

Dos and Don'ts to Minimize Violence

Violence can erupt unexpectedly, even at work. But sometimes, our personal behavior can help to minimize or de-escalate potentially violent situations. Here are a few suggestions of ways we can decrease the likelihood of a co-worker or customer (or partner of an employee) becoming violent. Remember—if at any time a person's behavior starts to escalate beyond your comfort zone, disengage.

DO:

- Project calmness—move and speak slowly, quietly, and confidently.
- Be an empathetic listener—encourage the person to talk and listen patiently.
- Focus your attention on the other person to let him/her know you are interested in what he/she has to say.
- Maintain a relaxed yet attentive posture and position yourself at a “right angle” rather than directly in front of the other person.
- Acknowledge the person's feelings. Indicate that you see he or she is quite upset.
- Ask for small, specific favors, such as asking the person to move to a quieter area.
- Establish ground rules if unreasonable behavior persists. Calmly describe the consequences of any violent behavior.
- Use delay tactics, which will give the person time to calm down. For example, offer a drink of water (in a disposable cup—a glass could be used as a weapon).
- Be reassuring and point out choices. Break big problems into smaller, more manageable problems.
- Accept criticism in a positive way. When complaints might be true, use statements like, “You're probably right,” or “That was my fault.” If the criticism seems unwarranted, ask clarifying questions.
- Ask for his or her recommendations. Repeat back to him/her what you think he/she is requesting of you.
- Arrange yourself so a visitor cannot block your access to an exit. If possible, also try to arrange yourself so that the agitated person has an “out” as well.
- Arrange your desk and work area so that objects such as pens, staplers, paperweights, envelope openers, etc., cannot be used as weapons against you.

DO NOT:

- Use styles of communication that generate hostility such as apathy, a “brush off,” coldness, condescension, strictly going “by the rules,” or giving someone the run-around.
- Reject all of the complainant's demands from the start.
- Pose in challenging stances such as standing directly opposite someone, hands on hips or crossing your arms.
- Make any physical contact with the complainant, or engage in activities such as finger-pointing or long periods of fixed eye contact.
- Make sudden movements that can be seen as threatening. Notice the tone, volume, and rate of your speech.
- Challenge, threaten, or dare the individual, belittle the person, or attempt to make him/her look foolish.
- Criticize or act impatiently toward the agitated individual.
- Attempt to bargain with a threatening individual.
- Try to make the situation seem less serious than it is (e.g., “Hey Joe, nothing's really that bad—why are you so upset about such a small thing?”)
- Make false statements or promises you cannot keep.
- Try to impart a lot of technical or complicated information when emotions are high.
- Take sides or agree with distortions
- Invade the individual's personal space. Make sure there is a space of 3' to 6' between you and the other person.