While the workplace should, in theory at least, be a safe zone for employees to do their jobs, the fact of the matter is that we know from experience and from observing the world around us that ideals and reality do not always match up. The nightly news is frequently riddled with stories recounting attacks occurring in both the public and private sectors, leaving many of us wondering if there is any area of everyday life that can be considered as being a truly nonviolent respite of safety. Unfortunately, the laundry industry is not immune to such dangerous activity, both from disgruntled employees and from random attacks occurring within the work environment. The best way to contend with such attacks in a work environment is to be armed with the facts about workplace violence and to have plans in effect in the event that violence creeps into a professional setting.

VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE: THE HARD NUMBERS

While the nightly news has made us all too knowledgeable of violence in the workplace, the statistics behind that knowledge are even more sobering. According to the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA), workplace violence is typified as “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.” These acts can include verbal abuse, physical assaults, and homicide, and encompasses any of these acts inflicted upon employees and customers of a place of business. In fact, homicide is the fourth-leading cause of death on the job, with 506 such homicides occurring in 2010 alone in the United States. Two million workers in the U.S. have reported being victims of workplace violence, and those are just the ones that those people have willingly shared.¹

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Although workplace violence is a problem that crosses over a whole host of professions, there are some sectors of the working sphere that are more likely to experience such assaults. According to OSHA, those who work in small groups or work alone, healthcare professionals, and public service workers are at a particularly higher risk to experience violence in the workplace.\(^1\)

**WORKPLACE VIOLENCE**

Workplace violence, as Vicky Vessey, sales manager for Textile Care Services is all too familiar, is not just a numbers game filled with empty statistics. When her facility experienced violence in the workplace, she said, “We contacted the police immediately, mitigated and isolated the people involved.” Being prepared to spring into action and implement strategies and procedures in the case of workplace violence is key to keeping a potential powder keg of a situation from becoming worse.

When violence erupts in a workplace, one can never be fully prepared to deal with the chaos that ensues and the fear that can well up from such attacks.

Similar policies in other areas of the textile industry seem to be the norm. According to Sgt. Robert Johnson, Sr., Crime Prevention Coordinator for the Dallas County Hospital Police Department in Dallas, Texas, “[The] Parkland [Health and Hospital System in Texas] has a robust, zero-tolerance workplace violence policy that is managed through our Environment of Care Committee.”

However, while workplace violence is a reality, it is sometimes difficult to hone in on the warning signs that an employee might become potentially violent. According to the United States Department of Labor (DOL), one reason that detecting such signs is difficult is that employees sometimes dismiss volatile personality traits of their coworkers as “just” their demeanor.\(^2\) Despite the reluctance to speak up, the DOL stresses vigilance and urges workers to take precautions if a coworker is showing signs of dangerous behavior.

**BEST PRACTICES FOR SECURITY**

While not all eruptions of violence can be thwarted, despite an exhaustive level of preparedness, there are measures that can be taken to minimized workplace violence. OSHA suggests that one of the greatest shields against violence is to adopt a no-tolerance policy in regards to violence in the workplace.\(^1\)

When violence does occur, though, it is important to have a set of security protocols in place to ensure the safety of employees and customers. Vessey emphasizes why having best practices for security is vital for fostering a safe work atmosphere. Following a violent occurrence in the workplace, the team at Textile Care Services took the event as an opportunity to evaluate the company’s security practices.

“When the event was calmed down,” she said, “we sat down and discussed with the team how to conduct any future issues.” These steps are an acknowledgment that all violent situations are unique in nature and that an outbreak of violence should be evaluated in order to take measures that further similar attacks are less likely to be an issue.

**CREATING A PLAN OF ATTACK TO PREVENT AN ATTACK**

When violence erupts in a workplace, one can never be fully prepared to deal with the chaos that ensues and the fear that can well up from such attacks. However, having a plan at the ready to implement can go a long way to keep the bedlam at bay.
Vessey explains that her company does have a plan in place should violence invade their place of business. The key, as Vessey suggests, is preparation and conversing with human resources in order to create a plan of action.

In the event that a disgruntled coworker or a random attack disrupt their place of employment, Vessey explains, “We discussed creating a plan with our HR department and they researched best practice procedures and we implemented them.” The big take away from her comments is that the human resources department with Textile Care Services took the time and put in the effort to decide what would be the best course of action in the event of violence in the workplace, basing those decisions on considered research. In this day of increased violence invading the work sphere, the time for guesswork and half-measures in creating a generic plan in the case of such emergencies is a thing of the past.

However, it is not enough to merely have such a plan in place unless the employees themselves have been familiarized with the proper procedures that have to be enacted in the event that theory becomes reality and violence does erupt. Those workers need to know what to do if such emergencies occur and have prepared for how they will react if they are found in those situations.

Vessey said that employees of Textile Care Services are trained to know how to handle violence in the workplace during orientation. In the event that an incident does occur, employees are brought together afterwards for reassurance and to reinforce policy. Being forewarned is forearmed.

Parkland has adopted a similar approach to crafting a plan for violence in the workplace. As Sgt. Johnson explains, “The procedure to prevent and handle any workplace violence was collaboratively developed through the Environment of Care Committee with input from the Parkland Police Department, human resources, and other divisions within the health system.”

In terms of training employees in the event of potential violence, Sgt. Johnson continues, “Every employee at the Parkland Health and Hospital System receives instruction about workplace violence in the new employee orientation and annually through mandatory training.”

Still, having this preparation and being trained in how to handle violence in the workplace is futile unless employees are vigilant and aware of their surroundings and action in their environment. Having best practices in place for security at work can go a long way toward at curbing such violent activity before it starts. The laundry facility environment presents a unique set of challenges in that there is significant traffic going in and out of the building, meaning doors are frequently left open and people unfamiliar to employees (such as drivers, vendors, etc.) may come and go on a regular basis. Building access must be carefully managed, and employees should be encouraged to be observant and report any suspicious activity. Employees should also feel secure in reporting any personal situations (such as domestic violence issues) that may spill into the workplace so that managers can take steps to keep employees safe.

“...We ask all employees to report any issues immediately,” Vessey said, “from lunch food being taken to strange people hanging around outside our building.” This attitude toward violent triggers acknowledges the differences in people’s temperaments and gives a nod to an awareness that not everyone handles stress the same way. A person’s lunch being taken can provoke different reactions in different people. Further, keeping an eye out for “strange people” milling outside the workplace reinforces the notion that, again, vigilance is key and the responsibility of all workers to create a safe working environment.

Sgt. Johnson echoes Vessey’s advice: “Our best practice is simple: we focus on early intervention before workplace violence starts through a reporting system available for all employees. Employees may report issues or concerns to their supervisor, the Parkland Police Department, human resources or through the system’s Integrity Line, which accepts reports submitted anonymously. Reporting is the key to early intervention to help avoid escalation of issues to the stage of physical violence.”

References

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