

Six Steps for Creating a Successful Workplace Program



Introduction

Employers who implement an intimate partner violence initiative are not expected to be experts on this issue. They are encouraged to work with professionals in the field to make certain that messages and actions are correct. Although there are many ways to create a successful workplace program, the following steps are suggested starting points that were developed by the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence (CAEPV), a national nonprofit organization that was developed by the business community to address intimate partner violence through workplace education and awareness programs.

STEP ONE: Organize a multidisciplinary team to oversee the process

A multidisciplinary team allows the stakeholders in different areas of the company to plan for program implementation in a way that works best for the organization. The stakeholder group should establish a realistic action plan and timeline for implementing the program. Areas that should be represented on the team include professionals from the following areas: human resources; health and medical; legal; security; internal communications; public or media relations or consumer affairs; community outreach; employee assistance programs (EAPs); and unions. A key component to the success of a workplace program is a commitment from the uppermost levels of the organization. To give the team legitimacy, it is optimal to have the chief executive officer (CEO) or president appoint its members. In this first step, employers may want to consider surveying employees regarding issues of workplace safety, including intimate partner violence. This approach allows the multidisciplinary team to have a baseline level regarding employee awareness of all workplace safety issues.

STEP TWO: Develop a corporate policy addressing intimate partner violence

The CAEPV sample policy includes the issue of intimate partner violence in a more comprehensive policy on workplace safety. This fact does not mean that a company cannot have a separate policy on domestic violence as a workplace issue. For example, Liz Claiborne has two distinct policies; however, the inclusion of intimate partner violence within a comprehensive policy may streamline the process for many companies.

The multidisciplinary team should review existing policies and procedures to determine which policy covers the issue of intimate partner violence. Examples of such policies include family-friendly benefits, such as flexible leave time that can be used to attend court or go to counseling. The policy should allow supervisors and human resources professionals to offer paid time off, flexible hours, or new shifts to victims so that the victims can avoid or flee their batterers, seek social service assistance, or deal with legal matters. Policies should emphasize that no violence or threats of violence should take place on workplace grounds or while an employee is on duty or acting in the interests of the employer, and they should spell out potential consequences of such actions. This approach holds true whether the person making the threat is to a co-worker, vendor, or intimate partner at home. It allows companies to discipline abusive employees who are violent or who threaten violence, including those who use workplace phones, faxes, or e-mail to harass their intimate partners.

State and municipal laws vary greatly with reference to intimate partner violence and workplace

issues such as unemployment insurance and nondiscrimination laws. Companies should work directly with their legal departments to develop policies and programs. They can access up-to-date information on legislation regarding intimate partner violence and unemployment insurance, leave for victims of domestic violence, nondiscrimination laws, domestic violence policies, and workplace restraining orders at the Legal Momentum website (www.legalmomentum.org). The focus of workplace policies and plans should be safety issues for the victim and for the workplace.

Keep in mind that a workplace policy and program is only as good as the internal culture that supports it. Companies must create a workplace in which victimized employees believe that they will get help and will not be fired or discriminated against for sharing this information with a supervisor or manager. The same must be true for batterers who voluntarily seek help through workplace resources.

STEP THREE: Provide training – recognize, respond, and refer

A series of departments within each organization should be trained; first and foremost, all members of the interdisciplinary team should receive training. This training includes awareness and general knowledge of intimate partner violence and familiarity with the company's policies and protocols in handling such cases. Specific protocols include determining who brings the team together when a case comes up and how cases are reviewed. This training must take place before any internal publicity about the policy or program.

Members of the security team should be trained to perform threat assessments; help create individual workplace safety plans; and assist victims of intimate partner violence by providing escorts to and from the office, securing parking and work spaces, screening calls, and providing other services. In some states, employers can apply for orders of protection on behalf of victimized employees.

The goal is to train managers to **recognize** -- to be aware of signs of violence for potential victims and perpetrators, and local domestic violence service providers often can assist with this training at little or no cost. Because managers are not in a position to address domestic violence as a separate issue unless the employee self-discloses the problem, managers should understand how to **respond** – to appropriately address changes in behavior that is affecting performance. Finally, managers should learn to whom to **refer** – whom to call internally and externally if such a situation arises.

Training should include issues of privacy and confidentiality. In some companies, information regarding a domestic violence situation is kept separately from the regular employee file to protect the confidentiality of the victim. Company representatives should not give personal advice or counseling (unless they are part of an in-house EAP)—this type of help should be left to the experts. Explanations of items, such as protective orders and how to enforce them under local law, are helpful. Training should outline what actions are appropriate and what referrals are available. Policies and protocols are guidelines, however, and there are not always black-and-white correct answers. Many incidents have to be handled on a case-by-case basis.

Employee education should include an understanding of intimate partner violence, possible warning signs, and how to respond sensitively and confidentially when victimized employees are identified. Employees should learn how to communicate with a victim or a perpetrator. As in the case of managers, coworkers are not counselors but are facilitators for helping co-workers.

STEP FOUR: Build awareness through workplace communications

Employers can use newsletters, payroll stuffers, e-mail, intranet sites, posters, and brochures to provide ongoing information to employees. Many of these materials are available for free or for a nominal fee from local service providers and other organizations such as the CAEPV (www.caepv.org). Employers should incorporate information about awareness of domestic violence into employee orientation programs, handbooks, or intranet-based human resources information. For the best effect, educational and awareness programs on domestic violence should be intertwined with other complimentary programs. Employee wellness fairs, workplace safety programs, and family issues seminars are effective venues for sharing information about intimate partner violence.

STEP FIVE: Enlist employees' help to ensure a violence-free workplace

Employees should know that they will not be penalized for seeking help for themselves, their families, or co-workers. In conjunction with the human resources department and EAP (if applicable), employers should offer resources for victims of intimate partner violence and abusers. Employees should be educated regarding security procedures to keep themselves and others safe in the workplace, including how to avoid inadvertently giving batterers access to victims and where to go to report a potential threat. Employees should receive information on how to recognize the signs of a troublesome or abusive relationship and know where to turn for assistance for themselves or for co-workers.

A 2001 study found that perpetrators of deadly domestic violence had several common characteristics, including extreme jealousy and possessiveness, stalking, and hitting victims at least once before the death occurred. All of these abusers had been violent with a previous partner. In this study, everyone who was close to the victims and perpetrators knew that something was wrong in the relationships but did not intervene. Employers must work with victims to develop an individualized

workplace safety plan without making assistance contingent on any action by the abused person (eg, leaving the batterer). For additional employee education, employers can invite local resource groups, such as local shelters, counseling groups, or law enforcement agencies, to provide speakers for company programs. Most local groups are happy to provide speakers and information. Companies should empower employees to take a stand—as caring co-workers and as the company's ambassadors. Interested employees can form a communications task force that works within the guidelines established by the cross-functional steering committee to implement a communications plan.

STEP SIX: Broaden communications to include the community, important stakeholders in the company's industry, and other organizations

Employers can spread the word and encourage other companies to participate by communicating the message to key external stakeholders, including local and trade media, community and trade organizations, customers, suppliers, shareholders, and government officials. Networking with other employers to share case studies and best practices strengthens the employer's program and provides a forum to provide assistance to other employers that may be interested in addressing domestic violence as a workplace issue.

Employers who implement best practices are willing to network with other businesses about how to handle tough and delicate issues and challenges. Groups of such employers include the CAEPV on a national level, Safe@Work Coalition (New York), Employers Against Domestic Violence (Boston, Cape Cod, and Worcester, Massachusetts), and Indianapolis Employers

Against Domestic Violence. Whether individually or in groups, these employers are committed to reaching out to the community to engage local service providers in training their staff or EAP members. They also engage employees in volunteer activities for service providers. They partner with service agencies for events, such as medical fairs, employee-wellness fairs, and community projects, and conduct drives to collect clothes, toys, furniture, or money for a local domestic violence program or shelter.

Employers who take on the challenge of addressing intimate partner violence as a workplace issue are true leaders. They are choosing enlightened self-interest in an effort to save lives—and change society. As a survivor of intimate partner violence shared with me, “Were it not for my company’s program on intimate partner violence, not only would I probably not have a job, I would probably not be alive today.”

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