



L.M. Sixel: Working

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WORKING

Preparing for violence

By L.M. SIXEL

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We prepare for hurricanes. We prepare for floods. But workplace violence? Not really.

The multiple killings at Virginia Tech this week have put a new focus on the need for companies to be ready in case someone comes to work armed and dangerous.

And based on Labor Department statistics, it isn't so rare. Across the country each week, more than 10 employees are slain while at work.

Workplace killings are among the fastest-growing kinds of slayings, according to Greg Bangs, a vice president for the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies in Warren, N.J. He's product manager for a line of insurance policies that reimburse companies for ransom payments, grief counselors and compensation for losses if a business must close temporarily to deal with a tragedy.

The violence typically comes from a disgruntled employee who is angry at his boss or co-workers, said Bangs. Often, the employee is also facing severe personal problems such as marital troubles, a sickness in the family or addiction to drugs or alcohol.

Many companies have not done enough to prepare.

Terry Hemeyer, who has taught corporate crisis management for nearly a decade at the Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Management at Rice University, said that each year he assigns his students to contact a company and ask about its disaster preparations.

Students ask whether a company knows its vulnerabilities — everything from a flood to its product going bad to workplace violence — and whether it has a plan in place for how to react.

That would include a list of whom to notify, which can include the police and government regulators, and then how to put a team in place to deal with the situation.

Over the past nine years of hearing his students report on what they found, Hemeyer estimates that only one out of five companies is prepared.

"Workplace violence is not at the top of the list for most companies," he said.

They're better prepared for natural disasters, he said, probably because they're more used to them.

Limits to what can be done

But there are limits to what a company can do to control what happens on its premises.

"We live in a free society and people come in and out, which is difficult to control," said Joel Tietjens, whose company T-jens & T-jens in Spring provides consulting and seminars on occupational health and safety.

For example, Tietjens asked, how does a company keep someone from bringing in a weapon to a department store?

Customers "would almost have to go through a metal detector, and I don't think society is ready to accept that," he said.

So what should companies do to spot trouble before it happens?

Hemeyer recommends setting up a toll-free line that employees can use anonymously. This would allow workers to alert company officials if a co-worker is acting strangely or complaining about a threatening ex-spouse.

It's got to be anonymous, he said. Otherwise, employees won't report it.

It's also important for a company to have a progressive discipline policy so a job termination isn't a big surprise, Bangs said.

When performance problems are highlighted, then it's up to the employee to improve. It's important for a supervisor to set deadlines and meet periodically with the employee to discuss the progress, he said.

A grievance resolution program that allows employees and customers discuss their problems also helps to defuse anger, Bangs said. Dealing with some of these situations can be highly emotional, he said, such as when an employee discovers his health insurance won't pay for a treatment for a sick family member.

Controlling access to plants and offices is also important.

A chance for better security

When Dynegy relocated to new space at Wells Fargo Plaza recently, it took the opportunity to tighten up security for its 400 employees who work downtown as part of its emergency planning procedures.

Now, during nonbusiness hours, a key card is necessary to get onto each floor as well as in each suite of offices, said David Byford, director of corporate communications.

It's also important to put out a memo every six to 12 months reminding employees that the company has a crisis plan, Hemeyer said. Otherwise, people just forget.

This week's tragedy spurred the University of Texas at Austin to distribute step-by-step safety procedures if students, faculty and staff encounter someone who is armed or disruptive.

The lengthy procedures, which were included in a campuswide memo from UT President William Powers Jr., had been in preparation for some time, said Robin Gerrow, director of public affairs at UT.

But UT quickly finished up the project and distributed the information after the violence in Virginia, she said.

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