



Things Every Employer Should Know: Six Warning Signs of Workplace Danger

Every year, 1.7 million violent incidents occur against individuals while they are at work or on duty. With professional stress on the rise and employees dealing with issues like less pay, less job security, more work and more worry, work-related stress can take a toll. But when does a stressful work environment turn dangerous? Here are six warning signs of workplace danger.

Disgruntled

Employees (or former employees) who feel unfairly treated, resentful or have a “chip on their shoulder” could seek revenge by acting out against their company, co-workers or customers. The employee may have a grievance pending or a history of filing grievances. These employees tend to blame others for the results of their own actions and refuse to accept responsibility. Their perceived mistreatment or bias could ignite violent behavior.

Direct or indirect threats

One in four full-time workers has been harassed, threatened or attacked, and co-workers accounted for most of the harassment, followed by customers. An employee may express outrage and blame against others through direct or indirect threats. They use direct intimidation, verbal and written threats to create fear, stress and anxiety in their targets. Here are examples of direct and indirect threats:

- Statements like, “someone is going to pay for this,” or “he better watch his back” are indirect threats that could lead to workplace violence.
- Bold statements like, “if I had a gun right now I’d blow him away,” or “I’m going to mess you up so bad you won’t know what hit you” are considered direct threats.
- Direct threats can also be nonverbal, such as the display of a weapon during or after an argument.

If you have a gut feeling about a person who may become violent, don’t ignore it. You should contact your supervisor immediately to report your suspicions.

Unmanaged anger or stress

Individuals who do not have anger management or conflict resolution skills can be a dangerous in the workplace. This type of person may be emotional and impulsive, leading them to act out towards others or themselves. Here are warning signs to look for:

- Inappropriately loud voice and agitated gesturing
- Patterns of agitated behavior
- Person indicates they have no options
- Damage of property, such as throwing objects or pounding a table with their fist
- Vehemently refuses to follow policies and procedures

Paranoid or delusional

Paranoia causes people to feel as if others are conspiring against them or that unconnected events are related. Similarly, people who are delusional may believe outlandish conspiracy theories, make wildly improbable statements and view the accidents and mistakes of others as intentional and aimed at him/her. A paranoid or

delusional individual with out-of-touch beliefs and an inability cope with stress could become violent at work. This is especially true if the person feels unappreciated or feels as if they have no control of their workplace circumstances.

Emotionally abusive workplace

Verbal or physical abuse in the workplace can cause workplace danger. Derogatory words, bullying behaviors, threats or disrespect can cause people to become fed up. Sometimes negative workplace environments become conducive to “mobbing” which is similar to bullying. Mobbing is persistent and systematic harassment and does not include isolated incidents or appropriate corrective measures which may be covered in other policies. This type of workplace can be very toxic to employees. Mobbing behaviors can occur between co-workers, between co-workers and management or even between employees and customers.

Workplace is unprepared for crisis

Effective managers understand that crisis preparedness is a leadership responsibility and give it just as much attention as any other management function. But all too often employers are not prepared to effectively respond to a critical incident in the workplace. Here are some signs a workplace is not prepared for a crisis and may be vulnerable to employee violence:

- Lack of crisis response plan
- Failure to perform a risk management assessment
- Failure to act on warning signs
- Indifference to employee needs
- Poor management of employee terminations or downsizings
- Poor communication between labor and management
- Withholding critical information about situations

Centerstone offers Crisis Management Strategies to help local, state and national businesses and organizations plan for and respond to workplace crises. For more information about these services call 888-291-HELP (4357).

About the CMS program: <http://centerstone.org/crisis-management-strategies>

About Centerstone

Centerstone, a not-for-profit organization, has provided a wide range of mental health and addiction services to people of all ages for more than 50 years. Through more than 60 facilities and 170 partnership locations across Middle Tennessee, Centerstone serves more than 50,000 children, adolescents, adults and seniors each year. Centerstone is accredited by The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). For more information about Centerstone, please call 888-291-4357 or visit www.centerstone.org.

About Susan Gillpatrick, MEd, LPC, CTS

Susan Gillpatrick, Centerstone Crisis Management Specialist, primarily works in the field with clients in critical incident response situations, and in Centerstone’s wellness trainings and presentations. She is also responsible for planning and implementing marketing and growth strategies for Centerstone’s Crisis Management Strategies.

Ms. Gillpatrick is a Licensed Professional Counselor, Certified Trauma Specialist, Certified Workplace Conflict Mediator, and Mental Health Service Provider in the state of Tennessee and a National Certified Counselor. She is also a member the American Counseling Association, the Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists, the Tennessee Mental Health Counseling Association, and the Middle Tennessee Employee Assistance Professionals Association. She is a frequent presenter at local and national conferences, and has had numerous articles published. She received her Master of Education degree in Human Development Counseling from Peabody College at Vanderbilt University.