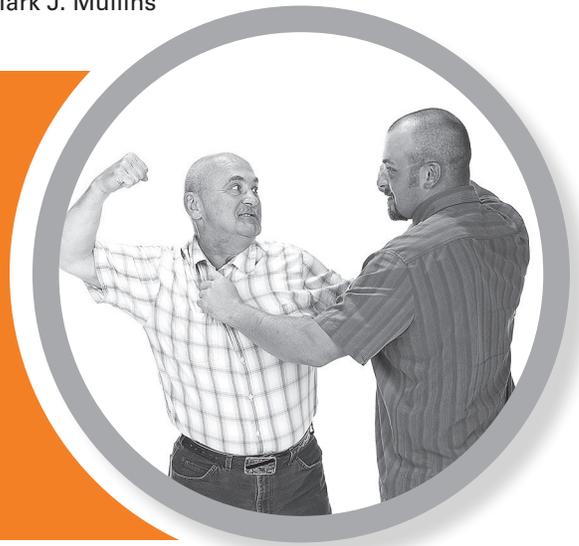


# Preventing violence in the workplace

By Mark J. Mullins

## Before you begin

Contact your human resources department to see if your organization has a written policy on violence in the workplace. If so, review the policy before your meeting to identify key points. If your facility does not have a policy on violence in the workplace, use this information to help develop one. Be sure to include a cross section of employees to develop the policy.



## Introduction

Workplace safety is a major concern to managers and employees alike. Media attention has resulted in fear and apprehension, yet violence is less common than is popularly believed. Given the millions of workers, the probability is very low that any single individual will be involved in a violent workplace incident leading to serious injury. Still, prevention is critical. Incidents involving disruptions and threats are increasing, and early intervention helps thwart more serious acts.

The session information highlights stresses and risks in the work environment. It also provides tips to enhance workplace safety and to reduce and prevent disruption and violence.

In presenting this information, there is no expectation that an incident will occur. The only assumption is that knowledge and preparation are the best ways to minimize and avoid such events.

What is disruptive, threatening or violent behavior?

All organizations should have policies in place to prohibit disruptive, threatening or violent behavior, which obstructs workplace functions and activities and endangers the health or safety of workers.

- Disruptive behavior disturbs, interferes with or prevents normal work functions or activities. Examples: yelling, using profanity, waving arms or fists, verbally abusing others and refusing reasonable requests for identification.
- Threatening behavior includes physical actions short of actual contact/injury (e.g., moving aggressively closer), general oral or written threats to people or property, ["You better watch your back" or "I'll get you"] as well as implicit threats ["You'll be sorry"].
- Violent behavior includes any physical assault, with or without weapons; behavior that a reasonable person would interpret as being potentially violent [e.g., throwing things, pounding on a desk or door or destroying property], or specific threats to inflict physical harm [e.g., a threat to harm a named individual].

### **Preventive steps to maintain a safe workplace**

Workplaces with high levels of unresolved conflict and poor communication are often prone to having disruptive incidents. Conflict at work is normal, but must be addressed promptly and effectively, not avoided or suppressed. You can reduce or prevent disruptive behavior by facilitating an environment that promotes healthy, positive means of airing and resolving problems (e.g., methods that do not disrupt the workplace or harm or frighten others).

It is also essential to improve managers' and employees' conflict-management skills. Set and enforce clear standards of conduct and provide help (e.g., mediation and counseling) to address conflicts early.

### **Indicators of problem behavior**

The following is a list of behaviors and attitudes that may be indicators of disruptive, threatening or violent behavior. If you observe a pattern of such behaviors and attitudes that cause a concern, contact your supervisor/human resources department.

### **Group action**

Stimulate group discussion to develop a list of behaviors and attitudes that could lead to disruptive, threatening or violent behavior.

### **Behavior indicators**

- Upset over recent event(s); work or personal crisis
- Recent major change in behavior, demeanor, appearance
- Recently has withdrawn from normal activities, family, friends, co-workers
- Intimidates, verbally abuses, harasses or mistreats others
- Challenges/resists authority
- Blames others for problems in life or work; suspicious, holds grudges
- Uses/abuses drugs and/or alcohol
- Unwelcome obsessive romantic attention
- Stalking
- Makes threatening references to other incidents of violence
- Makes threats to harm self, others or property
- Weapons; has or is fascinated with weapons
- Has known history of violence
- Has communicated specific proposed act(s) of disruption or violence

### **Attitude indicators**

- Is isolated or a loner
- Morally superior, self-righteous
- Feels entitled to special rights and rules do not apply to him/her
- Feels wronged, humiliated, degraded; wants revenge
- Feels without choices or options for action except through violence

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