

A key component of a safe and inclusive workplace involves individual employees feeling confident to step in when they witness discrimination, harassment, or inappropriate language or behaviour taking place at work. An employee who takes action by intervening in such situations goes from being a bystander to an upstander.

A workplace culture in which employees are equipped to move from bystander to upstander requires a 'whole of organisation' approach. It requires leadership commitment to endorse upstander action in the workplace, and to develop clear policies that demonstrate the organisation's responsibility to eliminate harassment and discrimination.

It's also important for individual employees to understand what bystander to upstander action involves, and to reflect on how their own privileges and identities can influence action, or hesitancy to act. This 'bystander to upstander' guide is targeted to individual employees to help build their knowledge and skills in speaking out against the behaviours or actions of colleagues.

What is bystander behaviour?

Bystander behaviour refers to the actions or lack of action taken by individuals who witness an incident or situation where someone is being harmed or treated unfairly. It can be challenging to intervene in such situations due to fear, uncertainty, or the belief that someone else will step in to help. Bystanders might feel uncertain about how to respond or fear the consequences of intervening however, intervention is crucial in fostering inclusive and equitable communities.

What is upstander behaviour?

An upstander is someone who recognises when something is wrong and acts to make it right. In the context of social justice, being an upstander means acting against injustice, discrimination, or harassment instead of passively observing or ignoring the issue. This can

involve speaking out, offering support to someone being harmed, intervening in a situation, or working to change the conditions that perpetuate injustice.

Upstanders play a crucial role in creating a culture of inclusion and equity because they challenge the status quo and encourage others to reflect on their behaviours and the impacts of their actions. By intervening in a way that supports the victim, challenges the perpetrator and maintains safety, upstanders can inspire and empower more people to become actively involved in promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in their communities and workplaces.

Actions for employees

To take effective action as an upstander, it's useful to develop your knowledge on how this might look in your workplace.

You can start by:

- reading organisational policies and procedures around building a safe and respectful workplace. These policies and procedures may reference or provide some guidance around upstander action and may detail protection measures for employees who take these actions. Your organisation may have policies in place on the following:
 - diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB)
 - workplace behaviours/code of conduct
 - equal opportunity
 - discrimination/bullying/harassment
 - grievance and complaints resolution
- talking to your manager about where they stand on taking upstander action
- talking to your team members about the kinds of behaviours that constitute harassment and discrimination, the negative impact of these behaviours on people and the workplace, and the ways to address these behaviours through upstander action
- reflecting on your own personal commitment to building a respectful workplace
- reflecting on factors that might influence your ability to be an upstander in certain situations

- encouraging the development of a team charter which outlines the way you will work together. This can encourage a discussion about behaviours rather than just the work you do together.

Your identity and privileges will influence how easily you can go from being a bystander to an upstander. It's important to keep in mind that taking action by being an upstander will be more difficult for some people than others. Some workplaces may have mechanisms through which employees can express concerns without repercussions, but some workplaces may not. That's why starting by reading your organisation's policies and procedures, and opening up a conversation about upstander action with your manager, can help you gain a better understanding of your organisation's position on upstander action.

Reflective exercise: Exploring identity and privilege

In this section, we encourage you to reflect on your own personal identities and explore the concept of privilege. The reflective questions will support you to consider how privilege operates in society and how personal privilege or lack thereof can impact a person's ability to be an upstander.

Reflection questions:

- *What are your own identity markers? (e.g. race, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, religion, etc.)*
- *How do you think these aspects of your identity have shaped your experiences, opportunities, and interactions with others?*
- *What aspects of your identity afford you privilege in society? (e.g., being white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, level of education etc.).*
- *How might these privileges shield you from certain challenges or biases and how they could be used responsibly to support equity and inclusion?*

- *What aspects of your identity expose you to discrimination or societal disadvantages? (e.g., being a person of colour, LGBTQIA+, female, person with disability, etc.).*
- *How do these experiences influence your views on equity and inclusion and what challenges do you face in being heard or supported?*
- *How do different identities and privileges interact and impact on individuals differently?*
- *How has your identity influenced your perceptions of fairness?*
- *What ways can you use your privilege to support others?*

Steps to taking upstander action

1. Notice the event and what is happening. Being aware of the situation requires observation, reflection and being present when incidents occur.
2. Decide whether the behaviour or practices you are seeing are a problem – these behaviours could be discriminatory, harassment, or inappropriate. Consider what your organisation's policies and procedures may state about the behaviour or practice you are seeing.
3. Decide whether taking upstander action will be helpful, and whether you feel safe to step in.
 - a. Think about whether you would want someone to step in for you if you were on the receiving end.
 - b. Think about whether stepping in might result in a positive outcome.
 - c. It's important to remember that you should not take action that might put you, or someone else, in danger.
4. Consider the seriousness of the behaviour or practice to determine how you might step in. VicHealth have developed the [ladder of active bystanding](#) that illustrates the following practical upstander actions:

- a. Diffuse the situation by making a light-hearted comment to try and stop the situation or express disapproval. This could be said in private or with an audience.
- b. Check in with the person who is being harassed to express your disapproval, ask if they are okay, and offer support or to help progress the matter.
- c. Call out the behaviour and educate others. You could calmly disagree and publicly declare the action or statement of the perpetrator to be wrong or unacceptable, and explain why it's important to stop the behaviour.
- d. Report the behaviour if the person being harassed agrees. Support them to report the behaviour through your organisation's reporting system.

Effective communication strategies

Effective communication is key to engaging with those involved in or affected by discrimination or injustice. Employees can enhance their communication skills, including active listening, assertiveness, and empathy-based communication. Further, conflict resolution techniques can be explored to ensure upstanders can confidently address conflicts that may arise during intervention.

Communicating with the perpetrator may look like:

- Deciding that the situation requires direct action.
- Communicating clearly and firmly to de-escalate the situation.
- Asserting yourself without provoking hostility by using a calm, steady tone and non-confrontational language.
- Challenging the perpetrators motive and goal without escalating the situation with a confrontational tone.

Communicating to support a victim may look like:

- Using an empathetic response to express your concern and ask how you can assist them. Use neutral language to facilitate understanding and dialogue between the parties, aiming to reach a peaceful resolution.
- Take responsible for communicating the incident to a higher authority.
- Use soothing tones, non-threatening body language, and offering alternatives to conflict.