



Distribution Center MANAGEMENT

Managing people, materials and costs in the warehouse or DC

Safety and Security

To avoid violence in the DC, recognize warning signs, react right away

When a 32-year-old employee of a Wal-Mart distribution center in Dinwiddie, VA, shot and injured his manager in February, he provided another reminder of the dangers of running a facility with hundreds of employees.

The attack followed a spate of DC shootings in 2010, when workers at three separate warehouses came unhinged and killed 12 coworkers.

While federal statistics say DCs are no more dangerous than other workplaces when it comes to violent attacks by workers, the sheer size of the facility and number of employees at many warehouses makes violence an ever-present possibility.

Only a tiny percentage of workers ever act out in a violent way, but if you have hundreds or thousands of employees in one place, you've raised the odds of a violent incident, experts say.

For instance, there are 600 employees at the 1.2 million-square-foot Wal-Mart DC that was the site of the February shooting. It takes only one unstable worker to disrupt an otherwise calm workplace.

While gunfire is rare in DCs, workplace bullying is far more common and harder to spot. One study indicates that more than a third of Americans have been intimidated by a workplace bully.

Two experts on workplace violence — Mike Staver of The Staver Group in Fernandina Beach, FL, and Marty Martin of DePaul University in

Chicago — offer the following advice for managers looking to keep their warehouses safe:

- **Be alert for warning signs.** Usually, acts of violence are preceded by red flags. Perhaps the shooter threatened violence. Maybe he showed an inability to control his temper.

“In most cases, people who are going to act out have given indications,” Staver says. “Some people are just going to go off, and there’s nothing you can do about it — but that’s the exception to the rule.”

- **Report threats immediately.** Too many people believe that workers who make threats are unlikely to act on them. “In fact,” Staver says, “people who threaten violence are more likely to commit violent acts.”

Be sure to take threats seriously. Report them right away, and train your workers to report threats.

Many organizations lack a sufficient system for reporting threats, so be sure to set up a way for workers to report incidents. Martin suggests an anonymous hotline that’s open around the clock and lets workers report threats or bullying confidentially.

- **Understand how and why people get angry.** Violence doesn’t just happen, Staver says. It’s at the end of a continuum that starts with annoyance and proceeds to anger.

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Reprinted from the May 2012 issue of *Distribution Center Management*
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Anger is triggered by one of three things, he says. A person feels a situation is unfair, out of his control, and personal.

Anger can be more likely to manifest itself among unskilled workers, Martin says — not because they're innately more violent but because they can lack the verbal skills to deal with their anger. Workers with more advanced language

skills tend to verbalize their emotions first, while people who lack language skills are more likely to express their frustration physically.

- **Be alert for bullying.**

Shootings and stabbings are

rare, but more subtle forms of intimidation are surprisingly common. More attention is being paid to schoolyard bullying, and Martin says aggressive behavior doesn't go away after adolescence.

"Bullying does not disappear with age," Martin says. "People don't grow out of bullying."

In fact, older bullies can become more problematic because they've grown adept at concealing their behavior.

While it's easy to dismiss bullying as something beyond your control, consider that victims of bullying are less productive, less happy, and less likely to show up for work.

- **Adopt a workplace bullying policy.** This type of policy establishes rules for inappropriate and appropriate behavior at work. The policy should address issues such as physical abuse, verbal abuse, and electronic stalking. To make sure your rules comply with federal and state laws, have your HR department or an attorney review your policy.

- **Train workers and supervisors about bullying policies.** Once you have a bullying policy in place, be sure to communicate the rules to your workers.

"Simply slapping the policy on an intranet site or website is not sufficient," Martin says.

And don't forget your supervisors. It's easy to stay so focused on productivity goals that you forget to train your supervisors in this important area.

At least once a year, you should train supervisors to recognize warning signs of violence and bullying.

- **Enforce zero tolerance of bullying.** Your goal should be to rid your DC of aggressive, intimidating behavior. Be sure to put teeth into your policy by imposing discipline when the policy is broken and rewards when it's followed. Track the status of your bullying policy and report annually on its effectiveness, its enforcement, and the resolution of workplace bullying complaints.

Contacts: Mike Staver, The Staver Group, 904-321-0877; Marty Martin, DePaul University, 630-715-6270. **DCM**

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712 Main Street — Suite 187B, Boonton, NJ 07005-1450

Telephone: (973) 265-2300 • Fax: (973) 402-6056 • Email: info@DistributionGroup.com • Website: www.DistributionGroup.com

Distribution Center Management is published monthly by Alexander Communications Group, Inc., which provides news, data and information on key distribution and warehousing topics through its newsletters, books, and website.



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