risk for violent incidents.

Work situations and locations can increase risk

Generally, employees are more at risk if they work with the public. People handling money (cashiers, bank customer service reps, etc.) are understandably more at risk for robberies and assault. Those in work situations where alcohol is served (restaurants, bars) or drugs are available (pharmacies, hospitals, clinics, etc.) may be at risk for acts of aggression. The potential for violence can also be affected by the time of day and/or the location in which you work. For example, employees working alone, in isolated areas, or late at night, may need to take additional precautions.

Workplace environment can impact on or increase the risk of violence

The work atmosphere in an organization, a particular department or a work location can increase the risk of a violent situation. When employee morale is low and individuals or groups are distressed due to changes in the workplace, it can stoke the rage of some individuals to the point of aggression.

How can you protect yourself and prevent workplace aggression?

Although workplace violence policies and measures must be developed and implemented by the organization, prevention is everyone's responsibility.

Awareness. Awareness is the first step in preventing workplace aggression.

Start by reviewing your organization's Workplace Violence Policy so you are familiar with the processes in place to identify, report and respond to potentially violent situations. This policy should define workplace violence; outline prevention procedures; indicate the consequences of threatening or violent behaviour; outline the reporting process and explain the procedures for investigating and resolving complaints.

Be alert. Just as you should be cautious and aware when out after dark or in potentially dangerous situations, you should also develop a sense of safety awareness at work. Until now, you may have taken security devices and procedures for granted. Become aware of security items such as closed-circuit cameras, alarms, card-key access systems. These serve not only to protect equipment or products, but also to protect employees. Be sure not to leave secured doors open or to disable any alarm systems that might protect you in a violent incident. If there is a sign-in procedure, be sure to adhere to it.

Assess the risk. While an organization-wide risk assessment is the responsibility of the organization's management, individuals can conduct their own audit of their particular work area, department or total workplace. You can be the judge of what may be required to make your work area more safe or secure. For example if you are working alone and/or late a night, be sure the exits are secured and alarms are turned on. Is the lighting appropriate? Are there procedures that could be put in place? Discuss your ideas or concerns with your manager/supervisor.

What to do if you experience workplace aggression

Report all potential threats or incidents. If you experience harassment of any kind (e.g., sexual, verbal or physical) or feel threatened in any way, report it immediately to your supervisor or Human Resources department. You could also check your organization's workplace violence policy, which should outline how and to whom you should report such incidents. It is important not to delay or feel ashamed about reporting an incident or a potential problem. Remember, you have a right to a safe work environment and no one should tolerate aggression on the job. If you've been harassed, intimidated or threatened, your safety and that of your co-workers might be in danger.

Write down the details. Record the details of the incident (when, where, how) and whether there were any witnesses. This is particularly important if there are on-going incidents of harassment or threats.

Handling aggressive situations. If you find yourself in a potentially threatening situation, don't become aggressive. Keep the tone of your voice calm. Keep your hands by your side. And keep the volume and pitch

of your voice as stable as possible and try to de-escalate by presenting yourself as being unaffected by the anger of the employee. Next clarify why the employee is irate and acknowledge that the person's anger is not going to influence you.

Violence or aggression can occur in any workplace. It may not always be possible to prevent it, but by understanding its causes and identifying workplace risks, we'll be better prepared to avert or handle potentially violent incidents.