Keeping Retail Associates and Customers Safe

BEST PRACTICES AND ACTION STEPS

Amid a rise in Organized Retail Crime (ORC), theft, violence, and associated workplace stress and mental health issues, experts in loss prevention, asset protection, and retail learning & development share strategies for maintaining a safe retail environment.

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White Paper | Keeping Retail Associates and Customers Safe

The news reports have shocked us all. A gunman walks into a store and opens fire on customers and associates. “Flash-mob robbers” target stores and ransack malls. Organized Retail Crime (ORC) rings post videos brazenly documenting their criminal activity as they steal thousands of dollars of merchandise, damage property, and shatter a sense of safety and security in local communities.

I’m someone who literally grew up in retail — I went to work with my dad at his paint and hardware store as a child and later spent more than 25 years in the field and senior store operations for major retailers before joining MOHR Retail to serve the industry with talent development, coaching, and training solutions. So many of the events that have transpired across the country in recent months have stuck with me. They underscore the real risks and challenges today’s retailers and their associates are facing amid a rise in gun violence, ORC, and theft, as well as the workplace stress and mental health issues that accompany these incidents. With staffing shortages, burnout, and turnover increasing, these issues are making it even harder to recruit, hire, and retain associates and leaders — and that only makes things more difficult for your staff and for your customers.

These are big challenges, and retailers can’t solve all of them on their own, but there are some action steps and best practices that will help keep team members and customers safe while also helping to reduce losses due to theft.

We recently gathered a panel of industry experts to discuss the issue, its prevalence, and impact, and to share strategies that will support a safer, healthier, and more productive retail environment. This paper highlights some key takeaways from that discussion. A special thank you to all of our panelists for their insightful commentary and valuable advice that contributed to this white paper:

- Leorn Chatman, Senior Manager, Loss Prevention, Westlake Ace Hardware
- JD Dillon, Chief Learning Architect, Axonify, a technology provider that offers training and communication tools for frontline retail associates
- Paul Jones, Executive Board Member, Loss Prevention Foundation
- Mike Limauro, Vice President, Global Asset Protection, Whole Foods Market

Mary Beth Garcia, CEO
MOHR Retail

Date: November 2023

Retail Realities: A Look at the Current Environment

"Never before in my career have, I had to go to sleep at night and wake up worrying about 20 people getting shot in my store. I sat at a conference this year with a number of top LP leaders who were brought to tears as they described how they approach issues related to workplace violence and active shooters. It's a real issue."
– Paul Jones, Loss Prevention Foundation

Shoplifting and internal theft have always occurred in retail. Today, however, violence and safety concerns related to theft have become more prevalent.

At the same time, retail businesses continue to be particularly vulnerable to a host of changing dynamics more broadly, including high inflation, increased customer expectations, the political climate, social upheaval locally and across the globe, increased homelessness, and the impact and long-term effects Covid has had on the industry. The rise in violence and theft in recent years has only exacerbated the challenges faced daily by those on the front lines.

"I'd say in the last five years, violence as it relates to theft significantly increased across the board," Jones observes. "And that violence isn't just the shoplifters. It also has manifested itself in active shooters and employee engagement where there's an altercation that happens. So it's not a great environment for those frontline employees or the asset protection people."

The impact of this difficult work environment is showing up both anecdotally and in research that points to increased dissatisfaction, fear, burnout, and turnover among retail employees.

According to Axonify's worker pulse survey on theft and violence in retail:

- 40% of retail workers are afraid to go to work due to ORC, theft, and safety issues.
- 50% have witnessed some form of theft in the last 6 months.

According to Axonify's manager pulse survey on theft and violence in retail:

- 47% of frontline managers report workers have quit due to concerns around safety.

According to The Deskless Report 2023: Retail edition:

- 54% of retail managers feel burned out on a daily basis.

What to make of media reports skeptical of retailers' claims that increased theft and violence are affecting their businesses and the workplace environment? "Sometimes the media gets it right, but not in this case," Jones says.

In fact, Dillon says, "The research shows that these crime and safety issues are causing trepidation just to clock in every day." And if people are worried about showing up to work or quitting their jobs due to safety and theft issues, it's only going to make things worse for those stores, particularly since helpful, knowledgeable, and engaged staff are one of the greatest deterrents for retail theft. Retailers have to take positive steps now and invest the time, resources, and attention necessary to stem the problem.

Key Insights and Best Practices: A Blueprint for Retailers

According to The Deskless Report 2023: Retail edition, only 32% of retail workers said they felt heard. That compares to 63% who said they felt heard in the 2021 survey.

"Feeling heard is feeling safer."
– Michael Patrick. MOHR Retail

That's an alarming drop-off, one that Dillon says "speaks to that disconnect that can often exist between what frontline employees experience every day, or what it's like to do the job, and what they hear from corporate and support teams, and how those two audiences, in a lot of cases, just aren't hearing one another."

All of our expert panelists emphasized the importance of being proactive in keeping the lines of communication open and running in both directions, from the front line to the top of the organization. Here are a few of the key takeaways and best practices they shared.

Communication is Key: Listen, Respond, Ask for Input

"Don't assume what your team members want. Learn what your team members are going through. Listen to what's going on in your community. Stay relevant."
– Michael Limauro, Whole Foods Market

To properly enable frontline teams, we must truly understand what it is like for them to do their jobs every day. This requires listening in a meaningful way, being empathetic, and making a point to understand what your store associates and leaders are going through. Limauro, for example, recalls visiting stores with higher incident activity and "flat out asking" the team members what would make them feel safe, rather than making assumptions.

Whole Foods has also implemented a robust awareness and communications program that Limauro describes as the hub of their asset protection program. It's one element of a multipronged strategy for ensuring team members have the confidence and knowledge when handling escalated situations such as theft and irate customers.

To that point, Dillon notes that conducting an engagement survey once a year isn't going to cut it. Opening the lines of communication and asking for feedback has to be routine and ongoing throughout the year. Especially considering all the tools we have available to us now, there are more opportunities than ever to listen and include frontline and store teams in problem solving.

In addition to listening, retailers need to be more proactive about soliciting ideas and suggestions from the people who are out there every day. The more people feel like they're participating in the process, the more they feel like they have ownership in the solution and that leadership cares about their perspective and feedback.

Chatman shares that Westlake Ace's loss prevention field team engages with associates on store visits and asks them about their current concerns. Those conversations often become the foundation for future training and other preventative solutions.

"They give us a lot of different types of information, and we're able to take some of those concerns and build additional training or recommendations around safety, and then share that with the company as a whole," he says. "We really want to ensure that we're listening to the associates in the store and providing them relevant solutions to create a safer work environment."

"We need to be doing everything we can to engage with our local communities, because community is a huge driver of retention when it comes to frontline employees — the community within the store and the community around the store — and we need to make sure we involve associates in these types of conversations."
– JD Dillon, Axonify

Chatman adds that, during the chaos of the holiday season, it's particularly valuable for the loss prevention team to be out in the stores, checking in with associates, having conversations, and reinforcing consistent messaging and communications.

Another area where listening pays off is the broader community you operate within. Whole Foods Market is a good example of this. In addition to partnering with a company that helps them engage with and build relationships with local politicians, landlords, and police departments, Whole Foods works with a nonprofit organization to hire individuals from the community to serve as greeters and "peace officers."

"It's created a different dynamic because they know the individuals coming through that door," Limauro says. "What we're doing is embedding Whole Foods into the community and the community into Whole Foods."

Enable Frontline Leaders

All of the panelists emphasized that the frontline management team plays a critical role in listening, connecting with team members, and keeping people safe. The question is whether your managers have the skills, strategies, and mindset to focus on their people, be present, and have productive conversations about safety, well-being, and other employee concerns.

> *"Our loss prevention field team spends time with every single new leader, really investing in their development. It's critical to build that partnership and have them understand that we're there to support them. We've definitely seen a reduction in shoplifter engagement issues as a result."*
> – Leorn Chatman, Westlake Ace Hardware

We know retail leaders are overburdened and experiencing high levels of burnout themselves. One of the best ways to support them is to build their comfort and confidence in these areas. As Dillon puts it, we need to make sure store leaders have "not just permission but the skills and the support necessary" to prioritize these issues and do the work with their teams.

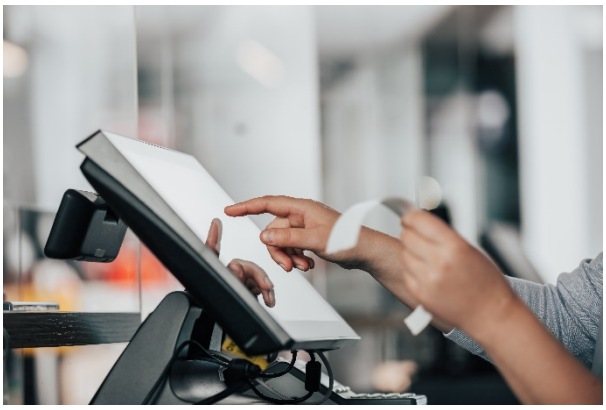
At its core, this is about the difference between managing and leading. Rather than focusing only on making sure the job at hand gets done, great retail leaders are also proactive about innovating and suggesting changes, engaging their team, developing them, and creating a culture of trust through their own actions and behaviors.

This is also an opportunity for retailers to think in new ways and leverage evolving technology to make these leadership priorities top of mind. Dillon says tools like artificial intelligence (AI) and microlearning can be used not only to improve equitable access to important information but also to pick up employee insights and enhance the employee experience. It can help make leaders more aware of who on their team is struggling in different areas, for example, or who they need to have a conversation with about a particular issue.

As Dillon puts it, "It creates a meaningful opportunity to nudge frontline managers in the right direction to have the right conversations when it potentially matters most." Because different people have different levels of comfort and confidence in their abilities, this is a way to give each leader the support they need so that if something were to take place, they'd be well positioned to make the right decision.

The bottom line: Empathetic, emotionally intelligent retail leaders — at all levels — who understand what their people are dealing with and are motivated and capable of engaging productively with their diverse team members are essential. Without that foundation, retailers will struggle to attract and retain talented people regardless of external circumstances.

Implement, Update, and Reinforce Training



"It starts with human resources and learning and development. How do we hire? How do we educate people on how to listen? And that has to be an evolving process."
– Paul Jones, Loss Prevention Foundation

Learning and development is an important pillar of any retail safety strategy, and, crucially, it must be current and situationally relevant. A playbook from five years ago on how to handle shoplifting and customer altercations will not be sufficient today.

Westlake Ace's loss prevention team conducts a comprehensive safety training with every new associate and continually learns from what they're hearing in the stores to refine and update the training to meet new and evolving needs. "We're engaging with new hires from day one, and we go back and reinforce the training and continue to build those relationships," Chatman says.

Interpersonal skills training is also vital. Communication skills and techniques will empower team members and help them feel more comfortable and confident to handle escalated situations.

Once again, this starts with leaders who set the tone and create a welcoming environment for concerns. Effective listening is a skill to be learned and developed, just like any other. Done well, it builds trust and rapport and encourages more feedback and conversations. That's how leaders develop a deeper understanding of employee needs and concerns and discover new ideas from those who are on the front lines every day.

Building a Safe Retail Environment

"At Whole Foods our higher purpose is to nourish people and the planet — just as other retailers are driven by their missions. The broader societal issues, such as drug addiction and mental health, cannot be left on the shoulders of retail alone to solve."
– Michael Limauro, Whole Foods Market

All panelists agreed that there needs to be more done at the community, criminal justice, and government levels, both federal and state, to protect retailers. In the meantime, though, these issues aren't going anywhere any time soon, and Jones encourages retailers to get programs in place and make investments in preventative solutions.

"Until we see our world settle — until we see protests reducing, active shooters reducing, criminal justice systems operating at a level of efficiency, partnerships with the communities improve — I don't think this will get better. So it's really about, how do we protect our associates and protect our product?"

There are devices to protect products, innovative new preventative solutions and technologies, and third-party services to help retailers build relationships with local law enforcement and community leaders. Investing in your people is just as vital.

"Number one is preparedness. Take a moment to look at your current programs and ensure you're prepared for anything that potentially could occur."
– Leorn Chatman, Westlake Ace

A journalist who recently spoke to retail workers about theft said many wondered about the impact of cutting hours and staff even further to make up for losses. "They worried about their safety…They often asked why their companies weren't at least trying to do more about it — having someone at the door, more people on the floor, just listening to their feedback — even if that was going to cost them a little more."

While retailers don't have complete control over solving the theft and safety issue, there are some things you can do now to create a safer, healthier, and more productive environment for your team members and your customers:

- **Partner with the communities you serve:** Get to know your client base and hire from the community to foster collaboration between associates, customers, and the community in keeping everyone safe. Build relationships with local organizations, including law enforcement, government, and other relevant agencies.
- **Develop internal partnerships:** Build partnerships throughout your organization, including with loss prevention, asset protection, HR, learning and development, and senior leaders, so that everyone is working together to make safety a priority. Close the loop on incidents to let people know follow-up occurred and what the end result was. Transparency reduces frustration and instills confidence.
- **Prioritize mental health and well-being:** Store associates need to be able to trust their boss and feel confident that leadership and the company have their backs and will protect them. Engage with associates, have conversations, listen to their concerns, and ask for their input on solutions.
- **Empower people with relevant, up-to-date knowledge and skills:** Training can't be a one-and-done event. When it comes to safety issues, the dynamics and needs are evolving and require continual updating and reinforcement. Similarly, to ensure sustained cultural and behavior change, communication and leadership skills and strategies must be regularly reinforced and refined to meet the needs of your learners and the changing work environment.

As Dillon says, "This is more than just a conversation about executing a standard operating procedure. This is a personal topic. This is an emotional topic." Now more than ever, we need to be proactive about creating and sustaining an environment where people feel safe and supported and able to contribute their best.

ABOUT MOHR RETAIL

For more than 30 years, MOHR Retail has developed the critical people-to-people skills needed to create results in the retail industry—and we're just getting started. Through innovative classroom, online and virtual learning methods, as well as our ongoing national retail research projects, we continue to stay on top of the trends so we can fuel the success of specialty stores, chain stores, outlets, off price, department stores, spas, fitness centers and more. Nowhere does learning meet experience as it does in a MOHR Retail training program.

Learn more about why retailers choose MOHR and how our interpersonal skills training helps retailers stay ahead of disruption.