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## When domestic violence comes to the office.

**Author: Martin Scheepers**

Anger and male-perpetrated violence are a pandemic in this country. How do companies approach the sensitive issue and are there policies in place to help employees who are victims of violence?

We are an exceedingly angry country and brutal attacks of violence by men on women in this country need to be addressed on all fronts. On 27 September 2017, StatsSA released figures from their latest crime survey showing that sexual offences (including rape) have increased by 117% in the last financial year. Earlier in the year, Statistics SA's 2016 Demographic and Health Survey listed that one in five women in our country (over the age of 18) has experienced physical violence.

### **Acknowledging a violent society**

When addressing the issue of anger, it's important to distinguish between anger per se and violence or aggression. Anger itself is a normal human emotion. The problem arises when the individual fails to understand it. Anger is energy and unless processed constructively it is ultimately expressed in the form of violence and aggression, on a physical level as well as verbally and emotionally. This cycle is unfortunately all too present in our society, and to break this cycle, one has to start by understanding anger.

### **In the workplace**

Corporate spaces may feel that issues of anger and domestic violence are best left out there in the world, and not in the office – but corporates need to understand that the workplace is not immune.

My question is: how do we create the safe space for these issues to be acknowledged and addressed? A Violence at Work Survey (by the International Labour Organisation) conducted a few years back in South Africa showed that nearly 80% of respondents had experienced hostile behaviour at the workplace during their working life. The survey further stated that remedies to workplace violence can only be applied effectively once the problem has been brought out into the open. This suggests that most effective solutions are obtained when the issue is addressed by an active partnership of all the actors concerned. The overriding question concerns how this collaboration should be constructed.

Many men are quite disconnected from their emotions; therefore, initiating a structured 'awareness' or 'counselling' intervention could definitely impact positively on reducing aggression levels, helping male employees deal better with stress and living a more balanced life, both at work and in the home space.

Gender Activist, Lisa Vetten, says approaching violent behaviour in the workspace is a loaded topic, and must be handled with extreme caution. "I think having conversations with men about their conduct is extremely difficult – it has to be facilitated with a great deal of skill. Most men avoid the topic, or joke about it or make light of it."

She says the notion of introducing an anger management strategy or a few courses in stress management won't touch sides in the corporate space.

"Who is going to want to stand up and admit in front of their company that they have anger problems? No one! I think it has to be quite a careful strategy. You know there are other issues as well, personal information and stuff that people can use against others in the workplace, so there has to be a great deal of sensitivity around how this is dealt with."

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It's clear that for such an intervention to be successful, it would need to be successful from the outset, or it will be sabotaged before it even begins. This is the proverbial million-dollar question.

She says, now more than ever, it is essential for companies to look at the topic of violence and how this is addressed by the company as a whole.

"How does one assist those in the company who are experiencing violence?" She says it is also key to work with management on bad behaviour that is being modelled within a company. "Is there sexual harassment going on in the company, how is the company taking that up and investigating it? How does this company address a lack of recognition of female employees?"

She says the workplace is an important place to acknowledge that violent behaviour is a challenge to our society and that it definitely spills into the workplace.

"Sometimes abusive partners arrive at the workplace and threaten others, so there are safety issues – and you can raise these more broadly. It affects performance, you are going to need sometimes – staff need time off work to be able to go to court, so I think there it a clear issue for workplace intervention."

Confidentiality is absolutely key, according to Vetten, and trust needs to be at the heart of any programmes. "Matters of violent behaviour cannot be broadcast to the whole company and safe spaces need to be an option," says Vetten. The notion of violent management strategies in the workplace is a tricky subject, and one that many companies would like to ignore completely.

However, Vetten says some local companies are being proactive in this space and she says that having some kind of policy going forward is essential. "It's not just an HR issue, but an issue in terms of how you intervene".

"All companies, small or large, should have some sort of policy or thinking on how they are going to deal with this issue," she says, but she also advises that companies do their homework and proceed with caution. "If you want to go in there stirring things up you had better make sure you are going to be there to help pick up the pieces."

It might not be an easy one to tackle, but sooner or later the corporate world is going to have to put policies in place to deal with the increased levels of violence in our country. Being prepared is key.

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