

WHAT IS DISRUPTIVE, THREATENING, OR VIOLENT BEHAVIOR?

Disruptive behavior disturbs, interferes with or prevents normal work functions or activities. Examples: yelling, using profanity, waving arms or fists, verbally abusing others, and refusing reasonable requests for identification.

Threatening behavior includes physical actions short of actual contact/injury (e.g., moving closer aggressively), general oral or written threats to people or property, ["You better watch your back" or "I'll get you"] as well as implicit threats ["you'll be sorry" or "this isn't over"].

Violent behavior includes any physical assault, with or without weapons; behavior that a reasonable person would interpret as being potentially violent [e.g., throwing things, pounding on a desk or door, or destroying property], or specific threats to inflict physical harm [e.g., a threat to shoot a named individual].

PREVENTIVE STEPS TO MAINTAIN A SAFE WORKPLACE

Workplaces prone to disruptive incidents are often characterized by high levels of unresolved conflict and poor communication. Conflict at work is normal, but must be addressed promptly and effectively, not avoided or suppressed. Disruptive behavior can be reduced or prevented by facilitating a workplace environment that promotes healthy, positive means of airing and resolving problems (methods that do not disrupt the workplace or harm or frighten others). It is also essential to improve the conflict management skills of managers and staff, to set and enforce clear standards of conduct, and to provide help (e.g. mediation and counseling) to address conflicts early.

DEALING WITH PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS OR CONFLICTS

1. **Intervene promptly;** don't let the situation fester.
2. Contact Labor Relations (577-20810 **to gather information about your rights and responsibilities as a manager** before meeting with those involved. Contact Carmen Albert (577-8014) regarding coaching **and counseling around behaviors in these situations.**
3. **Be clear about the facts of the problem** as you see them.
4. **Ask individuals** involved **to describe their perceptions** of the problem (if appropriate).
5. **Set clear expectations** for improvement in job performance or in the relationship.
6. **Assess additional needed resources**, and seek outside help as necessary.
7. **Follow up** to be sure that your expectations are met and directed changes are made.

Labor Relations and I can explain policies and procedures for performance problems, including corrective action. We can provide referrals for counseling, suggest and facilitate approaches to problems with employees or intra-office conflicts, and provide support to faculty and staff who feel endangered or threatened by workplace situations or personal conflicts. These resources can provide "coaching" on how to handle the problem, or, if you prefer, intervene directly on your behalf. We can also provide assistance with intra-office conflicts by opening lines of communication to address the conflict. The key to prevention is creating a work environment that confronts problems before they escalate.

Consultation, intervention, and referral for assistance can diffuse a tense situation and prevent it from becoming disruptive or violent. Compliance with the personnel policies and procedures of the University and of your specific department are essential.

INDICATORS OF PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Below is a list of behaviors and attitudes that may be indicators of disruptive, threatening, or violent behavior. If you observe a **pattern** of such behaviors and attitudes that cause you concern, please call either Labor Relations or myself.

BEHAVIOR:

- Upset over recent event(s) [work or personal crisis]
- Recent major change in behavior, demeanor, appearance
- Recently has withdrawn from normal activities, family, friends, co-workers
- Intimidating, verbally abusive, harasses or mistreats others
- Challenges/resists authority
- Blames others for problems in life or work; suspicious, holds grudges
- Use/abuse of drugs and/or alcohol
- Unwelcome obsessive romantic attention
- Stalking
- Makes threatening references to other incidents of violence
- Makes threats to harm self, others, or property
- Weapons - has or is fascinated with weapons
- Has known history of violence
- Has communicated specific proposed act(s) of disruption or violence

ATTITUDE:

- Is isolated or a loner
- Morally superior, self-righteous
- Feels entitled to special rights and that rules don't apply to them
- Feels wronged, humiliated, degraded; wants revenge
- Feels without choices or options for action except violence

HOW TO RESPOND TO DISRUPTIVE, THREATENING, OR VIOLENT BEHAVIOR

STEP 1: General response to disruptive behavior (no threats or weapons)

1. **Respond quietly and calmly.** Try to defuse the situation.
2. **Do not take the behavior personally.** Usually, the behavior has little to do with you, but you are used as a target in the situation.
3. **Ask questions.** Respectful concern and interest may demonstrate that aggression is not necessary.
4. **Consider offering an apology.** Even if you've done nothing wrong, an apology may calm the individual and encourage cooperation. *"I'm sorry that happened. What can we do now that will solve the problem?"*
5. **Summarize what you hear the individual saying.** Make sure you are communicating clearly. In crisis, a person feels humiliated and wants respect and attention. Your summary of the individual's concerns reflects your attention. **Focus on areas of agreement** to help resolve the concern.

If this approach does not stop the disruption, assess whether the individual seems dangerous. If in your best judgment he/she is upset but not a threat, set limits and seek assistance as necessary.

STEP 2: Step 1 response ineffective, individual DOES NOT seem dangerous

1. **Calmly and firmly set limits.** *"Please lower your voice. There will be no disruptions in this office." "Please be patient so that I can understand what you need and try to help you."*
2. **Ask the individual to stop the behavior and warn that official action may be taken.** *"Disruption is subject to University action. Stop or you may be reported."*
3. **If the disruption continues despite a warning,** tell the individual that he/she may be disciplined or prosecuted, state that the discussion is over, and direct them to leave the office. *"Please leave now. If you do not leave, we will call the Police."*
4. **If the individual refuses to leave after being directed to do so,** state that this refusal is also a violation subject to discipline, exclusion from work, or arrest.

STEP 3: Step 1 response ineffective and the individual SEEMS DANGEROUS

1. **If possible, find a quiet, safe place to talk, but do not isolate yourself** with an individual you believe may be dangerous. Maintain a safe distance, do not turn your back, and stay seated if possible. Leave the door open or open a closed door, and sit near the door. Be sure a co-worker is near to help if needed.
2. **Use a calm, non-confrontational approach to defuse the situation.** Indicate your desire to listen and understand the problem. Allow the person to describe the problem.
3. **NEVER touch the individual yourself to try to remove him/her from the area.** Even a gentle push or holding the person's arm may be interpreted as an assault by an agitated individual who may respond with violence towards you or file a lawsuit later.
4. **Set limits to indicate the behavior needed to deal with the concern.** *"Please lower your voice." "Please stop shouting (or using profanity) or I'll have to ask you to leave."*
5. **Signal for assistance.** The individual may be antagonized if you call for assistance so use a prearranged 'distress' signal to have another staff member check on you to determine how you are. If you need help, the co-worker should alert your supervisor and/or the campus police.
6. **Do not mention discipline or the police if you fear an angry or violent response.**
7. **If the situation escalates, find a way to excuse yourself, leave the room/area and get help.** *"You've raised some tough questions. I'll consult my supervisor to see what we can do."*

IN AN EMERGENCY

For crimes in progress, violent incidents or specific threats of imminent violence, call WSU Police (577-2222).

Immediately contact the WSU Police (577-2222) or have someone call for you if an individual

- **makes threats of physical harm toward you, others, or him/herself;**
- **has a weapon; or**
- **behaves in a manner that causes you to fear for your own or another's safety**

Use a phone out of sight/hearing of the individual. The campus police will respond and take appropriate action.

1. **Do not attempt to intervene physically** or deal with the situation yourself. It is critical that the police take charge of any incident that can or does involve physical harm.
2. **Get yourself and others to safety** as quickly as possible.
3. **If possible, keep a line open to police until they arrive.** The more information the police receive, the more likely they can bring a potentially violent situation to a safe conclusion.

POST INCIDENT RESPONSE

When a violent incident occurs, many are affected: the victim, witnesses, bystanders, as well as friends, relatives, and co-workers of those involved in or witnessing the event. To avoid long-term difficulties following a violent event (often called post-traumatic stress syndrome) certain follow-up responses and interventions must take place. For post-event counseling and intervention, call the University's Counseling and Psychological Services (577-3398) and the Employee Assistance Program (toll-free, 800-852-0357) which provides counseling and referral services to employees and their family members.

Disruptive, threatening, or violent behavior can occur in the workplace. We do not expect you to experience such an incident, but hope this information will help you feel that you know what to do if one should occur.