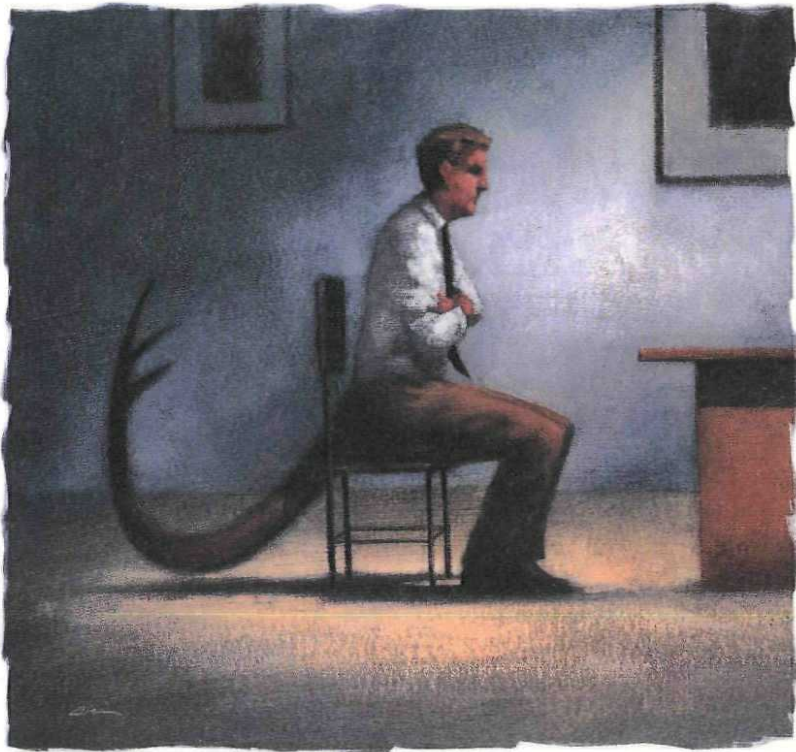


# Executive **EDGE**

## WARDING OFF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE



Chris McAllister

Although studies on violence in the workplace do not conclusively show whether it is increasing or decreasing, employers' and employees' concerns are certainly on the rise.

In 1992 employers lost an estimated \$4.2 billion in work time and medical and legal expenses related to workplace violence. Only 4 percent of all murders in the United States are work related, but the workplace is the site of 16 percent of violent incidents that do not end in death.

Employers in high-risk businesses—such as food retailers and the U.S. Postal Service—

are taking steps to curb workplace violence. Steve Albrecht, a workplace-violence consultant and co-author of *Ticking Bombs*, a manual for preventing workplace violence, notes that the first step to prevention is to be aware of the profile of a violent personality: a 30- to 40-year-old man, obsessed with guns, with no family support but whose job means everything to him.

Steps to screen violent applicants include hiring an outside consultant for background checks. But thorough background checks are not always possible,

particularly in industries with high turnover rates. Also, several states have limitations on employers' inquiries about criminal records.

Instead, employers may ask questions that reveal the degree of cooperativeness of persons inquiring about the job, or have applicants fill out a form that tries to pinpoint hostile personalities. In addition, interviewers can identify people with aggressive tendencies by first asking, "On your last job what was something your boss did that made you mad?" and then following up with, "When you were mad at your

## QUELLING "BOSS ANXIETY"

The helplessness subordinates feel under the power of the boss can restrain them from offering suggestions, information, and criticism that could make the organization a success.

One way a supervisor can quell this "boss anxiety" is by letting subordinates know what the manager wants, when it is expected, and how they will know whether they are meeting the leader's expectations. In turn, a boss needs to listen to staff members' needs, even if he or she cannot fulfill all of them. Such empathic listening can be a big step in curbing boss anxiety.

Supervisors must also spell out their expectations for communications within the group, including where, what, when, and how. They should not commit to meetings they will not be able to attend. Bosses who repeatedly cancel meetings may increase staff members' sense of powerlessness.

Employees also need to know how much initiative they can demonstrate. A manager who needs a high level of control should acknowledge this. Those bosses who believe in empowerment must make it known they will support subordinates who solve problems independently.

Although a supervisor need not reveal a lot of personal information, a boss should try to give subordinates a sense of who he or she is professionally. For example, employees should be aware of the boss's values and favored work behaviors.

*From Lynne Gaines, "The Questions Your Employees Are Afraid to Ask," Executive Female, September-October 1994, pp. 17-18.*

boss, what did you do about it?"

Training managers to identify and handle potentially violent employees is also important. Managers should be aware that threats can lead to violence. In a 1993 survey of 600 people in various industries, Northwestern National Life Insur-

ance Company found that one-fourth of them had been threatened by a co-worker within the past year.

Companies should develop clear policies for dealing with verbal abuse and weapons possession.

*From Jan H. Schut, "Killers among Us," Institutional Investor, August 1994, p. 125.*