

FlashPoint Violence on Campus Video Script

Background music plays during intro scenes.....

Flashpoint - the point when a fire ignites. It happens when you have the right combination of fuel, heat and oxygen. It's a point of no return.

I'm Randy Spivey and I'm Jim Sporeleader both from the Center for Personal Protection and Safety.

From a match to a flamethrower, we all know the things that can generate a flashpoint and trigger a fire, but oxygen is invisible. You can't see it and you can't smell it. With too much oxygen in a room though, even a small spark can create a devastating flashpoint.

Here at the Center for Personal Protection and Safety, we help individuals and organizations create a safe environment wherever they are. Whether it's in the workplace or when they travel abroad.

This program is focused on an issue that affects all of us, how to prevent violence in the workplace. In it, we'll provide you with an understanding of what workplace violence is, common myths surrounding the issue of workplace violence, warning signs of potential violence before it occurs and we'll give you options on how to respond.

So what is workplace violence? A common myth is that workplace violence only involves murder or physical assault, but in truth it covers a whole range of disruptive behaviors that include threats, harassment, intimidation, bullying, stalking and domestic violence that enters the workplace and many others. Workplace violence is any action that threatens the safety of an employee, impacts an employee's physical and/or psychological well-being or causes damage to an organization's property.

When catastrophic violence explodes on the job it often turns out that the workplace was like a room full of flammable gas that no one realized was there. One of the biggest myths of workplace violence is that events happen out of the blue or that someone just snapped. What we know, is that violence is evolutionary. It builds up over time and is often preceded by behaviors which might suggest the propensity for future violence.

Let's dispel what is in some ways the most dangerous myth about workplace violence. The myth that workplace violence is rare, that it can't happen here or that it couldn't happen to you. Actually, there are more than two million reported acts of violence per year in America's workplaces at a staggering cost of thirty six billion dollars per year and these are the numbers of incidents that we know about. In fact, many incidents that don't involve physical violence go unreported, this includes disruptive behaviors at the lower end of what's known as the workplace violence spectrum. So the true cost is much higher and it's not only measured in dollars and lost productivity but there's a significant human cost as well. That's why making the effort to prevent workplace violence is such a win-win. You may

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never know if you actually succeed in preventing a violent incident but if you can help create a more positive and respectful work environment it's hardly a waste of time.

One of the other myths that we see in workplace violence is that these events were resolved themselves that if they're not intervened with are not interfered with it'll just disappear or go away over time. We know for a fact that's not the case. Early intervention is the key to preventing workplace violence.

Preventing a violent incident. That goal puts to rest a final and persistent myth about workplace violence. The idea that you can't do much to prevent it. The part that is truly a myth, is employees adopting the feeling that no matter what they do they can't have an impact on the problem and that's just not true. In fact, you can do something about many situations that could eventually lead to violence. You can make a difference in keeping your workplace safe.

So let's start with a formula that will help you do just that. Awareness plus action equals prevention. Of course the action has to be appropriate and effective but without awareness and the willingness to act, you truly become vulnerable. The beginning of awareness is understanding the spectrum of workplace violence. On the extreme right is death and there's nothing ambiguous about that. If shots are fired, if someone begins shooting people in a workplace, there are some things you can do to increase your chances of surviving; but the reality is you're reacting not preventing.

At the next level down the spectrum, are behaviors that clearly represent physical violence but once again if this occurs the focus is on reacting rather than preventing. As we move to the left we see a transition from physical violence to psychological and emotional violence. In this part of the spectrum, are behaviors, like intimidation, stalking, bullying and making threats both direct and implied. These behaviors don't amount to physical violence but they are destructive to the workplace.

At the far left of the spectrum are what experts call behaviors of concern. This is a gray area - the place we'll spend most of our time in this program. The main purpose of this training is to raise your awareness about these behaviors of concern. We want to give you a sharper lens to look through as you go through your workday. We want to help you recognize when a low threat behavior may be escalating toward possible violence. The path toward violence is almost always an evolutionary one with signposts along the way. We want you to be able to recognize what are sometimes subtle but important indicators that point to the possibility that violence could be brewing in your workplace. It's important to be aware that there's no profile of a workplace violence offender. The fact is that you just can't predict with certainty who might become violent, which is why recognizing and responding to behaviors of concern is so important.

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So what are behaviors of concern and what are some examples? Behaviors of concern are disruptive, aggressive, hostile or emotionally abusive behaviors that generate anxiety or create a climate of distrust and that adversely affect productivity and morale. While these behaviors may or may not escalate into more severe behavior, they are harmful in and of themselves and warrant attention and possible intervention.

Behaviors of concern run a spectrum. Any of us, at one time or another, can be overwhelmed with life and when we're feeling that way, our coping skills are diminished and that's when others will see a change in our behavior. Some examples of behaviors of concern include but are not limited to prolonged anger, holding grudges, hyper sensitivity to criticism, blaming others, collecting injustices, preoccupation with violent themes, obsessions, extreme anxiety and extreme sadness. If there's behavior that makes you uncomfortable, sometimes you can't really put your finger on why it's making you uncomfortable but you have a feeling and you should always follow that feeling. Many people call it intuition. There may be an innocent explanation for a behavior of concern you might have observed in your workplace.

"Morning Sarah."

After all, we've all had bad days when we've snapped at someone or been angry or sad or out of sorts. However, there are behaviors and patterns of behavior that suggest the potential for future violence and while behaviors of concern don't guarantee that violence will occur, the fact is when violence does occur, behaviors of concern are almost always present.

"You know I'm sick of the treatment I get around here."

Some behaviors of concern might not look like they could lead to a flash point. Take sadness for example, like anger it's one we all know. We've all been sad ourselves but we all recognize that if sadness continues over an extended period of time it probably needs more attention, if only to help someone in need. But you should also know that what begins as sadness may evolve into a serious depression and the potential for suicide. A person in this desperate emotional state may pose a threat to himself and others in the workplace. An individual who is contemplating suicide may not be just thinking about taking his own life but may also decide to take the lives of others in the workplace.

Change is another important aspect related to behaviors of concern. Sometimes there's a stereotype associated with a workplace violence offender that he or she was a loner, but some people are just quiet by nature and may enjoy solitude. If someone changes though, if someone who is usually friendly and outgoing suddenly becomes quiet and disengaged, that change is a behavior of concern. Remember you're not trying to decide when something has become dangerous, by then it may be too late. Your responsibility is to recognize and respond to behaviors that left unchecked might lead to violence. Often there's a triggering event that causes a

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violent flashpoint in someone in the workplace. It might be something significant to that individual, like a reprimand, termination or a layoff. Or it could be something that happened at home like financial troubles, a separation, divorce or a death.

“Why are you throwing me under the bus? I’ve always been there for you. I’m the one that’s put the most into this.”

Throughout my career I've noted that those that engage in violent behavior many times they're doing so as the result of a loss, whether real or perceived, in their personal or professional life. This is what triggers a crisis for an individual and when people go into that type of crisis mode, it affects the way they think, it affects the way they feel and lastly what we need to be sensitive to, it affects the way they behave. On the other hand, it might be a series of imagined slights to someone who is overreacting and blowing a situation out of proportion. Those who blame others for everything, people that have a short fuse, they're very intolerant to frustration. They are suspicious of others. We see individuals that we would term injustice collectors. They perceive every slight as something that they should take action upon. They're constantly hypersensitive to criticism. These are just some of the things that we've seen in dealing with some of these individuals that ultimately did act out violently but many of these behaviors manifest themselves much earlier in the spectrum.

There are a couple of issues you might not have thought about as related to workplace violence or that could spill over from someone's personal life into the professional life. Stalking and domestic violence. We've all read about high profile stalking situations - individuals who harass, follow and threaten celebrities or other public figures. Stalking, however, occurs most commonly in the context of a relationship involving intimate partner violence and stalking can also occur between strangers and just acquaintances. Someone who's being stalked might receive unwanted attention, contact or gifts but where does it cross the line from a misguided and inappropriate sense of friendliness to clearly recognizable stalking? If you're the one receiving the attention that's something you'll have to decide for yourself. Remember though, people who stalk others sometimes become violent toward them when their attention or actions are rejected or not returned in kind.

Since stalking and domestic violence often go hand-in-hand, what is domestic violence and what does it look like? Domestic violence is defined as a pattern of behavior in which one intimate partner uses physical violence, intimidation, threats, emotional, sexual or economic abuse to control the other partner in a relationship. It's a significant problem in today's workplace affecting nearly one out of every four women. Employees can often observe behaviors which might suggest that someone is the victim of violence at home. These behaviors include disruptive phone calls and emails at work, discomfort when communicating with others, anxiety and lack of concentration on the job, unexplained bruises or injuries, inappropriate clothing for the time of year, frequent work absences, unplanned use of leave time and disruptive visits to the workplace from a current or former intimate partner. Because domestic violence often spills over into the workplace, you should report signs of domestic violence just as you would other behaviors of concern.

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There are two critical points that can be placed on the workplace violence spectrum - a flashpoint and an action point. The flashpoint is a place on the spectrum where actual violence occurs. The action point is the place where you recognize the violence may be an outcome and you respond with some type of action. It's important to keep in mind that the exact location of a flashpoint can vary from one situation and individual to another. Here's why it's so important to set an early action point. The fact is we just don't know what's going on inside another person's head, the thoughts they're having and the emotions they're feeling. We also might not know what's going on in their personal lives or the number of stressors they may be experiencing. When a violent incident happens, the people who are called in to investigate don't have to wonder about any of those things. They know there was a flash point. They can look back from the moment it happened and usually see points along the way where intervention might have prevented the violence. They look for the earliest signs the first behaviors of concern. Hindsight's always 20/20 when you look at these cases and you do the post-mortem on a workplace violence incident, that there are opportunities to intervene at a very early stage because these behaviors were there.

When you don't know what the outcome will be, the signs can be harder to read. Sometimes it's unclear if you're watching a slow build-up to violence or just a bump in the road and it's hard to know if someone's poor coping skills or an extremely stressful situation in their lives could lead them to immediately go from a behavior of concern to a violent event. So when in doubt, take action. You may be asking yourself "well what if I'm wrong and the behavior I'm seeing won't lead to a flashpoint?" Well let's consider that for a moment. If you're mistaken, a fellow employee who may be going through a very difficult time, may get some much-needed help and appreciated assistance. There's no downside to that outcome.

"Hey, Amy?"

"Yes."

"Can we talk to you about something?"

"Sure."

"There's an issue with Darren. He's been acting a little strange lately and just made a bit of a ruckus out in the office. He seems really upset and it's not the first time it's happened."

We have to take all these behaviors or threats seriously. I think we have to move away from "I don't want to get John in trouble. I don't want to cause him to even get fired." That's a very real fear. I think we have to become more empowered to overcome that because what you do here can prevent a future violent incident.

Now that you know what behaviors of concern are and that setting an early action point is so important, let's take a closer look at what options you have in responding to behaviors of concern. Essentially you have three possibilities: note it and remember it, talk about it to the person of concern or report it to the appropriate person or office.

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Let's look at how you might respond to a common behavior of concern like an outburst of anger. It might just be someone having a really bad day and acting out in a way that's out of character. In that case, the right response might be to just note it and remember it. But if that kind of behavior continues or if it seems to be escalating, you need to recognize it might lead to a flash point in the future and take some kind of action. For many lower level behaviors of concern, you might feel comfortable just asking the person if everything's okay. The fact is, the path to violence often begins with someone experiencing a loss in his or her personal or professional life.

"I'm gonna go talk to Darren."

In situations like that, just giving someone the chance to talk and to vent about what's troubling them can be a powerful stress reliever.

"Hey Darren, are you okay?"

"I'm just a little upset."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Sure."

If you're making these observations, they're sending out duress signals. It's like a personal SOS and if you're tuned into your environment you're picking up on that and so sitting with them and giving them an opportunity to tell you about that is an incredible contribution to your work environment. If you've asked a co-worker how they're doing and their answer concerns you, you should take the next level of action and report it to an appropriate person in your organization.

"What's going on?"

"Everybody else gets credit for my work. She's gonna pay for this. You're all gonna pay for this."

Let's take a different view of anger as a behavior of concern. In its extreme form, aggressively angry behaviors are harmful. For that reason alone, they require timely attention and effective intervention. The same is true for physical violence as well as all threats and threatening behavior. All of these behaviors must be taken seriously and must be brought to the attention of the appropriate person or department. For these behaviors, the only effective response is to report them immediately.

"I'm calling because there was something that happened in my office today that made me kind of uncomfortable."

There are many ways to report when you've decided you've reached an action point. Beyond some of the confidential systems companies have put into place, there's also your supervisor or someone from human resources, security, employee assistance or perhaps a union representative. Many companies have 24/7 tip lines where whoever calls in can maintain their anonymity. Other ways to do this would be through the use of maybe emails, text messaging or any other electronic means as a way to communicate what the issues might be and sometimes there's strength

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in numbers. Maybe you need some help, maybe you want to team up with another employee who has also maybe observed some behavior that concerns them.

Why is it that when violence erupts in a workplace investigators often learn in the aftermath that people knew the situation was dangerous but no one took action? It's because there are roadblocks to taking action. Actually the first roadblock is simply lack of awareness. People who've not been trained to recognize behaviors of concern will not have the awareness needed to respond and there are psychological barriers too. Some people worry about being seen as a busybody or a snitch. They may be concerned about something but they want to be sure a situation is really dangerous before taking action. Sometimes people hesitate to report something because they're worried about retaliation. That's why confidential reporting systems can be so valuable. And sometimes people fail to take action because they think it is someone else's responsibility. It's not. It's your responsibility; your personal safety is at stake. If a flashpoint is triggered in your workplace it will affect you in some way.

In my experience in working these types of cases and in lecturing all over the country, in dealing with these issues one of the issues that always strikes me is how many times people have observed behaviors. After the fact, once they've thought about it, after an incident occurred that had they done something early, they could have prevented this incident from happening.

People are the backbone of a workplace violence prevention program. If you sense something, say something. Work from a mindset of awareness. Be aware of the people around you so you can recognize behaviors of concern. Be prepared and committed to take action when action is required. Don't talk yourself out of doing what you need to do. The stakes are too high.

These behaviors, if left unchecked, will not go away and in many cases can escalate into more violent behavior. There's probably no greater contribution you can make to the safety of your workplace than responding in a timely and effective manner to behaviors of concern.

The point of this training is to make you mindful, not fearful or suspicious.

"Hey Amy, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure."

Awareness plus action equals Prevention. You can make a difference!