Workplace Violence

Carol Fredrickson, CEO of Violence Free

Carol Fredrickson is CEO of Violence Free, a workplace violence consulting firm in Phoenix, AZ. In this interview, she defines workplace violence and outlines the steps employers can take to reduce the risk of violent incidents occurring in the workplace.

MPS: Please provide a brief description of your professional background and of your role as CEO of Violence Free.

CF: My business partner and I have more than 45 years’ law enforcement experience. He was also in the Army Reserves, and his knowledge of weapons of mass destruction and counterterrorism is helpful in workplace violence prevention. In the 20 years we have been in business, we have delivered programs to corporations and associations across North America on preventing workplace violence, managing angry people and developing savvy street smarts. The stories and case studies we use in our training and consulting are based on actual worst-case scenarios with which we have dealt.

MPS: How is workplace violence defined, and why does it seem like workplace violence incidents have increased over the past 10 years or so?

CF: My definition is a little bit broader than some. Workplace violence is any form of physical, verbal or psychological threat or abuse, assault or trauma on an individual that results in physical or psychological damage. Most people think of it as the person with the gun who walks into a workplace and starts shooting. The things we see on a routine basis are harassment, hate crimes, spying, stalking, sexual assault, bullying, arson and threats of any kind. Workplace violence also includes hurtful gossip and domestic violence. I believe workplace violence has increased, although statistics say otherwise, but these statistics are always one year to 18 months behind.

MPS: What factors might cause someone to act out violently in the workplace? Do workplace violence incidents share a common thread?

CF: Factors include a harsh economic climate, influence of alcohol and drugs, mental illness, increase in the availability of guns, glamorization of violence and feelings of dehumanization in the workplace. Many companies treat employees like robots instead of addressing feelings, problems and issues.

Incidents can share a revenge thread. Ongoing mistreatment and bullying in the workplace can cause a need for revenge. Another common thread is mental illness. More serious shootings are often traced back to mental illness. Domestic violence is the third common thread.

MPS: What are the greatest misconceptions employers have about workplace violence, and how can they be addressed?

CF: One of the greatest misconceptions is that the company lacks a policy or has a misunderstood policy. Some companies have a workplace violence policy buried under their sexual harassment policy, while others have a workplace violence policy so complex that you would need to hire a lawyer to interpret it. Workplace violence policies should be written in 8th-grade language and should not be lengthy.

The other misconception is assuming that you will not have any problems because your company has a workplace violence policy. These employers often have no reporting system, and their employees do not understand when or how they should report something. Is a person just having a bad day or is it considered workplace violence? Many employers are in denial. For example, we will hear, “It cannot happen to us because we are a small company in the Midwest. We will take the risk.”

Employers need to work with a consultant or workplace violence expert who can guide them in the right direction and bring them up to date. Many employers have old policies, and so many new things have happened that can affect how policy is written. When we work with clients, one of the first questions I ask is do you have a policy and can I look at it? I do not want to tell a company to do one thing when its policy says something else. To help lower their risk of workplace violence, employers should have a combination of an updated policy and reporting system with mandatory training for all employees.

MPS: What red flags should employers and employees look for in the workplace? Is it possible to prevent workplace violence incidents without creating an environment in which workers are suspicious or fearful of one another?
Red flags to look for include suspected or known mental illness, fascination with other violent incidents, weapons or artwork depicting violence, membership in hate groups, unusual interest in military or law enforcement, bizarre behavior or signs of paranoia.

A threat assessment team should look at red flags and perform an initial assessment. Do not assume you have the experience to handle a high-risk threat. Call in a professional, a security consultant, a workplace violence expert or, in some cases, a forensic psychologist.

Train your employees to understand what workplace violence is and explain that everyone plays a part in keeping the workplace safe. It all depends on how you present and deliver the information. People need to know what to look for and that they are responsible.

Red flags to look for include suspected or known mental illness, fascination with other violent incidents, weapons or artwork depicting violence, membership in hate groups, unusual interest in military or law enforcement, bizarre behavior or signs of paranoia.

MPS: On average, how much do workplace violence incidents cost U.S. businesses each year?

**CF:** Ten years ago, the National Safe Workplace Institute said workplace violence costs U.S. businesses $4.2 billion annually. We believe this amount is much higher—so many other costs are involved and no one has the exact number. Costs can include lost work productivity, use of sick time, training of replacement employees, overtime expenses, legal and medical expenses, court expenses, employee counseling sessions, increased insurance premiums, increased workers' compensation premiums and loss of business because of a tarnished image in the community.

The average jury award is more than half a million dollars, but it can range up to $3 million. It is difficult to obtain statistics because workers' compensation claims, legal claims and local lawsuits also need to be taken into account.

MPS: How can safety professionals assist their organizations in developing workplace violence policies?

**CF:** We see things differently. Usually, a human resources person writes the workplace violence policy. S/he may work with a risk manager to write the policy, but a workplace violence expert will look for vulnerabilities to help reduce risk.

Once your policy is written, have another person, such as safety professional, review it to see what you might have missed. Vulnerabilities and gaps can get you into trouble. If a workplace violence incident occurs, the company will write a check, but the difference is how many zeros will be at the end of the number. You must take reasonable steps to ensure your employees' safety.

MPS: What is progressive discipline, and how can it be used in the workplace?

**CF:** Progress discipline is the process of using increasingly severe steps or measures when an employee fails to correct a problem or has been told that s/he needs to change his or her behavior and it does not change.

People in the workplace can become angry if they feel they have been treated unfairly. If they see one employee who is treated differently
and is not disciplined, that ruffles feathers. Progressive discipline sets boundaries within the workplace and sets the expectation that certain behavior will not be tolerated. It also gives employees the opportunity to correct their behavior. If the last step in progressive discipline is termination, employees will usually hire a lawyer to file a wrongful termination. If a paper trail shows that the employer gave the employee opportunities to change his or her behavior or performance, the lawsuit is usually dropped.

MPS: What recommendations do you have for employees who feel they are being harassed or bullied at work? How can they ensure that their concerns are taken seriously?

CF: Document, document, document. Employees should document to whom they reported it, the date and time of the incident and the method used to bully or harass. Employees should get clear expectations from their supervisor or whomever they reported it to that the incident will be investigated. They should also know when they can expect a follow-up or response. If the supervisor does not follow through, then that should also be documented, and the employee should approach the supervisor one more time to get a response. If after a period of time, the supervisor still does not respond, the employee should speak to that person’s superior or to a human resources representative.

MPS: What advice do you have for organizations that wish to implement a workplace violence policy or prevention program but do not know where to start?

CF: Contact a consultant or people in other industries, such as human resources or risk management, and make use of online resources, such as LinkedIn communities on workplace violence and sample workplace violence policy templates. However, it is worth spending a little money to hire a workplace violence expert to ensure that you are headed in the right direction. This is about reducing risk and liability.

A workplace violence expert should do consulting and not just speak on the topic. Check the person’s credentials and client testimonials and also ask to see his or her client list. If s/he does not want to show this list to you or to refer you to someone you can speak with personally, steer clear.

Carol Fredrickson is CEO of Violence Free in Phoenix, AZ. She may be contacted at (623) 242-8797 or carol@violence-free.com.

Fire Protection Practice Specialty

The Fire Protection Practice Specialty (FPPS) was founded in 2004. FPPS was formed to concentrate on fire protection, prevention, preparedness and mitigation issues. FPPS diligently addresses hot topics related to fire safety and is an invaluable resource for technical content related to this field. FPPS is led by a volunteer advisory committee with extensive experience and expertise in the field of fire safety. FPPS works hard to contribute technical content to ASSE and the safety profession through regular publications, special publications and research, virtual events and conference sessions. FPPS is open to all ASSE members.

To join this popular practice specialty, visit www.asse.org/JoinGroups. Connect with FPPS at www.asse.org/ps/fire and on LinkedIn.