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## Danger Signals at Work, and How to Handle Them

By Eilene Zimmerman

- Q. How real is the threat of violence on the job, especially from co-workers? Should you be worried that your workplace isn't safe enough?
- A. Recent fatal shootings at an accounting firm in suburban Detroit, a marketing company in Philadelphia and a shopping mall in Salt Lake City serve as reminders that the workplace can be dangerous.

Kevin Zwetsch, a labor and employment lawyer in Tampa, Fla., says that in the last 18 months he has handled half a dozen workplace violence cases, more than he has in the previous five years combined.

Serious and violent threats can be a major concern in these kinds of cases, but other types of aggression are often a precursor to violence, said Mr. Zwetsch, who works for the law firm Fowler White Boggs Banker. These may be anything from staring to dirty looks to verbal threats to stalking.

A significant amount of violence occurs in retail establishments, but aggressive or violent behavior can also take place in corporate settings, especially during downsizings and layoffs. Depending on how a company handles the delicate task of termination, former employees can wind up bitter about their separation, and those who remain on the job can become depressed and anxious.

Problems of domestic violence — usually involving spouses or significant others who are thought to be cheating — can also spill over into the workplace, Mr. Zwetsch said.

Confrontations between employees have been on the rise over the last 10 years, according to Timothy A. Dimoff, founder of SACS Consulting, a human resources consulting firm in Akron, Ohio, that specializes in workplace security. He said that these included “low level” confrontations like yelling, threats and stealing; physical confrontations involving pushing, shoving, spitting or fighting; and retaliation, which can be anything from scratching the paint on a supervisor's car to returning to the workplace with a gun.

Q. What indicates that a colleague might become violent?

A. The most common red flag is unusual behavior. Examples may include an outgoing colleague who suddenly becomes withdrawn and angry, or a normally quiet, easygoing worker who is now outspoken and overexcited. Personal trauma — a financial loss or a death in the family — can also push someone to the edge, as can substance abuse.

Employees often recall these kinds of signals only after violence has occurred. “They will describe the co-worker in terms like ‘ticking time bomb,’” even though they did nothing about it, said Jerald Jellison, a professor of social psychology at the University of Southern California who specializes in interpersonal relations.

Q. Should you try to head off a problem by confronting a co-worker directly?

A. If you have been on friendly terms with the worker, you might try talking as a friend and seeing if he or she is willing to open up. Sometimes just saying, “Hey, you seem down. Is everything O.K.?” may be enough to help someone start talking, said Robert Siciliano, a personal security expert in Boston who conducts corporate seminars on predicting and preventing workplace violence.

Treat your co-worker with respect and dignity, said Scott R. Gane, vice president of AlliedBarton, a security services firm in King of Prussia, Pa., and a teacher of workplace violence-prevention seminars. But if you feel uncomfortable with the answers you receive — for instance, if weapons are mentioned or if the person becomes angry or extremely withdrawn — it is time to report your concerns to management.

Q. How should your manager or supervisor handle the report?

A. Above all, he or she should never mention your name. A manager should approach the troubled employee as an ally and schedule a meeting to discuss problems and concerns.

“It should be a comfortable conversation that allows the employee to open up; if they get defensive, then management can address it head-on,” said Carly Drum, managing director of Drum Associates, an executive recruitment and coaching firm in Manhattan. “Most problems can be resolved with a meeting like this. But if management waits until the employee starts behaving aggressively or obsessively, it’s usually too late.”

Q. Will it be seen as bad form to report negative or worrisome feelings about a co-worker to your boss?

A. You do have the right to act on reasonable belief. If you feel threatened — even with no threat made — you are within your rights to report that feeling to your

employer. You are more likely to be taken seriously, however, if you offer more than one instance as evidence.

“One thing alone may not be enough,” Mr. Siciliano said, “but if you see three or more red-flag behaviors, you should definitely bring it to the attention of a manager or human resources.”

Q. What should your employer be doing to keep you safe?

A. The company’s procedure for responding should be both written and orally communicated to employees, and should give instructions on how to report potentially violent co-workers.

The policy should include zero tolerance for threatening or violent behavior, should bar the presence of weapons and require immediate reporting of incidents, said Jennifer Berman, a lawyer and human resources consultant at CBIZ, a business consulting firm in Cleveland.

“That written policy should be communicated to everyone in the company,” she said, “and backed up with training for managers in how to handle potentially dangerous situations.”

*Workplace or career topics may be sent to [ccouch@nytimes.com](mailto:ccouch@nytimes.com).*

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