

BEYOND POSITIVE DUTY

SAFE AND HEALTHY WORKPLACE CULTURE



When we think of harmful workplace behaviours, there's more to consider than sexual harassment and assault. Workplace dynamics can encompass negative behaviours, including bullying, discrimination, aggression, and even subtle workplace incivility.

Whilst positive duty provides organisations with the impetus to examine the deeper factors contributing to sexual harassment and assault in the workplace, it also provides a much broader opportunity for organisations.

The opportunity is to move beyond treating negative workplace behaviour by focusing on what not to do, and moving into the positive by focusing on what respectful workplace relationships look like and how we model and embody that.



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Understanding Workplace Civility

Workplace behaviour sits on a continuum - on the right-hand side, we have respectful workplace relationships. That doesn't mean you have to be friends with everyone, but it is characterised by friendliness, respect, and courtesy. On the other end of that continuum, on the left-hand side, sit harmful behaviours - discrimination, harassment, physical and mental bullying. Workplace incivility is slightly left of the centre - the unobvious actions that leave individuals feeling excluded, undervalued, or uneasy. It's that sense of being dropped off emails when you need the information. Maybe it's the fact that you don't receive a hello when you're walking into the office in the morning, or you are ignored.

All these behaviours aren't necessarily overt, but they leave someone with the sense that something's not quite right and erode the sense of well-being and security in the workplace.

Unfortunately, workplace incivility exists in many organisations and can significantly affect employee turnover and return to workplace efforts. So, whilst it's not always easy to define or address these subtle behaviours, its pervasiveness highlights the need for education and awareness.

The Spectrum of Workplace Relationships

Recognising that workplace incivility is not just about isolated incidents is essential. It's about the larger framework of relationships and culture within an organisation. Businesses and organisations are fundamentally networks of relationships. There's an entire world of interpersonal connection that happens at work. People meet and fall in love at work all the time. They make friendships at work. They have work people in their community that they spend time with outside of work.

Work is hugely social, and layered on top are interpersonal dynamics, organisational culture, and social norms.

In many Australian organisations, humour underpins how we are together and is a big part of connecting. Lots of humour sits at the heart of workplace culture; unfortunately, some of that humour can be unsafe.



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It seems funny and humorous at some point, but it becomes a sequence of social norms that tolerate harmful behaviour.

So, when looking at an incident, if you unpack the cultural or systemic dimensions, you suddenly say, "Oh, wow, so many factors made it easy for that person to walk over that line". We need to start to unpack this with organisations. It's not black and white.

What are some of the conditions that make it seemingly permissible for our relationships with each other to move into places that are unhealthy and potentially unsafe and harmful? And how do we do that in a way that doesn't shame and blame? It's about taking people on a journey of exploring what those relationships are like, what the culture is like, and how they might reset it together.

Ultimately, this is about capability uplift and organisations equipping their teams with the tools and skills to know that if something is making you uncomfortable, you need to know how to express it and have the culture around you to do that safely.

Taking Action

Addressing harmful workplace behaviours is multifaceted. It encompasses understanding workplace incivility, acknowledging work's social and cultural aspects, and adopting a trauma-informed approach.

It requires creating a culture where open communication and dialogue are encouraged, and employees feel empowered to express their concerns. The new positive duty is a huge step in helping organisations look deeper at addressing harmful behaviours and take preventative action to create safe, respectful and inclusive workplaces.

Encountas is actively working with clients to create healthy workplaces with our **Active Respect** experiences and can support your organisation in creating systemic change and transformation that will minimise harmful behaviours. To dive deeper, ask any questions, or to chat further, please reach out for a conversation.



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