



An Introduction to Workplace Violence

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Describe what workplace violence is
- ✓ Identify some warning signs of violence
- ✓ Apply the cycle of anger

An Introduction to Workplace Violence

What is Workplace Violence?

Defining Violence

The actual definition of workplace violence can depend on the company and the area where the company operates. For example, some states classify sexual harassment as workplace violence, while others don't. Likewise, some organizations have separate workplace violence and sexual harassment policies.

Typically, the definition of workplace violence encompasses:

- Verbal abuse (such as yelling)
- Psychological or emotional abuse (such as name-calling or threats)
- Physical abuse (such as hitting or pushing)
- Sexual assault

It is important to remember that no matter what form violence takes, whether it's yelling, threatening, or physical assault, it is essential that your organization have a policy to prevent and respond to such incidents.

A crucial step in developing a workplace violence policy is determining just what workplace violence means to your organization, and therefore determining what your policy will cover.

The Cycle of Violence

In most cases, workplace violence is like a thunderstorm, building slowly before exploding. The process often begins with frustration. If the frustration isn't alleviated, it often turns to anger. Then, that unaddressed anger becomes violence.

Our goal for the first third of this workshop is to work on some tools that can help us interrupt the storm. Problem solving tools, communication strategies, anger management processes, and de-stress routines can all help alleviate anger and frustration, preventing the cycle from reaching the stage of violence.

The Warning Signs

There are many signs that may indicate that a person is on the path towards committing a violent act. These can include:

- Threats (direct or indirect)
- Harassing or obscene phone calls
- Suicidal or homicidal threats or gestures
- Expressions of hopelessness, despair, belligerence, or defiance
- Talk of violent behavior or fantasies
- Frequent profanity
- Challenging or intimidating comments
- Paranoid thoughts or delusions
- Delusions in general
- Hallucinations (particularly those where the person feels that they are being commanded)
- Signs or history of substance abuse
- Physical assault or intimidation of people or property
- Inappropriate use or possession of a weapon
- Obsessing with/stalking another person
- Easily upset, short-tempered, inappropriate emotions
- Sudden personality changes; from extroverted to introverted, or becoming very withdrawn
- Deteriorating appearance (i.e. personal hygiene)
- Deep grudges and resentments
- Belief that everyone is out to get them
- Obsession with public acts of violence or violent figures
- Obsession with fairness and equality
- Frequent misinterpretation (i.e. sees disrespect and injustice everywhere)

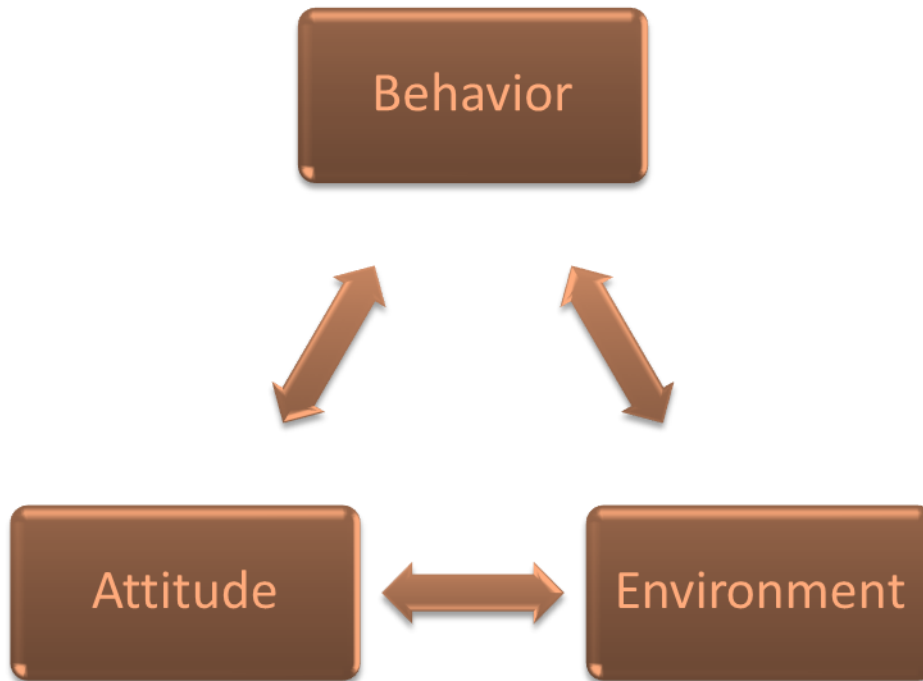
Now, we're not saying that if someone starts cursing a blue streak you should call in the cavalry. These signs can be present for all kinds of reasons, and are easy to see in retrospect, but you are trying to look ahead, not behind. If you notice that a co-worker's behavior changes, their temperament seems different, or if someone pulls out a knife in the lunchroom, then action needs to be taken. Simply mention your concerns to your supervisor. They have the tools and the resources required to help the person and to keep your workplace safe.

Understanding the Behavior Wheel

The Behavior Wheel

Psychologist Albert Bandura has developed a theory called the **behavior wheel**. This wheel provides the answer to the timeless question, "Why do people act the way they do?"

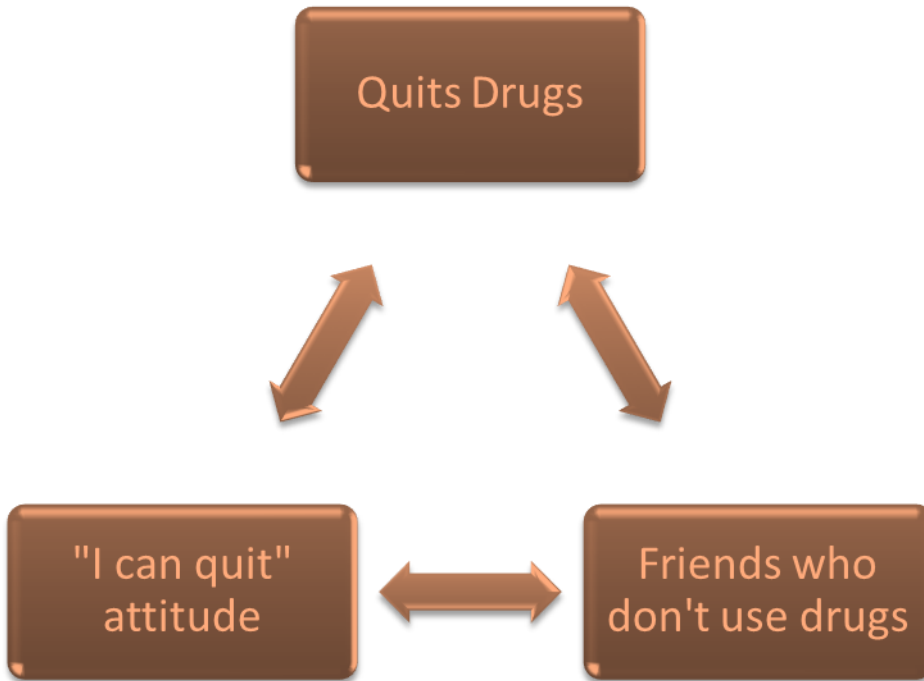
Bandura's wheel looks like this:



This wheel shows us how our attitude, behavior, and environment all influence each other. Note how the arrows go both ways: our environment affects our attitude, but our attitude also affects our environment.

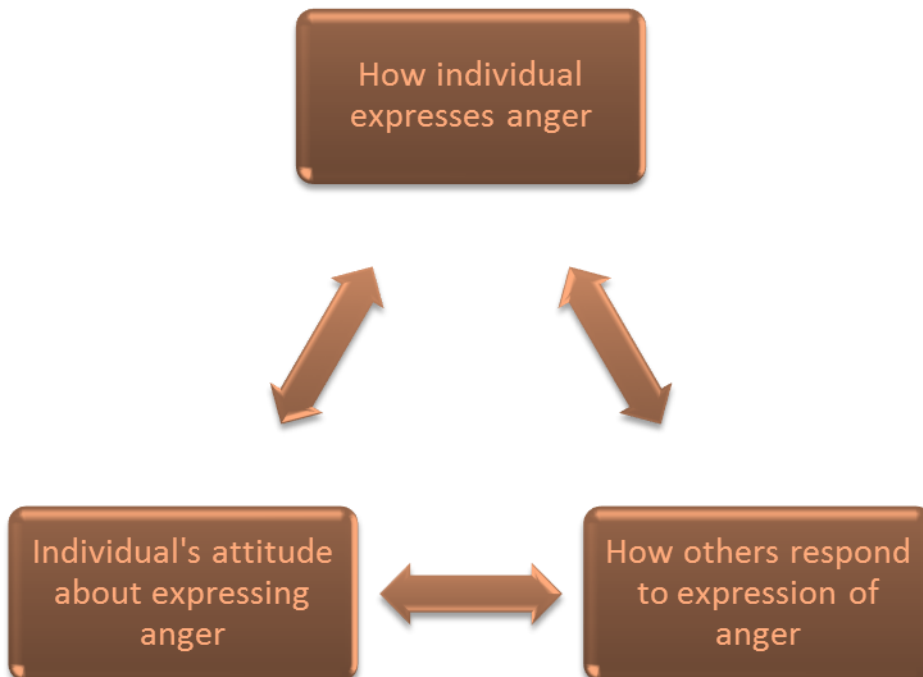
Case Study

Let's apply this wheel to a drug addict. One traditional approach is for the addict to simply quit. However, even if the addict's behavior changes, his attitude may still be that drugs are OK, and he may still associate with drug users. These factors will affect his behavior, contributing to him using drugs again. However, if his environment and attitude change, his behavior will be more likely to change.



Anger and the Behavior Wheel

Dr. Lynn McClure has applied the behavior wheel to anger:

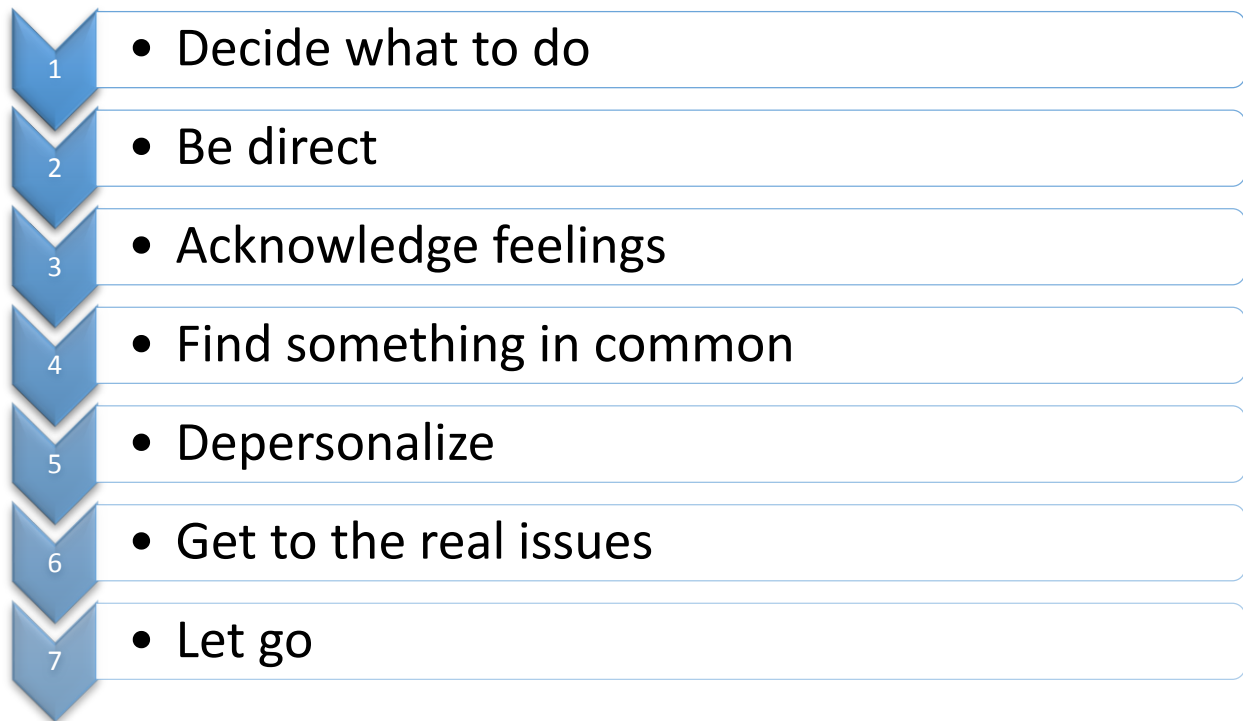


Understanding this cycle of behavior, attitude, and environment is crucial to managing anger.

The Anger Management Process

The Seven Steps

Dr. Lynn McClure has identified a seven-step process to manage anger. This process can be used whether you're angry or whether you're responding to someone else's anger.



The first step must always be deciding. Then, the other steps can be performed in any order.

Step One: Decide What to Do

Before you try to resolve the situation, ask yourself three questions:

- Do I want to work it out?
- Does the other person want to work it out?
- Is it appropriate for me to be involved?

The answer for all three questions must be yes or the process will not work. However, both parties don't have to be 100% committed. Even if they both are only willing to resolve the problem to get a project done, for example, that's still a level of commitment that can be built on.

Step Two: Be Direct

Once you have decided that you need to address this situation, it's time to start the process. Your next step should be to address the problem in the proper way, to the right person.

For example, let's say you've just seen your work schedule for next week and you're not impressed with the amount of evenings you're working.

Some improper ways of dealing with this (that are not direct or appropriate):

- Yelling at your supervisor
- Threatening to quit
- Complaining to your colleagues

The proper way to deal with this would be to approach your supervisor and talk to them calmly and logically. You want to lay out the issue and some solutions.

For example, you could say, "I saw that you posted the schedule and I wanted to talk to you about it. I noticed I'm working the most evenings again. I'd like to switch some of those shifts with Karen, since she likes the evening shift better. That would work better for both of us."

By dealing with the problem in this way, you're addressing the issue before it escalates to anger and violence. You're also setting a good example for your co-workers. Having solved this problem will probably make you feel better about yourself and about your job, thereby making work a happier place for you. (If we apply the behavior wheel, this improved attitude will spill over to your behavior and your environment.)

Step Three: Acknowledge Feelings

Another key skill in managing anger is acknowledging the other person's feelings. This step does two things: it helps the other person calm down, and it can help you understand their point of view.

Acknowledging anger doesn't mean explaining it away. An answer that starts with, "We have to do this because..." tends to make the angry person angrier and it makes them feel like no one is listening.

Let's take the scheduling example again. Let's say you said to your supervisor, "I saw that you posted the schedule and I wanted to talk to you about it. I noticed I'm working the most evenings again."

If he or she said, "Well, I have to do that because of company policy," you would probably get angry or defensive, even if you had already calmed down after you saw the schedule.

A better way for the supervisor to respond would be to say, “Yes, I can understand why you’re angry about the schedule. It certainly doesn’t seem fair.” This sort of response would be more likely to calm the angry person and make them feel as though their opinion counts.

Step Four: Find Something in Common

If you can find something in common with the person, rather than emphasizing differences, you will be well on the way to solving the disagreement. (After all, solving the problem is all about finding a mutually acceptable solution. The process is a lot easier when you know that you and the other person are on the same team.)

For example, let’s say you and a team member have had a disagreement over a project you’re working on together. An easy commonality would be that you’re working on the same team, towards the same goal. This common goal may be enough for both of you to start resolving the disagreement.

Step Five: Depersonalize

If you’re on the receiving end of someone’s anger, it is essential that you depersonalize their emotions or actions so that you don’t become angry as well. This can be very hard to do and does require some practice.

It’s very easy to misinterpret things and take things personally. You must first determine if this is professional feedback or a personal attack.

Professional feedback...	Personal attacks...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on your performance at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on you as a person
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is intended to help you grow as a professional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is intended to make you feel bad or guilty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can help you learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usually have no valuable advice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should be accepted as constructive criticism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tend to make you angry

If this is professional feedback, you need to focus on how the feedback can help you grow, rather than mistakes you have made in the past or emotional interpretations you received from the conversation.

If this is a personal attack, think about how seriously you should take the incident. Is it worth causing a scene and damaging your professional reputation? Is there a mature way that you can handle this? Another good way to depersonalize is to think about what their attack says about them, not about you.

Example: You are in your supervisor’s office for your monthly review. He says to you, “You know, you might get a raise if you weren’t such a slob.”

Let’s say you took a moment to analyze his comments before allowing yourself to get upset. You think about your desk: how its surface is always neat and how you organize it every morning. He certainly can’t be referring to your work environment.

But then you take a look around his office. It looks like a landfill, with papers, CD’s, and even garbage everywhere! You feel a little bit sorry for your supervisor; it seems clear that he’s the disorganized one and is taking his insecurities out on you.

To ensure that this is the case, you can try to turn his personal attack into professional feedback. You could say, “I’m sorry you feel that way, Jim. What areas do you think I need improvement in?” This way, you have not only managed to depersonalize his attack, but you have also turned it into a learning opportunity.

Step Six: Getting to the Real Issues

Earlier we discussed how frustration can build into anger, which can then escalate into violence. Often, the event that triggers anger or violence is not the original issue that caused frustration. It is important to identify the real issue so that the problem can get solved.

Case Study

Let’s look at an example. Gina and Cindy are working on a project together. All of a sudden, Cindy explodes, yelling, “You’re so stupid! I’m never going to get this done if I have to work with you.” Gina is shocked; she and Cindy have always worked together well in the past.

Gina moves through some of the anger management steps within a few seconds.

<p>Step One: Decide what to do.</p> <p>Gina wants to work it out and she is the right person to do so. But, does Cindy want to work it out?</p>	<p>Gina: “Cindy, I’m sorry you feel that way. Can we talk about this?”</p> <p>Cindy: “Sure.”</p>
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Step Two: Be direct.	Gina is doing this by speaking to Cindy.
Step Three: Acknowledge feelings.	Gina: "I can tell that you're really upset."
Step Four: Find something in common.	Gina: "We've always worked well as a team in the past, and I'd like to continue working as a team. We do need to get this project done." Cindy: "That's true."
Step Five: Depersonalize.	Gina thinks to herself, "I haven't done anything different today, so I think Cindy is upset about something else. This isn't my fault. I can grow from this by helping her through the issue."
Step Six: Get to the real issues.	Gina: "I don't feel like you're angry at me. I feel like there is something else going on. I've noticed you have been distracted the past few days. I'd really like to help you." Cindy: "I'm really sorry for calling you stupid. My husband and I have been having problems, and it's really affecting me. I'm very angry at him."

Now that Gina knows what the real issue is, it's easier for her to depersonalize and help Cindy work through the real problem, or to help her find the appropriate resource. This process has probably helped Cindy calm down and let go of some emotional baggage.

When you do talk to the angry person, make sure you:

- Speak to them in a calm manner.
- Don't blame or judge.
- Choose a quiet, private place free of interruptions.
- Follow Step Two: be direct and discuss the issue in an appropriate way.

