Create a Culture of Security to Prevent Workplace Violence

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In January 2023, the United States Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (USSS NTAC) released a study entitled "Mass Attacks in Public Spaces: 2016-2020." This comprehensive study examined 173 mass attacks, in which three or more people other than the assailant were harmed. The study provided an overview of the timing, locations, targets, motives, weapons, and other factors in an effort to identify patterns for preventing future attacks. While many commonalities were identified, the reality is that acts of targeted violence impact communities of all sizes. While the mass attacks occurred at schools, houses of worship, public events, and open spaces, the most common location identified was businesses (51%). This fact begs the question "How do we protect our businesses against acts of violence?" Due to the variety of threats that exist, the answer is multifaceted. The first step is understanding how businesses are targeted.

How Businesses are Targeted

Businesses frequently are the subject of targeted violence. Therefore, understanding the ways they are targeted is an important factor in creating strategies to protect them. Violence in the workplace generally falls into four categories each with varying or overlapping mitigation strategies.

Type 1: Violence by strangers

An unfortunate reality is that many acts of violence that impact businesses are perpetrated by individuals with no connection to the organization. Of the 173 incidents studied by the USSS NTAC, 53% of the attackers had no known affiliation with the location of the attack.

Type 2: Violence by customers or clients

In some cases, violent attacks are made by unsatisfied or aggrieved customers or clients. These accounted for 9% of the incidents in the study. Violence in these cases often involves the first accessible targets in the organizations. These "gatekeepers" may be administrative assistants, reception staff, building security, or others tasked with greeting visitors.

Type 3: Violence by co-workers

Employee conflict, disciplinary actions, or terminations may also be catalysts for violence. 13% of the incidents studied involved current or former employees with actual or perceived grievances. Many incidents involve(d) employees who were recently disciplined or terminated and managers or supervisors were targeted.

Type 4: Violence by personal relations

Other cases involve indirect connections to the targeted location. Perpetrators may be unaffiliated with a business themselves but target an employee who is a family member or someone who they wish to seek revenge against. These cases often involve domestic violence or family discord.

Identifying Prevention and Mitigation Strategies

So how can businesses protect against threats that have both internal and external origins? The answer is a holistic approach. The threat landscape for any organization can be fluid and change significantly over time. Workplace violence can be the result of internal conflict or random selection. For this reason, both internal and external protection and prevention strategies must be part of a comprehensive prevention plan.

Management Commitment and Employee Involvement

The cornerstones of successful workplace violence prevention plans are management commitment and employee involvement. Management must visibly support efforts to provide a safe work environment and include employees in the planning process to address specific employee concerns. This collaboration creates a culture of security and an environment free of violence that benefits both management and employees. To ensure the understanding and commitment of the entire organization, organizations should adopt clear policies and prevention plans to codify the commitment to a violence free workplace. Once adopted, policies must be strictly enforced, and employees must be held accountable for organizational expectations related to violence in the workplace.

Worksite Analysis/Risk and Vulnerability Assessment

To effectively prevent or mitigate threats, organizations must know the threats they face. This can be accomplished through an analysis of the work environment which includes a risk and vulnerability assessment. Because of the myriad of threats that exist, the analysis should include both internal and external threat analyses. Once the risks and vulnerabilities are identified, mitigation strategies can be developed to address each vulnerability.

External threats are often mitigated by target-hardening measures such as access control, fences, bollards, and physical security measures designed to protect employees from targeted violence originating from outside of the organization.

Mitigating internal threats can be accomplished through established mechanisms for employees to report the concerning behavior of others in the workplace. Investigating all reports and establishing a threat assessment process allow organizations to promptly address employee concerns by identifying concerning behavior and implementing appropriate supports or interventions for employees who may be on a pathway to violence or experiencing personal or professional crises.

Planning, Training, and Security Awareness

Cultural change is not quick or easy. To create a culture of safety, an enduring message of security awareness must be ever present. Organizations, however, must carefully balance prioritizing security against the risk of creating fear and anxiety among employees. The best way to achieve this balance is to provide training for employees on safety related policies and responses. Incidents that require a specific physical response such as lockdowns or evacuations should be practiced periodically to ensure understanding and reduce anxiety.

Collaborative planning, comprehensive policies, and frequent training will greatly enhance organizational preparedness and foster a culture of security in any organization.

Key Takeaways for Proactive Prevention

Organizations have unique environments and resources. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to workplace violence. While organization-specific planning requires customized consideration, general strategies exist to begin formulating a successful violence prevention plan, which include:

- Collaborating with community partners to identify external threats
- Adopting clear workplace violence policies and prevention plans
- Encouraging employees to report concerning behavior and investigate all reports
- Assessing the physical environment to identify risks and vulnerabilities
- Making training in violence prevention, threat detection, threat assessment, and threat management a regular part of organization's assessment and planning
- Supporting, protecting, and providing resources when domestic violence, personal conflicts, or other risk factors impact an employee in the workplace
- Creating a culture of security through planning, training, and security awareness

Organizations have an obligation to provide a safe working environment for all employees. Implementing comprehensive workplace violence prevention strategies will illustrate organizational commitment to safety and security while protecting the organization's most valuable assets, its employees.