

How to prevent workplace violence

Following the shooting earlier this month at Hartford Distributors Inc, where employee [Omar Thornton killed eight coworkers](#) before turning the gun on himself, we asked several workplace violence experts about the possible connection that [workplace bullying](#) might have had to this deadly rampage, and we asked them for tips on preventing workplace violence.

Can workplace harassment and discrimination drive some victims to violence?

“Regarding the bullying and victim post, I definitely think that it’s possible someone could feel pressured or pushed into violence by a superior. But I also think personal accountability and a person’s mental health are factors as well. A bad boss is not by itself grounds for murder, obviously, but it is possible to see where a fragile person can feel despondent and seek violence as the only release.”

[Tony Deblauwe, HR4Change](#)

“[Workplace discrimination](#) and bullying have been cited in some incidents of workplace. It is impossible to tell whether these were or were not one of the triggers in these cases.”

[Stephen M. Paskoff, ELI, Inc.](#)

“Yes, definitely when the momentum of a sociopath is moved to the breaking point which is generated from the harassment definitely can trigger violence, especially in times where there is more passion than reason which takes place within the mind. Stalking and harassment are usually a build-up over time, and the longer the harassment the less reward it provides to the perpetrator and that often triggers a violent episode.”

[Alexis A. Moore, Survivors In Action](#)

Could the employer have done anything to have prevented the attack?

“Even though bullying isn’t illegal, employers should take complaints of bullying seriously, and not allow the bullies to retaliate. At the very least, bullying is a waste of workplace resources and time. It reduces morale, has been shown to cause mental stress, post traumatic stress disorder, and other psychological and physical harm.”

[Donna Ballman, Employment Attorney](#)

Should the employer have handled the shooter’s dismissal differently?

“In the case of the Connecticut shooting, the employee was caught on tape stealing. Although stealing is most often grounds for immediate termination, it can be viewed as a cry for help, especially when you factor in the reports of bullying and/or discrimination. Offering assistance to an employee in this complex situation is a humane and smart option. The employee’s future job status would be best determined after an open-minded investigation of all the facts has taken place. Snap decisions are rarely without unintended consequences. If the bullying and/or discrimination were reported and not investigated this points to a bigger issue and is definitely a

mitigating factor that could spark an employee's rage and violence."

Cay Humphryes and Gayle Gregory, "The Institute for Bully Free Living"

What measures should employers take to ensure violent workplace attacks do not occur?

"As it relates Omar Thornton's shooting rampage at Hartford Distributors, it is critically important that we understand that there is absolutely no justification for his heinous actions. It is equally important that employers, managers and organizational leaders clearly understand their obligation to provide an atmosphere with a zero-tolerance for behavior that openly or tacitly violates others based on cultural, gender, sexual orientation or any other perceived difference."

Val McLeod, VIE Enterprises

"* Have clear and consistent policies in place in the Employee Handbook and ensure the policies are understood and enforced.

* Have policies in place to protect employees against discrimination and bullying.

* Enforce policies from the top down.

* Have humane ways for progressive discipline, write ups and separation.

* Build relationships from the top down.

* Openly talk about workplace violence and how your organization can learn from these situations.

* Keep lines of communication open with employees who have been separated due to code of conduct issues.

* Listen with compassion."

Cay Humphryes and Gayle Gregory, "The Institute for Bully Free Living"

"1. Create a positive work environment that addresses risk factors and promotes protective and resiliency factors.

2. Create a working environment where open communication, open and honest feedback, team work, and self-mastery is promoted.

3. Establish and implement a workplace policy addressing violence in the workplace

4. Identify or establish a Threat Management Team (TMT)

5. Establish a Crisis Management Team"

Mallary Tytel, Ph.D., M.B.A., Healthy Workplaces, LLC