Workplace violence is a common threat to all work environments. This violence can include threats, stalking, bullying, intimate partner violence, physical attacks and homicide. Violence can occur in a public, retail, private or manufacturing setting—anywhere there is a concentration of people. Violence in the workplace generally does not occur without warning; preattack indicators are usually discussed thoroughly in the media. However, your organization can take steps to be better prepared if violence strikes.

The most important step includes an emergency action plan. This plan must be communicated to employees with training on what to do, how to report in, whom to report to and what to be aware of in their daily work environment. The plan needs to be specific to each work area or location with identification of evacuation areas, routes, employee needs, etc. A general plan will likely just create confusion in an emergency. It is important for employees to understand that if they see something, they should say something and let a supervisor know their concerns. Employers need to work on encouraging an environment where employees are comfortable reporting situations that seem out of place or out of the ordinary routine.

The active shooter scenario is unique in that the shooter may be an unknown person or a coworker. Either way, active shooters usually have one thing in mind: kill as many people as they can until they are stopped. They will not negotiate as they do not usually have any agenda other than killing people. Most active shooters will commit suicide when confronted by someone who can stop them. The typical active shooter scenario is over in 10 to 15 minutes and occurs at learning institutions or other areas of high occupancy.

What may surprise people is that most active shooters are not former employees, coworkers or even strangers. Historically, almost half of the active shooters in a work environment were customers and/or clients. These people usually have knowledge of the building, including areas where people tend to congregate, such as break rooms and conference rooms, and they know the planned escape routes.

With this in mind, employers need to be able to notify their employees that a situation is developing without alerting the shooter. One way to do this is to develop a code, similar to “Code Adam” used in retail stores for a missing child. This code should be communicated to all employees, be simple to use and sound like routine communications in the work environment. The code may be as simple as asking “Alice, please call Reception” or “Alice, please report to Conference Room B” when there is no employee named Alice or a Conference Room B. Higher-education employers have set up text mail systems where they can send out a mass text or e-mail to alert students and faculty to potential situations.

Once employees recognize the alert code, they need to make the decision to run, hide or fight depending on their situation:

**Run:** Leave all personal items behind and watch for danger along the evacuation route (the shooter may be familiar with the routes and may be waiting for employees at the exit point). Leave your cell phone in your pocket. Keep your hands visible at all times so law enforcement can see that you are not hiding anything.

**Hide:** Turn off your cell phone, including vibration mode, and stay quiet. If you attempt to text family or friends to tell them to alert authorities, have a code word previously set up to let them know it is a legitimate emergency and not a hoax. This will also let them know that they should not call you back.

**Fight:** Barricade yourself into a secure room if possible. Remember that everything and anything can become a weapon in this type of situation. Do not worry about the possible harm to the shooter. There is safety in numbers; attack en masse whenever possible.

Law enforcement agents responding to an active shooter call have only one thing on their mind: to stop the violence. If they see someone clutching a large bag or a cell phone (potential triggering device), they will treat that person as suspicious or as a potential threat since they have no idea what the shooter looks like or if the shooter is acting alone. One mistake in evacuations that law enforcement often addresses is people running...
toward them, seeing them as the “saviors” during violent situations. As mentioned, these law enforcement agents are focused on stopping the violence. When they see people running toward them, they must make a split-second decision to determine whether or not those people are trying to harm them, and they may guess wrong, leading to unnecessary casualties. After the shooter is stopped, law enforcement will then begin to help the victims and to provide aid.

The most important thing that employers can do to strike back at workplace violence is to take proactive measures; have a plan in place, communicate that plan and train employees on what to do if the unimaginable happens. Employers need to foster an environment where employees feel comfortable reporting unusual behavior or circumstances. This may not stop violence from intruding on your work environment; however, it will give your employees a better chance of surviving.

The Department of Homeland Security has posted information on responding to active shooter situations, including proactive measures that may be taken and online training.

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