



Keeping the Workplace Safe

Conflict, disruption, and threats at work occur more often than expected—and the impact on mental health can be substantial. This is what your HR team can do.



In HRCI's *State of HR* report released earlier this year, 97% of HR professionals surveyed said they feel safe at work. About a quarter say the idea of violence in the office "never crosses their mind." But the truth is that workplace conflict is often misunderstood.

While major tragedies such as shootings and other deaths dominate news headlines, such cases are exceedingly rare. Smaller acts of conflict, disruption, and even violence are a far more common reality.

The HRCI survey showed that 4 in 10 HR professionals have witnessed some form of aggressive or criminal behavior, including verbal arguments or shouting, hostile situations, direct threats, damage to company property, physical altercations, or the presence of weapons. One-third have witnessed bullying.

While safety should be a minimum requirement in every workplace, the survey showed that many companies still have work to do. For example, 29% of survey respondents said their organization has no active shooter plan in place, and a similar percentage (31%) take no measures at all to prepare employees for active shooter situations. Among those at organizations that do take measures, about half (49%) said the training was fair, poor, or very poor.

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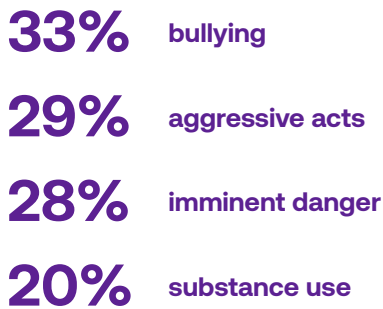
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Workplace experts say conflict of any kind can have mental health consequences for both employees and managers. The problems can manifest in many ways, from increased anxiety, turnover, and absenteeism to lower productivity and morale. Fortunately, companies that act early and deliberately can build safer environments and a stronger foundation for workforce well-being.

“Everyone deserves to feel safe at work,” said Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI. “We cannot ignore incidents like bullying or shouting, because these situations can escalate into the catastrophic events we fear the most. Conflict should be acknowledged and addressed fully, and never be considered a routine aspect of the workplace.”

What have HR professionals witnessed in the workplace?



Source: HRCI State of HR 2026 survey

A Proactive Approach to Mental Health

Minimizing workplace conflict, whether it be verbal altercations, bullying, or other forms of disruption, is vital to the mental health of any workforce.

“While we can expect legitimate and reasonable disagreements at every organization, it is important to prevent them from escalating into conflict,” Dufrane said. “It should be very clear what is acceptable behavior and what is not. There must also be discreet avenues to report problems and obtain help. Employees should never feel like they are on their own to solve the problems we all share.”

Dr. Alessandra Polizzi, CEO of Verdant Consulting and author of *The Workplace Mental Health Strategy Workbook*, recommends that companies take a proactive stance on mental health issues.

“Too many organizations still approach mental health with a focus on mental illness,” she wrote in HRCI’s *State of HR* report. “They offer benefits to people already in crisis. A much more effective strategy is to shift that focus to prevention, addressing problems such as burnout, depression, and withdrawal before they have a negative impact.”

Policies that cover violence and harassment; anonymous reporting systems; training in conflict resolution and compassionate intervention; and Employee Assistance Programs that offer counseling can go a long way toward protecting mental health.

“Mental health matters, both to our people and our mission,” Polizzi wrote. “A preventative investment in the mental and emotional well-being of our employees—including those in HR—is an investment in the success of any business.”



What's Happening at Work

Workplace deaths are closely tracked by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics through the [Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries](#)—and the trend may be more encouraging than recent headlines suggest.

While headlines tend to highlight the most extreme cases, actual workplace deaths have *decreased* in recent years. According to government data, there were 733 violence-related work fatalities in 2024. Homicide accounted for 470 cases, and more than a third were suicides. While zero would be ideal, the number of deaths is still extremely low when compared to the 170 million people in the U.S. workforce. Due to country-by-country differences in measurement and reporting, there is no universally agreed-upon number for total global violent deaths at work.

The HRCI survey showed that other forms of conflict and disruption are far more common than violent acts. For example, 33% of HR professionals have witnessed bullying; 29% have seen acts of aggression; 28% have witnessed threats, physical altercations, or the presence of weapons; and 20% have witnessed substance use at their organization.

Situations like these do not always manifest into a full-blown altercation, and they may be more subtle. For example, bullying is not always a verbal exchange. It can happen when an employee's voice is not heard, when work is purposely unacknowledged or attributed to someone else, or when someone is intentionally excluded from committees or key decisions that impact their job. These situations, compounded, can escalate and result in more serious incidents.

External forces can also complicate relations at work. For example, almost half of those who responded to the survey have experienced issues relating to politics. More than a third (35%) have witnessed or heard a political argument at work. Almost one in six (14%) have seen an employee leave due to political tension and 16% have seen those tensions impact client relations. Nearly one in 10 (9%) say political tensions have impacted their ability to hire.

“Regardless of the political climate, everyone at work is entitled to respect—and is responsible for being respectful in return,” Dufrane said. “Our job in HR is to create an environment that promotes healthy interaction, while also ensuring physical and psychological safety. When we do that, we minimize the situations that result in more serious conflict.”

Addressing Conflict at Work

Experts in workplace conflict say that mitigation requires a mixture of policies, procedures, training, and assistance programs to ensure all employees and managers understand how to handle situations that arise and have the proper tools to do so.

“The best preparation for potential workplace conflict will be tailor-made for your organization, fully integrated and continuously improved,” Dufrane said. “This is not a single program or policy, nor a set-it-and-forget situation. As an HR community, we must continually develop and refine the ways we provide physical and psychological safety in the workplace, where employees can thrive without fear.”

Kathy Claytor, SPHR, GPHR, chair of the HRCI Board of Directors, echoed Dufrane: “The ‘tone at the top’ and a positive, open workplace culture can help mitigate some of these issues before they escalate to violence.”



Resource: To learn how to address political conflict at work, [download HRCI’s Managing Political Polarization in the Workplace.](#)

Workplace Deaths

| Year | Total fatal injuries | Violent acts | Homicides |
|------|----------------------|--------------|-----------|
| 2014 | 4,821 | 749 | 403 |
| 2015 | 4,836 | 703 | 417 |
| 2016 | 5,190 | 866 | 500 |
| 2017 | 5,147 | 807 | 458 |
| 2018 | 5,250 | 828 | 453 |
| 2019 | 5,333 | 841 | 454 |
| 2020 | 4,764 | 705 | 392 |
| 2021 | 5,190 | 761 | 481 |
| 2022 | 5,486 | 849 | 524 |
| 2023 | 5,283 | 740 | 458 |
| 2024 | 5,070 | 733 | 470 |

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries*

Note: A methodology change took place at BLS in 2023. Prior to that year, the numbers for violent acts contained animal attacks and cases where someone was hurt by another person but intent was unclear. In 2023 and 2024, the number of violent acts contains only cases of deliberate, intentional acts of human violence.

A Framework for Workplace Violence Prevention

A comprehensive violence prevention program addresses both prevention and response. Here's what experts recommend.

- **Develop a Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan.** Create and maintain a written plan that, when implemented broadly and combined with training, can reduce the potential for workplace violence. It is critical to ensure all workers understand the policy; are trained on prevention methods and how to effectively react when an incident occurs; and understand that all claims involving workplace violence will be investigated and addressed immediately.

“Consider working with local police departments or security experts, who are typically willing to tour and review workplaces from a physical safety standpoint,” said Claytor. “They can provide more informed recommendations to improve and protect physical spaces, including badge systems, entry point protocols, parking lot security, camera placement, etc. Whatever action you take should involve and be communicated to your employees for maximum engagement.”

- **Develop (or Refine) Anti-Harassment Policies.** Clear policies addressing violence, harassment, discrimination, and bullying should be created to communicate expectations for how employees and managers treat one another. These policies should clearly define unacceptable behavior, provide guidelines for reporting incidents, outline procedures when reports are filed, and explain disciplinary measures. Regularly review and update these policies to ensure they are functioning effectively, well understood, and align with changing workplace dynamics.
- **Offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** EAPs often address the personal stressors that, when left unresolved, can surface as workplace conflict or volatile behavior. EAPs can help address mental health, Substance Use Disorder, financial stress, and personal conflicts—all known precursors to workplace disruption. A 2025 study that examined more than 166,000 employees who used EAP services found them effective: 79% recovered from anxiety or depression, 67% from Substance Use Disorder, and 61% from workplace productivity problems.

“Create trusted relationships with the EAP provider for voluntary use, referrals, mediation, on-site grief and crisis counseling, and lunch and learns,” said Claytor. “The EAP can proactively work with your team to provide aggregated data on trends they are seeing, enabling you to operate more proactively and less reactively.”

- **Promote EAP Participation.** It is not enough to simply offer an EAP. Companies must ensure employees are aware of the benefits and encouraged to use them. A 2024 study published by the [International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications](#) analyzed more than 85,000 EAP cases. The study found that utilization is low, with usage rates for counseling averaging about 5% annually before the pandemic and rising to roughly 9% afterward.

- **Train Managers to Recognize Warning Signs.** Supervisors are often the first to observe behavioral changes that may signal escalating distress. Being aware of warning signs is part of a solid prevention strategy. Early recognition and compassionate intervention can help an employee before a crisis develops.
- **Provide Conflict Resolution and De-escalation Training.** Equipping employees and managers with practical communication skills is one of the most direct ways to prevent disruption. Training should cover methods for preventing or diffusing volatile situations or aggressive behavior, such as conflict resolution, stress and anger management, and relaxation techniques. With structured tools to manage tension and disagreements, situations are far less likely to escalate.
- **Build Open, Multi-Channel Reporting Systems.** Employees must have safe, accessible, and confidential ways to raise concerns. Providing an open line of communication to management, the HR team, and other key members of company leadership encourages people to report potential problems early. Anonymous reporting options are particularly helpful in creating a safe reporting culture in which grievances are heard and addressed appropriately.
- **Establish Post-Incident Response Protocols.** Effective response after incidents and close calls can prevent recurrence and support affected staff. Everyone involved, including witnesses, should have access to counseling and trauma-informed care when appropriate. All incidents should be recorded and individuals debriefed, creating data that drives ongoing program evaluation and improvement.

Even the most well-designed program falls short without visible commitment from the top. Executives and managers set the tone—through their decisions, their behavior, and the resources they’re willing to invest. Employees, too, play a vital role, bringing ground-level knowledge of the workplace to help reinforce policies and procedures.

The Recovery Friendly Workplace

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a common contributor to workplace conflict and disruption. When left unaddressed, it can escalate into volatile behavior, safety incidents, and crises that affect entire teams.

The good news is that the workplace is one of the most effective settings to identify and address SUD, and a growing certification movement is helping companies take meaningful action.

The National Recovery Friendly Workplace Institute, run by the nonprofit Global Recovery Initiatives Foundation, offers certification for companies and nonprofits that want to better support employees impacted by SUD.

A Recovery Friendly Workplace is one in which the employer and employees work together to create policies, practices, and a work environment that supports current and prospective employees in recovery.

[National Recovery Friendly Workplace Certification](#) can be sought by organizations that have employees in multiple states and meet national standards in areas such as culture, hiring and retention, benefits, and education and awareness. HRCI itself is certified as a Recovery Friendly Workplace.

“It was important to us to help lead the conversation on how employers can support recovery and reduce stigma,” Dufrane said. “We feel that certification as a Recovery Friendly Workplace is a powerful step forward, and we wanted to lead by example.”

To learn more about supporting SUD recovery in the workplace, [download HRCI’s Becoming Recovery Friendly white paper.](#)

“What we are doing here is culture building,” Dufrane said. “It takes buy-in at every level to create a successful effort. By making safety a priority, employers are signaling to the workforce that they care about their well-being, including physical safety and mental health.”



Resource: To learn about the workplace impact of Substance Use Disorder, [download HRCI’s white paper *Becoming Recovery Friendly*](#).

Preparing for Mass Violence

While active shooter situations are rare in the workplace, every company should be prepared. The HRCI survey suggested many are not. Twenty-nine percent said their organization has no active shooter plan in place, and, among those who received some form of active shooter training, 49% thought it was fair, poor or very poor.

Indeed, only about half (52%) said their company trains employees on what to do in an active shooter situation; about 35% proactively coordinate with local safety authorities; 28% assign employees to enact safety measures; and only 18% conduct active shooter drills.

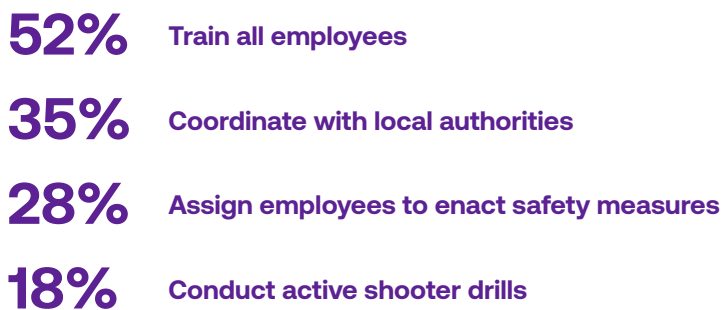
Experts recommend the following to increase preparedness and safety:

- **Develop an Emergency Action Plan.** Every organization should have a written, site-specific action plan that addresses active shooter and mass violence scenarios before an incident occurs. The plan should include who is responsible for initiating emergency procedures, how employees will be notified, where shelter-in-place areas are located, how to account for all personnel, and how to coordinate with first responders. Importantly, the plan must be communicated to all employees and revisited whenever facilities, staff, or procedures change. The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency [developed a template and instruction guide](#) to help organizations create a realistic plan. Companies can also review the [International Labour Organization’s global activities](#), including ratification of an international standard on violence in the workplace, as well as existing case studies and handbooks used in a variety of countries.

- **Include a Recovery Plan.** In the unlikely event that an incident does take place, what happens in the hours, days, and weeks afterward profoundly affects a company’s ability to recover and return to work. Employers should work with emergency response organizations and their Employee Assistance Program in advance to ensure trauma counselors and other services are available to support employees following an incident. Recovery planning, including how to communicate with employees, manage media inquiries, and safely resume operations, should be built into the Emergency Action Plan before any crisis occurs.
- **Train All Employees on Procedures.** Everyone at the company should know how to respond in an active shooter emergency, including how to evacuate if a safe path exists and how to shelter and barricade if evacuation is not possible. Training should be conducted regularly, cover all shifts, and be adapted for the physical layout and employee population of each specific facility. Training and drills should be conducted by professionals who understand how to do so without inflicting trauma.

“In HR, it is our responsibility to build strategies that protect our people, and to empower them to keep themselves safe, too,” Dufrane said. “We must be able to take action when the worst happens. The best way to do that is by planning in advance, working with experts in our communities, training our teams, and making preparation a companywide priority.”

How companies prepare for an active shooter situation



Source: HRCI State of HR 2026 survey

Methodology

The State of HR survey was completed by 4,583 human resources professionals, who received it via email between October 15–31, 2025. A large majority of those respondents (85%) practice HR in the United States.

Forty-eight percent had 15 years of experience or more, 19% had 10 to <15 years, 18% had 5 to <10 years, 11% had 2 to <5 years, and 4% had less than two years. Our sample included 1,727 individuals who reported holding titles at director-level or above, and 1,686 people who indicated that they manage other HR Professionals. Eighty percent identified as women; 18% identified as male; and about 2% identified as non-binary, preferred to self-describe, or chose not to identify at all. Respondents were 64% white, 16% Black, 9% Asian, and 8% Hispanic/Latino. Unless otherwise noted, the percentages in this report reflect only respondents who answered each question. All percentages are rounded, and the data was not weighted.