



Workplace intervention: Domestic violence is an issue that can't - and shouldn't - be left at home

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In my experience

Perhaps we noted a coworker's sunny demeanor darkening over time. Or was it a phone call that disrupted our meeting and clearly left her so shaken? Perhaps we noticed the recurrent absences, or the fact that she was wearing a long-sleeved jacket in the middle of the summer. It all made us uncomfortable.

Not long ago, USI was like so many other corporations: We did not know how to identify the signs of domestic violence. Or, we quietly changed the subject for lack of an adequate response. The issue didn't seem to be any of our business, even if it was affecting a colleague about whom we cared.

We were wrong. With guidance from Safe Horizon, the nation's leading provider of services to victims of violence, we educated ourselves about domestic violence. The more we learned, the more we understood the need to take action if the USI mission to "Protect. Manage. Grow." was to have any true meaning in terms of serving our own employees.

Domestic violence is an epidemic in this country. Nearly one in three women will be either sexually or physically assaulted by a husband or boyfriend in her lifetime. Look around your office or out on your production floor. Consider how many women are working for you, and do the math.

How does this affect businesses? Nearly two-thirds of domestic violence victims report that their ability to work - when they weren't absent altogether - was negatively affected by abuse related to stalking, harassment and other threats, according to a study conducted by the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence.

The National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that the costs associated with domestic violence exceed \$5 billion each year in medical expenses and productivity losses.

There are also liability issues. Even if a woman's abusive partner does not work at her company, her employer may be liable if the abuser creates a hostile environment at her workplace. Then there are the worst-case scenarios in which an abusive partner shows up at the workplace of their victim. When you think about it in these terms, it's clear that this isn't just a social issue. It's a business challenge.

Initially, we didn't "get" the enormous impact an unsafe home has on the workplace. But when we did, we decided to do something about it. USI has initiated a program that can easily be replicated by companies everywhere. There's no secret formula. It's not complex or time-consuming. In fact, the risks of not meeting domestic violence head-on are far greater - both in terms of human and financial impacts.

This reality has motivated us at USI to step up and raise awareness around domestic violence. We have developed a workplace violence policy and have opened the lines of communication among our human resources professionals regarding the issue. These actions are setting an example for companies that wish to tackle a pervasive, costly and unacceptable problem.

We know that a thoughtful and well-publicized policy guides managers, HR and security staff as to how to intervene safely and appropriately. It also communicates to everyone on staff that the company is deeply committed to supporting victims of domestic violence - a top concern for women nationwide today. This has proven to be a much better alternative than ignoring the problem and letting valued staff suffer in silence.

Employers who initiate a workplace violence policy aren't expected to be experts on this issue. Just the contrary, a good policy instructs staff to refer to domestic violence experts in their community. Far from being complicated or costly, this approach covers a lot of bases through simple measures such as training managers to recognize signs of abuse or instructing security personnel on how to keep abusers out of the workplace.

I encourage HR managers to learn more about workplace violence programs by visiting www.safehorizon.org. It has made a difference to our corporate culture on so many levels.

It's not just good practice or good will. It's good business.

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