

## **Preventing Violence and Harassment at Work**

*Presented by Bruce S. Wilkinson  
at the Regions 3 & 4 Educational Conference & Exposition  
New Orleans, October 29-30, 2004*

reported by Sarah Lund Allen

I had the pleasure of attending the Regions 3 & 4 Educational Conference in New Orleans this past fall as the representative of the Gateway Chapter – one of the perks of being the chapter's President. This conference was well attended and had terrific educational sessions. One of my favorite sessions at the conference was Preventing Violence and Harassment at Work, presented by Bruce S. Wilkinson, CSP, President and Chief Leadership Officer of Workplace Consultants, Inc. This session surprised me with new information that was powerfully presented and inspired thoughtful reflection on a number of human resource issues. The materials from this presentation are a terrific supplement to the January 19, 2005 Gateway Chapter speaker, April White's, SBC Communications, presentation on Violence in the Workplace.

Workplace Consultant's mission is to help organizational leaders translate their corporate culture into a workplace climate that inspires excellence. He brings years of police work and other experiences into his presentation as learning tools and examples to demonstrate his points. Mr. Wilkinson acknowledged the topic for this presentation was too broad. In order to get through the material, he skimmed over the sexual harassment material in a brief review of the cost of sexual harassment to employers, the two basic kinds of sexual harassment (Quid Pro Quo and hostile environment), as well as verbal, physical and nonverbal acts that constitute sexual harassment. His keys to a successful sexual harassment prevention program are as follows:

1. Get expert advice from seminars, consultants, attorneys, subscription services.
2. Implement a pre-employment background check/screening program.
3. Implement a pro-active Sexual Harassment (or harassment) policy providing proof of its distribution.
4. Hold employee orientation/education meetings.
5. Train supervisors and managers in how to resolve employee conflicts and investigate and document allegations of misconduct.
6. Create a workplace atmosphere of fairness consistency and open communications.
7. Investigate all claims of harassment and keep the claimant informed of the results.
8. Make an effort to change or alter the working environment of one or both of the employees when a claim cannot be proven (document all these actions).
9. Document in a separate confidential file.
10. Take appropriate and consistent disciplinary action whenever an employee is found to be in violation of the posted policy.
11. Offer to provide the claimant with access to an Employee Assistance Program or other appropriate outside resources.
12. Remember that most incidents of sexual harassment (or harassment) occur in the workplace because they are ignored, condoned or committed by employees who are deemed to be too important to discipline.

### **Preventing Violence, Threats and Attacks at Work**

This section of the presentation was the heart of the speaker's message. It is important to note that many of the steps previously listed as keys to prevention of harassment are closely related to prevention violence, threats and attacks at work. Mr. Wilkinson's definition of workplace violence is: Any incident in which an employer, employee or visitor is threatened, intimidated, verbally or physically attacked, harassed, injured or killed.

Mr. Wilkinson began this section by highlighting the statistics regarding violence at work and acknowledging that workplace violence is often difficult to predict. However, violent employees give warning signs and threats and that need to be taken seriously. The speaker discussed the four reasons personnel do not report the warning signs and threats:

- Personnel do not want to get involved
- Personnel thought the employee wouldn't do anything despite threats or warning signs
- Personnel thought the employee is always doing this type of thing
- The employer did not ask them to report it!

For all of the reasons listed above as well as other reasons, it is necessary for an employer to have a Workplace Violence policy. Mr. Wilkinson suggested utilizing OSHA's website as a resource for creating a policy [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov). In addition to including a statement that personnel are required to report threats of violence, you should also include a working definition for workplace violence that is broad enough to include harassment, intimidation, bullying, stalking, assault, use of weapons, property damage, grabbing, suicide, murder, kidnapping, robbery, and threats.

The signs and symptoms for predicting violent behavior should be familiar to most experienced managers and leaders. Employees with sudden changes in their behavior or demeanor should be closely monitored as a potential volatile situation. Additionally, other "red flags" that the FBI would recommend a supervisor monitor are: threats, intimidation, an employee who is a loner, unaccepting of criticism, holding a grudge, recent personal problems, testing limits of behavior, and stress in the workplace.

Leaders in organizations do have control over certain points of disenchantment in the workplace: confusion, lack of trust, not listening, meaningless work, bosses taking all the credit, personnel not knowing their mission or how their role fits, and indiscriminant work rules. It occurs to me that the same factors that create morale issues and employee dissatisfaction may add fuel to potential volatile situations.

### **Summary Leadership Considerations – Redefining Leadership in Time of Change and Concern**

Workplace Consultants, Inc. has a copyright for the materials for this session. Consequently, I will share with you the general ideas of the presentation's leadership considerations with regards to preventing violence.

Certainly, not all violence can be prevented in the workplace but an organization's leaders can be prepared and take preventive measures to minimize the number of potential volatile situations and diffuse some situations by proactively leading the organization. For example:

Know your mission and vision and hold it up for example along with core values while explaining the mission and vision to your personnel.

Integrate your organizational goals into operations by establishing a fair and effective workplace culture. Have a culture where employees can identify with their effectiveness in a respectful and appreciative environment where they are a part of decision making processes; encourage employee ownership of issues.

- Discipline with dignity.
- Approach change in the organization as a positive challenge leading to success for everyone.
- Listen to understand, note that there are plenty of obstacles to listening that need to be overcome.
- Consistently hold everyone, and especially the "leaders" accountable.
- Lead with "one voice" in the presence of employees, clients, visitors.

It is clear by managing effectively and leading appropriately we can have a positive impact on minimizing the threat of violence in our workplace. One important word of caution throughout the presentation was to not "diagnose" a person's problems, but instead refer the employee to your Employee Assistance Program, document the suggestion and document the performance issues to appropriately address the performance issues.