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Firms Should be on Alert for Domestic Abuse

By Stephanie Angelo

The flowers are beautiful, a bright bouquet of roses, pink lilies and purple irises. You admire them atop your colleague's or employee's desk. You think, "How lucky, someone really cares. Flowers come all the time."

You ask what the occasion is. Your co-worker mumbles something about a project deadline and walks away.

You think how your colleague's spouse or significant other rarely is mentioned. They talk on the phone often, you know. Now that you think about it, your co-worker is a little tense. You want to ask, "Is everything all right?" But you don't. After all, you don't want to pry.

That's a fictional scenario, but it's a very common sign of domestic abuse, says Bob White, a retired 26-year veteran of the Phoenix Police Department.

Not all victims are women and not all abusers are men, but 85 percent of victims are women.

And not all abuse is physical. Domestic abuse is any physical, emotional, sexual or other violence between people who are related, romantically involved or have a significant relationship.

Emotional abuse plays an enormous factor in the psychological crippling of its victims. An abuser may insult, degrade or control the victim's actions, activities, relationships, money and wardrobe to the point of inducing depression and self-loathing.

As a society, we still focus on "victim blaming," says Doreen Nicholas, training coordinator for the Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

We still assume that if the victim changes her behavior, the abuse will stop.

A couple of things should be kept in mind with this thought. What if the victim has tried to leave and was subjected to even worse consequences? Or what if the victim did not have the support of her family, friends, clergy, employer, law enforcement or the judicial system?

Only the victim knows when it's right to leave. It may be when it feels safest or when she has gathered resources, personal documents, clothing, money, or secured a place to stay or an order of protection.

If she is employed, it is imperative that she feels secure her job will not be jeopardized.

But most important, the victim needs to feel that she is not risking her safety or the safety of her children. Without all that in place, she is far more likely to have to return home to the abuser.

“Business leaders agree that domestic violence is a problem that affects their workplaces: 57 percent of senior corporate executives believe domestic violence is a major problem in society,” notes the Family Violence Prevention Fund. “One-third of them think this problem has a negative impact on their bottom lines, and 40 percent said they were personally aware of employees and other individuals affected by domestic violence.

“Sixty-six percent believe their company's financial performance would benefit from addressing the issue of domestic violence among their employees.”

So why are so few employers actively involved? And why are so many co-workers afraid to speak up?

I applaud those companies that have policies and procedures addressing domestic violence. I'm just not convinced that it's enough.

Lost productivity due to domestic violence is estimated to cost \$727.8 million a year, with more than 7.9 million paid workdays lost annually.

Forty-four percent of executives surveyed say domestic violence increases health-care costs. One employer had to pay \$850,000 in a wrongful death lawsuit for failing to respond to an employee's risk of domestic violence on the job.

Among survivors, 74 percent of employed battered women were harassed by their partners while at work and that, of course, doesn't account for what goes on at home, says a study by the Family Violence Prevention Fund.

Yet Arizona employers and managers tend to assume no domestic abuse occurs among their employees because they never hear about it. And co-workers never let them hear about it because they are afraid of the consequences.

Further pressed, many employers concede they do not have domestic abuse policies and procedures, which may provide time away from work for court appearances, a shift change to a safer time of day or a transfer to another position where the abuser cannot find the victim.

Look around your office. Chances are, employers have not provided awareness posters in restrooms, hallways and break rooms.

Nor have they provided shoe cards and brochures with information, resources and emergency shelter phone numbers for employees.

Employers also can put posters in men's restrooms, hallways and break rooms to help abusers recognize their behaviors and encourage them to participate in a prevention program.

We can learn to watch for indicators such as overuse of telephones, a change in behavior or job performance, or phrases such as: "I should teach her a lesson."

As employers, we must promote the message that abuse is not OK. As co-workers, we must speak up to executives and managers and effect a change in office protocol.

We can be part of the solution, supporting the needs of colleagues, employees and the organization all at the same time.

So if you're really wondering why your co-worker is receiving all those flowers, ask if everything's OK. You won't be prying. You'll be showing you care.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

Domestic abuse is an epidemic in our society. But an epidemic to our businesses? Studies show that:

- 1 in 7 employees and 1 in 3 women is the victim of domestic abuse.
- 74 percent of employed battered women are harassed while at work.
- Homicide was the second-leading cause of death on the job for women in 2000.

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