

Minimising the risk of bullying

And other harmful workplace behaviours

To minimise the risk of bullying (and other harmful workplace behaviours), focus on:

- designing work to minimise the risks of poor role clarity, role conflict and excessive work demands
- rigorous selection of leaders and managers
- setting and reinforcing consistent and firm expectations about workplace behaviour (including performance expectations)

This guidance should be read in conjunction with SafeWork SA's guide for effective handling of workplace complaints.

Prevention through addressing sources of conflict between workers

Reducing the likelihood of bullying requires action to address problems with role clarity, lack of clear goals, role conflict between workers, and excessive work demands. These are the most common work design factors associated with the prevalence of bullying because they often create conflict and tension between workers.ⁱ

Prevention through effective leadership and management

Due diligence when selecting people for leadership and management roles is critical to reduce the prevalence of harmful workplace behaviours. [Democratic and coaching](#)ⁱⁱ leadership styles vastly decrease the risk of bullying, particularly for those leaders who invest time and effort to develop and use their conflict management skillsⁱⁱⁱ and have the skills to proactively manage workloads and role clarity, performance and conduct issues.

In contrast, [laissez-faire leadership](#) (where leaders fail to fulfill their leadership and management responsibilities) has consistently been found to be associated with higher levels of bullying across countries and different cultural settings. Leaders with this style often permit or condone negative and abusive acts, and the misuse of humour to test new workers as part of socialisation processes.^{iv} Laissez-faire leadership is also associated with higher levels of role conflict, role ambiguity and interpersonal conflicts. Leaders with autocratic, coercive, and authoritarian leadership styles who foster climates of fear, non-acceptance of complaint or dissent, and the use of unjustified punishment, are more likely to engage in bullying behaviours.^v



Augmenting preventative efforts through setting and reinforcing expectations

Behavioural standards should be reinforced in a consistent manner throughout the employment lifecycle. That is, managers at all levels of an organisation should:

- deliver recurrent communication about expected and prohibited workplace behaviours;
- apply proportionate and consistent rewards for pro-social and productive behaviour; and
- apply proportionate and consistent sanctions or other consequences for harmful and potentially harmful behaviour. This also protects workers from harm associated with the combined effect of harmful behaviours and poor organisational justice. Consistent and proportionate sanctions have been identified as a very strong predictor of satisfaction with organisational responses to harmful behaviours.^{vi}

What about policies and procedures?

Administrative measures to manage the risk of harmful behaviours (such as bullying policies, codes of conduct and procedures for managing complaints) generally have a positive impact on awareness and confidence in self-management and reporting avenues.

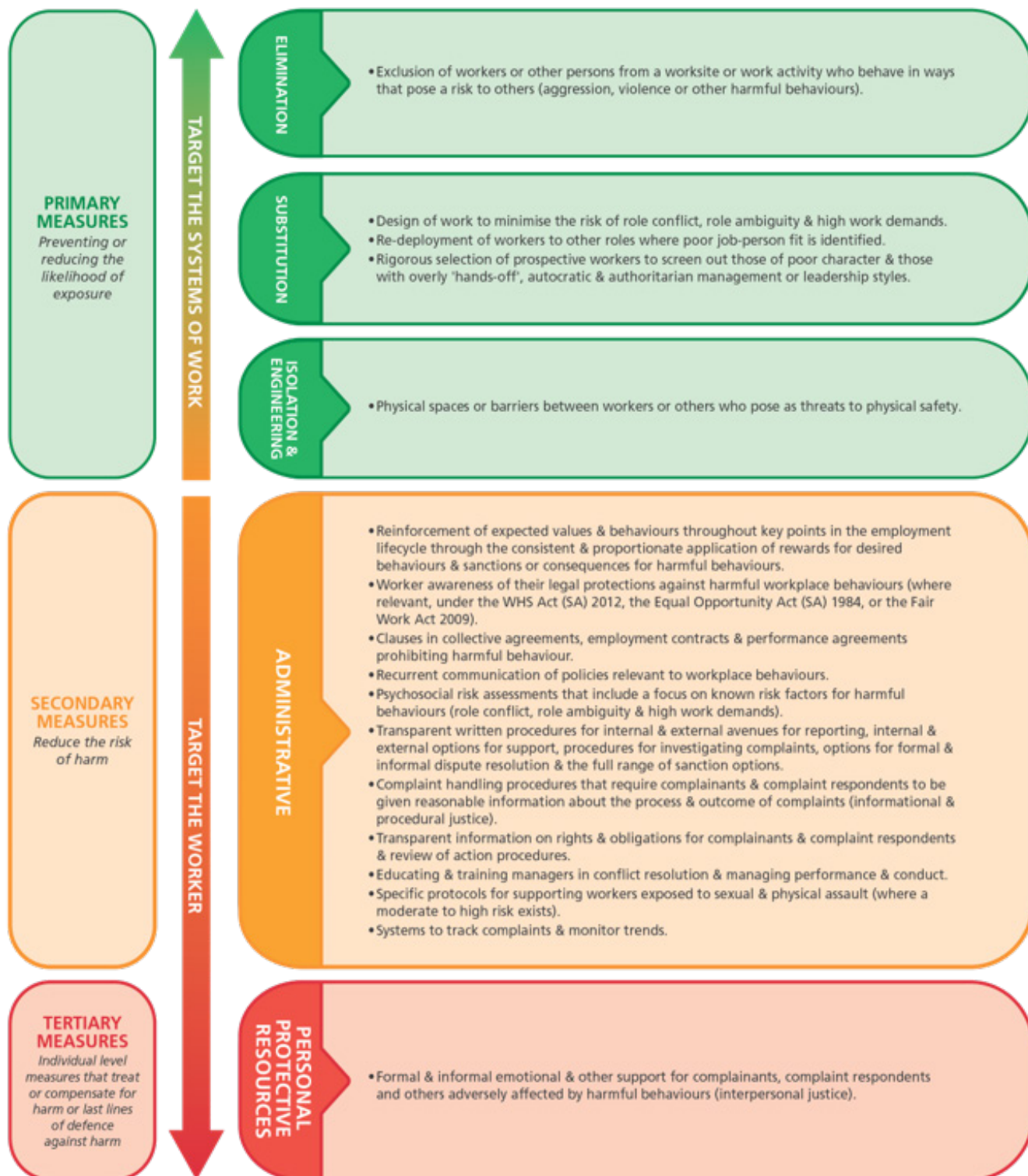
Effective procedures for the handling of workplace complaints about bullying and other forms of misconduct are critical for mitigating the risk of harm associated with both bullying and poor organisational justice (unfair processes, inadequate information and not treating people with dignity and respect).

Despite their benefits, policies and procedures have not been found to be effective at preventing harmful behaviour.^{vii} Their benefits as measures to mitigate the risk of harm are largely dependent on the extent to which they are maintained for currency and relevance and are communicated and followed. Regardless of whether or not there are indications of bullying in a workplace, policies and procedures relating to bullying should be regularly reviewed to identify scope for improvement in their clarity, and their relevance to workers and their workplaces.

Policies and procedures have their place as part of a bullying risk management plan. However, effective people management practices to manage underperformance and conduct problems, clarify and define job roles and work hours, and manage interpersonal and team relationships are of greater benefit.^{viii}

The graphic displayed on the following page sets out a range of options for managing the risk of harmful workplace behaviours that is based upon the above guidance.

HIERARCHY OF CONTROLS FOR MANAGING THE RISK OF HARMFUL WORKPLACE BEHAVIOURS



ⁱ Bowling, N. A., and Beehr, T. A. (2006). Workplace harassment from the victim's perspective: a theoretical model and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(5), 998; Hauge, L.J., Skogstad, A., and Einarsen, S. (2007). Relationships between stressful work environments and bullying: Results of a large representative study. *Work and Stress*, 21(3), 220-242; Notelaers, G., De Witte, H., and Einarsen, S. (2010). A job characteristics approach to explain workplace bullying. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 19(4), 487-504.

ⁱⁱ Transformational leaders are persons who show individual consideration to followers and inspire them to be at their best and develop their own leadership skills. Bakker, A. B., Hetland, J., Olsen, O. K., and Espevik, R. (2023). Daily transformational leadership: A source of inspiration for follower performance?. *European Management Journal*, 41(5), 700.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hoel, H., Glasø, L., Hetland, J., Cooper, C. L., and Einarsen, S. (2010). Leadership styles as predictors of self-reported and observed workplace bullying. *British Journal of Management*, 21(2), 453-468; Astrauskaite, M., Notelaers, G., Medisauskaite, A., and Kern, R. M. (2015). Workplace harassment: Deterring role of transformational leadership and core job characteristics. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 31(1), 121-135; Nielsen, M. B. (2013). Bullying in work groups: The impact of leadership. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 54(2), 127-136; Hauge, L. J., Skogstad, A., and Einarsen, S. (2011). Role stressors and exposure to workplace bullying: Causes or consequences of what and why?. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 20(5), 610-630.

^{iv} Salin, D., and Hoel, H. (2020). Organizational risk factors of workplace bullying. In S.V. Einarsen et. al., *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace*, Boca Raton: CRC Press, 309-312.

^v Sheehy, B., Boddy, C., and Murphy, B. (2021). Corporate law and corporate psychopaths. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 28(4), 479-507; Nielsen, M. B. (2013). Bullying in work groups: The impact of leadership. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 54(2), 127-136; Tsuno, K., and Kawakami, N. (2015). Multifactor leadership styles and new exposure to workplace bullying: A six-month prospective study. *Industrial Health*, 53(2), 139-151; Hauge, L.J., Skogstad, A., and Einarsen, S. (2007). Relationships between stressful work environments and bullying: Results of a large representative study. *Work and Stress*, 21(3), 220-242; Strandmark, M. and Hallberg, L. R. (2007). The origin of workplace bullying: experiences from the perspective of bully victims in the public service sector. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 15(3).

^{vi} Einarsen, K., Mykletun, R., Einarsen, S. V., Skogstad, A., and Salin, D. (2017). Ethical infrastructure and successful handling of workplace bullying. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 7(1), 37-54.

^{vii} Escartín, J. (2016). Insights into workplace bullying: psychosocial drivers and effective interventions. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 157-169; Hoel, H., Giga, S. I., and Faragher, B. (2006). Destructive interpersonal conflict in the workplace: The effectiveness of management interventions. Research project funded by the British Occupational Health Research Foundation (BOHRF), Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester.

^{viii} Tuckey, M. R., Li, Y., Neall, A. M., Chen, P. Y., Dollard, M. F., McLinton, S. S., Rogers, A., and Mattiske, J. (2022). Workplace bullying as an organizational problem: Spotlight on people management practices. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 27(6), 544-565.



See the [SafeWork SA website](#) for more information about psychosocial risk management



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