



# Creating Positive Workplace Relations

## Self-Guided Learning Package

This resource was developed by Community Child Care (CCC) with funding provided by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations under the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (2008-12).

The Inclusion and Professional Support Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

## About Self-Guided Learning Packages

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Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email [psc@gowrievictoria.org.au](mailto:psc@gowrievictoria.org.au)

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# Creating Positive Workplace Relations

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You have chosen to complete the 'Creating Positive Workplace Relations' package. The aim of this package is to assist you in developing skills in working productively and cohesively as a team member. This package will also provide you with information relating to reflective practice, communication, conflict and professionalism within children's services.

## Introduction

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We all have a responsibility in how we contribute to our workplace environments. In general, people want to work in an environment where they are:

- safe
- treated fairly
- valued for their contribution
- respected
- free from harassment or bullying
- supported in their career development and
- Able to work in harmony with their colleagues.

A workplace culture that promotes these values, combined with strong leadership that reinforce and model these values, has a greater capacity to inspire their workers.

## What are Positive Workplaces

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Positive workplaces are where people are happy and motivated. The Australian Industrial Relations Commission has stated that the community expects a standard of behaviour that allows us to go to work each day and do our jobs without having our personal dignity diminished.

A positive workplace encourages engagement with employees. It promotes effective and transparent communication across the organisation. It is a place where people feel comfortable with themselves and where everyone is treated in a fair and equal way.

Workplaces where there are unresolved issues, hostilities, discrimination, inappropriate behaviours, harassment and bullying will not only have difficulties in being effective and productive but can also be exposed to prosecution under State and Federal Government Legislation.

## Legislation

There are Federal, State and Territory laws that require all employers to create a workplace that is free from discrimination and harassment. This legal responsibility is called *vicarious responsibility*. These laws help protect people in the workplace from unlawful behaviour.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has a list of relevant Federal and State and Territory laws at <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/about/legislation/index.html>.

### Self Help Question 1

Reflect on your current workplace environment. Make a list of all the things that make you feel good about coming to work. For example, list if you feel valued, respected, listened to, considered, consulted, supported etc.

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List the type of actions or even some examples shown by your work colleagues that reinforce you experiencing these positive values.

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### Elements that contribute to a positive workplace

In the introduction to this learning package, we detailed the type of attributes people want from their work environment. You have probably included some of these attributes in your response to the self-help questions above.

Positive workplaces are not only places where employees enjoy being but also places where all stakeholders enjoy visiting and being connected to. If your children's service is a positive workplace, then you'll find that the children, families and other stakeholders also enjoy visiting the service.

It is important for workplaces to have a vision statement or a statement of purpose. This is a statement that establishes a set of values and goals for the organisation. All staff and educators are required to work in a

way that reinforces this vision statement and the principles which guide the organisation's direction and goals. A philosophy is a living document and should continue to be reviewed regularly. Children's Services will follow how the National Quality Framework, National Regulations, which include the National Quality Standard, captures philosophy in their guiding principles and outcomes.

A philosophy underpins the practices for educators in their service.

### Self Help Question 2

Have a look at your organisation's vision statement or a statement of purpose. What values and standards does your organisation uphold and require the team to respect and work towards?

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If your organisation does not have a vision statement and you were asked to put together a draft statement, what would your vision statement say? What are four key values that you would include?

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Positive workplaces are more productive workplaces for everyone involved. They generally encourage a high performance culture that promotes innovation and creativity and are less likely to have staff absenteeism and employee turnover.

The importance of strong relationship building in creating positive workplaces cannot be underestimated. Strong interpersonal skills help build relationships. Many of the values we consider important in our own personal relationships are the very same values we should be considering in our work relationships. These values include:

- Trust
- Honesty
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Accountability
- Commitment

- Clear and Open Communication
- Consideration
- Equality and
- Fairness.

It is really important to put in the time at the very beginning of building a relationship with someone as you create strong foundations for the relationship's future journey. If the foundations are strong, then the relationship is less likely to fall apart when cracks appear. The building of a positive workplace environment is everyone's responsibility.

## **Leadership**

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### **Strong Leadership**

Organisations with strong leadership create a workplace that is motivating for all team members, including educators, support staff, families and children. Whilst an element of leadership encompasses roles such as supervision, really effective leadership is about inspiring people to develop to their full potential and work as a happy and productive team.

Providing pathways to support people in realising their goals and then achieving them can be both challenging and rewarding. The behaviour of our leaders has a huge impact on the teams they are leading. Their behaviour needs to demonstrate purpose. Leaders need to be accessible and approachable and they need to have a sound sense of self. Rodd (1998) identifies the five key elements to effective leadership as being the leader's ability to:

- Provide a vision and communicate it;
- Develop a team culture;
- Set goals and objectives;
- Monitor and communicate achievements; and
- Facilitate and encourage the development of individuals.

Personal leadership is also important in the workplace. It involves being able to find your own purpose in life and know who you are and want you want to be. Choices that you make or sometimes don't make are the most important elements in not only leading yourself but also others.

Cope (2006) states that there are six core choices that influence how we lead others and ourselves:

1. How we actually make choices
2. How we set direction
3. How we discard false assumptions
4. How we become more adaptive
5. How we build relationships
6. How we build shared success.

**Self Help Question 3**

Think about the leadership around you and within you.

Do you feel inspired and motivated by the leadership you have? If so, why? If not, why not?

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Do you know who you are and what you want to be? If so, what do you want to be? If not, how would you like to be?

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Think about the choices you have made in your working life Are you comfortable with these choices and are you prepared to take ownership of those choices? If so, why? If not, why not?

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## Communication

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### Clear Communication

Have you ever been in the situation where you haven't completely understood the communication being delivered to you and therefore you have misinterpreted the message someone was trying to give you and uneasiness or conflict has been the result?

Good communication is one of the biggest contributors to positive workplace environments. The way in which we process information being given to us encompasses and supports our values, beliefs and thoughts. As Australia is a diverse country that embraces people from a range of cultural backgrounds, it is important to have an understanding of how values and beliefs filter our communication. We need to take this into consideration with our communication techniques.

There is a more going on in communication than just the spoken word: The words only account for approximately 2% of communication, with body language accounting for 58% and the tone in which the words are delivered responsible for 40% of how communication is interpreted.

Whilst the words you use when communicating may be positive, you can communicate mixed messages if your body language is confrontational with folded arms and your tone of voice loud, high pitched and fast. Remember though that for some cultures loud voices, fast and sharp movement of arms are part of the cultural heritage so be sure to include these considerations in your delivery and acceptance of communication.

Think about the combination of the elements of words, tone and body language in your communication technique. Be clear about the message you wish to deliver and the techniques that will ensure you do.

### Being a Good Listener

Listening is a large part of what we need to do in order to have clear communication. Not only is it the amount of listening we do, but it is the quality of the listening as well. If we think about the types of listening we use, we might discover that many are unhelpful when we are trying to build and maintain positive relationships in the workplace. Starr (2003) identified four main types of listening we can engage in during a conversation. We will deal with three of them here.

Cosmetic Listening When we use this type of listening we are not fully engaged with the person we are having the conversation with. We can often be caught out using this type of listening when our



conversational partner asks us a question about the conversation and we cannot answer the question. Examples of cosmetic listening include thinking about what you are going to do after work and all the things you will need to do to get ready while you're talking with someone else.

Conversational Listening When we use this type of listening we are listening to the other person and we are engaged with them and contribute to the conversation. The conversation flows and we appear to be getting along. Conversational listening can be useful when we are getting to know another person and finding out more about them. One of the problems with this type of listening is that it is often more about you than the other person.

Consider the following scenario: Sarah has come back from her holiday in Fiji and is excitedly telling you about the resort she stayed at, the activities she did. Although you are engaged in this conversation, you decide to talk about your experience in Fiji as well including where you stayed, what you liked and didn't like, how your children behaved or misbehaved, the adventures you had, the food you tried, and so on. By the time you've had your turn, you haven't picked up on the fact that Sarah is a lot quieter and not contributing as much to the conversation.

Active Listening When we use active or reflective listening, we are actually focusing on what the other person is saying and not as much on ourselves. We put aside our own feelings, thoughts, worries and expectations and focus on the other person and what they're really saying. Not only do we focus on their words but we also focus on their body language, facial expressions and tone of voice.

Another aspect of listening actively is clarifying and building on what the other person has said in a way that says I'm really listening to you. This type of listening is particularly useful:

- When in conflict with others
- When trying to get good or clear information
- To affirm or support someone
- When we're in an emotional situation and have to diffuse anger etc.

An example of using active listening might be when Stacey comes to you about a problem she is having with a child in her room. She is anxious about the child's behaviour and the way she is supporting the child and their family. Her confidence is suffering and she is not sure what to do next. When you listen to Stacey you are drawing out all the facts and helping her look at the situation in a different way. You summarise what she has said and check that you understand the situation and her feelings are correct. You notice that

she is slumped in her chair and may say something like, 'This is really getting you down'. This invites her to provide you with more information in order to better understand and support her.

It's helpful to know what type of listening you are using and if it's not appropriate to then change it to a more suitable one. Listening is a skill that requires practice. Don't worry if it doesn't feel right the first few times, just keep practising.

Another aspect to effective communication and active listening is the ability to give feedback that is responsive, relevant and appropriate. Cornelius and Faire (1989) identify a number of dos and don'ts to consider in relation to giving feedback.

First, some things to avoid, especially when a colleague has come to you for advice:

- Remember, it's not about you: Avoid offering stories about your experience of the problem at hand. Use active listening and thoughtful questions to assist them to stay on track and work through the issue.
- Don't diagnose: They are the expert in their own situation, not you. Help them come up with their own solutions rather than providing them for them.

Now let's consider some things that can help:

- Clarity: In order to provide effective feedback it is important that you have understood what is being communicated. This means asking questions when things are not clear for you. For example, "I'm not sure that I understand. Can you tell me some more about that?"
- Paraphrasing: another way of checking for clarity is to repeat back to the speaker your understanding of what has been said. This is another way of checking for clarity and demonstrates your intent to hear and truly comprehend their message. For example, "So what you are saying is....Have I got that right?"
- Affirm emotions: in addition to being clear about the content of the message it is also helpful to get a sense of the emotions behind it. For example a statement like "It sounds like this has made you quite angry" gives you the opportunity to check that you have understood and also invites them to tell you more.
- Focus on strengths: rather than dwelling on the problem, provide feedback that focuses on what they have done or are already doing that is working well. Highlight the strengths that they may be able to use in this situation. Ask questions that encourage them to look for solutions.

Let's think back to Stacey and her situation as described previously. How might you provide feedback that shows you are interested in helping her without giving her all the answers? What might you say? What questions might you ask?

**Self Help Question 4**

Think about a recent conversation you had with a work colleague. What type of listening did you use? On reflection, how helpful was it?

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What ways of giving feedback to colleagues have you found to be effective in the past?

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The next time a colleague approaches you for support, try suspending judgement, worries and any thoughts and feelings that you might bring to the conversation. Use active listening to check that you've understood their position. Offer feedback to demonstrate interest and provide support.

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Reflect on what happens. What did it feel like? How did they respond? What did you learn? What might you do differently next time?

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**Trust**

No organisation can survive unless there is trust within the team. Trust is not a maybe it is an absolute. Researchers have identified that integrity, which is all about honesty and truthfulness, is the most important element in building trust. Staff and educators need to trust that their manager will treat them fairly and managers need to trust that their employees will do the right thing (Cole, 2005 p. 139).

Cole (2005) lists ten ways to build trust:

- Be considerate and empathic
- Remember the little things
- Keep commitments and promises
- Communicate fully: clarify expectations, speak your feelings and tell the truth
- Be consistent
- Demonstrate competence and make things happen
- Be fair
- Be reliable
- Be sincere
- Maintain confidences.

**Self Help Question 5**

Think of someone you know and trust and answer the following questions:

How have you come you trust this person?

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What is the impact on your relationship with them?

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Give three examples of what you have done to build trust with a work colleague in the past.

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## Equity

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### Social Justice

Positive workplaces are places that promote a social justice framework. A positive workplace is one that is compassionate and equitable, where people are valued and respected, where everyone has an opportunity to participate and contribute, and where difference is understood and valued.

These workplaces have an understanding and appreciation of the diversity that exists amongst the people who work there. They see diversity as an opportunity to learn from different perspectives, to work within a collaborative approach and to value and utilise each other's strengths.

A positive workplace is one where colleagues:

- Respect and value difference
- Are considerate of their team members
- Treat each team member in a fair and equitable manner
- Care for one another
- Communicate clearly
- Are good listeners
- Recognise the importance of diversity
- Are open to embrace and accept change
- Are fair and decent
- Have trust in themselves and their leaders

- Don't gossip about colleagues
- Enjoy doing what they do.

Consider the following scenario. Mitch has been working in a children's service for five years and has specific responsibility for children aged four and five years of age. This year Suzie, another member of the team, has moved from the 'two to three' age group to work with Mitch. Mitch hasn't worked closely with Suzie before but has noticed that she doesn't generally have a lot to say at staff meetings and appears aloof and reserved. He has also heard from colleagues that she can be 'difficult' to work with. She is great with the children though and is rarely seen without a group of children flocking around her.

Mitch has recently been to a professional development session where he learnt some new ideas about programming and documentation. He is really excited about what he has learnt and is keen to try out some of the ideas. As room leader Mitch meets with Suzie to talk to her about his ideas and how he would like to implement them. He is surprised when Suzie doesn't seem at all keen about the changes, although it does reinforce his colleague's comments. After a couple of weeks Mitch and Suzie meet again to review how things are going. Mitch discovers that Suzie hasn't implemented anything he asked her to.

Take a minute to reflect on the scenario and consider the following questions:

- What are some possible reasons behind Suzie's response to the changes Mitch wants to introduce?
- What is the likely impact of Suzie's label as 'difficult' in this situation?
- What are Suzie's concerns and what might she need from Mitch?
- What are Mitch's concerns and what might he need from Suzie?
- If you were Mitch how might you talk to Suzie about the changes?

**Self Help Question 6**

Reflecting on your current workplace and respond to the following questions:

Take a moment to consider how you like to be treated. How can this support you to build and maintain respectful relationships with your colleagues?

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How do you ensure everyone has opportunities to participate, make choices and be involved in decision-making?

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What does 'participation' look like?

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What parts of a Learning Framework related to participation? (The Learning Frameworks are the EYLF, FSAC and VEYLDF.)

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### **Pleasant and comfortable environment**

The physical surrounds of your workplace can also contribute to achieving a positive workplace. If the space around you is unclean, cluttered and aesthetically unappealing then this can impact on the way you feel about your work.

Legislation requires for workplaces to comply with Occupational Health and Safety Standards and non-compliance with these can result in prosecution. Be sure that you are familiar with the Occupational Health and Safety standards of the service you work in. These are particularly important as services involve children. Everyone has a responsibility to ensure that the workplace is safe so don't think that it is only the management's responsibility.

### **Self Help Question 7**

Taking the Occupational Health and Safety Standards into consideration, look at your existing workplace environment.

Is it an appealing and aesthetically pleasing space? If so, how? If not, why not?

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What is the colour scheme like?

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Is it clean and free of clutter? Please comment

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What are some simple and inexpensive ways that you could make the area more appealing?

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Have a look at the National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care. List the areas from this document which related to Occupational Health and Safety for educators, families and children.

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If you have ideas on how your workplace could be made more inviting discuss them with your manager/coordinator and colleagues. List some of your ideas below.



**Suggestion**

As a team or individual, create a treasure map of what your ideal workspace might look like? Collect magazine clippings, photographs, images, words, colours, fabrics, etc. to inspire you and help you envisage your ideal workplace.

**Acknowledgement and celebration**

How do you feel when you receive feedback that the work you are doing has real meaning and purpose?

When people receive positive feedback and acknowledgement that they are doing a good job they are more inclined to put more effort into it. When people enjoy and like what they are doing they are more motivated and efficient, and more likely to experience increased positive emotions and well being.

In the movie 'Chocolat' a measure of goodness was made by:

- What we embrace
- What we create
- Who we include

At work it is important for all colleagues to feel included and celebrations are often a way that this can happen. Celebrations may be for a job well done, on the completion of a particular task, achieving something above and beyond the normal workplace role, birthdays, return to work after holidays or a long break, sporting or leisure achievements or a range of different reasons.

**Self Help Question 8**

When did you last acknowledge an achievement or milestone reached by one of your colleagues?

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How did you acknowledge or celebrate?

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How did your colleague respond?

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How did it make you feel?

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What three words best describe your relationships with this colleague since this event?

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## **The Work Environment**

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### **What factors contribute to a negative workplace?**

We have explored earlier in this self-guided learning package some of the elements that contribute to a positive workplace environment where people want to be. Looking at the flipside of this, there are other elements that will have an adverse effect and may create an environment where people don't want be and others don't want to visit.

A workplace that has a culture of inequality where some colleagues are treated differently to others will struggle to create a motivating environment. If there are cliques where some members are excluded or ignored, these are not only unhelpful and damaging but can also be interpreted as harassment and therefore unlawful.

### **Self Help Question 9**

Think about either your current workplace or other places you have worked in the past.

On reflection, were you or your colleagues treated fairly and equally? Can you recall any times that people were treated differently?

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What were some of the outcomes of this unequal treatment?

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How did this you make you feel?

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### **Discrimination**

Discrimination could have been the motivator of this unequal treatment. Under Federal, State and Territory legislation unlawful discrimination occurs when someone, or a group of people, is treated less favourably than another person or group because of their race, colour, national or ethnic origin; sex, pregnancy or marital status; age; disability; religion; sexual preference; membership of a trade union activity; or some other characteristic specified under anti-discrimination or human rights legislation (The Australian Human Rights Commission).

The Australian Human Rights Commission has statutory responsibilities under the following laws.

- Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986
- Age Discrimination Act 2004
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992
- Racial Discrimination Act 1975
- Sex Discrimination Act 1984

Further information on the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 2010 can be found at

[www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au](http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au).

While some forms of discrimination may be clearly obvious, covert discrimination is more subtle but by no means has less impact. Covert discrimination is when people discriminate based on assumptions about characteristics of certain groups in the community through negative stereotyping. For example they have known someone from a particular age group, gender, or cultural background that they had a bad experience with so therefore they consider everyone from this group to have the same characteristics.

If, on reflection, we have found ourselves in this situation and made these assumptions, we need to acknowledge and take responsibility for our own value systems and challenge this negative stereotyping and our responses to it. We may not have even been fully aware that this behaviour falls into the terminology of discrimination.

### **Self Help Question 10**

#### **Scenario**

You have seen numerous stories on current affairs television programs that promote the idea that the parenting skills of mothers who are sole parents are not to the same standard of women who are in legally recognised relationships. There are children in your care who are from sole parent families. Are your interactions and care of these children any different to those children from two parent families? If so, why? If not, why not?

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#### **Harassment**

Harassment is an unlawful behaviour and is a major contributor to workplace hostility. It can be a one-off incident or a constant and ongoing range of behaviours designed to intimidate and humiliate those being targeted.

Harassment is unwelcome and uninvited physical or non-physical conduct that is offensive to 'reasonable' people. The behaviour can include threats, unwelcomed touching or kissing, restricting a person from moving freely, derogatory comments, jokes, sexually explicit emails, threats or suggestive remarks about a person's alleged sexual activities or private life.

As a result the person being harassed feels offended, humiliated or intimidated. The reason for the harassment can be linked to the same motivations for discrimination including gender, sexuality, race or religion.

### **Bullying**

'Bullying is repeated unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety. In most cases this behaviour is persistent and happens over a period of time. Bullying can take many forms, such as publicly humiliating someone, verbal abuse, or spreading malicious rumours or gossip' (WorkSafe, 2009, p.3). Bullies can themselves have low self-esteem. Their desire to achieve dominance over others and increase their own self-worth is enacted by demeaning others. Their behaviour is unreasonable and can be carried out in privacy or in front of other colleagues or clients.

Bullying behaviour is varied and can be really obvious or subtle. Obvious behaviours can include:

- swearing;
- constant criticism;
- spreading of rumours;
- excluding or isolating individuals from workplace activities;
- not passing on messages; and
- not providing correct information regarding work tasks.

The less obvious behaviours may be:

- lack of acknowledgment of a colleagues successes;
- scheduling meetings with someone when you know they cannot attend and reprimanding them for not attending; and
- constantly setting unrealistic goals and timeframes.

### **Self Help Question 11**

What policies and procedures does your organisation have on the prevention of bullying, workplace harassment and staff grievances?

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If you or another team member were being bullied or harassed, how would you respond?

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## Conclusion

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Creating a safe and harmonious workplace culture is everyone's responsibility. Workplace culture refers to the beliefs that are shared amongst employees in an organisation. Have you ever had a feeling or emotional response when walking into a business or organisation? Have you formulated an opinion of the organisation based on your initial observations? Chances are you have had a glimpse of the workplace culture in action.

Creating a harmonious and productive workplace culture requires the entire team to work towards common goals. Positive relations amongst colleagues require a commitment by all colleagues to work in collaboration with each other and behave in ways that are deemed to be professional, responsible and ethical.

All children's services professionals play an important role in creating a workplace where all early childhood educators, children and families want to be.

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## Assessment Task

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1. Identify two values that are reflected in your service's philosophy or vision statement that could contribute to creating a positive workplace. Give an example of one way that you have enacted these values in an interaction with a colleague.
2. What qualities do you think are required in a leader? Nominate someone (in your local community, within Australia or around the world) who you consider to be a leader and explain why?
3. What are three ways of communicating with your colleagues that you have found to be effective? In what ways have they been helpful?
4. Define in your own words what 'active listening' means?
5. List four characteristics of an effective team. Which of these do you think your team does particularly well and why? Which of these do you think your team could improve on and how?
6. Give an example of how the social justice principles of respect and equity are demonstrated on a daily basis within your team.
7. In what ways does your children's service acknowledge and celebrate the milestones and achievements of individuals and the team as a whole? Why is this important?
8. What kinds of discrimination are against the law? Name one source that you can use to access more information about discrimination and discrimination law.