

Workplace Violence - How to Manage the Risks

So, as an employer you have done your risk assessments, put your workplace violence and harassment policies in place, and trained all of your employees. You have a competent person for employees to contact when at risk, and someone of the same level of competence leading the investigations.

You then find that you have an employee that has a tendency to act violently, or an employee is being abused by their partner at home, or you have a manager that has been abusing an employee. Where do you go from here?

It is an unfortunate reality these days, but as health and disability management specialists, Cowan receives several calls from Human Resource professionals, employees, supervisors and managers about threats of violence in the workplace.

In any situation, it is important to identify the threat and react quickly. Below we have provided some recommendations on actions to take in a variety of situations. This is the same advice and action that we would follow when helping a client.

Key Steps

1. If there is a perceived or a questionable threat of violence or aggression in the workplace, our recommendation is to inform the employee that their behavior is unacceptable. An investigation should occur immediately.
2. When there is an actual verbal or physical threat or act of violence, we encourage employers to send the employee home (by taxi or with a family member) to remove the threat from the workplace. When appropriate, police should be called. While some employers may find it daunting to call the police on one of their own employees, this deals with the immediate threat, and ensures the safety of the rest of the employees.
3. In cases where actual violence has occurred to someone in the workplace, or domestic violence has occurred to someone in the workplace, Cowan recommends a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD). These types of situations have a profound impact on co-workers. Professionals go on-site and meet with employees as a group.

We have had a lot of success with CISD sessions in allowing employees to discuss their reactions to critical and unexpected events. It gives your employees a forum to vent, discusses normal reactions, and gives resources if ongoing reactions occur.

Returning to Work

So what happens when an employee who acted violently is off of work? A note from their doctor stating they can return may not be sufficient. The employee should be referred to an objective medical professional for assistance and follow up. The appropriate steps need to be followed to assess the employee, as the priority is the safety of all employees. The employer has a responsibility to provide a safe work environment for their employees.

Within 24 to 48 hours after receiving a report of violence, it is important to assess the needs of the employee in order to refer him/her to the appropriate medical professionals. This can range from a psychiatric referral, to a referral to their existing medical professional.

Did You Know...

Workplace violence means:

- The exercise of physical force by a person against a worker, in a workplace, that causes or could cause physical injury to the worker
- An attempt to exercise physical force against a worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker
- A statement or behaviour that it is reasonable for a worker to interpret as a threat to exercise physical force against the worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker.

Workplace harassment means:

- Engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome.

Workplace harassment may include bullying, intimidating or offensive jokes or innuendos, displaying or circulating offensive pictures or materials, or offensive or intimidating phone calls.

Source: Ontario Ministry of Labour

If you do not have a medical department on site, a third party health and wellness provider can help with this.

Give your workplace the support it needs, to not only be proactive in this area, but to have a reactive process in place.