



EQUAL AT WORK

Manager Guide

Workplace Bullying

What is workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying is repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed at a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety. The behaviour may be intentional or unintentional and can occur in person, online or through digital communication.

A single incident is not considered bullying, but repeated or escalating behaviour over time can have serious impact on individuals in the workplace and does constitute bullying.

Examples

Examples of workplace bullying can include:

- Verbal Abuse (swearing, threatening, insulting)
- Name calling, belittling or humiliating comments
- Unjustified or unfair criticism
- Intimidating body language
- Deliberate exclusion of someone from work-related activities or information
- Abusive or offensive language (written or verbal)
- Abuse of power
- Spreading gossip, rumours or misinformation about someone
- Unreasonable demands or deadlines (setting up for failure)
- Unjustified punishment
- Undermining or sabotage
- Repeated teasing, jokes or sarcasm

What bullying is NOT

Not all behaviour that makes someone upset or anxious at work is bullying. For example, if someone makes a comment but they only do it once and do not repeat it, by law this is not considered bullying.

An employee may feel bullied when a manager or employer takes performance or disciplinary action. If this action is 'reasonable management action', carried out in a reasonable way, the law does not define it as bullying.

Examples of 'reasonable management action' include:

- Setting performance objectives
- Giving constructive feedback
- Managing underperformance
- Taking action to maintain reasonable workplace standards
- Telling an employee their behaviour is inappropriate
- Request to perform reasonable duties as part of their role

Bullying and psychosocial hazards

A psychosocial hazard is any aspect of work that has the potential to cause psychological harm. This can include how work is designed, managed or carried out, as well as workplace behaviours and interactions.

Workplace bullying is a recognised psychosocial hazard because it can expose workers to ongoing stress, fear or intimidation. When bullying behaviour is repeated, prolonged or severe, it creates a risk to health and safety and may interact with other psychosocial hazards, such as high workloads, poor role clarity or low support.

The impacts of workplace bullying on the individual and the organisation can include:

- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Difficulty sleeping
- Depression and decreased self-esteem
- Reduced productivity
- Decreased workplace morale
- Increased absenteeism

Early intervention is key - don't wait for a formal complaint before acting

Recognising and responding to workplace bullying early is critical to preventing harm and meeting Work Health and Safety obligations.

Roles & responsibilities

Prevention is the key to creating a safe working environment. Employers have a responsibility under the Work Health and Safety Act to maintain a workplace that is safe and without risks to psychological and physical health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Measures to eliminate or reduce the risk of workplace bullying at your workplace:

- Create a positive workplace culture
- Set values and standards of behaviour
- Model the values and standards of behaviour
- Ensure clear policies and procedures are in place
- Encourage open communication and reporting
- Take all reports seriously and maintain confidentiality
- Provide information, instruction and training
- Identify, risk assess and manage psychosocial hazards

Responding to workplace bullying

Workplace bullying may be observed by a manager, reported by a witness or by someone experiencing the behaviour. An employee can report or raise workplace bullying verbally or in writing to a manager or business owner or through established reporting procedures.

If you are made aware of workplace bullying consider the following strategies for responding:

- Acting promptly and responding effectively
- Seeking information to ensure clear understanding
- Consider if it is bullying behaviour with risk of ongoing harm
- Documenting facts, dates, times and people involved
- Being neutral and supporting all parties
- Communicating processes and outcomes
- Can this be resolved between parties/at team level?
- Does this need escalation/further advice?

Workplace culture and bullying risk

Workplace culture plays a critical role in shaping behaviour. The way leaders set expectations, respond to issues and role-model conduct can either reduce the risk of bullying or allow it to develop and continue. Understanding the features of lower-risk and higher-risk work environments can help managers identify where action may be required.

Low risk workplaces show:

- Clear understanding of behaviour required
- Leaders role-model respectful behaviour
- Open communication
- Healthy, respectful workplace relationships
- Positive employee engagement
- Acceptance of differences and diversity
- Encouragement to speak up
- Conflict managed early and effectively
- Clear reporting pathways
- Support available when issues arise

High risk workplaces show:

- Unclear or inconsistent expectations of behaviour
- Leaders tolerate or model inappropriate behaviour
- Fear of speaking up
- Poor or strained workplace relationships
- Low staff morale and increased absenteeism
- Limited inclusion or respect of diversity
- Lack of trust or confidence in management
- Conflict ignored or allowed to escalate
- Unclear or inaccessible reporting pathways
- People feel unsupported when issues arise