

WILL FINANCIAL WOES SPARK A RISE IN WORKPLACE VIOLENCE?

Even before the media began calling it an economic crisis, American workers have been feeling the stress of making ends meet. With rumors of lay-offs and cutbacks, consumers have been trying to deal with the rising cost of fuel, groceries, healthcare, and home utilities. While workers fear the loss of their jobs or homes, their employers fear these stressful conditions could lead to incidents of workplace violence.

The American workforce is feeling the pinch – people are losing their jobs, their homes and retirement savings due to the economic downturn. Most workers are seeing the costs of basic goods and services like fuel and food rise while income and job security decline. With “the perfect storm” of stressful conditions cast upon American workers, fear, anxiety, desperation and extreme behavior can begin to take over – which can often lead to tragic events. There have been numerous stories of domestic violence brought on by the adverse U.S. economic situation and it is a real possibility this violence could easily manifest itself in the workplace as well.

“There has been an overwhelming amount of pressure lately due to the current economic meltdown,” says Gail Tolbert, SPHR, an independent HR consultant in Atlanta. A September 2008 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows the number of unemployed persons has risen by 2.2 million in the last 12 months. Jobs such as manufacturing, construction, and retail have lost 760,000 positions in 2008. In the financial activities industry, 172,000 jobs have been lost since December 2006.

Even if your company remains financially sound there is a good chance your employees are being negatively affected by the economic downfall. Executives and human resource managers need to be aware of the increased pressures their employees are facing and take action to divert potential workplace dangers. While it is difficult to predict the exact toll these challenging times will take on society, it is understood that times of economic hardship coincide with increased suicide rates and greater acts of crime and violence.

What to Look For

How each individual will react to money and job woes is unpredictable. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports more than 70% of all businesses do not have established guidelines for dealing with violence in the workplace. Yet, an estimated 2 million people each year are victims of workplace violence. While violence by current or former employees accounts for just a small percent of these events, layoffs and other stresses could lead some individuals to extreme behavior, culminating in threats and acts of violence.

Many factors can contribute to potential workplace incidents and employers should be looking for signs of extreme stress and changes in behavior in their employees. Managers should also be trained to look for these signs and know how to address them. Individuals, especially males, will initially respond to stress by attempting to manage the situation themselves. Dr. Margaret Nelson Agee, an expert in grief counseling, says the emotional and physical reaction to financial

loss can be identical to that of the death of a loved one. As an employer, it is important to recognize the signs of shock, grief, depression and anger.

While there are no sure signs an employee will commit an act of violence, certain behaviors can signal a problem and include:

- An employee with marked changes in attendance such as missing work frequently, arriving late, or having trouble completing tasks.
- An individual who is belligerent or begins making threats, no matter how benign or innocent they seem to be.
- An employee who has developed hypersensitivity to criticism or suddenly complains or can't handle taking guidance from those higher up.
- Co-workers who develop extreme conflicts of personality. Arguments that seem to enter the workplace from outside work hours or problems in the workplace that workers argue about or settle outside work.
- Outbursts of anger or emotion.
- Specific troubles to people who have had a history of addictive behaviors or past records of violence.

Understand and watch for signs of domestic issues as well, as these are violence issues that are most likely to affect the workplace environment.

What to Do

As in most types of disaster preparedness, the biggest obstacle is convincing managers and human resources professionals to overcome the assumption that workplace violence, particularly threats between co-workers, won't happen in their own place of business. Preventing violence in the workplace is the key and a multi-faceted task which requires continual training, program development, expert input, and effective management practices. These proactive steps can be essential in protecting employees and the future of your business.

Eric Swenson, author of the *Managing People in the 21st Century* and a Kolbe Certified Consultant specializing in human resource management, says an employer is better off to err on the side of too much information when communicating the future of a businesses to its employees. "Employees want and need to be informed of what the situation is in their company," Swenson says. "Employees are normally just as invested in the success of their company as the business owner."

While there may be no best way to handle news of impending layoffs, knowing and acting per company policy and established guidelines is critical. Have all answers in writing regarding benefits, termination procedures, employment agreements, and unemployment insurance. If you have to lay off workers, provide job placement services and implement a system for referrals and job verifications.

Create Outreach Systems and Help Employees

On a more personal level, however, dealing with your employees in an open and sincere manner may be your best bet to avoid issues that could escalate into violence. Swenson recommends using team meetings and honesty to get through economic hardships. Take the time to review the situation with the future in mind.

By empowering your employees and giving them the responsibility of the “next step”, you can go a long way toward helping vulnerable personalities become part of the solution rather than an added problem. Another proactive method is to give employees tools they can use to manage their difficulties at home. What do people need to know to survive in times when the financial future appears bleak? What problems do they need to manage in order to come out ahead? What resources should they utilize to help with both the emotional and physical impact of reduced income and rising costs? Workshops, counselors and specialists can also help ease the stress by talking to employees about household budgeting, managing debt, investing for the future, and coping emotionally. Make initial counseling and referral services available to all employees.

This economic crisis is real and immediate for many workers. The reality of your employees’ every day lives is going to affect the workplace as much as the workplace affects them. Acknowledging problems and providing leadership is the way to prevent a crisis situation. “Show you’re in charge,” Swenson urges. “Leadership comes from the top. Your employees respond to your emotions and words. Showing panic or a dark side is the worst thing an employer can do. Be as positive as possible.”

For more information on workplace violence and workforce preparedness, contact info@preparis.com.