



Averting Workplace Violence Demands Planning and Communication

BY GREG FALAHEE | SEPTEMBER 2019

Today's facility managers have many tasks to complete on a daily basis, navigating the ins and outs of the business and ensuring that all processes, systems and personnel are in place to secure their physical assets and create a positive environment for tenants and visitors. As liaisons between the asset manager or owner and tenants – as well as providers of a variety of services – facility managers don't govern the actions of their tenants but act as educators to ensure their tenants are safe and secure.

Workplace violence is a challenging and unpredictable security issue and a pressing trend for facility managers in establishing – if they don't already have a comprehensive plan in place – the policies and procedures on workplace-violence

avoidance. These policies should place a fundamental emphasis on 360-degree communication that ensures tenants, building managers, legal personnel, human-resources management, risk management, security staff and law enforcement are involved and working toward shared goals. According to the [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#), workplace violence falls into four categories: Criminal intent, customer/client, worker-on-worker and personal relationship, the latter of which overwhelmingly targets women. While a variety of personal or professional issues can lead to violence in the workplace, one common source is employee termination.

Facility managers cannot predict if an employee's angry spouse will show up on site or if an employee's financial challenges will lead to violent behavior, but a planned termination gives the manager time to put in place the

resources and protocols that can help prevent workplace violence. Proactive facility managers work with their tenants to ensure that when an exit interview is conducted, all necessary data is collected. If the terminated employee reacts angrily and issues threats, for example, an established plan of action will prepare the building for possible negative outcomes. Local law enforcement can be alerted, a photo of the aggrieved former employee can be circulated among building security, and the employee's building access can be deactivated. Security personnel are critical in the communication and implementation of any action plan that will limit exposure and create the "avoidance" posture.

Facility managers are the team leaders in a corporate property and have a considerable amount of responsibility for keeping tenants and visitors safe from violence. While properties may be split into different office spaces or businesses and each may have their own plan, there should be a violence-prevention plan coordinated for the building as a whole. This whole-building plan should include who is to be contacted from facilities management and the necessary steps to take if an incident should occur on the property. Savvy facility managers understand that reducing their tenants' risk and exposure for workplace violence is crucial to the reputation of their property.

The security team should be involved in the implementation of the workplace-violence-avoidance plan. Through a team approach, and the combined efforts of the facility manager and security team, a violence-avoidance plan helps ensure minor details do not fall through the cracks, and that human resources, employee relations and company policies are consistently applied. Security personnel are trained to identify warning signs and initiate emergency-response plans, and they can coordinate the dignified yet controlled removal of the potentially violent employee.

Workplace violence has an impact beyond the traditional, permanent employees. Forward-thinking facility managers also audit their service providers and engaging in screening and background checks for their contracted vendors. Outside service providers or vendors are often a common part of tenants' or facility managers' daily population; they should be screened as would any full-time employee. Additionally, these contract teams should serve as an extra set of eyes and ears in the effort to prevent workplace violence and should be made aware of response plans should an incident occur.

Each year, nearly 2 million American workers report having been a victim of violence at work, according to the Occupational Safety and Health

Administration, with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics attributing the number of annual workplace homicides at about 400. According to a study done by the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health, more than 70-percent of American workplaces do not have a formal program or policy in place to address workplace violence. The reality is that the vast majority of facility managers nationwide have yet to adopt clear workplace-violence-avoidance policies as well. The security officer at the front desk, for example, is often not notified of the pending termination of a tenant's employee or of dangerous and threatening behavior by any employee. The facility manager is responsible for coordinating efforts to make sure everyone is aware of these situations. Communication is vital.

Sophisticated facility managers spearhead tenant-education programs with training that helps everyone understand the signs of potential workplace violence. Violence-prevention awareness is critical to the communication process and should be an integral part of new-tenant orientation, with refresher classes provided annually to all employees. Concentrated training is advised for managers and first-line supervisors who are the eyes and ears of every organization. Physical drills bring the violence-avoidance plan to life and should include all service providers. A well-trained security team can help facilitate the drill and outline any missed details.

Too often, managers and supervisors are unaware of workplace-violence issues and are not prepared for the potential impact on the safety of the people who work for them or on their business. Understanding the behaviors that lead to workplace violence – and having the appropriate communication channels in place – are crucial to identifying possible workplace violence before it happens. Key behaviors to look for include:

- Increased use of alcohol and/or illegal drugs
- Unexplained increase in absenteeism, perhaps with vague physical complaints
- Noticeable decrease in attention to appearance and hygiene
- Depression and/or withdrawal
- Resistance and overreaction to changes in policies and procedures
- Repeated violations of company policies
- Increase in severe mood swings
- Noticeably unstable or emotional responses
- Explosive outbursts of anger or rage without provocation
- Increase in unsolicited comments about firearms or other dangerous weapons and violent crimes
- Talk of previous incidents of violence
- Escalation of domestic problems into the workplace, such as severe financial problems
- Paranoid behavior
- Suicidal comments

Unfortunately, workplace violence has become commonplace and prevention plans should be as well. Facility managers should work in concert with their in-house or contract security provider to conduct a thorough threat assessment to determine the risk of workplace violence incidents at their properties. The team should then develop a plan of action to eliminate or mitigate the identified risks.

It also is important to constantly work to keep workplace violence a topic of priority with all parties involved. Adopting workplace-violence-avoidance policies demands that facility managers keep current with pertinent municipal, county and state laws and practices, and that they develop relationships with local law enforcement.

Many fatal workplace-violence incidents have been followed by lawsuits brought by the aggrieved families of the victims. In the fact-finding that follows, all relevant entities are legally compelled to provide information to the parties bringing the suit. All too often, managers and supervisors at every level are called to testify to their lack of awareness of violence-prevention issues, and higher management must testify as to their organization's failure to prevent the tragedy. As a result, many companies have agreed to multi-million-dollar settlements rather than make a public admission of negligence.

Facility managers should review and update plans and ensure plans are being practiced. The ones who work in concert with tenants, service providers, security and law enforcement to proactively keep workplace violence at bay represent the finest leaders in their field and the standard for what will be expected from all facility managers.



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