

## Preventing Workplace Violence

In the wake of the Yale lab murder, experts in workplace violence identify steps that managers can take to prevent other tragedies from occurring.

By J.J. McCorvey | Oct 2, 2009

Amid the day-to-day tasks of running a business, the issue of safety, unfortunately, is sometimes easily overshadowed. However, the recent murder of Yale University student Annie Le has sparked a national discussion on workplace violence, and what businesses can do to better prepare for such incidents.

"It is important to note that this is ... an issue of workplace violence, which is becoming a growing concern around the country," said New Haven, Connecticut Police Chief James Lewis after announcing the arrest of Le's alleged killer, Raymond Clark III, who worked with Le at a research lab. But just how do businesses go about addressing the issue?

Though the Yale incident is a rare extreme of workplace violence, a survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that other incidents of workplace violence, such as domestic violence that spills over into the workplace and criminal activity, are not as uncommon. Out of the 7.1 million private businesses surveyed in 2005, more than 350,000 reported occurrences during the year leading up to the study. However, the rarity of homicides on the job may be the reason some business owners and managers neglect to address the issue, says Ashley Virtue, director of marketing and development at the San Diego-based National Conflict Resolution Center.

"A lot of times these types of situations are avoided, because they think it'll blow over," she says. The NCRC, which holds conflict mediation workshops and demonstrations at businesses across the country, teaches managers to be perceptive to growing tensions and to be bold about intervening.

"One thing we find is that most managers actually know when a conflict is going on," Virtue says. "The first thing we talk about is using the process to give yourselves the confidence to

step in and deal with the situation."

The NCRC uses a four-step method, called "The Exchange," that employers and managers can use to deescalate situations on the job. The steps include meeting with each employee, spending time alone to assess the issue, having a joint meeting with all involved parties, then coming to a "problem-solving" session of the meeting. When it comes down to it, Virtue says, communication is key.

"The more that people can solve things at the lower level, that's the best," says. "It really starts with the manager being able to speak with the employees one on one."

Officials say Le's murder may have been the culmination of a workplace dispute between Le and Clark. Le, a pharmacology grad student, conducted research on mice, whose cages were cleaned by Clark, a lab technician. Co-workers said Clark could get territorial over the mice.

Jo-Ellen Pozner, an organizational behavior professor for the Haas School of Business at UC-Berkeley, says the growing speculation of Clark's alleged resentment toward Le's higher position in the lab is not surprising, and represents an issue that bosses should not neglect to acknowledge.

"Are there reasons for the status difference? Is it equitable?" asks Pozner. "People at the bottom are going to feel that difference in status more keenly than those at the top, so they should be compensated either tangibly or intangibly to overcome that difference."

Smaller businesses would be less likely to offer such compensation as a raise, says Pozner, but managers can express gratitude and appreciation regularly to ensure all employees feel like their work is valued.

"There are ways to make them feel a sense of belonging and esteem, which could help this kind of resentment from boiling over," she says.