

BUILDING A SAFE WORKPLACE
Courtesy of: Elizabeth A. Estabrooks, MSW
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You have read the book and (hopefully) learned some useful information about the impact of interpersonal violence and how it affects millions of people, some of whom may well be employed by you. At this point you may be asking yourself “how can I do better?”

Great question!

Whether you are a Top 500 Forbes business that employs thousands of people, or a small community non-profit, ensuring a safe, understanding, and supportive space for your employees will go far in improving employee retention, efficiency, and safety. After all, when a person feels unsafe – especially one who has experienced trauma – it can lead to anxiety, retraumatization, and an interruption of care and services. How is this relevant? Because domestic and sexual violence are known to enter workplaces around the world, and because employers have been sued for not having an appropriate response in place when such an event occurs. According to Employers Against Violence¹, these are relevant facts related to domestic violence:

- The annual cost of lost productivity due to domestic violence is estimated at \$727.8 million with over 7.9 million paid workdays lost per year.
- 74% of employed battered women were harassed by their partner while at work.
- 78% of abusers use workplace resources at least once to express remorse or anger to, check up on, or threaten the victim.
- The health-related costs of rape, physical assault, stalking, and homicide by intimate partners exceed \$5.8 billion each year
- 94% of Corporate Security Directors surveyed rank domestic violence as a high security problem at their company.

¹ Employers Against Violence, <https://www.eadvma.org/facts-and-statistics.html>. Viewed 10/24/2024

- 78% of Human Resources professionals polled by Personnel Journal said that domestic violence is a workplace issue
- The United States Department of Justice estimates that 8% of rapes occur while the victim is working. That number is higher in the military and higher education. Thirty six percent of rape/sexual assault victims lost more than 10 days of work after the assault.

Domestic and sexual violence are always your business, but especially so when they enter your workplace. How do you ensure that your workplace is free from violence or be prepared if an incident occurs? Here are some recommendations.

Workplace Safety

Workplace safety is about doing your best to ensure that employees, clients, and customers are safe from all types of harm. Moving toward a safe space is an important process.

It begins with engaging your workforce. Hire a consultant who is familiar with the topic and this type of organizational planning. Their first step will be the analysis process that helps you identify and address relevant weaknesses and strengths in your organization.

This analysis should involve staff and help you identify key areas for improvement or change. Next, you will be working with the consultant to develop actionable recommendations and strategies that address any issues uncovered. If you are working with a board, this step is vital as you move toward your next step: policy and protocol development.

Bear in mind as you do your work that this process makes for easier development and implementation of your new policies and protocols. Last, do not leave out the evaluation plan. With your consultant, determine what an evaluation will look like. Obviously, in the event of an incident, you will do a debrief so you can determine what needs changed and what worked, but you do not want to wait until something happens to evaluate your plan. Perhaps you will want to do a quarterly drill? Or maybe a simple survey? Again, this is something that your consultant, who should be an expert in this work, would help you design.

Furthermore, remember that this is dynamic rather than static. Anyone who has worked in policy understands it is not unusual for policies to have unintended consequences. You can address these unintended consequences, as well as lessons learned, as they arise, by conducting regular assessments. Never be afraid of adjusting when someone involved with your organization shares that there is a problem, or something is not working

These are some of the components you should address as part of training and development:

- Actions to take if violence is perpetrated by an employee against another employee in your workplace.
- Actions to take when violence that comes into the workplace involve an employee's partner, spouse, ex, or other family member.
- Processes and guidelines to support an employee who is a victim or survivor of interpersonal violence
- Strong, legal processes, protocols, and policies that guide you if a perpetrator of interpersonal violence is your employer.
- A plan for what to do in the event violence or a threat of violence occurs. Appropriate responses, codes, safe rooms, and more can help prevent lethal outcomes.
- Policies and protocols that cover proper procedures if a client/customer, or a person(s) in your employ reports harassment, assault, or other. This includes having a plan that addresses a scenario where the person doing the harm is in a supervisory or executive position.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

- If you have an EAP, discuss with them whether their resources are trained in providing care and services to people with experiences of interpersonal and/or workplace violence.
- Whether you have an EAP or not, a great partner is your local domestic violence shelter and crisis intervention center. They are the most qualified to provide services, care, and support to victims and survivors and their children. Along that line, also include resources that focus those who are immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQIA+.

- Make sure signs that give information about available help are posted in the bathrooms as well as public areas.

Environment:

This may seem like the least important item on the list, but your environment speaks volumes to everyone coming into your space. Your consultant should be including this in your analysis.

- If you have artwork, do a walkthrough in all your spaces and look at your art. Assess if it is single-gender or single race artwork or photos only. If the answer is yes, add art that is inclusive, or simply hang landscape or other types of art.
- While you are doing this walkthrough, determine if there are images or symbols that are offensive to women, LGBTQIA+, people of color, or other marginalized groups, or images or symbols that make people feel unsafe. For instance, is someone displaying a sign or image that is sexual, sexist, racist, or anti-LGBTQ+? If you have staff displaying political signs, clothing, or caps, consider how divisive this could be. Have anything that could be contrary to a safe space removed and develop a protocol or policy about such displays.
- Again, sit in different offices and ask yourself if they are designed in a way that a person feels (or is) safe. Are offices laid out in a way that could impart an unsafe feeling for anyone occupying the office where they may feel trapped in a volatile or other situation?
- If you have a lounge-type space dedicated to clients or staff, pay attention to who is using that space, their language, and how it adds or detracts from your environment. Frequently drop by that space to learn if it is the safe, relaxing space you intended or if it feels more like a bar atmosphere. While you may mean to harbor an environment that is inclusive and friendly, it is important to regularly determine if it feels like a safe or unsafe space.

Developing a workplace safety plan takes thoughtful planning, knowledge, and effort. This document is simply a high-level overview to provide some ideas on what to consider and how to get started. As mentioned earlier, my advice is to hire a consultant who has knowledge and experience on this topic – one who is aware that workplace safety is not just about accidents but who also understands the need to address all forms of violence.

Domestic violence and sexual assault are an insidious part of our society that affect millions, and it is everyone's business. Make it yours for your business.