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## BUILDING A CULTURE OF **RESPECT**

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- What Australia's Indigenous culture can teach us about respect for elders
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# RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE RELATIONS

*A culture of respect for aged care consumers will stem from a culture of respect for our co-workers, colleagues and staff.*



In general, a positive workplace culture is reinforced by leadership's modelling of positive behaviours and their active engagement with the organisation, including:

- accountability towards compliance with industry standards, regulations and best practices;
- regular transparent communication with staff, including the regular giving and receiving of feedback; and
- efficient management of workplace issues.

On the other hand, when workplace issues and complaints are poorly handled, this negatively impacts workplace culture. The biggest risk factor to your respectful workplace culture is inappropriate workplace conduct, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Employers and managers are responsible for seeing the red flags and mitigating the risks of inappropriate workplace conduct.

## Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual behaviour that could be expected to make a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated, regardless of the intention of the behaviour.

These behaviours may include sending or displaying explicit texts, emails or images, physical contact or leering, sexual requests or demands, repeatedly asking for a date, personal or offensive comments, jokes or innuendo.

The risk of sexual harassment is increased at work-related events where alcohol is consumed. Even if the work function is held off-site or outside of normal work hours, it is still legally considered a workplace, and therefore appropriate workplace code of conduct still applies.

## Bullying

Bullying is defined as persistent and repeated negative behaviour directed towards another person or group in the workplace that creates a risk to health and safety.

In addition to sexual harassment, bullying can include any number of negative behaviours such as repeated gossiping, teasing, intimidation or psychological harassment, hazing, deliberate exclusion, pushing, shoving, tripping, grabbing, threatening or attacking.

Organisational leaders have both a moral and legal obligation to ensure that everyone feels safe and respected at work.

In 2014, new workplace bullying laws formed part of the *Fair Work Act 2009*, directly placing obligation and liability on the employer and directors, who can be held personally liable if they fail to provide a workplace free from bullying and harassment.

## Discrimination

The *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* legally protects employees from workplace discrimination on the grounds of age, sex, gender identity, race, political or religious beliefs, disability, marital status, pregnancy, breastfeeding, physical attributes or appearance, employment or industrial activity, or association with anyone who has any of these protected attributes.

Employers need to look out for red flags in their recruitment, promotion and dismissal processes, as well as any potential indirect discrimination, such as requiring all workers to work the same hours, which may discriminate against employees with parental or caring responsibilities at home.

## Personal relationships

There are potential red flags surrounding workplace romances or 'best friend' relationships. Hierarchical relationships involving a supervisor and subordinate can lead to the perception of preferential treatment. If co-workers believe that a promotion

or reward has been given on the basis of favouritism, this has a damaging impact on workplace culture and may also lead to discrimination claims. Even if a workplace romance appears consensual, the supervisor/subordinate power imbalance can raise the issue of whether the junior employee feels intimidated or pressured to consent. If the relationship ends badly, this could lead to a bullying and harassment claim.

A workplace culture free from discrimination, bullying and harassment requires leadership to demonstrate that appropriate workplace conduct is built on respect, responsibility, communication and appropriate use of power.

Workplaces should have a code of conduct or set of policies in place to address appropriate workplace conduct, and provide regular in-person staff training programs.

A healthy, respectful workplace culture has a positive ripple effect on aged care consumers.

When managers and staff are practicing appropriate workplace conduct, this helps ensure that older Australians are receiving dignified, quality care. ■

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For more information visit [www.workplaceplus.com.au](http://www.workplaceplus.com.au)



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