Improving workplace culture for SMEs

Discrimination, harassment and bullying have a major impact on workplace productivity. In 2018, sexual harassment at work, for example, was estimated to cost Australian businesses $3.8 billion through staff turnover and loss of productivity.

What does culture have to do with anything?

Everything. The time we spend at work means that workplaces have a significant impact on the way we see and respond to the world around us. The culture in your workplace influences how employees interact with each other and everyone around them. Workplaces that allow or encourage inequality, discrimination and disadvantage, also allow bullying and sexual harassment of women and men to happen.

Does your workplace promote respect for everyone?

Any of the following attitudes and behaviours are a sign that your culture needs work for all employees to be respected and safe.

- Certain groups of people are considered less capable for some jobs.

- There are attitudes about how "proper" or "real" men and women should behave.

- Discriminatory jokes are seen as harmless

- Disrespectful behaviour is excused, perpetrators are protected from consequences, victims are blamed, complaints aren't taken seriously

- Verbal aggression is considered acceptable by people if their attitudes are challenged.

The Fair Work Commission has jurisdiction over bullying, provides dispute resolution services, and have the power to make orders to stop bullying in the workplace. If the person or organisation named in the order disobeys it, the matter can be referred to the courts. For more detailed information and case studies, see the Fair Work Commission and their anti-bullying benchbook.

Increasing respect in your workplace

Having policies, complaint handling procedures and training in place are important, but changing a culture of disrespect in your workplace will take more than that.

Leadership = Show that you are committed to changing the culture in your workplace.

- Be open with staff about problems
- Make cultural changes a feature of staff meetings
- Always challenge disrespectful behaviour
- Be prepared for and manage backlash and resistance

Risk Assessment = Use Work Health & Safety risk assessments to identify and control discrimination, bullying or harassment hazards in the workplace.

- Identify the hazards
- Make it the responsibility of all employees
- Make it a regular topic in WHS discussions

Culture = Understand your workplace, emphasise safe and inclusive behaviour, and address problem areas.

- Workplace culture/engagement surveys
- Team-building and social events
- Rewards and recognition for positive behaviours
- Two-way communication between employees and leaders
- Thorough candidate screening and reference checking

Knowledge = Ensure all staff understand what bullying and sexual harassment are, and how to prevent and challenge it.

- Focus training on employee understanding
- Reinforce key information with resources like Know the Line
- Include bystander intervention training and support. See How to be an Active Bystander
- Provide a "safe space" for discussions to educate employees. For more information see Equal Footing.

Preparing for and managing resistance

People resist change when they disagree with it, or feel uncertain and threatened. But you can plan for and deal with resistance.

- Include all employees in the discussions about change, and explain how they will benefit
- Give employees opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback.
- Identify where backlash is most likely to happen.
- Ensure key staff have the knowledge and confidence to address resistance.
- Ensure all staff know how to access available support services such an Employee Assistance Program if they experience distress from backlash.
- For more support in dealing with resistance in your business, see Male Champions of Change's Backlash & Buy-in and Our Watch's Practice Guide: Dealing with Backlash, and VicHealth's (En)countering Resistance.

Links

Australian Human Rights Commission – Know the Line
knowtheline.humanrights.gov.au/downloads

Fair Work Commission – Anti-Bullying
www.fwc.gov.au/disputes-at-work/anti-bullying

Male Champions of Change – Backlash & Buy-in
malechampionsofchange.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/MCC-CEW-Backlash-and-Buy-in.pdf

Our Watch – Practice Guide: Dealing with Backlash
workplace.ourwatch.org.au/resource/practice-guidance-dealing-with-backlash/

*VicHealth – How to be an Active Bystander
www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/bystander-research-project

*VicHealth – Equal Footing
www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/equal-footing-toolkit

*VicHealth – En(countering) Resistance
www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/PVAW/Encountering-Resistance-Gender-Equality

*Victorian resources are included here because VicHealth in particular has been a leader in the development of resources to support businesses dealing with sexual harassment and resistance to cultural change. Fair Work and Work Health and Safety laws are national and so the advice provided by Victorian resources is equally useful for South Australian businesses.