Practical strategies to prevent and manage workplace violence and aggression

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Session Outline

• Key definitions

• Review the contemporary context of workplace violence

• Strategic organisational level strategies

• Implementation at operational levels

• De-escalation in heightened environments
Definition – work related violence

• Work-related violence covers a broad range of actions and behaviours that create a risk to the health and safety.

• Work-related violence can be any incident where a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work.

• Includes both physical and/or psychological violence

• Includes activities phone/text, email and online

Source: Safe Work Australia
Definition – work related violence

Examples include:

- any form of assault, such as biting, spitting, scratching, hitting, kicking, punching, pushing, shoving, tripping, grabbing or throwing objects
- any form of indecent physical contact
- intimidating behaviour that creates a fear of violence, such as stalking or threatening to do any of the above.
- entering into someone’s personal space, yelling and swearing

Source: Safe Work Australia
**Definition of bullying**

Workplace bullying is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety.

Includes physical, psychological, or even indirect behaviors—for example deliberately excluding someone from work-related activities.

*Source: Safe Work Australia*
Examples of bullying

Some examples of workplace bullying include:

- abusive or offensive language or comments
- aggressive and intimidating behaviour
- belittling or humiliating comments
- practical jokes, hazing or initiation rituals
- unjustified criticism or complaints.

Source: Safe Work Australia
Context of OV - Prevalence

• Mental stress claims as a result from exposure to occupational violence: 15%
• Mental stress claims made by workers aged 20-27 years were from exposure to workplace violence: 26%
• Mental stress claims made by workers under 20 years were from exposure to workplace violence: 31%
• Workers who report being physically assaulted or threatened by patients or clients: 22%

Context of OV - Prevalence

- One in three women who claim for a mental disorder stated it involved harassment or bullying
- One in five men who claim for a mental disorder stated it involved harassment or bullying
- Workers who report being sworn or yelled at in the workplace: 37%
- Workers who report being physically assaulted or threatened by patients or clients: 22%
- Mental disorder claims that are caused by harassment, bullying or exposure to violence: 39%

High risk industries

• Healthcare workers
• Retail and hospitality
• Field based community support work
• Public safety and welfare workers
• Public transport workers (inc ride-share, taxi)
• Security
• Education and training
• Construction
Perpetrators

Sources of work-related violence and aggression include:

- External violence and aggression from customers, clients or members of the public
- Internal violence and aggression from other co-workers, supervisors or managers
- Family and domestic violence from a family or domestic relationship when this occurs at the workplace, including if the person’s workplace is their home.
Victimology

- De-sensitised and normalisation of violence
- Age based characteristics
- Gender
- Different cultural groups
- Based on work role
- Opportunistic/targeted
- Experience/inexperienced
Specific violence hazards

• Handling cash, drugs and/or valuables
• Working alone
• Working in isolated or remote areas
• Working offsite with/without vulnerable people
Specific violence and aggressive hazards

- Working *onsite* with vulnerable people (in your workplace)
- Engaged in service methods that cause frustration, resentment or misunderstanding
- Working in unpredictable or uncontrolled environments
- Working at night or outside business hours
Aggression within the organisation

- Presence of organisational cultures that promote/condone aggression
- Existence of hazing rituals, initiations resulting in both physical and mental injuries
- Bullying and harassment
- Domestic violence
Obligations of organisations – Risk Management

• Establish and maintain a robust and practical policy framework
• Identify hazards and assess risks in the work environment, the tasks and the design of work
• Actively treat those risks
• Review and evaluate control measure/s
Research and understand your organisational OV context

- WHSMS review of aggression/violence prevention hazard management (internal and externally driven)
- Are our policies and procedures current and effective?
- How well are we managing the reporting and actioning of incidents?
- Review your trends in incident reporting, claims, staff turnover, absenteeism, exit surveys, grievances and complaints. How do you compare to industry trends?
- What are the lessons learned?
Strategies

Consult with staff as part of preventing violence and control measures for example:

• Identifying hazards in the workplace that may result in potential violence and aggression

• Reviewing policies/procedures designed to prevent violence with practical activities e.g., risk assessments, field based contact arrangements

• Review workplace design as part of crime prevention through environmental design initiatives (CPTED)
Strategies

- Reaffirm expectations of all stakeholders in relation to organisational expectations of behaviour – including clients, staff and visitors

- **Take action** where incidents are identified

- Reaffirm processes to be implemented when staff experience aggression
Strategies

• Provide training designed to build confidence and skills to manage aggression
  – Situational awareness – dynamic risk assessment and recognising changing levels of risk
  – De-escalation techniques
  – Self defence (where necessary)
  – Emotional intelligence
  – Assertive communication skills
  – Exit awareness and tactical decision making
  – Developing protective behavioural habits
  – Safe home visiting
Strategies

• Acknowledge staff who manage heightened situations constructively and encourage mentoring/role modelling
• Create and maintain effective Employee Assistance Programs
• Encourage peer support / mentor programs
• Record wellbeing initiatives and support provided to staff
Strategies – operational level

• Acknowledge the environment and the risks with teams
• Recruit the required skill set for that work context
• Ensure the implementation of the training to improve risk assessment and management skills at frontline levels
• Develop people to build confidence to engage where necessary early and effectively
• Encouraging teams to develop protective behavioural habits when attending potentially volatile and uncontrolled locations – this includes identifying suitable exit strategies
• Create a practical understanding of situational awareness in the context of aggression – what are the signs of escalating risk?
Strategies

• Develop and implement your strategies based on evidence and consultation

• Monitor your strategies

• Act where there is evidence of workplace violence

• Act on signs that work related violence may be effecting the health and safety of workers (for example, monitoring HR metrics, work performance)

• Act on the signs of negative internal cultural practices
De-escalating heightened situations

- Being self aware of our default response to conflict
- Active listening
- Language - disciplined and neutral
- Tone
- Non verbal communication
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Thank you