

Workplace Violence in a Down Economy

Tough economic times can be a serious stressor for retail and wholesale workers, especially if sales are slow or you've instituted layoffs, benefit reductions or pay freezes. The threat of workplace violence always exists, but when the economy suffers, ordinarily composed employees may suddenly become aggressive in expressing their mounting frustrations and worries.

Pinpointing employees who will turn to violence is difficult because they may have no history or previous signs of violence and could be generally compliant, veteran workers. Outlining the origins of workplace violence during tough economic times can help you develop a plan to prevent it.

Fuels of Violence

One of the biggest fears that fuels workplace violence is the potential for job loss, or a reduction in hours or wages. Employees who fear a layoff feel less comfortable coming to work; normally even-keeled employees who find themselves unable to make ends meet could suddenly take their frustrations out on others in the workplace.

Also, because of the lack of job availability, employees are more likely to butt heads with co-workers and compete viciously for a new position or promotion. The increased pressure to succeed and provide for a family in the midst of economic crisis may drive even the most unsuspected employee to hostile behavior, threatening behavior or bullying. Desperation can be an extremely powerful force behind many cases of workplace violence.

Laying Off Veterans

In some cases, economic conditions may force you to lay off employees who have dedicated years of service to your company. Those who feel they have been loyal to the company for years may consider the layoff unfair, and these ex-employees may seek violent retaliation. Similarly, disputes over economically-driven benefit changes may be a trigger for violent actions.

Normally even-keeled employees who find themselves unable to make ends meet and insecure in their jobs could suddenly take their frustrations out on others in the workplace.

Preventing Violence Driven by Economic Struggle

One of the most important things you can do as an employer is assure your employees that their work is valuable. Look for extreme stress, anxiety and other behavior changes in employees to identify those that might be at risk.

Another side effect of economic downturn and layoffs is that remaining employees tend to pick up slack and commit extra hours to complete increased task loads. This occurs sometimes by necessity, but often it is a choice employees feel they need to make to avoid being the next one laid off. Avoid placing this kind of pressure on remaining staff through effective management—

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carefully monitor work levels, and never allow employees to take on more than they can handle.

Be Transparent

Communication is important in preventing workplace violence, especially when the economic climate is an underlying factor. Speak with employees who feel overworked and, if possible, take steps to alleviate some of their stress. Explicitly explain to longtime employees the reason for any layoffs and make an effort to part on the most positive terms possible. Be as transparent as possible by informing employees about company changes, and most importantly, encourage open communication between management and workers to ensure a healthy, safe environment.