



PARTNER VIOLENCE WE ALL NEED TO PAY ATTENTION

By **Audrey Russo**, President & CEO,
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As the separation of work and life becomes even more blurred—fueled by ubiquitous access, continuous optimization and wider responsibilities—ensuring the safety of employees becomes even more imperative. While safety is often focused on the workplace itself (keeping people free from accidents, hostile situations, and safety code, etc.) we now realize that the impact of each employee’s personal safety outside of work has significant impact on company morale and productivity.

Intuitively this seems obvious. But what’s frequently overlooked is the infringement of domestic violence on an individual’s ability to actually perform work as well as feel safe. In recent months, there have been new campaigns that have brought attention to the complex issue of partner violence (PV), creating new, important conversations across the business community.

There is a Pittsburgh-based organization, Standing Firm, that provides deep expertise for employers of the financial, safety and human costs of partner violence on the workplace, while also providing useful tools for taking effective organizational action.

According to Standing Firm (standingfirmswpa.com):

- 21 percent of full-time employed adults in a recent study were victims of domestic violence;
- 78 percent of human resources professionals say partner violence is a serious workplace issue;
- PV-related events in the workplace are responsible for 25 percent of all workplace violence incidents in the US each year;
- More than 50 percent of all murders of female employees in the workplace each year occur in companies with less than 20 employees;
- Nearly 20 percent of employed PV perpetrators report a workplace accident or near miss from inattentiveness due to preoccupation with their relationship.

How prepared are you, as a leader, to assess and address the issues which surround employees who may be in abusive and violent relationships in their personal lives? Are you aware of the signs that one of your team members is a victim of PV? Do you believe that what a person endures in their personal life has no impact on your work environment? Do you know what resources are available support your employees and yourself, as a leader?

The focus on wellness in the workplace is critical. We cannot confuse wellness with good physical health, reduction of obesity and chronic medical conditions. Nor can we think that small companies and startups know their employees well enough that they should remain ill equipped to support their people. All this happens as a result of awareness and education. Companies who are invested in having a healthy and productive workforce will recognize that addressing partner violence must be an integral facet of the resources available to employees.

There are some misnomers about the separation of personal life and work life. There is prevalent misuse of company time and resources by PV perpetrators engaged in stalking, harassment and threatening communications. There are tremendous costs to companies through loss of productivity, increased absenteeism, costly mistakes while distracted and potential liability if threats are delivered via company equipment (e.g., cellphones, email, cars) and/or on company time.

And sadly, the use of technology to perpetrate abuse is on the rise. Using technology, a perpetrator can:

- Make threats via email, send disturbing info electronically, post fake or hurtful information on blogs, etc.
- Monitor or stalk the victim by installing devices on the victim’s car or spyware on the victim’s phone
- Impersonate the victim via social media or by hacking into and sending bogus emails or posts via the victim’s account

According to Standing Firm, employees who are victims of PV show increased absenteeism (8 million workdays lost/year) and decreased productivity (cost=about \$728 billion/year) and \$5.8 billion in increased medical costs.

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Women hold only about 17 percent of tech positions at tech companies (using stats from Microsoft, Google, Apple), but adding in women in non-tech positions in such companies brings the rate of female employees up to 30 percent in the tech industry.

In addition to employees who are victims or perpetrators of PV, there may be employee “bystanders”—employees who know something bad is going on in a coworker’s life and who are working distracted and worried themselves. Attributed to the national coverage of high-profile debacles, we are beginning a national conversation about bystanders and how they can be empowered to stand up on behalf of victims and/or against perpetrator behavior. We must provide everyone with tools and resources to help.

Leadership establishes organizational culture and sets acceptable standards. I implore you to create a sustainable corporate culture that is supportive of victims, intolerant of the workplace behaviors of perpetrators, and to become both educated and alert to the threat of PV-related workplace violence.

Employers who do not take reasonable steps to prevent or abate a recognized violent hazard in the workplace can be cited under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s General Duty Clause, no matter the size of the company.

Lastly, while more women are victims, this does not preclude men. We all need to pay close attention to PV. Set standards for the office. PV impacts all of us, whether we now know it or not. It cannot be ignored.

For more info across SWPA:

Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh Hotline
412-687-8005

Crisis Center North (Northern suburbs of Allegheny County)
412-364-5556

Womansplace (Mon-Yough area & Allegheny County)
412-678-4616

Alle-Kiski Area HOPE Center (Alle-Kiski Valley)
724-224-4673

The National Domestic Violence Hotline (Nationwide)
800-799-7233

The Center for Victims of Violence and Crime
1-866-644-2882

Pittsburgh Action Against Rape
1-866-363-7273

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