

# Identifying Potentially Disgruntled Employees



The recent on-air shootings of two US news station employees in Virginia again reminds us of the importance of taking seriously warning signs of strain and mental health problems among employees. Although rare these incidents do happen in Canada. In 2014 an employee of a Loblaw's warehouse in Edmonton fatally stabbed two co-workers and injured four others, a former employee of a Nanaimo B.C. sawmill showed up at his former place of work and shot four employees killing two and in Toronto an employee of Ceridian, an HR management company, who was being told he was being terminated attacked and stabbed several employees.

When people are under enough strain, feel disconnected or threatened, this can impact their ability to manage their emotions or control their actions. Unhappy and disgruntled employees engage in many types of acts of revenge including behaviours such as spreading rumours, hurling insults, making threats, damaging property and more up to and including violence. This is in particular true when these individuals do not have a good social system of support.

It is imperative for organizations to take seriously signs of mental and emotional strain and anti-social behaviours among their employees as early in the process as possible.

## **Signs Of An Employee Who May Be At Risk**

Most employees under stress or who experience mental health crisis will not violently act out in the workplace. Employees experiencing a mental health crisis are more likely harm themselves than others. For the safety of all of your employees it is important to pay attention and know when and how to intervene when early warning signs appear. Some signs are not difficult to spot if you are prepared to see them.

## **9 Behaviours of a Potentially Volatile Employee**

- **Decline In Performance:** Many factors can impact performance, physical health issues, financial pressures, family problems or mental health issues can negatively impact work performance. A change in an employees performance or chronically poor performance may need to first be addressed as a sign of something more and not just a disciplinary problem.
- **Signs of Depression:** Some signs of depression are difficult to spot in the workplace because issues like problems sleeping, loss of interest in sex or

physical activity or change in appetite are not apparent at work. Additionally, an employee who is difficult generally or a loner may not spend enough time around co-workers or supervisors for them to notice a change. Still, some factors you might spot include increased irritability, trouble focussing or concentrating, difficulty making decisions or frequently changing their minds about actions and decisions.

- **Attention Seeking Behaviours:** High maintenance employees, those who need constant and ongoing affirmation and feedback or who are always trying to be involved in decision making can signify an employee with a need to have their ego stroked. When this does not happen it can lead to more concerning behaviours.
- **Frequent Complainers:** Complaining or filing grievances itself is not necessarily a reason to be concerned. However, a victim mentality can exist in employees who file multiple grievances and a variety of grievances against different people or for different issues, including trivial and more serious.
  
- **Over Identification With Their Job:** Individuals who define their identity through their employment may be more likely to react badly if they feel their job is threatened. An employee who spends a lot of time participating in everything, every event, BBQ, Picnic and so on may over-identify with the company and if they feel their job is threatened can become unstable.
- **Threatening Words or Actions:** Some threats are easy to spot but others less so. Comments, letters, voice mails or social media posts such as 'I will make you regret that' or 'you will be sorry' should be considered carefully, this includes treats from former employees.
- **Violent or Extreme Opinions:** These employees may discuss political issues, news events and even entertainment with fervour and overtly voice their opinion supporting retaliatory actions including saying that people who are harmed 'got what they deserved'.
- **Controlling Behaviours:** These employees may not want others telling them what to do, become involved in their work or workspace and may act as though they are superior to others and know the right way to do things.
- **Experienced Recent Discipline or Job Loss:** The experience of a threat to their job or a job loss can be a triggering event that lays the groundwork for explosive or retaliatory behaviours.

Many employees who will never become violent can exhibit these behaviours at times in their employment history. These signs in combination or exhibited over a prolonged period of weeks and months should be investigated further.

### **Take the Time To Investigate**

Although you do not want to spend all your time checking up or monitoring your employees, if you see warning signs it can be useful to check further.

- Try conducting a search of social media to see if this employee has been actively saying anything of concern online.
- Conduct an anonymous survey of employees about the workplace and include questions about workplace safety, specifically asking if they have any concerns for their safety or about the health and wellness of other employees
- Take note of employees who reacted badly to feedback, did not receive an expected promotion, were disciplined or recently let go.

Pay attention and have a process for responding to employees under stress or who may be exhibiting signs of anger, depression or self-destructive behaviors.