

Civil Unrest and Employees: When Community Concerns Become Workplace Challenges

Planning Ahead to Keep External Events from Affecting Internal Culture

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The global workforce today is more diverse and blended than ever before. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and now iGen all work and live together, and it's an incredible challenge for managers to balance the various personalities, morals, and beliefs evenly and fairly.

With so many diverse viewpoints within each generation, not to mention between generations themselves, conversations in the workplace can sometimes become argumentative. We've all been advised to tread lightly when discussing politics and religion in public, but recently other issues have become sources of workplace disagreements.

In recent years, we have seen the rise of discussions on racial and gender inequality, income inequality, gender discrimination, opiate abuse, health care, and more. In particular, the internet has become a tool for both public discourse and mobilization. More than ever before, people across the world are able to voice their opinions on social issues, disagree or find common ground, and even organize for protests or large gatherings in response to the issues facing our modern world.

Emergency and human resources managers need to understand, then, that their employees don't exist in a bubble. Internet-driven interconnectivity means that employees are not only aware of the issues in their community, but also the issues in the world at large. Managers must know how to handle crises in the workplace, yes, but sometimes crises outside the workplace can

have equally dramatic effects on employees, and can be much harder to control.

At FEI, we've received an increasing number of calls at our employee assistance program (EAP) service center about problems in the workplace thanks to civil unrest and polarized public opinion, and we've developed strategies to help emergency managers handle the intrusion of outside events into the workplace.

Civil Unrest

In seeking to minimize its effects on employees, it's important to first know what civil unrest is. Also known as civil disorder, civil unrest is a broad term used to describe unrest caused by a group of people. Within this description, though, it can take many forms.

Some civil unrest is concentrated in localized areas or neighborhoods and affects the residents of these specific communities, usually sparked by some major event in the community. This was seen in the Rodney King riots of the 1960s and more recently during the rioting in Ferguson, Missouri, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Civil unrest also can occur when groups of people deliberately target a business district, a facility, a transportation system, or an organization to impose maximum disruption. This is the kind of civil disorder that occurred during the World Trade Organization and Occupy Wall Street protests, and can directly affect business in the targeted areas.

Civil unrest can even grow to regional or state levels, affecting large numbers of people no matter the original cause. Unrest on this scale was seen in the days following the 2016 election, as both protests and riots broke out across the United States. Additionally, this level of unrest was seen in reaction to the 2016 shooting of Philando Castile. Individuals located states away from Castile's Minnesota town were affected by the nationwide civil unrest that resulted.

Conflict in the Workplace

Racial injustice, partisan politics and other hot-button issues can bring civil unrest into your workplace, and employees aren't going to leave their thoughts and emotions at the door. The best workplaces are those that have a diversity of thoughts and ideas, but this same diversity can lead to heads butting in times of high stress or conflict.

Conflict can negatively affect workplace culture and turn an external crisis into an internal crisis, but emergency managers have to be careful of ineffective zero-tolerance policies that squash discussion altogether. The most effective offensive against civil unrest's impact in the workplace is planning. Emergency managers should avoid falling into the trap of thinking "it won't happen here." Civil unrest is not a common crisis, but one for which managers and employers always need to be prepared. We recommend several key steps to

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help your organization plan for any civil crisis.

Adhere to OSHA

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OSHA), it's the duty of employers to provide a safe and healthful workplace for their employees. Employers can do this by setting and enforcing standards, and by providing training, outreach, education and assistance before a crisis occurs.

Disruptive and assaultive individuals can cause disturbances that open employers to OSHA lawsuits. Emergency managers should make sure to preempt such events with planning that keeps their workplace within OSHA standards.

Set the Tone for Appropriate Behavior

Don't assume your employees are equipped with perfect workplace etiquette. People are hired to fit the needs of the company, but this does not always mean they're hired for their workplace behavior. In addition, what may work in one workplace could be completely inappropriate for another.

Simply stating that combative or inappropriate behavior is not tolerated is rarely enough. Actively setting the tone and educating

employees on acceptable workplace behaviors is critical, and will ideally be accomplished before a civil crisis breaks out so you're not dealing with an out-of-control workplace situation.

Create a Culture of Diversity and Inclusion

Often, managers see a call to foster diversity and think of racial, gender or sexual orientation requirements in hiring practices. What we encourage, however, is inclusion of diverse thoughts and opinions.

When making plans in the workplace, whether about handling a civil crisis or planning for the future, make sure to include employees at all levels of responsibility. Managers should avoid an "idea vacuum" where their ideas alone matter.

Create a workplace where differences of opinion can be discussed in a respectful way, and the effects of a controversial or tense external situation will be minimized internally.

Establish a Process for Conflict Resolution

Even the most ideologically diverse workplace will experience disagreements, and those disagreements can disrupt workflow. Establishing a conflict resolution plan or policy means emergency managers can prevent disagreements from escalating into conflicts that become detrimental to workplace culture and productivity.

Understand Community Dynamics

Organizations must be careful of denying civil unrest or its likelihood. As much as it seems that "it could never happen here," being unprepared due to skepticism will give your company a negative public image and hinder it from effectively dealing with any crisis that does arise.

Having your finger on the community pulse won't just make you a more open, receptive company. It also will prepare you for how civil unrest may develop.

Strategize Communication Efforts

Always know in advance how your organization will communicate in the face of unrest. Do you need to know about curfews or street closings? Respond to external requests for information? Talk to your employees?

Knowing how you'll communicate with the media and on social media is all a part of preparing for a crisis, and should not be overlooked. In an increasingly diverse, vocal and interconnected world, being prepared for the effects of external crises on internal culture will help your organization remain resilient and effectively manage otherwise damaging situations. ▲



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