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WHITEPAPER

# **WORKPLACE BULLYING AND VIOLENCE:**

***ADDRESSING THREATS IN  
TODAY'S WORK ENVIRONMENT***



# WORKPLACE BULLYING AND VIOLENCE:

*Addressing threats in today's work environment*

Disagreements of one kind or another may happen throughout the workday. Although differing points of view among team members help organizations innovate and solve problems, it's important to understand the difference between professional disagreements and workplace bullying or violence.

When emotions escalate, situations can get out of control quickly. Even when there is no physical harm, bullying can leave deep emotional scars. And the consequences can have a profound impact on morale.

While acts of violence are rare, they can lead to injuries or death. These acts also turn into headline news and can seriously damage an organization's public image.

Knowing how to address threats can help create a more productive and safe work environment for everyone. Read on to learn more!

## HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT

A hostile work environment consists of a pattern of offensive comments or behaviors so frequent or persistent that it affects a person's ability to perform their job.

Harassment can contribute to a hostile work environment. Every company has a duty to stop harassment before it violates the law.

Illegal harassment is unwelcome behavior directed at a person in a protected class. Federally protected classes fall under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which applies to employers with 15 or more employees.



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That means people cannot be discriminated against in employment matters because of their:

- Race
- Color
- Religion
- National origin
- Age (40 and over)
- Sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity)
- Pregnancy
- Familial status
- Disability status
- Veteran status
- Genetic information
- Citizenship status

It's important to note that some states have broader laws that apply to all employers or protect additional groups.

Harassment can include bullying and rude behavior, but this type of conduct is only illegal when based on a protected class. Some people are just bad-mannered. Their behavior doesn't violate the law, but their conduct shouldn't be acceptable at work.

## WORKPLACE BULLYING

Bullying is defined as repeated, unwelcome behavior that humiliates or intimidates a coworker or otherwise sabotages the person's performance. A key word in this definition is "repeated." A single incident of anger or frustration may not be considered bullying. But if a pattern develops, then it likely fits the definition.

Bullying takes many forms, such as:

**EXPRESSIONS OF HOSTILITY:** Communicated verbally or through body language.

**ABUSIVE CONDUCT:** Behavior that belittles, harasses, or isolates a coworker.

**ABUSE OF POWER:** Behavior that berates one employee, while giving others a free pass.

**DECEIT AND SABOTAGE:** Taking credit for someone else's work is an example.



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**BROWSE BY TOPIC**

Even though many employees are working remotely, bullying can still occur over email, instant messages, phone calls, etc. Remote workers are not safe from a bully's verbal attacks.

Even though it may be improper and unprofessional, bullying is not currently illegal under federal law.

However, severe forms of bullying are illegal. These include assault and battery, as well as retaliation, discrimination, and harassment based on legally protected classes.

Ignoring a bullying problem only makes matters worse.

Consider the message received by employees — especially a victim of bullying — when their employer fails to address and resolve the problem. The continued negative impact on their working relationships compounds.

Employers should send a consistent message to employees with a company policy that:

- Encourages reporting,
- Includes steps for effective response to issues, and
- Requires supervisors and managers to take appropriate action when they become aware of a bullying situation.

### **WHAT SHOULD EMPLOYERS DO IF SOMEONE REPORTS A BULLYING SITUATION?**

For example, if two employees are having problems getting along and one person is bullying the other, address it as a matter of improper workplace conduct. Talk to the bully and victim. Outline expectations for future conduct and consequences. Encourage the victim to report further problems. Then monitor the situation for compliance.





**TREAT ALL REPORTS  
SERIOUSLY AND  
CONFIDENTIALLY.**

### **WHAT IF THE BULLY IS A HIGH-LEVEL EXECUTIVE?**

Generally, even a company CEO answers to someone, such as a Board of Directors. A few steps to take are:

- Investigate and document,
- Present the information to the Board of Directors, and
- Suggest executive coaching.

### **WHAT SHOULD EMPLOYERS DO IF THERE IS A REPORT OF BULLYING, BUT THERE AREN'T ANY WITNESSES?**

If one employee has been intimidating or ridiculing a coworker, and there were no witnesses, the report might be your first indication that a problem exists.

First, treat all reports seriously and confidentially. Assume that everything being reported is true. It might be exaggerated, so keep an open mind, but the effects on the bullied victim are real, and the situation will need to be addressed.

Next, investigate. The investigation should be conducted by a trained supervisor or manager, or by a Human Resources representative. Follow these steps:

- 1.** Interview the victims and witnesses to hear their versions of what's been happening.
- 2.** Meet with each person separately and privately. Their versions of what happened may differ.
- 3.** Interview the offender after talking with the victims and witnesses and inform the alleged bully about the allegations.
- 4.** Give the offender the opportunity to reply to the complaint.
- 5.** Maintain everyone's confidentiality as much as possible, but don't promise 100 percent confidentiality because that could inhibit your ability to investigate thoroughly.

Review everyone's statements. If clarification is needed, conduct another round of interviews.



## **ENCOURAGING EMPLOYEES TO REPORT INCIDENTS OF BULLYING HELPS AN ORGANIZATION:**

- **Take action to address issues quickly.**
- **Assess the effectiveness of bullying prevention measures.**
- **Provide prompt support to employees.**

Evaluate the credibility of the statements. If there were no witnesses, evaluate one person's word against another's. Even if it doesn't appear that bullying occurred, the employees obviously have problems working together, and the conflict needs to be resolved.

At the end of an investigation, document the incident following these steps:

- Describe the allegations and what was reported.
- Describe the investigation processes.
- Outline all relevant evidence, including who was interviewed.
- Conclude whether workplace bullying is substantiated.

If the investigation confirms that workplace bullying did occur, communicate recommendations to the victim, the bully or bullies, and others involved.

Options to resolve the bullying could include:

- Direct the bully to stop the behavior.
- Coach, counsel, or mentor the bully.
- Invite an apology.
- Conduct individual training.
- Provide mediation.
- Use disciplinary action. Responses at the workplace should be appropriate to the seriousness of what has occurred.

After discipline, follow up to make sure the bullying is not continuing.

Keep in mind that threats to harm someone, acts of violence, assault, property damage, and stalking are criminal matters that likely will result in termination, and may even prompt a call to the police.



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Unfortunately, attempts to de-escalate a bullying situation are not always effective. Sometimes bullying can escalate and turn into workplace violence. Not all workplace violence is caused by bullies. It can erupt for a variety of reasons.

## WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Violence at the workplace can be caused by personal factors such as financial, legal, or marital problems; drug or alcohol abuse; or mental or physical ailments. It could be caused by workplace factors such as job loss, perceptions of unequal or unfair treatment, or harassment by coworkers.

Workplace violence is very real and very dangerous. It affects organizations of every size and type. And when it happens, the repercussions can be severe.

The circumstances surrounding an event can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide. It can affect and involve employees, clients, customers, vendors, and visitors. In whatever form it's manifested, workplace violence is a major concern for employers and employees nationwide.

## TYPES OF JOBS WHERE VIOLENCE CAN OCCUR

Research has identified factors that may increase the risk of violence for employees at certain worksites. Such factors include exchanging money with the public and working with people who are unwell.

Working alone or in isolated areas may contribute to the potential for violence. Providing services where alcohol is served may also impact the likelihood of violence.

Time of day and location of work, such as working late at night or in areas with high crime rates, are also risk factors that should be considered when addressing issues of workplace violence.



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Jobs that tend to be at a higher risk level for violence include delivery drivers, healthcare professionals, public service workers, customer service agents, and law enforcement personnel.

## ADDRESSING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

The key to helping prevent workplace violence is to identify and address potential problems before they get out of hand. Although not all threats lead to violence, in many cases the violent person exhibited warning signs or told others about their plans.

Key warnings signs may include the following:

- A good employee suddenly becomes a problematic employee.
- Someone becomes increasingly frustrated and starts lashing out and picking fights with others.
- A person exhibits an obsession with weapons.
- Someone makes direct or implied threats.
- An employee shows a recent decline in health or hygiene.
- Signs of alcohol or drug abuse are observed.
- An employee is intimidating or bullying coworkers.
- A person complains of recent financial, marital, or legal issues.

It isn't just employees who perpetrate workplace violence. Offenders can also be customers, vendors, a worker's estranged spouse, or an acquaintance of an employee.





**BE ON ALERT FOR  
WARNING SIGNS OF  
WORKPLACE VIOLENCE.**

## **HERE ARE FOUR STEPS TO PREPARE FOR AND MINIMIZE INCIDENTS OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE:**

- 1.** Be alert to the warning signs. All threats must be taken seriously, handled promptly, and reported to the Human Resources department or police. Don't ignore the potential for violence, only to regret it later.
- 2.** Know the company's crisis management or emergency response procedures. Know who to call for help in a crisis situation and listen to all instructions.
- 3.** Know in advance how to respond to threats and violent acts. This includes moving away from the situation and knowing where to go and how to warn others.
- 4.** Be on the lookout and report any physical security concerns, such as doors left unlocked, lights that are not working, or unidentified visitors.

If a violent incident occurs, supervisors should work with Human Resources regarding disciplinary action or other appropriate responses, depending on the situation. For example, it may have been an otherwise good employee who briefly lost their temper. Or it could be an employee who gradually becomes more and more aggressive and starts making threats.

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Another type of violence that affects the workplace is domestic violence. Just as home life issues don't get left behind when employees report for work, domestic violence does not disappear when victims leave home.

If a victim of domestic violence leaves an abuser, where's one place the abuser knows the victim will likely be every day? At work. That's why domestic violence presents a unique set of challenges for employers, supervisors, and security staff.



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Employers that suspect an employee might be in an abusive relationship should watch for these signs:

- Arriving to work late or very early
- Unplanned or increased use of paid time off
- Decreased productivity
- Stress caused by personal phone calls
- Wearing long sleeves on a hot day or sunglasses inside
- Difficulty in making decisions or concentrating
- Bruises, chronic headaches, abdominal pains, or muscle aches
- Signs of fear, anxiety, depression, or fatigue

For all these behaviors, look for a repeated pattern, rather than a single incident.

Employers that think an employee is the victim of domestic violence should be concerned, but not act in the role of a counselor. Offering support, such as suggesting resources, is acceptable. Do not, however, try to solve the problem alone.

Words of comfort and support to say to an employee who may be a victim of domestic violence could include:

- “I know it’s hard to talk about this.”
- “You’re not alone. Many people have gone through this.”
- “I can give you a number to call for professional help.”

Again, don’t try to be a counselor or tell the person what to do. And don’t discuss the person’s information with anyone else without permission unless there is an immediate need to contact law enforcement.

Make sure the employee knows the specifics of the workplace policy and how to report any incident. Let the employee know where to go for help, such as the Employee Assistance Program or other resources.



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To avoid a potentially dangerous situation, be careful about becoming overly involved or offering personal favors. A supervisor should never offer their home as shelter or make impromptu safety checks at the employee's home. Maintain a professional working relationship as supervisor, not as counselor.

As a supervisor, be aware of the laws that apply to domestic violence as part of an early prevention strategy:

- Occupational health and safety laws generally require employers to maintain a safe workplace, which may include a violence-free workplace.
- Family and medical leave laws may require employers to grant leave to employees who are coping with domestic violence situations.
- Victim assistance laws may prohibit employers from taking adverse job actions against employees who disclose their situation, or who take time off from their jobs to make court appearances.

## WRAPPING IT UP

Workplace bullying and violence affect the victims, coworkers, managers, supervisors, and the company's bottom line.

When hostile or violent incidents are allowed to continue, they can decrease employee morale, increase stress, lower productivity, increase absenteeism, and increase the use of company healthcare benefits.

Stay alert for signs of bullying and violence in the workplace. And know what steps to take if problems arise. Make sure employees know that abuse and violence won't be tolerated, and that there will be consequences.

Employers might not be able to prevent every incident. By taking the appropriate actions when needed, however, everyone can benefit from having a safe and productive work environment.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Michelle joined J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. in 2011. She is currently an Associate Editor on the Editorial Content Team. In this role, she researches and creates content on a variety of employment-related topics including recruiting and hiring, downsizing and layoffs, independent contractors, and workplace violence.

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