

Fighting back: How your boss can stop domestic abuse

Businesses are at the frontline of helping employees who are enduring violence in silence, as Social Policy Editor **LAUREN NOVAK** reports



MANAGING & UNDERSTANDING

Case studies provided by the Working Women's Centre SA
*Names have been changed

CASE 1

LISA has worked as a factory machine operator for five years. She recently told her boss she was experiencing violence at home and has since ended the relationship. Before telling her boss, Lisa had been given a warning for being absent. She had been unwell and her then-partner undertook to call her manager. But instead of explaining her illness, he – unbeknown to Lisa – told the manager that she was not home and he did not know where she was. As a result of the suspicions this raised, Lisa has been isolated at work and is facing the threat of another formal warning. She is taking days off without pay because she has no sick leave and has not been able to access domestic violence leave.

absence but, after undertaking training, she was able to negotiate a safety plan for the employee instead, to give her time off to secure her property, seek legal advice and change her banking arrangements.

CASE 4

LAURA manages a casual employee whose ex-partner was jailed for two months for causing her significant injuries. The violence was only disclosed when Laura referred the worker for a health assessment because her injuries were hindering her at work. She had tried to “soldier on” because she feared losing her job. The employee’s ex-partner was due for release from jail on a Monday and she did not show up to work that day. Eventually Laura reached her by phone to discover her youngest child had been admitted to hospital. Laura arranged to follow up with the employee and put a safety plan in place in future.

CASE 5

JEAN works at a regional school. She experienced years of abuse from her partner, which she kept hidden. She tried to leave the relationship but feared for her safety and was worried about financial insecurity. Eventually, the stress of the situation – and lack of support – left Jean exhausted and unfit to do her job so she resigned. She now runs her own business and aims to be a model employer by supporting staff experiencing difficulties at home.

CASE 2

JANE holds a senior position in a government agency. Her former partner was jailed for domestic violence offences. She received a call from the Corrections Department warning that her ex-partner was due for release. Jane told her manager, in case her ex-partner tried to find her at work. The manager had attended training for employers and sought advice on whether Jane would qualify for paid domestic violence leave to give her time to seek legal advice and secure her property. Even though Jane was no longer experiencing the violence at home, it was decided she was eligible. Along with workplace safety planning, this equipped Jane to feel safer when her ex-partner was released.

CASE 3

STACEY manages a busy community facility. She became aware that a worker who had been frequently absent was experiencing violence at home – including attempts by her partner to strangle her and run her over. The employee had confided in co-workers but none had reported anything to management. Stacey had considered placing the worker under performance management for her

OFFICE car parks are emerging as a “hot spot” for incidents involving employees caught in abusive relationships, as more bosses seek training to help affected staff.

South Australia’s Working Women’s Centre is fielding increasing calls from managers of private businesses and government agencies to better understand how violence and abuse may be affecting their workforce.

More women are also willing to divulge that problems at work, such as lateness, absences or failure to meet expectations, are stemming from abuse at home. The WWC has delivered almost 140 training sessions since the start of 2016, increasingly in regional parts of the state.

WWC director Sandra Dann said there had been a spike in employers “reporting that the workplace car park is a hot spot when domestic and family violence is present”.

“Reports range from partners arriving to pick up a worker and, if they are not on time, yelling and screaming abuse at them to ... workers going to their cars at the end of a shift and being ambushed by a partner or ex-partner,” she said.

Ms Dann said teachers who attended training sessions, including in Mt Gambier and Port Augusta, revealed that

schools were also a common site for family violence-related incidents.

“Teachers ... display a high level of knowledge of domestic violence as it relates to children, or families, and good strategies for keeping others safe,” Ms Dann said, “but they often feel completely exposed (at work) when (it) is happening to them.”

THE Education Department engaged WWC in February last year and so far at least one person from 23 schools has received specialist training.

Department employee psychology and wellness manager Jane Richards said the training educated site leaders and managers on “how to appropriately respond to, support and manage” an employee experiencing domestic violence “to keep

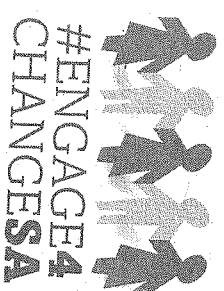
them safe and supported in the workplace”.

New rules, which took effect this month, require certain employers to provide up to five days of unpaid leave for about 2.9 million Australian workers who may be experiencing family violence.

Ms Dann said more women “seem to be aware that the workplace has a role to play in assisting them when they are experiencing ... family violence, even if they are not clear on what this is”.

“More women are disclosing that their workplace problem is because of their partner or ex-partner’s behaviour in the past,” she said. South Australia’s 106,000 public servants are entitled to 15 days of domestic violence leave a year.

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