

The most significant factor to creating a psychologically safe organisation is by having a positive and inclusive team culture. Role-modelling of inclusive leadership mindsets and behaviours are critical to foster a wider organisational culture of psychosocial safety. When senior leadership successfully demonstrate behaviours that support psychological safety, employees at all levels are more likely to behave similarly.

[Pulsely](#) states that organisational leaders can foster psychological safety in several ways including by promoting transparency, showing curiosity, showing vulnerability, creating meaningful connections, giving clear expectations, demonstrating active listening and by setting supportive work/life boundaries.

[WorkSafe Queensland](#) explains that most employees are likely to be exposed to psychosocial hazards in the workplace. However, there is a greater risk of work-related stress when these psychosocial hazards combine and act together, creating a compounding level of risk. For this reason, it's important that employers consider hazards as interconnected. This risk assessment aims to support organisations to evaluate the potential interconnected risks that may be present within your organisation.

Design or management of work

Psychosocial hazards are factors in the design or management of work that increase the risk of work-related stress and can lead to psychological or physical harm. Some examples of psychosocial hazards may include:

- power imbalances (e.g. workplaces where one gender holds most of the management and decision-making positions)
- workplaces organised according to a hierarchical structure
- employees having little control over aspects of the work, including how or when a job is done
- high and low job demands
- poor understanding among workplace leaders of the nature, drivers and impacts of sexual harassment or racism
- organisational injustice
- poor support from managers
- unfair or unclear performance management/appraisal
- inconsistency of applied procedures
- bias of work procedures
- the same voices being allowed to dominate team meetings
- poor or inconsistent reward and recognition
- remuneration and promotion decisions reward those who can work longer hours (not necessarily achieve better outcomes)

- recruitment and promotion decisions reinforce existing cultural stereotypes
- position descriptions not updated regularly or reviewed for inclusivity
- poor organisational change management

Workplace interactions and behaviours

Everyone in a workplace has a responsibility to ensure the physical and psychological health and safety of employees is upheld. Harmful behaviours directed towards or even witnessed by an employee can cause serious psychological harm. Examples of harmful workplace interactions and behaviours include:

- lack of respect
- lack of social support
- abusive, insulting or offensive language or comments
- aggressive and intimidating conduct (verbal or physical)
- belittling or humiliating comments
- teasing or regularly making someone the brunt of practical jokes
- low worker diversity (e.g. workforce is dominated by one gender, age group, race or culture)
- workplace culture that supports or tolerates sexual harassment or racism, including where lower level (but still harmful) forms of harassment are accepted (e.g. small acts of disrespect and inequality are ignored and reports of sexual harassment, racism or inappropriate behaviours are not taken seriously)
- worker interactions with clients, customers or members of the public (either face to face or online) which may give rise to bullying, sexual harassment or other psychosocial hazards
- use of alcohol in a work context, and attendance at conferences and social events as part of work duties (including overnight travel)
- communication barriers

Work environment

A poor physical work environment where an employee is exposed to hazardous, inappropriate or poor quality equipment that can cause serious physical and psychosocial harm for employees. Examples of an inadequate work environment could include:

- personal protective equipment (PPE) that isn't suitable for all body shapes and sizes or cultural considerations
- equipment that isn't suitable for a wide range of physical abilities or constraints

- social or physical isolation (e.g. due to location, hours of work) by working from remote locations with limited supervision, having restricted access to help and support, or working at residential premises (which may provide an opportunity for covert sexual harassment to occur online)

Assessing risks

There are several ways organisations can identify and assess the state of psychological health and safety in the workplace, including through:

- anonymous employee engagement surveys
- effective consultation practices
- effective communication processes
- consistent supervision frameworks that specifically address psychosocial risks
- review of internal data such as complaint reports, absenteeism and turnover rates
- auditing existing structures related to mental health including policies and procedures, management practices, workplace supports, training programs, job descriptions, and employee assistance programs.

It's important to use more than one assessment method to understand where improvements can be made and how.

Psychosocial hazards in the community services sector

All industries will have a higher risk for some factors over others. In the community services sector, some common psychosocial hazards include:

- **High job demand:** High job demand means more than being consistently busy. We know that the community services sector workforce often reports high levels of 'burnout'. The work the community services sector does is emotionally demanding, and the demand on services often goes beyond what resources will allow organisations to respond to. The effects of vicarious trauma and complex social justice issues on workers need to be carefully managed.
- **Poor support from managers:** For many reasons, those in leadership positions often don't have the leadership and management skills, capability and organisational systems to adequately support those they are supervising. Often frontline staff move into management positions without leadership and management training. Service delivery demands can mean that staff do not always have regular supervision, and the quality of the supervision varies greatly between organisations and between leaders.

Inadequate leadership practices includes not providing clear performance management/appraisal processes, which are crucial for providing role clarity.

- Client behaviour: The community services sector works with some of our most vulnerable community members. This work can expose workers to complex behaviours. Some workers may encounter violence or threatening behaviour, which can pose both physical and psychological risks.

These are just some of the considerations for our sector. It's important to have proactive ways of addressing the psychosocial hazards you have identified in your own workplace.

Resources

The [Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022](#) is a practical guide on how to prevent harm from psychosocial hazards at work, including psychological and physical harm. The Code is an approved code of practice under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (WHS Act).