

Managing Workplace Violence & Harassment: A Conversational Multi-Module Guide for HR Professionals



Picture a busy open-plan office in Vancouver: teams collaborate around screens, client calls hum in meeting rooms, and foot traffic weaves between desks. Then an argument erupts between two colleagues – what starts as raised voices quickly escalates to threats, shoving, and a stunned office watching in silence. Within days, morale cratered, absenteeism soared, and HR scrambled to manage legal complaints and rebuild trust.

Workplace violence and harassment (WVH) isn't limited to fists or curses. It spans verbal abuse, stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, and even cyber-harassment. For HR, it ranks among the top liability and morale risks – missteps can lead to WSIB orders, human-rights tribunals, class-action lawsuits, and a poisoned culture that drives talent away.

This six-module guide is your conversational roadmap to preventing, responding to, and continuously improving your approach to WVH in a Canadian context. We'll blend real case stories, statutory requirements, and practical, humane advice. You'll learn to:

- Understand the full spectrum and impacts of workplace violence & harassment
- Build a zero-tolerance policy framework that's legally sound and well-communicated
- Navigate federal and provincial WVH regulations (complete with a handy jurisdictional chart)
- Avoid six all-too-common pitfalls that undermine even the best programs
- Engage employees and leaders through training, reporting channels, and support
- Close the loop with incident response, investigations, and data-driven improvements

Ready to foster a truly safe, respectful workplace? Let's begin with **Module One**, where we unpack why a proactive WVH strategy is essential.

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- **Module One**

Module One: The Stakes – Why Violence & Harassment Demand Your Full Attention

When a customer service rep at a Calgary call centre was stalked by an ex-partner who gleaned her schedule from social media, the psychological fallout ground productivity to a halt. Calls went unanswered, sick days spiked, and HR faced a human-rights claim for failing to protect the employee's safety.

1. The Human Toll

- **Psychological Trauma:** Victims of harassment and violence suffer anxiety, depression, PTSD, and reduced self-confidence – often requiring long-term medical and counseling support.
- **Team Impact:** Witnesses experience “second-hand” trauma, eroding trust in leadership and each other.

2. Legal & Regulatory Risks

- **Federal & Provincial Duties:** Under the Canada Labour Code (Part II) and provincial OHS Acts (e.g., Ontario's OHS Act s.32.0.3), employers must assess violence and harassment hazards and implement controls. Failure can lead to stop-work orders and fines.
- **Human Rights Protections:** Harassment based on race, gender, disability, or other protected grounds invokes human-rights tribunals – award damages that can exceed \$50,000 per complainant.

3. Strategic & Operational Consequences

- **Brand & Recruitment:** A toxic culture repels talent. Glassdoor reviews citing harassment can drive away 60% of prospective hires.
- **Productivity Loss:** WSIB data links poorly managed harassment to 25% higher absenteeism and 15% lower engagement – translating into real financial drag.

Key Takeaway: Workplace violence and harassment threaten not only individual well-being but also organizational resilience. A robust, proactive strategy is not optional – it's the foundation of sustainable, high-performing workplaces.

- **Module Two**

Module Two: Building a Zero-Tolerance Policy Framework

A clear, comprehensive policy sets the tone for prevention, reporting, and response. Here's what yours needs:

1. Definitions & Scope

- **Workplace Violence:** Any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior – includes domestic violence spills into work.
- **Workplace Harassment:** Engaging in vexatious behaviour that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome – covers bullying, repeated insults, or psychological harm.
- **Applicability:** On-site employees, remote workers, customers, contractors, and even digital interactions on company platforms.

2. Reporting Channels & Protections

- **Multiple Reporting Options:** In-person, written, hotline, email, and anonymous digital forms.
- **Non-Retaliation Clause:** Assure complainants and witnesses they'll face no reprisal – legally mandated in most provinces.
- **Confidentiality Safeguards:** Limit information to "need-to-know" basis; store records securely and separately.

3. Investigation Protocols

- **Timely Acknowledgment:** Confirm receipt within 48 hours.
- **Impartial Investigator:** Use trained internal or external investigators – avoid conflicts of interest.
- **Fair Process:** Interview complainant, respondent, and witnesses; maintain detailed notes; provide procedural fairness (respondent right to know allegations and respond).

4. Corrective Actions & Supports

- **Range of Interventions:** Coaching, training, written warnings, suspensions, or termination depending on severity.
- **Support for Affected Individuals:** EAP referrals, flexible work arrangements, safety plans (e.g., security escorts).

By embedding clear definitions, safe reporting channels, structured investigations, and strong support, your policy becomes a living document that employees trust and leaders enforce.

- **Module Three**

Module Three: Regulatory Roadmap – Federal & Provincial WWH Requirements

Jurisdiction	Regulation / Standard	Key WVH Mandates	Documentation & Training
Federal	Canada OHS Regs Part XIX (Violence Prevention)	Hazard assessments; written prevention program; training; complaint procedure	Document assessments, incidents, training logs
Ontario	OHS Act ss. 32.0.3–32.0.12 (Workplace Violence & Harassment)	Workplace-specific program; domestic violence policy; review every 3 yrs; JHSC involvement	Maintain program, risk assessments, training records
Quebec	CNESST Harassment Prevention Regs	Anti-harassment committee (100+ employees); prevention plan; annual reporting to CNESST	Committee minutes; complaint logs; training records
Alberta	OHS Code ss. 216–219	Violence & harassment hazard ID; controls; reporting procedure; post-incident review	Hazard logs; investigation reports; refresher training
BC	OHS Reg 4.27–4.30 (Preventing Violence & Harassment)	Risk assessments; written policies; safe workplace committees; worker participation	Risk assessment files; policy acknowledgments; training
Manitoba	Workplace Safety & Health Reg 217/2006	Violence prevention policy; harassment prevention procedures; prompt investigation	Written policies; incident records; supervisor training
Saskatchewan	OHS Reg Part 48 (Violence & Harassment)	Prevention program; training; reporting process; evaluation of program effectiveness	Program reviews; complaint logs; training certificates
Atlantic Provinces (NS, PEI, NL)	Provincial OHS Acts	Vary, but all require hazard assessments, policies, and complaint procedures	Policies accessible; incident logs; training logs
Territories (YT, NWT, NU)	Territorial OHS Regs	Employers must address violence & harassment; develop policies and procedures	Written safe-work procedures; incident records; training

• **Module Four**

Module Four: Common Pitfalls – Why Programs Fall Short

Despite good intentions, many workplace violence & harassment programs stumble. Here

are six frequent missteps – illustrated by Canadian examples – and how to fix them:

1. Treating the Policy as a Checkbox

- **Pitfall:** Posting a policy PDF on the intranet without discussion.
- **Example:** A Toronto finance firm posted their anti-harassment policy but never trained staff – resulting in confusion when complaints arose.
- **Fix:** Host interactive launch sessions, refresher micro-learning, and integrate policy into onboarding.

2. Reporting Channels Too Limited

- **Pitfall:** Only allowing in-person complaints to HR, deterring victims fearful of retaliation.
- **Example:** In Calgary, employees feared face-to-face reports; an anonymous digital form doubled report volume and captured issues early.
- **Fix:** Provide multiple channels (digital, phone, in-person) and allow safe third-party submissions.

3. Superficial Hazard Assessments

- **Pitfall:** Conducting a one-time survey and never revisiting it.
- **Example:** A BC healthcare facility assessed harassment risks in 2020 but never updated for new remote-work dynamics, missing online bullying trends.
- **Fix:** Schedule annual or event-triggered risk assessments, including remote-work and customer interactions.

4. Inconsistent Investigation Quality

- **Pitfall:** Managers investigating their own teams, leading to bias and low trust in outcomes.
- **Example:** In Montreal, a mid-level manager dismissed a harassment claim by a direct report, sparking a human-rights tribunal decision against the employer.
- **Fix:** Use trained, independent investigators – internal HR specialists or external consultants – to ensure impartiality.

5. Punitive Culture Over Support

- **Pitfall:** Focusing solely on discipline, ignoring the needs of targets and respondents.
- **Example:** A Saskatoon firm suspended both parties involved in a conflict, leaving the alleged victim feeling unsupported and silenced.
- **Fix:** Provide EAP, mediation, and clear communication – address behavior and underlying issues, not just punish.

6. No Continuous Improvement Cycle

- **Pitfall:** After an incident, updating nothing and repeating the same mistakes.
- **Fix:** After-action reviews, data analytics on incident types and locations, and policy tweaks – embed in your safety-management system.

• Module Five

Module Five: Training & Culture – Empowering Everyone

A truly safe workplace requires everyone – leaders, managers, and individual contributors – to play an active role.

1. Leadership Modeling

- **Senior-Leader Workshops:** CEOs and VPs participate in harassment-prevention role-plays, signaling importance from the top.

2. Manager Enablement

- **Interactive Simulations:** Supervisors practice responding to harassment reports, conducting sensitive conversations, and following investigation protocols.

3. Employee Awareness

- **Micro-Learning Modules:** 5-minute video scenarios on bystander intervention, recognizing non-physical threats, and online harassment.

4. Bystander Empowerment

- **“See, Speak, Support” Campaigns:** Teach staff to safely intervene or report when they witness unacceptable behavior.

5. Safe-Space Forums

- **Peer Circles & Focus Groups:** Confidential, facilitated sessions where employees share concerns and suggest improvements.

By weaving training into daily rhythms – using stories, simulations, and peer support – you foster a culture where violence and harassment are recognized, reported, and addressed before escalation.

• Module Six

Module Six: Incident Response & Continuous Improvement

When incidents do occur, your response process determines how quickly trust is restored – and how well future risks are mitigated.

1. Immediate Action

- **Ensure Safety First:** Separate involved parties, provide medical or psychological support, and secure work areas.
- **Interim Measures:** Temporary re-assignment, no-contact orders, or supervised interactions.

2. Structured Investigation

- **Timelines:** Acknowledge the complaint within 48 hours; complete investigation within 30 days.
- **Fair Fact-Finding:** Interview all parties, document timelines, gather digital evidence (emails, chat logs), and maintain procedural fairness.

3. Corrective Measures & Follow-Up

- **Tailored Responses:** Discipline, training, or mediation – aligned to incident severity.
- **Victim Support Plans:** Ongoing check-ins, flexible work arrangements, and EAP follow-ups.

4. Data Tracking & Trends

Maintain a dashboard of:

- **Incident Types:** Physical violence, verbal threats, sexual harassment, cyberbullying.
- **Locations & Teams:** Identify hotspots (e.g., field sites, remote channels).
- **Resolution Times & Satisfaction Rates:** Measure speed and perceived fairness.

5. Policy & Training Refresh

Tie lessons into:

- **Annual Policy Reviews:** Update definitions, workflows, and jurisdictional requirements.
- **Quarterly Training Nudges:** Push micro-modules on emerging issues – remote harassment, social media conflict, third-party vendor interactions.

By treating each incident as an opportunity to learn – and by systematically analyzing trends – you evolve from reactive firefighting to proactive culture building, keeping violence and harassment out of your workplace for good.

Additional Resources

[Workplace Violence Policy](#)

[Employer's Legal Obligations: Harassment, Bullying, Violence in the Workplace](#)

[Workplace Harassment Policy](#)

[Employer's Legal Obligations: Harassment, Bullying, Violence in the Workplace](#)

[Workplace Violence Prevention & Compliance Game Plan](#)

WHY THIS GUIDE?

Human tone: Written like a chat over coffee, not a courtroom sermon.

Legal clarity: Key legislative references are embedded for quick scanning.

Actionable insights: Stories, examples, and clear next steps.