



**Mapping the
AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program
response to
Safe Work Australia's guidelines for
preventing workplace violence and aggression**

It is easy for most of us to think that preventing abuse, intimidation and aggression in the workplace doesn't apply to us. Most of us aren't coming to work committing invasive acts of harassment or bullying, so we think "There's nothing I can do". But in actual fact there is something we can all do: We can show each other respect in every interaction every day.

Any instance of workplace bullying or harassment is an expression of the culture of the organisation. And the culture of the organisation is shaped by all of us every day. So any exchange between us that conveys respect, courtesy and kindness fosters a healthy and safe culture. *And every exchange between us that conveys disrespect, discourtesy and unkindness fosters an unhealthy and unsafe culture. It's that simple.*

Every time we treat each other in a poor manner—for example if we're abrupt, sarcastic, condescending, dismissive, insulting. If we ignore someone when they try to join in, exclude them from the group or disparage them behind their backs... If we insult them or make fun of them ...: We contribute to a culture of disrespect in which bullying and harassment will thrive. Every time we treat each other in a respectful manner—greet people warmly, smile, include a new person, acknowledge their comments, listen to their suggestions, raise a disagreement politely and considerately ... We contribute to our culture of respect in which bullying and harassment will die out.

This is the kind of culture that, through the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program, we help staff grow every single day.

Leanne Drew-McKain, CEO Coach Pty Ltd

Ensuring Australian workers are safe, valued and respected

Safe Work Australia's (SWA's) new national guidelines for preventing workplace violence and aggression call on CEOs and HR/People & Culture leaders to use resources and processes to prevent, eliminate and minimise workplace bullying, harassment and aggression. The new guidelines cover physical and psychological violence and aggressive behaviours—both low-level and overt—face-to-face, on the phone or online.

In response, the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association (AHEIA) is taking a program-driven culture-change approach to raising behavioural safety in universities. Called the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program, the initiative affords organisations a way to comprehensively and meaningfully demonstrate that they have used appropriate resources and processes to eliminate or minimise risks.

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program equips organisations to visibly respond to the latest Safe Work Australia guidelines, as well as support existing university policies that are planned or in-play already to minimise mental, emotional, social and physical harm.

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program works using specific training and behaviour-consciousness-raising for all staff to minimise harm and maximise safety for themselves and the organisation. The programmatic centerpiece of the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program is staff participation in Class Act Conduct. The following summarises how each of the features of the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program map to the Safe Work Australia guidelines.

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program arms organisations with practical strategies to maximise safety and minimize the risk of harm, whether:

- physical or psychological
- verbal, written or online
- one-off or repeated incidents
- lower-level behaviours such as name-calling
- serious acts like physical assault, including criminal offences,
- threats in person or online (such as via social media platforms).

In particular, a key plank of the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program is the roll-out of Class Act Conduct. The Class Act program is based on neuroscience research which recognizes both the physical and mental ill-health effects of leaving poor behaviour unchecked, and the benefits of proactively helping people co-create an atmosphere of trust, respect and courtesy. Its neuroscience underpinnings help shrink the work and personal impacts of fear and stress.

The impacts –

The results of Class Act Conduct participant surveys indicate a significant reduction in the practice and impact of negative communication behaviours in the workplace and an overall increase in both emotional safety and team performance. Almost all respondents surveyed indicate that they made positive changes to their communication behaviours after participating.



94% of participants say they found Class Act's descriptions of negative communication behaviours helpful in producing change 1-2 years after participation



100% of Class Act participants said 'yes' when asked, 'Have behaviour changes in the team had a positive impact on your own performance?'



75% of participants in Class Act describe that changes arising from Class Act Conduct as 'very beneficial'



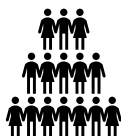
90%+ of all participants comments in Class Act show a high level of positive engagement with the content



75% of participants indicated 'yes' when asked 'Have behaviour changes in the team had a positive impact on the team's performance?'



In just 16 months, participation in Class Act's online program significantly reduced bad manner in the workplace from **60%** down to a record low **15%**.



In one case study, staff morale at the time Class Act was commissioned was 35% - the State mean is 82%. Following the role out of Class Act Conduct, the level of staff morale in the same organisation was **94.9%**.

"It is not just violent incidents such as physical assault which can cause harm. Exposure to lower level but frequent aggression can also have a lasting effect on a worker's health. For example, workers who regularly experience behaviours such as swearing, yelling, racist, sexual or gendered comments may have serious long-term negative impacts on their mental and physical health. This conduct can also escalate to other forms of aggression and violence like physical assault."

Safe Work Australia

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program is an educative, solution-based approach to:

- provide and maintain a work environment with a significantly reduced risk to the psychological and physical health and safety of workers
- educate staff in respectful behaviours by illuminating behaviours that produce threat responses as opposed to a trust response—with the program online modules outlining risk examples and providing leaders and staff with a clear shared respectful language and response to countering harmful communication and behaviour before it escalates
- give workers the necessary information, instruction, training and skills to do their job safely and without risks to their own and others health, and learn to confidently navigate all of the potentially challenging and difficult interactions that might be required with customers, and colleagues, by any staff member at any level in undertaking their work
- deal with inappropriate communication behaviours as well as ensuring that physical infrastructure is safe—providing training to all staff so that they are better able to detect the behaviours that could escalate to harm for themselves or others
- help workers to self-correct unhelpful reactions in themselves, and empower them to mitigate mental and emotional harm caused to them from others.

The research in developing the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program finds that where workers feel consulted and included in measures designed for them, those measures will be adopted far more readily. Accordingly, the Program includes a survey component where, prompted by the content, workers are able to indicate the types of behaviours that they would most like to experience, and contribute to, in their workplace for safety and wellness, and conversely, may also note specifically the behaviors that they find uncomfortable. These participant comments are then deidentified and distilled into a unique single-page team Communication Charter. Because the Charter is derived from participants' own comments it is readily owned by staff.

The Charter, kept visible in the workplace, is shared by the organisation with their client interface as far as is practicable. Clients/customers learn that respect will get them what they want far more than aggressive and bullying tactics will, and moreover and importantly, client interface workers in particular are armed with elite communication training on strategies designed to deflect angry speech and prevent escalation wherever possible.

“Workers must take reasonable care of their own health and safety in the workplace, and the health and safety of others who may be affected by what they do or do not do.” -Safe Work Australia

This statement in the Safe Work Australia guidance material goes to the heart of one of the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program key enablers- personal empowerment of each worker. The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program works to the right of every person to receive, and give, respect and care, so it assists a sense of shared responsibility for everyone’s communication and expressed attitudes being respectful. As the guideline states: “Workers must also comply with any reasonable instructions, policies and procedures given by their employer at the workplace, including policies and procedures to prevent workplace violence and aggression.” For senior leaders and executives, the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program status for their organisation equips all to take personal responsibility. While you, as a CEO, demonstrate priority on keeping workers safe, you are protecting yourself: “You must do whatever you can to eliminate or minimise the health and safety risks of workplace violence and aggression so far as is reasonably practicable.”

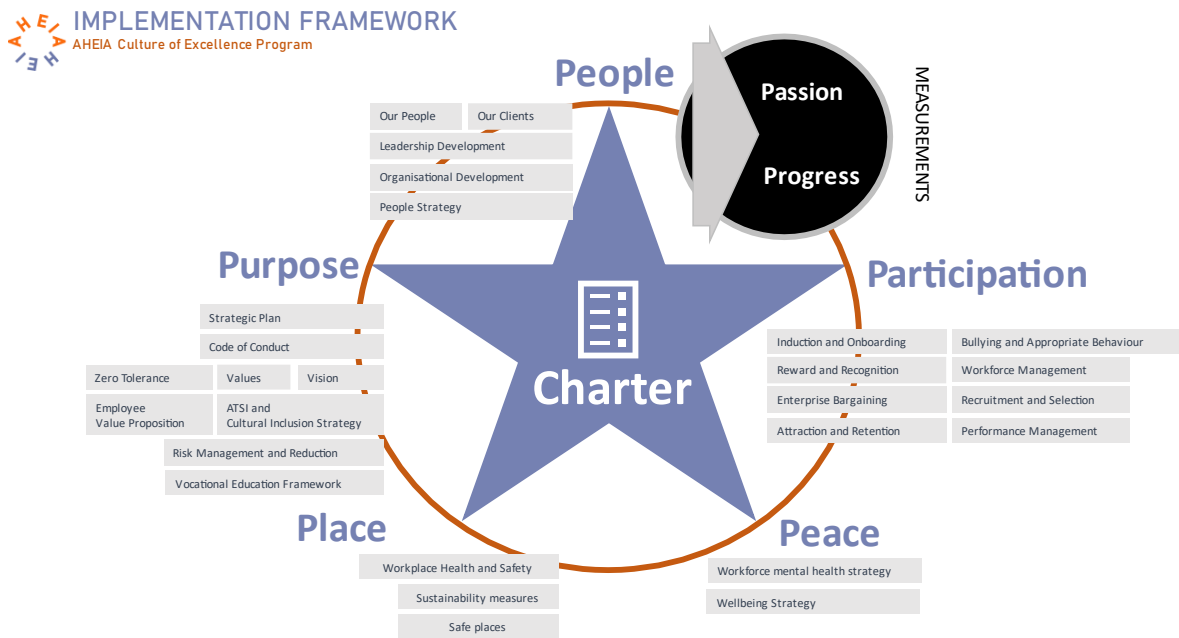
The key is prevention

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program ensures that management is systematically:

- identifying the hazards
- assessing the associated risks
- implementing control measures to eliminate or minimise risks, and
- regularly reviewing control measures to ensure they remain effective.

Having policies for safe behaviours in place is necessary but in themselves will not prevent harm taking place. The staff training included in the Culture of Excellence modules is aimed at preventing harm. The modules raise awareness about communication behaviours and responses that convey trust and respect, and those that convey threat and erode wellbeing, safety and performance. Hence, as staff are trained in how to deal inclusively, respectfully and confidently to prevent and deal with aggression, harmful behaviours become increasingly socially disallowed. Thus, identifying hazards, associated risks and implementing awareness and positive measures, shrinks fear and threat behaviours. The planning and outcomes of this staff training are integrated into organisational frameworks and aligned with the Voice Project’s research-based 7 Ps for Organisational Performance.

Consistent with “risk management processes also in the Code of Practice: *How to Manage Work Health and Safety Risks* and the Code of Practice: *Work Health and Safety Consultation, Co-operation and Co-ordination*”, the AHEIA Program helps identify hazards and assess risk.



The Culture Safety Checklist and planning tools within the Culture of Excellence ensure that organisations do not simply have policies in place but are engaging and equipping staff in how the policies translate in interactions between workers and clients/customers. Mapped to the Voice Project’s research-backed 7 Ps for Organisational Performance, the design and outcomes of this staff engagement program—through Voice staff and pulse surveys—are planned, supported, measured and evaluated to maximise results and future staff engagement and training initiatives. Through these cyclical efforts, workers are prepared for “the potential for violence or aggression” and given strategies for how to react to disallow and de-escalate problems. ‘Prevention’ calls for a way of gathering relevant data.

The guidelines promote: “gather[ing] information about the hazards in your workplace and assess[ing] the associated risk”. The survey components throughout the program identify where poor behaviour may be putting people at risk. Qualitative comments in the survey can bring to the surface latent “factors that can increase the likelihood and risks of a worker being exposed to violence or aggression”. Thus armed, the organisation is well-placed to “provide care or services to people who are distressed, confused, afraid....or receiving unwelcome or coercive treatment”. Organisations are safer with prevention insight data in tandem with the instructional, skill-building material it provides to limit aggression and violence in their teams.

Risk dimensions could be “gendered violence, low worker diversity, power imbalances along gendered lines, and a workplace culture which accepts and tolerates gendered violence, “high job demands, low job control, lack of role clarity and poor workplace relationships” and numerous other influences that “increase stress and conflict within the workplace which may escalate to aggressive or violent behaviour”.

Failing to address disrespectful speech and body language can lead to the occurrence of more aggressive types of behaviour and harm.

The Guidelines states: “You should look out for less serious, but still unacceptable behaviour such as eye rolling, sneering, swearing and name-calling. This conduct can sometimes escalate to more serious forms of aggression and may be an indication of a risk of violence.”

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program protects organisations, their CEOs and managers to the best extent possible by demonstrably showing that clear, cooperatively developed standards are in place, and that all staff have access to the same crucial training.

According to the Safe Work Australia Guidelines: “Although it may be difficult to control the actions of third parties, you must still eliminate or minimise the risks of third-party violence and aggression occurring at your workplace, so far as is reasonably practicable.”

The insights gained divest aggressive people of their power to harm, leaving their inappropriate actions exposed, helping to mitigate accelerated poor behaviour. This way, the organization has its best chance to risk manage against “Violence and aggression [which] may happen between workers within the workplace, [or] from third parties such as customers, clients, patients or members of the public.”

There must be widespread coverage of material to all levels and all areas of the organisation.

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program safeguards all levels of worker and all areas of the organisation with complete coverage, consistently with the Guideline: “Ensure that these work systems and procedures are well understood by all workers (e.g., through training, providing policies electronically or on noticeboards) and implemented consistently across all areas of the business and all levels of worker.

The program elements of the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program are undertaken by all organisational members, across all levels of staff and across all areas of the organisation. This results in an organisation-wide report that acts as a 'culture temperature' check to enable a unique line of sight across the entire workplace to identify where strengths and areas of particular focus of development might exist or need further work.

Sustaining an organisational culture free from fear of aggression and violence must depend on embedding required standards into every aspect of the organisation's operation.

In combination, the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program's educative, data-gathering and planning tools components equip leaders to "identify hazards at the workplace" and respond.

As the Guideline material states, it necessary to instate ways to:

- observe work practices to identify risks of exposure e.g., working alone, contact with the public, or working after hours
- observe customer behaviour and how people interact with workers, including lower level but more frequent behaviours like incivility from customers
- identify whether issues already identified between co-workers, clients, patients or others could escalate to violence
- observe the culture of the workplace to see whether violence or aggression is accepted as normal behaviour" [as] workers may take on this behaviour to participate in the workplace culture without thinking about the consequences to others e.g., name-calling, swearing, sexual or gendered jokes, or hazing new or young workers is seen as a workplace norm
- observe how managers, supervisors, workers and others interact with one another e.g., poor relationships, cultural or community issues leading to workplace tension, or workers avoiding being around certain people.

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program planning and integration tools equip the organisation to align all aspects of their workforce strategy and practice with program outcomes in accordance with Safe Work Australia Guidelines, further ensuring proper reporting mechanisms are in place and safeguarded:

"The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program enables a cross-organisation check to assess whether your existing risk controls to prevent violence and aggression are effective, if your response procedures worked the way they were supposed to and whether new risks have been identified that also need to be managed to prevent future incidents."

Stuart Andrews, Executive Director, AHEIA

Have in place a clear statement of expectations mitigating workplace harm.

The Communication Charter that is part of the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program contains the expressions of the workers as to their desired safe, supportive work environment. It is in everyone's interests to observe it as a standard. It represents a clear statement that the workplace will not accept any form of violence or aggression, including from clients, customers, members of the public or between workers.

Because the Charter is created through worker input it has greatest chance of wide adoption. It is advertised and promoted well in the organisation and amongst clients and customers. The guideline recommends "Putting up signs at the workplace, such as zero tolerance of aggression and violence ... clearly communicating to clients and customers that any form of violence or aggression is not tolerated" and that this "ideally becomes embedded into all parts of operations, e.g., including service agreements, contracts or on signs."

As the guidelines state, "The workplace culture, behaviour standards, policies and procedures that you implement to prevent workplace violence will play a key role in addressing inappropriate behaviour early, and ideally **before** it escalates."

With the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program insights and the Charter, adopting organisations will best "work to manage the risk of internal violence and aggression at the workplace" and aligns with Guideline endorsing "Training of all levels of workers, including managers and supervisors and [making is part of] your responsibilities as the employer" in ways such as :

- setting, modelling and enforcing acceptable behaviour standards for all in the workplace
- fostering a positive and respectful culture where violence and aggression is not tolerated
- addressing inappropriate behaviour early and the reasons for those behaviours
- providing training to workers in how to respond if violence or aggression is directed at them, what they should do if they witness an incident and how to report an incident.

Strategies against workplace aggression and violence are vital in managing care of people when they're beset with additional stresses, externally or from within.

With their AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program status, organisations have their best insurance against aggression, bullying and harm of all kinds in keeping with Safe Work Guidelines and related policies. It is the responsibility of the organization to systematically to embed the learning and Charter standards, so that these are 'front of mind', including when, as the Safe Work Australia Guideline states: "a significant change at the workplace has or may have introduced new or different hazards and risks". Hence, periodic 'refreshers' of the AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program are recommended for new staff, and for times of heightened anxiety amongst workers, in conjunction with strong reporting and process reviews, to maximise sustained culture risk-management capacity.

CEOs and management are best placed to protect against the fall-out of unchecked aggression and violence with systematic coverage.

The AHEIA Culture of Excellence Program works to the full gamut of protection as a single-source response to preventing, eliminating and mitigating against workplace bullying, harassment and aggression:

- making sure workers have a range of accessible and user-friendly ways to report informally, formally, anonymously and confidentially
- ensuring workers know how to report violent or aggressive incidents or behaviours of concern, their right to representation and the support, protection and advice available
- training key workers to receive reports of incidents and give support and advice
- ensuring processes and systems for reporting and responding to incidents are best-practice and widely communicated and regularly reviewed
- providing planning and survey tools to ensure data-driven workplace behaviour management
- providing supportive, consistent and confidential responses to reports
- implementing systems to prevent retaliation and victimisation of people involved in reports
- verbally informing all workers about the workplace policies
- displaying the policy on notice boards
- publishing the policy on the staff intranet or emailing it to workers
- distributing brochures or displaying posters, and
- providing training about violence and aggression, including through induction processes
- implementing verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to de-escalate conflict and identify signs of aggression [and] workplace policies, including acceptable standards of behaviour, consequences for breaches and how violence and aggression will be managed.