

A NOT SO SUBTLE REMINDER

The tragedy at Virginia Tech is a not so subtle reminder that workplace violence can erupt anywhere, at any time, and without obvious warning. According to OSHA statistics, homicides are the second leading cause of workplace deaths. Traffic accidents are number one. Fortunately, chances are slim that a tragedy, the scope of Virginia Tech or Sept. 11, will happen in a workplace. Most workplace incidences are far less news worthy, but various forms and degrees of violence still happen each day.

Every business is vulnerable. Stalking, threats, intimidation and harassment are commonplace. Domestic disputes spill over into the workplace, and property is defaced. Incidences that first appear innocuous, like insensitive teasing and subtle forms of bullying, can escalate.

OSHA statistics substantiate that 20 percent of workplace violence incidences involve coworkers, 5 percent former employees, and 7 percent managers. However, outsiders are the most common source of workplace violence. Forty-four percent of the time, workplace violence involves customers. The remaining 24 percent involve strangers, such as persons violating employees in parking lots.

Violence can escalate from stress, and from feelings of actual, or perceived, lack of control over work or personal issues. Although employees may feel powerless, management is not. They're vested with authority and control that can eliminate or minimize many workplace violence risk factors, including adopting the following prevention strategies:

- Prevention starts with a workplace violence policy. A policy alone will not deter someone bent on violence but it offers guidance to employees, illustrates unacceptable behavior, defines consequences, and provides legal support for terminating violators. Most policies prohibit carrying weapons and firearms into the workplace, and include rights and parameters for searching desks, furnishings and personal property on the premises. Importantly, policies should also include a comprehensive response plan in the event of a disaster.
- Management training raises awareness of situations that can erupt into violent behavior, such as insensitive terminations and employment decisions. Managers should know warning signs including mood swings, personal hardships, depression, stress, anxiety, and negative behaviors such as untrustworthiness, lying, and bad attitudes. Most importantly, managers need to recognize that their everyday actions and decisions have a direct influence to escalate or minimize opportunities for violence.
- It's important to hire the right person for the job. Job stress can result when an employee is not well matched to the job or work culture, and can manifest into violent behavior. Conducting background and reference checks can identify applicants with violent histories, and help defend negligent hiring allegations.

Likewise, promptly discharging violators sends a message that worker safety is a priority, and minimizes exposure to claims of negligent retention.

- Surveillance cameras are controversial, but can protect employees in work areas, parking lots and other work locations, and secure property. Cameras should be installed in conjunction with a policy that notifies employees of when and where they could be under surveillance, and where and when they can have expectation to privacy.
- An employee assistance program helps employees deal with difficult life and work issues. An EAP can be as sophisticated or as simple as the employer wants and can afford. It should offer opportunities for confidential referral to community mental health, financial counseling and other social service agencies that can help proactively ward off violence.

It's an old cliché but true. An employer's most important resource is its employees. It's unfortunate that it takes a tragic event like Virginia Tech to remind us how vulnerable we really are. Protecting our employee resources should be the top priority everyday.

What happened in Blacksburg, Va., Monday morning was no accident. But the effect on emotions was similar to a workplace fatality. The jolt is sudden, unexpected, shocking; the incident senseless, seemingly random and a horror.

And what the campus community is now experiencing in the aftermath mirrors a workplace after a fatality.

Activity comes to a halt. There is a lockdown or stand-down. Investigations begin. Surveillance tapes are reviewed, witnesses interviewed, timelines plotted, communications and personnel records reviewed. The cause or causes will become known later — if ever.

It happened at the Sago Mine in West Va. The BP refinery at Texas City, Texas. After the explosions of the Challenger and Columbia space shuttles.

It happened at more than 5,000 work sites in America in 2005. The number of fatal job-related incidents reported by the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics totaled 5,702.

That's more than 100 on-the-job fatalities every week.

As the leadership at Virginia Tech is struggling with this week, what do employers say to victims' families back home? To friends, coworkers, witnesses, survivors? To investigators? To reporters?

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

Thousands of workplaces grapple with this question, and the pain and suffering surrounding it, every year.

"It's something I never want to go through again," said a Ford Motor Company executive after a boiler exploded at Ford's River Rouge Plant in Dearborn, Mich. in 1999, killing six employees and injuring two dozen more.

Of course he doesn't. That's why we need defenses. Dr. Geller would call it a perceptual bias: It can't happen here. Not at our workplace. Not to us.

Which leads to one of the most famous (infamous) sayings in safety: It won't happen to me. Accidents happen to the other guy.

BLS statistics largely support this common perception of risk: The rate at which fatal work incidents occurred in 2005 was four deaths per 100,000 workers. Odds are, you're right, it will happen to someone else, somewhere else.

Which can give a safety manager fits. He or she battles the long odds of lightning ever striking their work site in safety training classes with employees, in safety meetings with supervisors, in budget reviews with execs. It's too easy to calculate the odds and doze off in another hazcom training class, or turn down a safety initiative budget request.

JUST ONE PHONE CALL

But all it takes is a call like Dr. Geller received driving to work, and nothing is ever quite the same again.

"It doesn't hit you until it gets personal," said Dr. Geller. "It's just numbers of people at first. But my secretary knew one of the teachers who was killed, knew her family, her two small children. When I saw how upset she was, well, it goes right through you."

"I'm still kind of shaky," a Virginia Tech freshman told an Associated Press reporter on Tuesday. She was heading for her car and home, tears streaming down her face. "I had to pump myself up just to kind of come out of the building. I was going to come out, but it took a little bit of 'OK, it's going to be all right'."

You can't stay locked down in a dorm, at home, or at work. The statistics are in your favor. But employees, supers, execs and organizations should give the need for safety the respect it's due. Despite the odds, more than a hundred workplaces will be jolted this week like Dr. Geller was Monday morning.