Watch out for warning signs of workplace violence: Consultant offers tips on avoiding trouble

Abstract (Summary)
Company leaders need to identify security weaknesses, commit to a good safety plan, communicate it to all their employees often and update it when needed. Here’s a partial list of warning signs to look for in colleagues: --A history of intimidation or violence at work --Domestic or legal problems --Talking about or showing off weapons or explosives --Making references to past shootings and massacres Joking about workplace violence should be dissuaded, he said, just like it is at airports.

Full Text (607 words)
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Oct. 11—Gary Hopkins’ work is much harder these days. The electrical contractor supervisor has nerve damage in one hand and partial paralysis of the other.

All thanks to an enraged ex-employee, who exacted his revenge with a barrage of bullets.

"He came back and jumped out and starting shooting," said Hopkins, recalling the June 27, 2006, shooting in Fort Lauderdale. "His whole objective to coming back was to get even. He just started shooting."

Hopkins’ case isn’t isolated. In March, a Wendy’s restaurant west of West Palm Beach was the scene of the murder of Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue Lt. Ray Vazquez and the wounding of four others by a man who just started shooting and then killed himself.

It is those types of situations John Sabourin is trying to prevent.

"If an incident took place, are you ready?" he asked a roomful of business leaders Thursday at the Safety Council of Palm Beach County in Boynton Beach. "If you heard 'pop, pop,' and people start screaming, what do you do?"

The safety and security consultant said too many employers can’t answer those questions. But there are simple, cheap and effective ways to help prevent such incidents and minimize injuries and damage if one happens. And he offered a few tips to everyone on how to improve your chances of escaping such an incident unharmed. Such tips are primarily for safety, he said, but they can also help protect companies from lawsuits.

Plan and practice

The key to a safe workplace, Sabourin said, is planning. Company leaders need to identify security weaknesses, commit to a good safety plan, communicate it to all their employees often and update it when needed. Most of all, he said, employees should run safety drills so they can see how things work in an emergency.

Open reporting

Employees need to feel comfortable reporting any suspicious or alarming behavior by co-workers. No one wants to be pinned as a rat or a snitch, but Sabourin said there have been too many tragedies followed by employees later
reporting they saw warning signs.

Here's a partial list of warning signs to look for in colleagues:

--A history of intimidation or violence at work

--Domestic or legal problems

--Talking about or showing off weapons or explosives

--Making references to past shootings and massacres

Joking about workplace violence should be dissuaded, he said, just like it is at airports.

"Reinforce it over and over, it's a cultural change," he said. "People have to learn you just can't say those things."

Put the plan in motion

In an emergency, call 911, warn employees and either evacuate or get people to rooms designated as a "safe haven" because they can be secured and have communications equipment. Try to account for all of your employees and help anyone in need until rescuers arrive.

Customers and employees do the same

Customers and employees should also always have a plan. Sabourin suggested people keep an eye out for suspicious people or situations and report anything that makes them uncomfortable. Always have an escape route and don't be afraid to run through areas normally off-limits if there is an emergency. Most of all, he said, "Don't be a hero."

"The ultimate responsibility is with us; this is my life," Sabourin said. "Use whatever opening there is to save your life."

In Hopkins' case, he survived because he ran from the man he had fired two hours before the shooting. He was hit once in each arm. The shooter, identified as Cadian Jerome Harrison, 25, killed himself seven months later in Delaware.

Brian Haas can be reached at bhaas@SunSentinel.com or 561-243-6633.

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