

Chipping away at the “mythperceptions.”

Prior to our recent retreat, members of the CAEPV Board of Directors talked with businesses that don't have a domestic violence workplace program in place to find out why. Here are some of the explanations they heard—and some responses.

“We don't have that ‘kind’ of employee here.”

Don't be so sure... I am often reminded of two women in particular. One is a very senior executive at one of our member companies. The other is an assistant DA—a high-profile domestic violence prosecutor, in fact. Trust me, no one would ever imagine that either of these accomplished, articulate professionals was “that kind” of employee. But they were.

“That's really a ‘women's issue,’ isn't it?”

A report from the Justice Department found that nearly 25% of women and 7% of men say they've been assaulted by a partner. Clearly domestic violence impacts women AND men. And even if women are the primary victims, everyone in the workplace is at risk if an incident happens.

“We have an Employee Assistance Program, so we have it covered.”

Having an EAP is great. But the fact is, you cannot assume your EAP is trained to respond to domestic violence. Furthermore, your managers still need to know how to recognize and respond appropriately to domestic violence and refer employees to your EAP.

“No one has talked to me about it, so I don't think we have that kind of problem here.”

Let's be clear. This is not the kind of thing that people just come up to you and talk about. Even if you have a strong program in place you still may not hear much. At

Liz Claiborne, for example, despite 10 years of education and policies, they had zero reported incidents in 2001. It wasn't until they retrained their HR, Security and Legal departments and reached out to employees that that number rose to about 40. Not hearing about it doesn't mean it isn't happening.

“We have a limited HR function here. We can't handle that kind of thing.”

If you can hang a poster in your bathrooms with the number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline, you are assisting potential victims. Better yet, if you can provide a list of phone numbers for local service providers, you've done even more to help. Many of these groups are willing to come into the workplace to discuss available resources.

“I can't have my managers becoming domestic violence experts.”

No—and no one wants you to. What a domestic violence workplace policy and program does is teach managers to recognize the signs that an employee might be a victim of domestic violence, to appropriately respond within the boundaries of the work environment, and to refer that employee to professionals—services and experts in the community that can assist him or her with shelter, counseling, a protection order, a safety plan, whatever is needed.

“I don't see how what happens in someone's home life impacts my business.”

In 2003, the CDC reported that intimate partner violence victims lose a total of nearly 8 million days of paid work—the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs—as a result of the violence. Domestic violence affects co-workers too. As the perceived danger increases for one employee, the level of distraction for co-workers also

increases. Co-workers may have to fill in for absent or nonproductive workers. And their own productivity drops if they feel protective, helpless, fearful or resentful. Not only that, the majority of batterers report using company resources to threaten or check up on partners.

“For the safety of our employees, wouldn't it just be best to let the victim go?”

On the surface, this might seem like a wise course of action. But it instantly creates a culture of silence, which is a real potential danger. What if an employee doesn't share a threat because she fears losing her job—and the batterer comes into the workplace with a weapon? It's much wiser to find proactive ways to keep the entire workplace—including any potential victims—safe.

“We don't want to teach people to look for this domestic violence stuff—they might find it.”

I will never forget the day a company representative actually said this to me—and I do appreciate her honesty. The problem is, whether you teach them to find it or not, it is already there. Isn't it better if they know exactly how to respond when they do find it in order to keep everyone safe?

“I don't have time or resources for a whole new employee program.”

Relax. You can integrate a domestic violence program into employee programs and policies you already have. You don't have to reinvent the wheel—simply incorporate domestic violence resources at employee health or education events and in your various employee publications, newsletters, intranet resources, etc. It's less complicated than you think.

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