



NAWIC Toolbox Talk

Workplace Violence Prevention -De-escalation Training: The Art of Diffusing Conflict

Workplace violence is a growing concern in the construction sector, which is commonly a high stress work environment. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 9% of worker deaths in the US in 2017 were due to workplace violence. Additionally, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that women (5.1 per 10,000) experience higher rates of nonfatal injuries due to workplace violence than men (2.3 per 10,000), resulting in days away from work.

Understanding Workplace Violence

Workplace violence includes verbal abuse, intimidation, harassment (including sexual harassment), and bullying. Some of these incidents can serve as warning signs for future physical violence.

A triggering event is an incident perceived as a threat by an individual who may become violent. These events typically fall into two categories:

1. Fear-inducing event - The individual feels threatened or is about to lose something of value. *Example: job loss, disciplinary action, personal safety concerns.*
2. Frustrating event - the person feels their needs are not being met. *Example: Being ignored in a conflict, denied a request, or experiencing discrimination.*

De-escalation Techniques

De-escalation is the use of communication or other techniques to stabilize, slow, or reduce the intensity of a potentially violent situation without using physical force. If handled properly, these methods can reduce the risk of violence.

- **Prioritize safety** - Your safety and the safety of others on the jobsite is the highest priority. Maintain a safe distance and avoid being along with an individual who is combative.
- **Know when to leave** - If there is a risk of imminent violence, remove yourself from the situation and seek help.
- **Recognize your limits** - Some techniques may work with certain individuals but not others. Understand your vulnerabilities and seek assistance when needed.
- **Call for help** - If you feel a situation escalating, seek support from other staff, security, or local law enforcement.

Verbal Strategies to Defuse Situations

Consider using phrases that show empathy and a willingness to understand:

- “I can call someone to help.”
- “Sorry about that.”
- “I hear you.”
- “I appreciate that.”
- “I’ll do what I can.”
- “I understand.”

Purposeful Actions to Consider

- Empathize: show genuine concern and a willingness to understand.
- Respect personal space: Maintain a safe distance and avoid touching the other person.
- Change the setting: If possible, move the conversation to a quieter or neutral area. Remove bystanders when necessary.
- Listen actively: Give your full attention, nod, ask clarifying questions and avoid interrupting.
- Remain calm: Purposefully demonstrate calmness and composure.

Non-Verbal Do’s and Don’ts:

DO:

- Stay relaxed and stand at an angle rather than directly in front of the person
- Keep your hands down, open and visible
- Use slow, deliberate movements
- Maintain a neutral and attentive facial expression.

DO NOT:

- Stand directly in front of the other person
- Point your finger or make excessive gestures
- Fake a smile

Managing Stress for Effective De-escalation

Stress can impact your ability to use de-escalation techniques effectively. If your stress is visible, it may escalate the situation further. Understanding how stress affects you and others can help prevent conflicts from spiraling out of control.

Solutions for Employers

1. **Implement a zero-tolerance policy** - Clearly define unacceptable behaviors, reporting processes, and consequences.
2. **Educate** workers on identifying and responding to potential violent situations.
3. **Encourage open communication** - Ensure employees can report incidents without fear of retaliation.
4. **Conduct risk assessments** - Identify high stress points in projects, evaluate past incident reports, and address potential hazards.
5. **Establish reporting and investigation procedures** - Ensure employees understand how to report incidents And that all reports are taken seriously.
6. **Support mental health and conflict resolution programs** – Provide access to employee assistance programs (EAPs) and medication resources.

Final Thoughts

Workplace safety is a shared responsibility. By recognizing warning signs, applying de-escalation techniques, and fostering a culture of open communication, we can create a safer and more respectful work environment for everyone. Speak up, support one another, and take action to ensure workplace violence prevention remains a priority.