

# Guidance on management of conflicts that can involve threats and violence



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# Introduction

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The guidance is composed by Merete Skov Habermann, Health & Safety Department, SDU and is adopted by the Main Occupational Health and Safety Committee in June 2014.

The guidance is composed for the work of conducting a risk assessment and handle risks by the health and safety group. It should be seen as a first debating point to use in handling risk of violence or threats.

Colleagues or groups of colleagues who are particularly vulnerable to threats or violence should be covered by a strategy for conflict management in the unit. The strategy for conflict management must make sense in the local working environment and be adjusted to the size of the risks of threats or violence in given working situations.

For example, the following can be mentioned here: Night-time work, solitary work, working with valuables (cash, for example), working with rejection (staff and course administration, for example), contact with those under the influence of drugs or alcohol, the mentally ill or with other people who are considered after individual assessment to be capable of manifesting an increased level of risk-inducing, externalised behaviour.

Such situations at work are identified as part of the unit's work with workplace assessment and work with emergency management planning.

The working environment body should take part in the preventive work regarding risks to health and safety, including risks of violence.

**The aims of a conflict management strategy are:**

- To prevent episodes involving threats or violence
- To prepare, communicate and practise internal guidelines for procedures in the case of episodes involving threats or violence.
- To improve measures on the basis of episodes involving threats or violence.

# Preventive measures

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As far as working with people is concerned, it is important that staff have the competences necessary to understand and handle the behaviour they encounter, for example, to act communicatively so as to ward off or reduce conflicts, to know how to summon help and to be able to see warning signs from potentially aggressive individuals.

## Here it is important:

- To have an open and trusting dialogue about how staff experience their own competence in being able to handle situations involving risks of threats or violence
- To have a continuing focus on the tone used in writing and speech among colleagues and towards 'clients'
- To be clear towards staff, colleagues and 'clients' about the rules that apply to the service provided that might give rise to conflicts and to risks of violence, for example, interviews, student counselling etc.
- To assess what competences are necessary in order to prevent and manage threatening situations, including training in, for example, being able to distinguish between assertive, aggressive and potentially violent individuals, and to be able to reduce conflicts (Prepare, for example, a competence plan for the unit that can be used for training of new or transferred staff and in planning staffing)
- To consider how the unit's physical space should be arranged (Does work involving a risk of threats or violence take place in rooms with a sufficiently accommodating appearance, including lighting, acoustics, spaciousness and opportunities for discretion? Should there be a separate escape route, the possibility for surveillance of the room, a barrier/counter between staff and clients?)
- To consider how critical conversations should take place. Which rooms are suitable? Where in the room, and where should those involved in the conversation be placed?
- To agree procedures with colleagues regarding calling for assistance and giving the alarm – banging noises, particular sentences etc. (Is an oral alert sufficient or should there also be technical devices such as an assault alarm?)
- To clarify what is expected in the way of back-up from colleagues (Is it, for example, in order/expected that colleagues offer advice, distract attention, create a movement or take over the conflict? How is back-up effectuated so staff retain respect for each other? Should colleagues wait until the person involved asks for help?)

# "Low arousal – conflict without confrontation"

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"Low arousal – conflict without confrontation" is a calm-inducing pedagogical approach to the management of conflicts. The present section is a summary of a piece by the certified psychologist Bo Hejlskov Elvéns in the book 'Konflikter og vold – en faglig udfordring' ('Conflicts and violence – a professional challenge'). The summary is intended as nothing more than a source of inspiration. When working specifically with these issues, you are referred to the article itself, of which an account is provided below, and it is recommended that you acquire the necessary qualifications if this approach is to be employed.

Conflicts often mean that the parties involved have problems, and the one party's solution can cause problems for the other party. If possible, hold on to the following three principles:

- Listen to the other's problems;  
relate to these and not to the physical expression of it.
- Examine whether your solution causes problems for the other.
- Offer support rather than resistance.

This pedagogical approach assumes that inappropriate behaviour such as threats and violence are often caused by loss of control. When someone loses control, they can react emotionally, and this can include among other forms of reaction stridency, swearing, threats and violence.

# Management of aggressive individuals

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In cases in which a conflict risks developing it is important to try to maintain it as a difference of opinion and not as a personalised issue or a situation in which dialogue is abandoned.

- Remain calm and patient.
- Focus on the other's problem, not on their attitude.
- Be respectful, attentive and appreciative.
- Outline the possibilities open to them.
- Create physical space.
- Make room for reactions.
- Always take care of your own safety and that of others.
- Make others aware of the situation.
- As colleagues, show awareness, not passivity.

## **If the person is considered to be violent:**

- Keep an appropriate distance (counters maintain a natural barrier).
- Discretely remove objects that could be used as a weapon.

It might be relevant to inform of personal description. So be aware of gender, height, build, age, beard growth, accent, clothes, tattoos, any other characteristics for example glasses, accessories e.g. and the color of skin, eyes and hair.

# Calling for assistance

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Being able to call for assistance gives staff a sense of security and of support being at hand, if necessary.

If members of staff feel themselves under threat, they should take no risks but call for assistance.

For procedures associated with calling for assistance to be reliable and create a sense of security, they have to be well thought-out, and everyone involved needs to agree about procedures.

The first strategy for reducing the level of threat might involve summoning a colleague. The aim of having a colleague to take over is to deflect the focus from the emotive issues that may have built up between the parties involved in a dispute. The arrival of a new colleague permits the creation of a new situation and the opportunity to change focus and bring the confrontation to a conclusion. The task of the colleague who has been summoned is not to take control or to be authoritarian, but simply to be present as another person.

If there is an expectation in advance that a conversation might develop into an unfortunate direction, you can contact Technical Services, who, given reasonable notice, will be able to send a staff member to act as a support function for colleagues by being present in the immediate vicinity of the area where the critical conversation is to take place.

If technical aids such as mobile telephones, assault alarms and alarm buttons form part of the equipment used to promote a sense of security, rules regarding their use must have been agreed. Furthermore, reliability of these products and available functional support must be secured in advance as to handle any technical breakdown. Power failure on mobile telephones or an emergency situation outside ordinary working hours are cases which must be considered before any acquisition of technical equipment.

## **Acute need for assistance**

A colleague who feels threatened must not take any chances, but call for assistance as soon as possible. If there is acute need to external help, contact the police directly on 1-1-2.

In an acute situation, contact SDU on 6550 8888, so that SDU can act as a support in the situation, e.g. by directing the police, blocking access, or providing advance notice about the acute situation.

# Informing and reporting

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Your immediate supervisor and your health and safety representative should be informed as soon as possible after an episode involving threats or violence has taken place.

The immediate supervisor will discuss with the member of staff who has been subject to threat or violence and the Technical Service staff who handle contact with the police how a report to the police on the part of SDU should be handled. Serious threats and violence are always reported.

Whenever there is physical or psychological injury to staff, the episode must always be reported and preventive measures launched in accordance with SDU internal procedures for injury at the workplace.

The immediate supervisor informs the department about the event. If there is a need for crisis management, SDU's guidance on crisis assistance should be consulted.



# Follow-up

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The immediate supervisor makes an assessment as to whether there is a need to bring in temporary replacement for the staff involved.

It might be relevant to conduct a follow-up risk assessment. Consider whether there is a need for 'heightened security' in the subsequent period in cases where the parties involved have separated with their conflict unresolved, and whether responsibility for the case in question should be transferred to another member of staff or whether procedures should be changed.

To talk about the event afterwards will most likely create an understanding of what has happened and prevent/reduce the damage it has caused.

It might be a good idea to write a report about the episode as soon as possible. It often helps to note it down, and it is valuable for the subsequent presentation of the case.

Note actions and times for use in a subsequent account and assessment.

Powerful experiences can produce reactions in the period after the danger has passed. Be aware, therefore, of subsequent reactions from those involved and from witnesses. Consider whether it might be necessary to administer crisis help or contact a staff psychologist. For further information, see SDU's separate guidance on crisis help.

The health and safety committee will review the event with the aim of avoiding a repetition and of preventing similar events.

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