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Domestic Violence Explodes in Workplace Settings

Danger zone expands

The 1994 criminal trial of O.J. Simpson for the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman still generates discussion worldwide. But one point on which there is general agreement is that the trial itself increased public awareness of the scope and seriousness of domestic violence in our country and helped mobilize Americans to respond to the problem.

In seeking to curb domestic abuse, Americans are motivated in part by the plight of the victims. The publicity surrounding the Simpson case and countless others like it makes clear that the victims of violent relationships need help to protect themselves and to reclaim their lives. But Americans are motivated as well by growing evidence that the effects of domestic violence spill over into society at large. The workplace in particular is affected by the problem in far-reaching ways.

The U.S. Department of Justice reports that today, nearly one million individuals annually become victims of violent crime while working. Many of the victimizations can be traced to abusive personal relationships beyond the workplace. This issue of The Lipman Report addresses the impact of domestic violence on the business sector and offers strategies to combat it.

What is domestic violence?

Knowing what constitutes domestic violence today can help managers head it off at work. Here are the facts.

Domestic violence is neither confined to the home nor limited to conflict between husband and wife. Widely expanded in recent years, the term refers to violence between or among anyone of any gender related by blood or marriage, or anyone with whom someone is or ever has been intimate. Although women comprise an estimated 95 percent of its victims, they are not its only casualties. Injuries to third parties, including children, and perpetrator suicide are on the increase. So is damage to property.

The nature of the violence often consists of actual physical battery, but it consists as well of any behavior undertaken for the purpose of establishing power and control over the victim. Such behavior includes verbal abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse, and harassment of all kinds.

Domestic violence is classless. As demonstrated by the Simpson trial, abuse cuts across all social and economic barriers. It is said to exist in one out of four American households. Says a physician involved in his community's response to the problem, "The spectrum of abuse is a lot broader than we think, and it is not about intelligence."

Above all, managers should know that domestic violence is not a private, family matter. It is not, as its perpetrators allege, a trivial squabble or a well-meaning exercise in "tough love" for the sake of the victim. Domestic violence is a serious crime against society. And as such, it is very much a public matter.

Why is corporate America concerned?

Corporate America is concerned because domestic feuds do not vanish at the office door. As more women enter the labor force, more of the violence to which they are subjected at home follows them to work. Even when the violence is confined to the home, the effects of the violence spill over into the workplace. One study reported that 96 percent of domestic violence victims who were employed experienced abuse-related problems at work. The problems ranged from diminished concentration to actual impairment of ability to perform the job.

Domestic violence reduces and disrupts the nation's labor force. Each year, more than one-half million women are victimized in workplace settings. Many are fatally injured. Indeed, homicide is the leading cause of death for women on the job. From 1992 to 1994, the alleged assailants in 17 percent of the homicide cases were current or former boyfriends or husbands. The percentages increase to 20 percent for Hispanic women and to 28 percent for African-American women. The American Medical Association reports that domestic abuse permanently removes more women from the workforce than does child rearing.

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Domestic violence weighs heavily on the corporate balance sheet. Experts estimate that the workplace effects of family violence cost American companies as much as \$5 billion annually in lost productivity, increased health care costs, higher absenteeism and turnover, expanded safety and security measures, and increased insurance coverage. A West Coast agency devoted to the prevention of family violence reports that *each month* at least 56 percent of women in abusive relationships are late for work five times, 28 percent have to leave early at least five times and 54 percent are absent at least three full days. In 1996, public and private employers in New York City reportedly incurred costs of \$250 million in high absenteeism and staff turnover resulting from domestic violence. In the same year, the city of New York itself reportedly incurred costs reaching \$500 million for services associated with cases of domestic violence.

Corporate liability is a major, related concern. Employers who fail to establish sound procedures to curb or prevent violence may pay dearly for harm that befalls employees in the workplace. In 1990 in California, a jury awarded \$5 million to the next of kin of a female employee killed at work by her jealous husband. The husband also killed one of the woman's co-workers and injured nine others. The woman's family claimed that the employer had been notified of the man's threats and should have tightened security.

A soon-to-be-released study of legal issues surrounding domestic violence in the workplace emphasizes the importance of prompt remedial action: "Although employers sometimes fear that they will expose themselves to added liability by volunteering to take action [at their facilities] to prevent or remedy domestic violence, it is much more likely," say attorneys involved in the study, "that an employer would instead face liability due to inaction."

Two factors point to a worsening of the threat of domestic violence in the workplace. One factor relates to psychology. According to a recognized expert on workplace behavior, a man tends to consider his job or profession as his critical anchor against life's stresses just as a woman tends to consider her intimate relationships as the sources of stability in her life. As American business continues to downsize, consolidate, and streamline, the expert predicts that the resulting loss of jobs will threaten this male anchor, thereby removing one strong barrier to aggressiveness. At the same time, women's advances in the workplace may spark in some men a kind of competitive anger that is likely to lead to even more male aggression against females. The other factor relates to logistics. A woman at work is particularly vulnerable because an abuser always knows where she can be found. She can change her telephone number or her door locks. She even may be able to change her address. But for the most part she cannot change her job.

Becoming part of the solution

Until recently, domestic violence was a topic relegated to the back burner of workplace priorities. But as more and more employers recognize that helping the victims of domestic violence helps their bottom lines, more are taking responsibility for addressing the problem. Because the vast majority of Americans spend a significant portion of their time at work, the workplace is one of the most effective arenas in which to combat this newly recognized American pandemic. Management initiatives which balance the need for workplace safety with the need to respect employee privacy are underway in both the public and private sectors.

On the federal level, in 1995, government departments were directed to institute domestic violence awareness campaigns, and in 1997, information on how to recognize the warning signs of domestic violence were included in new workplace safety requirements for government employees. On the

state level, Florida and Washington have developed model domestic violence policies. Tennessee has addressed the frustrating problem of victims who refuse to testify or press charges against their abusers by passing the Domestic Violence Act of 1995. The act shifts responsibility for bringing the abuser to justice from the victim to the arresting officer and prosecutor. The mayor of a large California city is among the growing number of public officials who are focusing on the problem and urging their constituents to respond.

In the private sector, dozens of major private businesses have held programs and distributed materials to alert employees to the prevalence and severity of domestic violence. Many focus their efforts on Work to End Domestic Violence Day, scheduled each year in October. The day is designed to educate all workers about the dynamics of domestic violence and resources available to combat it. Programs are as varied as the businesses that sponsor them and include anti-violence media spots and fund-raising projects to benefit local agencies. For more information, companies can contact the Family Violence Prevention Fund at (415) 252-8900.

Security directors especially can play a critical role in focusing attention on the problem of domestic violence and in enlisting the assistance of all workers to address it proactively. The violence prevention agency cited above reports that more than 90 percent of security directors contacted in a recent survey were personally aware of several incidents in which women employees were stalked by men, and labeled domestic violence as a “high” security problem for their organizations.

While it is impossible to predict with certainty which workers will become perpetrators or victims of violence in the workplace, or when such violence will occur, employers can learn to recognize warning signs of abuse and can help safeguard their facilities by implementing measures below.

Recognizing patterns of abuse

Some clues to an abusive situation are relatively straightforward. Workers who frequently are late for work or who tend to be absent on Mondays may be victims of domestic abuse. When they appear, victimized employees may be wearing heavy makeup or sunglasses in an attempt to cover bruises or black eyes. Some may seek to deflect attention from their condition by refusing to make eye contact with co-workers, by becoming withdrawn or anti-social, or by constructing elaborate and fictitious explanations for injuries.

A worker who seems agitated or frightened after receiving phone calls, faxes, or voice mail messages could be the victim of threats and harassment. Similarly, a number of phone calls in which the caller hangs up without speaking may indicate that a stalking episode is underway.

Other clues are more subtle. A worker who seems particularly concerned about leaving work on time may have to account for every extra minute away or suffer dire consequences.

Another subtle clue relates to gifts. Because an abuser often sends gifts to apologize for an attack, flowers or candy delivered to an employee for no apparent occasion could be warning signs of abuse.

Implementing an effective response

In attacking the problem, a company must strive simultaneously for both protection and education of its personnel. Some attorneys recommend taking actions such as the following to achieve this goal.

The most important step in breaking the cycle of domestic violence is for the victim to tell someone about the abuse. Managers can help protect their personnel and their workplaces by encouraging employees to reach out for help, especially if signs of abuse are evident. In providing assistance, management must be guided by considerations of employee privacy as well as by issues of

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workplace safety. Intervention should be work-related and should be rendered only at the written request of the victimized employee.

Distribute educational materials to all employees. Include victim safety information in company publications, in paycheck envelopes, on bulletin boards, in break rooms and in restrooms. Display prominently the National Domestic Violence Hotline telephone number—(800) 799-7233. The hotline is staffed around the clock by trained advocates who provide referrals to shelters, counselors and programs in the caller's local area. The advocates provide crisis intervention but do not provide counseling. In addition, the hotline offers a video about the impact of domestic violence in the workplace and a manual detailing basic steps victims can take to protect themselves at work and in transit.

Ensure that employee assistance or human resources personnel can provide accurate, up-to-date referrals and practical information. Offer names and phone numbers of shelters, other victim services, and of professional counselors for skilled intervention away from the workplace. To this end, corporate staff should maintain a working relationship with specific law enforcement and social services contacts.

Suggest that the threatened employee keep in touch with neighbors and obtain an unlisted telephone number or a second line. Suggest that the employee provide a photograph of the alleged perpetrator to security officers, parking attendants, receptionists, secretaries, and other appropriate personnel. Note the need to have on file the name of an emergency contact person in case the employee cannot be reached.

Ensure that corporate benefits policies enable a victim to take the time needed to move possessions from one house to another or to go to court to obtain a restraining order. Be aware that a change of address or the issuance of a restraining

order may incite rather than restraining an abuser, and ensure that both employee and employer take appropriate precautions. If a restraining order is issued, ask that a copy be kept at work.

Establish a program to teach supervisors how to identify and help victims. Ensure that supervisors understand and comply with federal, state and local laws governing workplace safety.

Take seriously reports of the threat of violence and take all reasonable measures consistent with company policy to protect employees. In extreme cases, and especially if an employee requests a transfer, consider relocating an employee's workstation or altering a work schedule to evade or confuse a stalker. If an employee is attacked after her request for a transfer has been refused, a company could face ruinous liability litigation.

"If the leading newspapers, " said Senator Joseph, Biden (D-Del.) "were to announce tomorrow a new disease that, over the past year, had afflicted from three to four million citizens, few would fail to appreciate the seriousness of the illness. Yet, when it comes to the three to four million women who are victimized by violence each year, the alarms ring softly."

A company's employees are its greatest assets. Domestic violence threatens this vital resource. Now that we know of its nationwide scope and its devastating impact, we must ring the bells loudly. With business, providing visible leadership, we must all speak out and get involved. Such a response is more than altruism, it is self-interest. Such a response can safeguard more than individual lives; it can safeguard individual companies; and it can safeguard society at large.



The Lipman Report Editors