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Employee Assistance Program could help avoid violence in workplace

PROTECTING YOUR BEST INVESTMENT
BY REESE MATYE



Consider the following scenario:

You run a small construction company and during the day, mostly your female employees manage your main office. Your principal office manager, and lead decision-maker at the office, starts receiving harassing phone calls from an ex-spouse. The harassment escalates to a direct encounter at your office. Do you know how you would respond? Do you have a plan?

According to Occupational Safety & Health Administration, more than 2 million America workers are victims of workplace violence each year. In certain industries, violence is the leading cause of workplace fatalities and for the growing number of women in the workforce (especially for industries such as construction), the workplace is now the most dangerous place to be, statistically.

Most people wouldn't immediately think of an Employee Assistance Program as a tool for dealing with workplace violence, but it is. While there are great strides being made in workplace safety to address and reduce violence on the job, it is also a growing concern for EAP providers. Facing a specific workplace violence challenge, or establishing an overall strategy for work-related

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emergency situations of any kind, is becoming an important concern for leading EAP consultants. Violent situations, or even the threat of violence, can cause low worker morale, loss of productivity, feelings of fear and vulnerability, and can quickly spill over to exacerbate other personnel challenges.

An EAP consultant can work with you to develop a complete strategy. One of the first steps to take will be to lower the threshold for potential violence. Does your company have adequate security in your offices? Do you have a defined evacuation plan? Is your workspace large enough to require remote video monitors, or even a remote radio-intercom system? Do you have a well-defined hierarchy of management responsibilities in cases of emergency situations?

In the case of our sample female

employee, does she have management's support in establishing a record of the harassment? Is she tracking and recording the threatening incidents? Are her fellow-employees informed of what their roles are, and where they can and can't intervene?

Today, both federal and state OSHAs have a growing number of tools and products you can use to become more aware of the issues involving workplace violence, but you still need a good management plan to be sure these tools are properly used.

Many outbreaks of violence at the workplace are the direct result of escalating, highly charged emotional situations. On rare occasions, the violence can come in the form of specifically directed emotion such as hate crime or venting anger from one or more former employees. A good EAP program takes all of this into consideration.

Employers have a growing number of responsibilities to ensure that their workplaces are safe. As violence in the workplace has grown, so too have the responsibilities on all businesses. If your group health insurance or workers' compensation insurer doesn't offer you EAP support, consider contacting such a service directly. It could be a call that saves your workplace unwanted trauma or even, in extreme cases, the life of one of your most valued employees.

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