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UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING BULLYING DURING COVID-19

NSW
GOVERNMENT

Public
Service
Commission

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the way Australians live and work. It's hard to think of a workplace that hasn't undergone significant and rapid change. Many workers are facing unprecedented volumes of work and a highly concerned public. Those in the front line are facing health concerns, the likes of which Australia has not seen in our lifetime. Many are now working from home full time in unexpected ways and learning how to get the most out of the technology available. Nearly everyone has experienced unprecedented change in the way we work and how we communicate with our teams.

While the rapid workplace changes were driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be expected that as we transition into recovery from crisis, things will not look the same as they did before the pandemic. In fact, this period has accelerated new ways of working and many of these shifts towards flexible and remote working will continue.

In these challenging times, supporting the wellbeing of our people is a priority. This means making sure that we continue to foster positive work environments- whether they are digital or physical- where bullying is not tolerated.

Last year in the People Matter Employee Survey, 18% of respondents told us that they had experienced workplace bullying in the last 12 months. While much has changed in our working lives, it is very likely that experiences of bullying persist. In fact, the research on bullying suggests that the additional pressures on individuals and changed work circumstances are significant risk factors for workplace bullying.

Experiences of bullying are likely to look different during and after the pandemic. What was overt, may now be more covert. For instance, exclusion may happen digitally rather than in the physical workplace. While bullying might look different now, the experience is still profoundly distressing for the individual and has negative consequences for teams and workplaces.

This guide provides information on what drives bullying and the different ways that bullying may be experienced during the pandemic and as we progress into new ways of working. Throughout the guide you will find examples of bullying in this context. These are drawn from composite sources, not real-life individual cases. These examples are designed to illustrate the complexities of bullying during the pandemic and in these times of rapid work changes and spark your thinking about preventing bullying. Finally, the guide provides some practical ideas to prevent and respond to workplace bullying.

What is workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying is repeated, and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety.[1]

Bullying is persistent behaviour over time and can take many forms. It can include obvious actions such as shouting and verbally belittling, and less visible actions such as intentionally withholding information necessary to do a job or designing activities which exclude a team member.

Bullying may be intentional or unintentional and the perpetrator may not be aware that their behaviours constitute bullying.

What causes workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying is caused by perpetrators responding to organisational environmental drivers/pressures and individual behavioural drivers/pressures. Often bullying is a result of multiple drivers/pressures. For this reason, any strategy to prevent bullying should focus on addressing both organisational and individual drivers.

In the context of the pandemic and rapid changes to working environments, many people are experiencing greater pressure and uncertainty at this time and the capacity for drivers of bullying to result in or be perceived as bullying is heightened.

Some common drivers leading to bullying are:[2]

Organisational drivers

- Role ambiguity
- Increased work demands
- Lack of resources
- Lack of training
- Change
- Job insecurity
- Poor workspace
- Lack of policies and support systems
- Staff shortages
- High workloads
- Poorly designed rostering
- Significant technological change
- Isolated work
- Change in work method
- Exposure to customer violence or aggression

Individual drivers

- Poor interpersonal and communication skills
- Autocratic leadership style
- Low emotional intelligence
- A traumatic experience
- High stress
- Unrealistic expectations
- Unconscious bias
- Discriminatory attitudes based on sex, age, race or other category of difference

[1] Safe Work Australia, 2016, Guide to Preventing and Responding to Workplace Bullying. Retrieved from: https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1702/guide-preventing-responding-workplace-bullying.pdf

[2] Safe Work Australia, 2018, Work-related psychological health and safety: A systematic approach to meeting your duties. Retrieved from: https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/work-related-psychological-health-and-safety-systematic-approach-meeting-your-duties

What does Bullying typically look like in our sector

Each year the People Matter Employee survey (PMES) collects employee reported information on a range of workforce matters including bullying. In 2019 the PMES told us that the most common types of bullying in the NSW Public Sector in both frontline and non-frontline roles were:

- unjustified criticism or complaint

- withholding information vital for effective work performance

- shouting and expressing anger.

This gives us an evidence base for understanding the types of behaviours that we need to address.
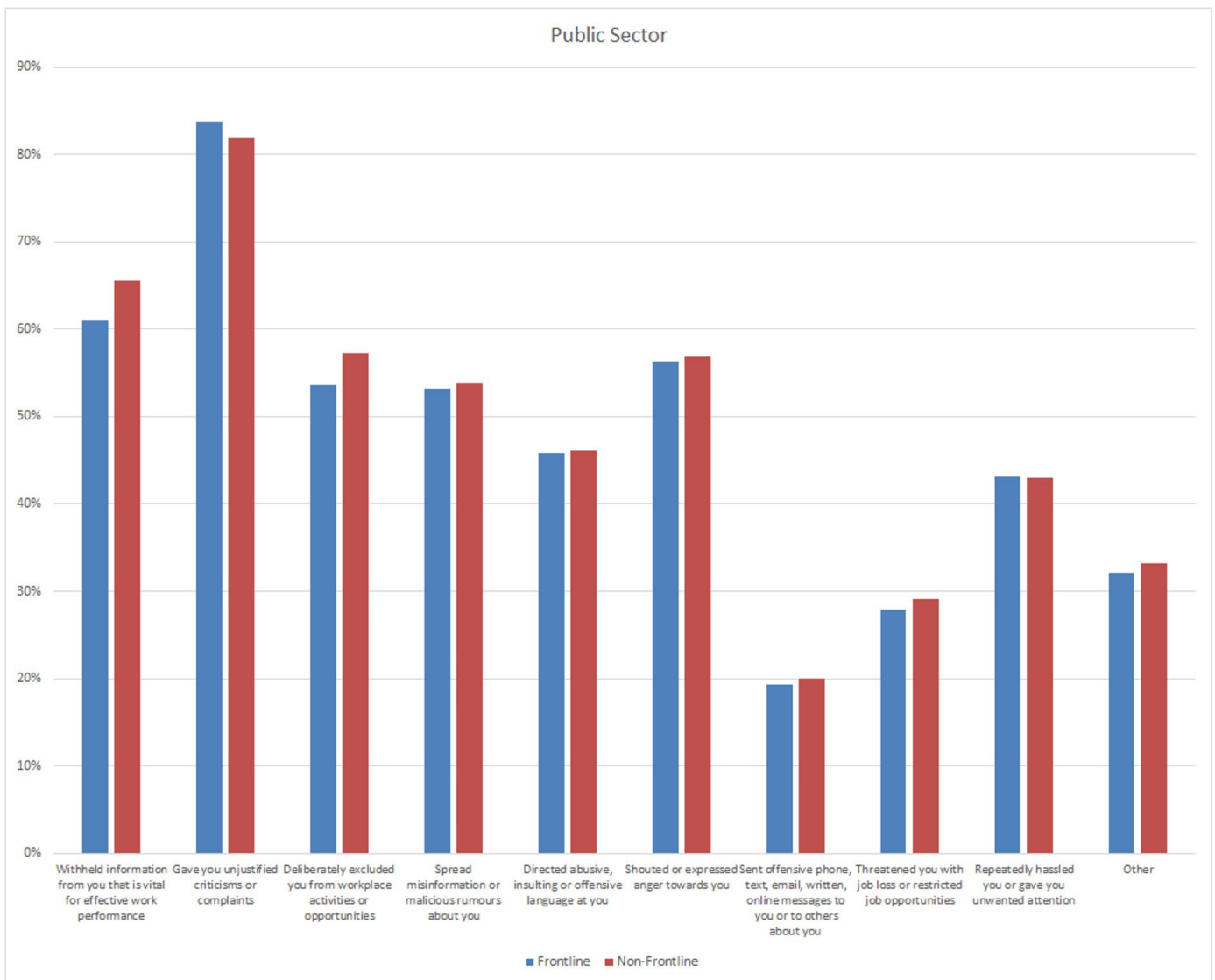

Figure 1: Percentage of bullying types by frontline/non-frontline, NSW Public Sector, 2019 People Matter Employee Survey

Groups at risk of bullying

From the 2019 People Matter Employee Survey data, we know that certain groups of people report experiencing bullying at higher rates than others.

Last year the groups reporting the highest rates of bullying identified as:

- People with a diagnosed mental health condition – 35%

- People with disability – 32%

- Aboriginal Peoples – 26%

- People identifying as LGBTIQ+ - 22%

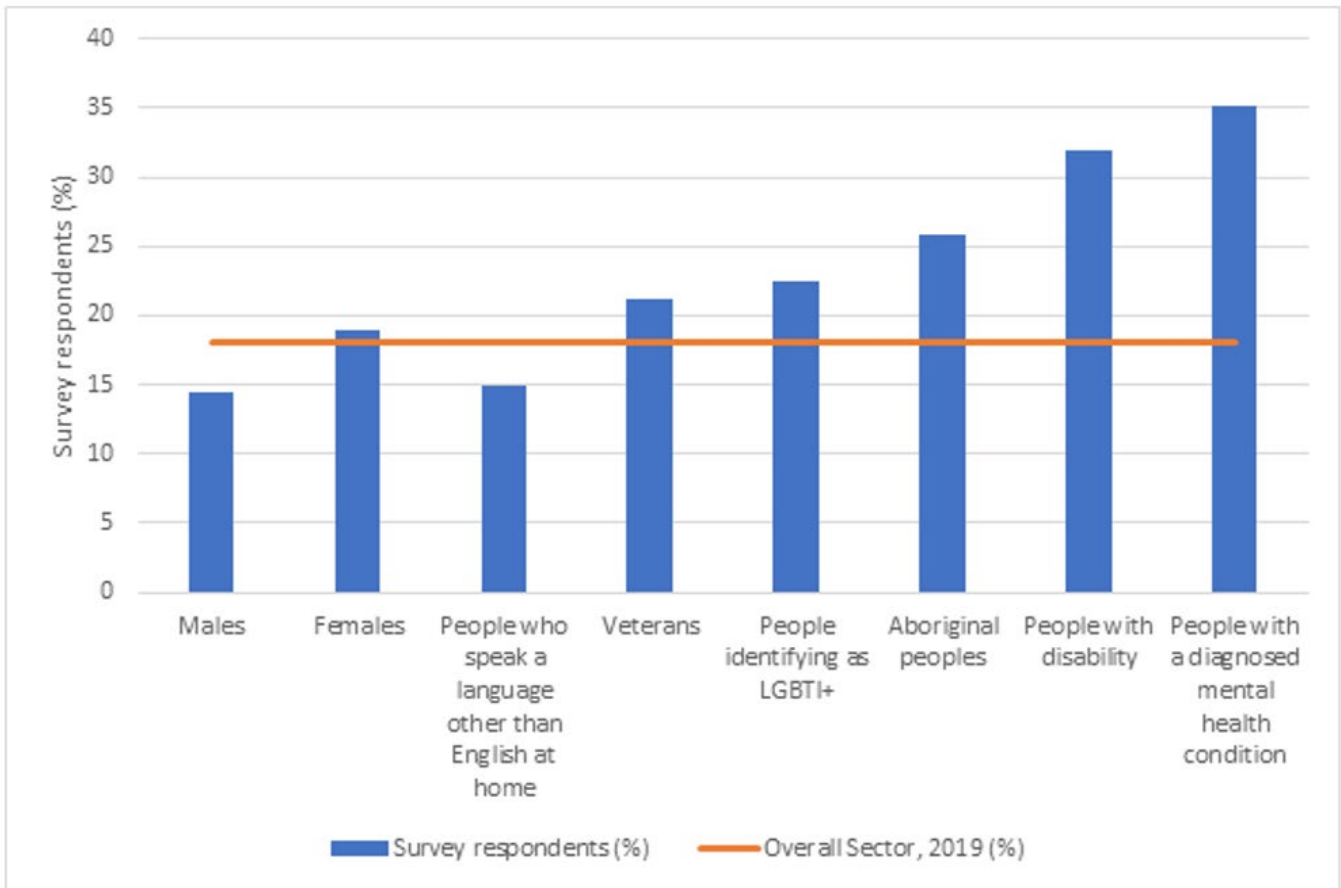- Veterans – 21%

- Women – 19%

Figure 1: Percentage of bullying types by frontline/non-frontline, NSW Public Sector, 2019 People Matter Employee Survey

Who is at extra risk right now?

As shown above, groups that experience social exclusion and discrimination are at greater risk of bullying. This dynamic is unlikely to have changed and may have intensified through social isolation during this period. Employees may identify with multiple categories of difference, including some that are not listed here, such as age, faith, geographical distance and economic background. As such, they may experience overlapping forms of distress or disadvantage during COVID-19.

Strategies to promote the wellbeing of and reduce risk of bullying experienced by these groups are necessary.

Further, as a result of COVID-19 there are other employees that may be at greater risk of bullying.

People with a diagnosed **mental health condition** report the highest rates of experiencing bullying. The Black Dog Institute states that between 25% to 33% of the community experiences high level levels of worry and anxiety during similar pandemics. Further, disease outbreaks can increase anxiety and panic, depression, anger, confusion and uncertainty, and financial stress.[3] With Lifeline and Beyond Blue reporting record numbers of calls

from people suffering with mental health concerns, it can be expected that there will be employees struggling with mental health concerns for the first time.[4] Men in particular are three times more likely to die by suicide than women and are far less likely than women to seek help for mental health conditions.[5]

It is completely normal to feel sad, or anxious or confused at this time– all employees may need some additional support at different times throughout the peak of the pandemic and when returning to workplaces. Approaching employees with empathy goes a long way to preventing experiences of bullying and improving wellbeing.

People of Asian appearance may face increased racial abuse, violence, vilification and discrimination during this period. The Australian Human Rights Commission reported that about 1 in 4 people who lodged a racial discrimination claim in February and March 2020 say they were targeted due to COVID-19.[6] A recent survey conducted by advocacy network Asian Australian Alliance also reports an increase of racially motivated attacks and discrimination during this period. Of those who responded, 81 percent indicated that the attack they experienced was related to or

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[3] Black Dog Institute, 2020, Mental Health Ramification of COVID-19: The Australian context. Retrieved from: https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200319_covid19-evidence-and-reccomendations.pdf; Bults, M., Beaujean, D.J.M.A., Richardus, J.H., and Voeten, H.A.C.M., 2015, Perceptions and behavioral responses of the general public during the 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic: a systematic review, Disaster Med Public Health Prep, 9:2, 207-19.

[4] Neal, A., 2020, Good Friday was Lifeline's busiest day ever as coronavirus puts strain on mental health, ABC News. Retrieved from: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-19/good-friday-was-lifeline-busiest-day-ever-coronavirus-anxiety/12161104; Medhora, S., 2020, Calls to Lifeline jump 20 per cent as coronavirus crisis takes hold, Triple j Hack. Retrieved from: https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/calls-to-lifeline-go-up-due-to-coronavirus-covid-19/12096922

[5] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019, Causes of Death, Australia, 2018: Intentional self-harm, key characteristics, cat. no. 3303.0., viewed 15 May 2020; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007, cat. No. 4326.0., viewed 15 May 2020.

[6] Fang, J., Renaldi, E. and Yang, S., 2020, Australians urged to 'show kindness' amid reports of COVID-19 racial discrimination complaints, ABC News. Retrieved from: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-03/racism-covid-19-coronavirus-outbreak-commissioner-discrimination/12117738

motivated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Concerningly, three quarters of these attacks were dismissed by the attackers as a joke.[7]

A large portion of these attacks have occurred in business places, with a further 13% recorded on public transport. Whilst a significant proportion of these attacks are perpetrated by strangers, these findings support a general upsurge in discrimination and racism against Asian Australians. Although these attacks can occur in any work environment – colleagues, managers and leaders must be particularly mindful to support frontline workers from Asian backgrounds dealing with members of the public and the impact these experiences can have on their wellbeing.

People who are at increased risk of a serious infection may have increased pressure and anxiety about returning to work, and consequently be more vulnerable to bullying. The Commonwealth Government Department of Health advises that "at risk" employees should be supported to work from home where possible. If this is not feasible, the workplace risks for vulnerable employees need to be assessed and addressed. For example, reassignment to non-customer facing roles.[8]

People likely to be at higher risk of serious illness if they are infected with the virus include:

• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 50 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions.

• People 65 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions.

• People 70 years and older.

• People with compromised immune systems.

People in insecure work may be facing increased uncertainty about their employment at this time, and therefore increased pressure. This may lead to increased bullying at this time.[9]

[7] Zhou, N., 2020, Survey of Covid-19 racism against Asian Australians records 178 incidents in two weeks, Guardian News. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/survey-of-covid-19-racism-against-asian-australians-records-178-incidents-in-two-weeks

[8] Commonwealth Government Department of Health, 2020, Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) – Information for employers. Retrieved from: https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-employers

[9] Black Dog Institute, 2020, Mental Health Ramifications of COVID-19: The Australian context. Retrieved from: https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200319_covid19-evidence-and-reccomendations.pdf; Burgard, S.A., Kalousova, L. and Seefeldt, K.S., 2012, Perceived job insecurity and health: the Michigan Recession and Recovery Study, Occupational Environmental Medicine, 54:9, 1101-6.

Workplace bullying and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the context of rapid work redesign and a pandemic, both the organisational and individual drivers of bullying are heightened. The quantum of change is far greater at the moment. Previously a significant organisational change might be a change to organisational structure or a new leader. While this can be a big change, other areas of work largely remain constant. In the current environment, it might instead look like a change to customer volumes or a move to work from home on a full-time basis- all in the context of significant upheaval in other areas of life.

While working arrangements have changed rapidly and continue to evolve, it is useful to think about how organisational drivers of bullying may be presenting in this unique environment and what we can do about them. The organisational pressures discussed do not always lead to bullying, however, they do create an environment where bullying can take root and negatively impact employee engagement and motivation. Employees, workplaces and organisational cultures all benefit from addressing drivers of bullying.

Organisational Drivers of Bullying

- **Role ambiguity** may occur in areas where organisations have changed priorities quickly as a result of COVID-19. Typical consultation and change processes may not have taken place and in cases where it has, employees may still be unclear how their work fits in the changed environment.

"Covid has shifted what my team is focusing on...the project I was working on has been put on the back burner completely and It feels like all of that work has gone to waste."

Before Covid hit I had a clear direction with my work...I regularly engaged in planning and consultation with my team and my manager...However Covid has shifted what my team is focusing on...the project I was working on has been put on the back burner completely and It feels like all of that work has gone to waste. The work I am now doing is quite new to me and I feel like I am falling behind due to the lack of communication I have received from my manager... everyone else seems to be fine but I am really struggling with wrapping my head around the work and its purpose.

My manager and I always used to have consultations about my work and its direction...now because of Covid I am really struggling to see the value in what I am doing and how it even fits with the current climate...I know other members of my team have been given new work that seems to align with everything that is going on, yet I am still working on the same things as before...I know my manager is really busy and rarely has time to talk but it would be nice to have a conversation about how the work I am doing is adding value.

- **Work demands** will be very high in areas of response to COVID-19. The Health sector balanced significant amounts of testing while adjusting how work was carried out to manage employee safety. Teachers had to adjust rapidly to lessons being provided remotely and returning to face to face teaching. Work demands in typical office roles might have decreased significantly as other areas needed priority. Both an increase or decrease in work can have an impact on employees and if not managed well,[10] can lead employees to feel like they are being targeted.

"Now that I am working from home, I feel a lot of pressure from my manager to work longer hours."

"Before Covid-19 I worked standard hours, I stayed longer if I had urgent work that needed doing but generally, I would be out of work around the same time every day. Now that I am working from home, I feel a lot of pressure from my manager to work longer hours because I don't have to travel to and from work. My deadlines are also a lot shorter which means I am not finishing work until late at night. I am really stressed, and I feel as if I never leave work because of the expectation to work into the evening… I don't want to say anything because I am a grad and I don't want to come across as lazy, but I don't have any more capacity to do these hours."

- **Isolated working** is growing as a concern with record numbers of people working from home. With whole teams in dispersed locations the capacity to exclude team members both intentionally and unintentionally is higher than ever.

"Since these meetings have started to be held over Skype, I have noticed that Sue is never on the invite list."

Before COVID-19, my manager would always book meetings during the week to catch up… When Covid arrived, we moved these to Skype. Before Covid these meetings were always booked last minute and one of our team members Sue was excluded occasionally. My manager always used the excuse that Sue didn't need the information that we were going to discuss. Since these meetings have started to be held over Skype, I have noticed that Sue is never on the invite list. I raised this to my manager in our most recent meeting, however she used the same excuse as before…the information wasn't relevant to Sue's work… I can't see why it wouldn't be, she was involved most of the time in the meetings at our physical workplace …I feel stuck, it was much easier to make sure everyone was included in the workplace as we all sat together, but now that everything is virtual, I don't know how to help and whether or not I will be taken seriously.

[10] The Australia Institute, 2013, Hard to get a break? Hours, leave and barriers to re-entering the Australian workforce; Wooden, M., Warren, D. and Drago, R., 2019, Working Time Mismatch and Subjective Well-being, British Journal of Industrial Relations 47:1, 147-179.

- **Lack of change management** would typically relate to senior management communicating changes in organisational structure or direction. However, in the current environment it could relate to organisations changing their ways of working to respond to social distancing requirements and employees feeling uninformed about these decisions. As restrictions ease and organisations start to return to pre pandemic workplaces, this trigger could arise again if decisions related to a workplace return are not communicated frequently.

- Those working from home are likely to have **fewer resources** available to them and those in areas of surging customer numbers have fears of depleting typical supplies, for example in hospitals.

- Managers not experienced in managing remote teams will have a period of adjustment while they adapt their **communications methods**. Similarly, employees not used to all communications being via technology might feel that they are being excluded. It is useful to remember that typically communication has both verbal and non-verbal elements, so while we are practicing social distancing, the absence of non-verbal communications can result in misinterpretation.[11]

"For the last 2 months all I have been getting from my manager are short, blunt messages. I have been worried that she wasn't happy with the work I was producing."

Working from home has made communication a real challenge for my team. Prior to COVID-19 my manager and I spoke often face to face and there was usually a in person discussion when work was being reviewed. ...however now the team is working remotely our communications are mostly via skype and email. For the last 2 months all I have been getting from my manager are short, blunt messages. I have been worried that she wasn't happy with the work I was producing. I finally built up the courage to ask her what I was doing wrong as her replies implied that she wasn't happy with me...she was shocked that I thought something was wrong. She said that she hadn't realised the tone and intent was being misinterpreted and we agreed it was probably because we weren't communicating in person anymore. I guess we all have to be extra considerate of how our communications might be interpreted. I'm really glad I raised it as it was affecting my focus and motivation and since then we have had more conversations with video to help manage the messaging.

[11] Byron, K., 2008, Carrying too heavy a load? The Communication and Miscommunication of emotion by Email, Academy of Management Review, 33:2, 309-327.

- **A poor workspace** may be a new factor as people have moved to work from home. Do all employees have the technology to remain connected to each other and the workplace? If not, this may mean some employees are excluded from meetings and feel marginalised. Shared workspaces and conflict arising from co-habitation can also impact the work environment.[12]

> ## "I feel like people are becoming really annoyed with me when I drop in and out...this makes me feel really anxious as I know there is nothing I can do about it."
>
> Prior to Covid I was rarely at home and never really worried about the speed of my internet...now that I am working from home this has become a real issue as all of my meetings have moved to video...I was meant to attend a 3 hour workshop the other day with my team and I missed half of it because of my poor internet speed...I feel like people are becoming really annoyed with me when I drop in and out...this makes me feel really anxious as I know there is nothing I can do about it...I hope people don't think I'm ignoring them or that I am not doing my work because it isn't the case...

This situation is common and could be resolved by temporarily adapting tasks or ways of working to be less reliant on internet connection. Also consider having a meeting "buddy" who can take notes and take steps to catch up after an online meeting with any employees having difficulty with internet connection.

- Technological change has blurred the line between personal and professional zones. During COVID-19, given the high level of change around when, where and how staff work, there may be more **ambiguity about workplace boundaries and appropriate behaviour,** especially on technological platforms.

- **Timelines** that are reasonable in a typical environment might be unreasonable in the COVID-19 environment. For customer facing roles this may be because of the surge in customers or slower processing times as a result of changed work methods which respect social distancing. For staff working at home this may be because of slower internet speeds, challenges accessing document management systems and decision makers while also managing caring responsibilities and other factors.

For many people the typical sources of stress relief have not been available to them until recently, including attending gyms, social gatherings and having time to themselves among others. And this is at the same time as pressures are greatest. It is especially important that managers and teams look out for each other.

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[12] Bouziri, H., Smith, D.R.M., Descatha, A., Dab, W. and Jean, K., 2020, Working from home in the time of covid-19: how to best preserve occupational health?, Occupational and Environmental Medicine; Tavares, A.I., 2017, Telework and health effects review, International Journal of Healthcare, 3:2, 30-36.

How might bullying present?

Aggression by customers and the public

I work as an ICU Nurse at an inner Sydney hospital. I catch the bus to work every day as I don't own a car. Last week on my regular journey to work, I was wearing my usual blue scrubs but had covered the majority with a coat as I had heard nurses were being spat and coughed at by people. I hopped on the bus and a lady on the bus kept giving me looks from her seat, I didn't really think much of it… I got off at my usual stop, the lady followed me off and at the traffic lights she proceeded to yell at me, telling me I was disgusting for wearing my scrubs out of the hospital. This really shocked me as I had never experienced this sort of behaviour before…Now I don't want to catch the bus to work anymore… what if I see the same lady again and the same thing happens again?

I work as a platform guard for Sydney Trains I really love this job but sometimes we are the first ones to be abused as we are on the frontline. The other weekend the trains were running on a reduced service because of track works. A man approached me whilst I was working on the platform and became abusive because of the wait time on the next train. I tried to explain the situation to him, but he was becoming more and more agitated. The man then coughed in my face and said he had COVID-19… I am just trying to do my job during this time and these experiences make me feel unsafe at work.

Inconsistent application of flexible working arrangements

Before Covid-19 I worked full time, normal 9-5 hours. However, now that my primary school aged children are at home learning, I asked my manager if I could potentially start later in the morning to accommodate their home-schooling. My manager indicated that I couldn't miss our morning stand up so it probably wouldn't be ideal if I was to start later... I know that another team member requested to start later for personal reasons and our manager agreed to it...I don't think my request is unreasonable. I am really struggling to organise my children's schooling, attend the morning stand up and play catch up on my work for the day... I wish my manager would be flexible when it comes to my needs.

Unreasonable timeframes

I work full time and now that Covid has moved everything into isolation I have had to take on the role of teacher for my kids on top of working. This has been extremely challenging as my husband is a frontline worker so he isn't home to help out during the day... my manager at work has never been that flexible with leaving work early or starting later, so I have generally had to rely on afternoon and before school care for my children...when this all started I asked my manager if I could negotiate my hours to accommodate my kids home-schooling. At first, he was receptive, but then he would just start booking meetings later and later into the afternoon and evening or in the mornings when I was trying to organise the kids schooling. He also made the comment that "I should be able to multitask aren't women supposed to be good at that stuff"... It is frustrating that he can't be flexible or responsive to my needs when he is fully aware of my situation.

Race based bullying

We have a team group chat on teams where we talk about everything from work to our normal lives. It is usually pretty casual and it's a place to just have conversations and stay in contact. Two of the guys in our team always crack jokes in the chat... Sometimes the jokes are pretty insensitive, and I don't find them funny. The other day we were having a video meeting and the same guys started joking about COVID-19 and how our Chinese colleague Josh might be spreading the virus because he is from China. Straight after the meeting they changed his name in the chat to Covid-19... I decided that it was completely inappropriate, so I went to my manager to complain about their behaviour. Just because we aren't communicating face to face doesn't mean they should be allowed to get away with that behaviour...I am glad I finally called them out and didn't continue to stand by.

No firm work boundaries

For the past year I have taken every Friday off from work to look after my kids who are not in school yet. When Isolation started, I was planning on taking my Friday's off as usual. Being at home in isolation, I think my manager has either forgotten or is ignoring the calendar notification indicating that I take Friday's off. I have it in my calendar that I don't work but I feel like my manager and even other team members just ignore it...working from home every day now, I feel there is an unspoken pressure to work on Fridays and attend meetings even on my day off. I don't understand why, just because I am working at home, the expectations of what my working hours look like have changed.

Responding to bullying during the COVID-19 pandemic

Employers need to be mindful that obligations under the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 apply to both psychological and physical health and apply regardless of the location of their workers. Therefore, it is important for employers to ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, that workers stay both physically and mentally healthy during this time.

Anti-bullying policies and reporting processes remain in place regardless of other workplace changes. Bullying and inappropriate behaviour should be reported and taken seriously. In the current context and the changed work environments bullying might not present as visibly as in times of normal work volumes and collocated work. However, if you see an employee being excluded from or targeted unreasonably in meetings or in workplaces, say something. If you are subjected to bullying talk to your agency work health safety advisor and Human Resources Business Partner. The PSC Positive and Productive Workplaces guide provides guidance on responding to and reporting workplace bullying, as well as creating a positive workplace culture.

Creating a positive workplace culture is everyone's business, and everyone can benefit. A positive workplace culture is associated with lower levels of bullying, increased productivity and improved overall employee wellbeing.

Prior to the pandemic, tackling workplace bullying and workplace hazards often involved decision-making and implementation of strategies at the executive level. However, as the pandemic has changed the ways we work and the ways in which bullying factors present, so too has it changed the preventative actions managers and team members can take.

Create an environment where people can ask for help

- Proactively acknowledge that many people working from home will be unable to perform all the tasks they would in a typical work environment for a number of reasons, some of which could be limited access to systems, caring responsibilities, sharing working environments with other household members and the stress resulting from COVID-19. Be upfront about this and make it ok for people to ask for help or admit they are struggling.[13]

- Make it ok for staff to ask for the resources they need to work effectively.

- As a manager, talk about challenges you may be facing so that it is ok for employees to do the same. Create an environment where discussion is encouraged about challenges and experiences

- Refer staff to relevant resources to support them through this period.[14]

Prioritise connection and communication

- Model behaviours of checking in with colleagues regularly.

- Set up regular team, branch and division meetings.

- Have team members check on and support each other often.

- Be mindful to include all employees in relevant meetings and emails.

- Establish early the frequency and channel for staff communications. Stick to it and check in with the team regularly to see if it is working for everyone. In times of significant change having a reliable pattern or communication from a leader helps staff to feel settled and included.

- Recognise the extent of change that staff are going through and acknowledge their efforts in adjusting to the change. Staff may be feeling like they are struggling. Letting them know others are impacted in similar ways helps with feeling like they are part of the community and not alone.

- Allow for a two-way dialogue, open up conversations about wellbeing and provide an opportunity for employees to share experiences, ideas and thoughts.[15]

- Provide information about the pandemic, changes to working arrangements and mental health/wellbeing regularly and from trusted sources. This will help reduce fear and anxiety amongst employees about the state of the pandemic.[16]

[13] Safe Work Australia, 2020, Working from home. Retrieved from: https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces/industry-information/home-services/working-home?tab=733

[14] Public Service Commission, 2020, Managing employee wellbeing during COVID-19. Retrieved from: https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/covid19/employee-wellbeing-

[15] Mazzei, A. and Ravazzani, S., 2011, Manager-employee communication during a crisis: the missing link, Corporate Communications, 16:3, 243-254.

[16] Public Service Commission, 2020, Managing employee wellbeing during COVID-19. Retrieved from: https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/covid19/employee-wellbeing-

Prior to the pandemic my manager was already a fantastic communicator...he regularly updated our team and was always transparent in his style of communication...now that we are all working from home he has made a huge effort to continue having weekly catchups with us all...these chats can be work related, but generally my manager focuses on my health and wellbeing...it has been really great to know that no matter the circumstance he is there supporting me.

As a police officer going to work hasn't really changed all that much for me...however there is definitely a fear that sits in the back of your mind that you might contract Covid-19...I do often think about how everyone else is at home and we are on the frontline... however most of my fears are usually settled by my senior Sergeant who has really made an effort to make sure I am coping with everything and that I am looking after my wellbeing...it's great to know she is looking out for me.

Set the priorities and be clear about roles and responsibilities

- Communicate the organisation's and team's priorities during the pandemic, so that employees are clear about what they should work towards. This can help avoid conflict between employees when conflicting priorities arise.

- Be upfront about changes to priorities and that this is in response to COVID-19.

- Have clear reporting structures in place so that employees understand who has final approval and who they need to consult with to complete work task.

- This is especially important in the new work environment, as it is easier to unintentionally exclude those who should be involved in a task.

Reconsider workloads and timelines

- Recognise areas that are under extreme pressure and where possible, deploy additional resources to provide support.

- Talk with employees about how their performance will be evaluated in this new working environment and changed priorities.

- Establish regular catch up times.

- Recognise that alternate working environments will not be optimum for many people and they may be balancing caring responsibilities with work.

Managers changed behaviour feeling like bullying

I manage a team in the Department of Customer Service whose workload has significantly increased due to the advent of COVID-19. I am usually very accessible to my staff, but due to the increased workload and stress, I have not been able to email or call my staff as much as I would like. One of my staff contacted me the other day and was quite distressed about her place in the team and whether her performance was lacking... She indicated that she felt my short replies or lack of replying was me signalling to her that she wasn't performing... This made me feel really guilty about my poor communication. I apologised and sent out an email to the rest of our team apologising and explaining why I had been so absent and that my communication was short. I wish I had done this earlier so that my team had clarity on my situation.

Be conscious of communication tone

- For those working remotely the reliance on email will have increased and is potentially the dominant form of communication. While email is great for some things, communicating tone and sentiment is not one of them. It is important to pay extra attention to the tone of emails at this time particularly as team members do not have the benefit of in person interactions to help interpret communications. With more anxieties it is easy to jump to conclusions or to project fears onto others.

Be aware of communications and discuss matters early

Before COVID-19 it was really easy to access my manager at work... She sat right next to me, so I was able to ask simple questions. I am new to my agency, so I don't really know many of the protocols and systems yet. So, when isolation started it was really difficult having to work from home without the face to face contact and ability to ask questions easily. I have been emailing my manager with questions, but I feel like she has been ignoring my messages...She never replies to my Skype messages either. I decided to send her a text message to organise a call...When I voiced how I felt she assured me that she felt terrible about the situation...she explained that her internet at home was really poor and she was trying to answer a lot of her emails and take skype calls on her phone. Since our conversation she has set up "remote visiting hours" a few times a week with our team where we can call her with any questions. I am so glad I asked her...it was all one big misunderstanding.

Look for changes in staff behaviour

- Are any staff members being quieter than usual? If yes, check in on them.

- Is a staff member disconnecting from the team? If yes, check in on them.

- Is someone being spoken over in meetings? If yes, acknowledge that they were speaking.

- Colleagues play a big role in stopping inappropriate behaviour from escalating into bullying. If you see or hear inappropriate or aggressive behaviour directed towards a colleague, speak up and make clear that the behaviour is unacceptable. Check in with your colleague on the receiving end of the inappropriate behaviour and let them know they are supported.

Further information

For further information on workplace bullying, please see below:

- NSW Public Service Commission - Positive and productive workplaces

- SafeWork NSW – COVID-19 recovery and mental health at work

- SafeWork NSW – Violence in the workplace guide

- Heads Up