

From the Washington Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2017/10/27/she-knows-how-to-handle-employee-issues-before.html>

The List Extra

She knows how to handle employee issues before there's a crisis

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Oct 27, 2017, 5:00am EDT

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Valerie Juarez is a 22-year veteran of the human resources world, currently working out of the Colorado office of Inspiring HR, a service team partner of Burtonsville-based Infiniti HR. She has worked all over the country, managing HR situations in a wide variety of industries.

How have antiharassment policies changed? What we're seeing is a trend to move away from calling it just a "harassment policy" to maybe a "respectful workplace policy." It's all under the guise of the same information, but presenting it in a way that employees understand a mutual respect for each other is critical.

How do firms do that? Have processes that allow employees to easily report and feel they won't be retaliated against when they report concerns. A best practice is to not only acknowledge the receipt of a complaint of any type in writing, but then as confidentially as you can, conduct an investigation.

What about hiring or screening practices? There are personality assessments and other assessments that help establish whether or not somebody has incompetencies in certain things like communication and handling stress. But essentially, actually knowing what you're hiring for will set people up for success. And that starts with the job description.

What about the job interview? Focus on somebody's ability to be successful, not just because you get along with someone. I mean really listening to their answers, really assessing whether or not they are being set up for success. That's the first line of prevention.

How should companies handle new hires? Using that time to carefully assess whether or not they're onboarding properly. It's critical leadership is monitoring and training and guiding to ensure they can either identify red flags because they're unable to do the job from a technical aspect, and/or because they're seeing conflicts with other employees.



CHRISTOPHER KOKIAS

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Should firms have a violence prevention training program? In some larger organizations, having annual training and resources available to employees at all times made sense. For smaller organizations, it's sometimes harder to do, as far as a formal class. Maybe just refreshing employees on workplace safety in general, and making it a safe topic to discuss on a regular basis.

What's wrong with letting small incidents slide? Dealing with issues when they're small makes it much more easy to nip in the bud. If you fail to deal with issues when they're small, they will only fester. And they will create a critical crisis. It also enables the perpetrator to act out more. It's a form of permission to continue, if there's no consequences.

Why is that such a problem? It can create a culture, enable a culture. A lot of organizations that find themselves losing class-action lawsuits for harassment of various kinds, it wasn't intentional culture that was built so much as it was problems that they were complacent to.

How can employers prevent domestic violence from following someone to work? A number of states are actually now requiring employers to give employees time off to deal with matters relating to domestic violence, such as relocation or counseling services, medical care, court hearings, etc. You may want to consider expanding your leave policies to allow time off to handle these issues.

Any other steps? If there's stalking or other issues involved, employers may actually be able to get their own restraining order against the abuser to keep them off the premises for the safety of all the employees. I've had situations where we've had to call a SWAT team to come and get somebody off our premises.

To-do list

Here's what Juarez suggests anyone in a leadership position should do after a violent workplace incident:

Ensure prompt medical evaluation and treatment

If appropriate, educate victims of their legal right to prosecute perpetrators

Offer stress debriefing and post-traumatic counseling services

Offer EAP (employee assistance program) services or grief counselors with "organizational incidents" experience to help staff

Management may also need the help of counselors to help with grieving and guidance on next steps

Have guided discussions on what happened before the incident with employees, encouraging them to share ways to avoid similar situations in the future, but being sensitive not to place blame

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