Dignity and civility at work

School of Psychology

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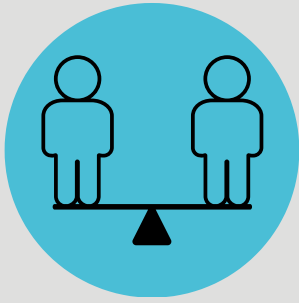
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Introduction

The School of Psychology is dedicated to ensuring a supportive, fair, inclusive and safe environment for all staff. This dedication is illustrated by the recent Silver Athena SWAN award, part of which recognises the existing support structures in place in the School.

Equality at its core, means fairness. Ensuring individuals or groups of individuals are not treated less favourably because of their protected characteristics.

Inclusion is when people's differences are valued and used to enable everyone to thrive at work. Everyone feels they belong and their contributions matter.

Building on this foundation, and as part of its continuing commitment to the Athena SWAN Charter, the School is committed to promoting dignity and civility at work through a number of initiatives designed to further encourage equality and diversity in the workplace, enhance staff well-being and build a civil work climate.

The current document is focused on potential adverse or negative behaviours that might be encountered in the workplace, and how those behaviours can be managed and mitigated.

The general term of 'workplace mistreatment' encompasses the following aspects:

- Harrassment
- Bullying
- Discrimination
- Rudeness / incivility

This document will define each type of mistreatment, provide examples of behaviours, along with guidance on how to manage these behaviours with appropriate support.

Mechanisms of enhancing psychological safety, civility and inclusion will also be described, both as approaches to minimising negative behaviours, as well as steps to enhancing workplace climate and staff well-being.

Civility, dignity and inclusion in the workplace

Dignity and inclusion at work

The University of Aberdeen dignity at work policy highlights that staff diversity should be celebrated, with all perspectives welcomed and utilised to enrich University life. As part of this policy all staff should be treated with dignity and respect, with support provided to ensure all staff have equal opportunities to engage and advance within the University community.

The School of Psychology is dedicated to providing a collegiate environment for all staff, across all job roles, to thrive. This is founded on a proactive approach to develop and embed inclusion and promote a sense of community.

Civility at work

The basis for civility at work is an atmosphere of support, inclusion, professionalism and respect where staff are polite towards one another, regardless of circumstance and across all forms of communication.

Civility is often associated with compassion, warmth and empathy, with research linking civility to improved communication and enhanced leadership. Civility reflects concern for others and helps retain norms for mutual respect.

Enhancing our culture of civility and collegiality

We can all take the following actions to continue to develop and enhance our School climate of civility and respect:

- **Listen** to the experiences and concerns of others without judgement, with empathy, and take action where possible and appropriate to mitigate any negative experiences.
- **Feedback** to others, and accept feedback given to you regarding behaviours that might be considered rude, upsetting or uncomfortable.
- **Respect** the opinion of others, demonstrate fairness, and encourage others to speak up.
- **Share** suggestions regarding job and work redesign that may alleviate issues, support others and enhance community.
- **Learn** about the experiences and perspectives of others and respect diversity in opinion. Openly share information and encourage transparency.
- **Foster** the development of diverse teams, encourage interactions and engagement across a broad range of perspectives.

Psychological safety in the workplace

What is psychological safety?

If you feel psychological safe in the workplace you will be able to speak up, share ideas, and challenge the status quo without the risk of negative consequences to your self-image, status or career. It means that employees feel comfortable asking for help, sharing suggestions informally or challenging the status quo without fear of negative social consequences. When psychological safety is low or doesn't exist, issues are swept under the carpet or ignored. High psychological safety opens the door for an inclusive, effective and high performing working environment. Without it employees will be silent and innovation will become unattainable. When it doesn't exist, leaders, teams and individuals will not have the confidence to speak up and share their experiences or concerns.

How can we encourage psychological safety?

Active listening: Listening actively requires giving the speaker your attention, indicating responsiveness (e.g. nodding), reflecting on what the speaker has said and attempting to gain understanding.

Share stories: Encourage staff to share their experiences, hear from people within the organisation who have been impacted by negative behaviours, exclusion etc. For example, what is it like to be a person of colour in academia?

Role modelling: Psychological safety comes from the top, and often begins with an open door policy - where staff are encouraged to raise issues and make suggestions freely. Senior staff should model the behaviour they wish to see elsewhere in the department - including respect and fairness.

Establishing norms and behaviours: What do we expect as appropriate behaviour within the department or school? This should ideally be explicit rather than implicit, with poor behaviours noted and called out.

Create a new shared language: This is about everyone being on the same page and being confident about using a shared language as well as feeling supported. For example, it is okay to get it wrong at the outset.

Ongoing review: Developing and retaining psychological safety requires ongoing insights and review - What is working? What is working less well? What can we do collectively to change whatever is not working?

What could be considered workplace mistreatment?

Harassment

- Harassment can take many forms and can include undermining the person, unfair treatment and denying training opportunities.
- Harassment may occur as an isolated incident or may be persistent.
- Harassment occurs when someone's actions or words violate another person's dignity or create an environment that is intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive.
- The key element of harassment is that the actions and / or remarks are regarded as unacceptable by the recipient.
- Harassment on the basis of race, gender reassignment, disability, marriage or civil partnership, religion or belief, pregnancy, maternity, age, sex and sexual orientation is unlawful.
- *Examples:*
  - *Insults based on a specific characteristic or membership of a social group e.g. age, religion, race.*
  - *Making threats or inappropriate comments about job security, intellectual capability, and performance.*
  - *Coercion into action that goes against an individuals beliefs or morals.*

Bullying

- Bullying is any conduct which has the cumulative effect of threatening, constraining, undermining, humiliating or harming another individual.
- It is usually repeated behaviour that is considered to be threatening, abusive, aggressive, intimidating, cruel, vindictive or humiliating by the recipient.
- Bullying tends to be an escalating process where the target of the bullying ends up in an inferior position and can be subjected to systematic negative acts.
- Bullying may include physical behaviours such as barging, jostling or shouting.
- *Examples:*
  - *Witholding information from a person or persons, or excluding them from a group (e.g. a research group or committee).*
  - *Persistent misrepresentation or distortion of the behaviour of another member of staff.*
  - *Attempts to isolate an individual, including spreading malicious gossip, rumours and victimisation.*

What could be considered workplace mistreatment?

Discrimination

- The less favourable treatment of one member of staff in comparison to another on the basis of race, gender reassignment, disability, marriage or civil partnership, religion or belief, pregnancy, maternity, age, sex and sexual orientation.
- The application of any unnecessary criteria that some members of staff will find easier to meet than others, and that might prevent progression or engagement for a sub-set of staff members.
- Any behaviours considered to be prejudicial towards members of staff based on the categories listed above.
- *Examples:*
  - *The restriction of participation in training, public engagement or promotional events based on any of the categories listed above.*
  - *Exclusion of any member of staff from any professional event based on their perceived membership in any of the categories listed above.*
  - *Promotion of prescriptive ideas about abilities or performance based on any of the characteristics listed above.*

Incivility

- Incivility is a lower-level behaviour than those listed above, is non-physical, and can appear ambiguous e.g. the person perceiving the behaviour may not be sure if it was intentional or not.
- Incivility goes against norms for appropriate workplace behaviour and politeness, and can therefore vary according to context.
- Incivility can be active, also considered a commission of disrespect, or passive, involving an omission of respect.
- *Examples:*
  - *Any behaviour considered impolite or unprofessional.*
  - *Active = Use of sarcasm, making unpleasant comments, inappropriate use of humour, being overly abrupt e.g. cutting someone off while they were speaking, assigning blame to an individual in front of others.*
  - *Passive: Not responding to a question or comment, not responding to an email that requires a response or action, evidencing inattention whilst someone is speaking (e.g. looking at phone).*
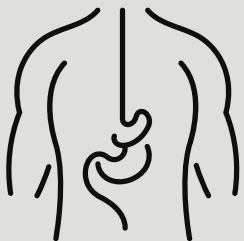
How can workplace mistreatment impact staff?

Psychological health

Workplace mistreatment has been linked to a variety of adverse mental health and well-being outcomes including:
- Increased psychological distress and anxiety
- Increased levels of depression and low mood
- Decreased confidence and self-belief
- Increased risk of suicidal ideation

Physical health

Workplace mistreatment can also adversely impact physical health with a range of potential physiological outcomes including:
- Gastric distress including stomach upset and acid indigestion
- Tension and associated musculoskeletal symptoms e.g. painful back or shoulders
- Increased risk of developing chronic illness
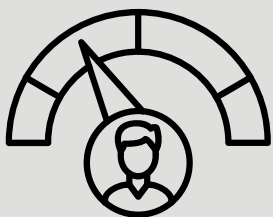
Occupational outcomes

Experiencing adverse behaviours at work can also impact a range of occupational outcomes such as:
- Increased quitting intention
- Reduced job satisfaction
- Increased level of sick leave required
- Reduced concentration and overall productivity

What should you do if you experience workplace mistreatment?

University guidance

The University has developed specific guidance, outlining a series of steps that can be taken, in response to bullying, harassment and discrimination which you can read in full HERE.

In essence the guidance outlines the following:
- **Informal action**
  - Keep a note of all incidences where you feel you were subject to workplace mistreatment.
  - If possible, and it is safe to do so, inform the person engaging in the behaviour that you find it upsetting / offensive etc.
  - Discuss with, and seek support from, friends and colleagues.
  - Approach the HR team, your line manager, or Head of School, trade union representative or well-being co-ordinator for an informal chat and advice.
  - Request a mediated meeting with the person, with the support of your chosen representative.
- **Formal action:**
  - Raise the issue in writing with your line manager and / or Head of School.
  - Your Head of School or line manager will then arrange for further formal investigation to take place via disciplinary procedures.
  - The guidance emphasises that all allegations will be taken seriously and in good faith.

Research-based coping strategies

In addition to the above research conducted on this topic suggests a variety of coping mechanisms that may help protect your well-being in conjunction with the mechanisms outlined above:
- **Problem solving approach:** It can be useful to try and understand why the behaviour has occurred, including antecedents such as stress, through a discussion with the person engaging in the behaviour. This is most appropriate for lower-level behaviours such as rudeness, where bringing the behaviour to the attention of the person can lead in a change in that behaviour and restoration of the inter-relationship.
- **Sharing the experience:** Talk to colleagues and friends after the incident with the aim of gathering shared experiences and insights. You can then turn the incident into a learning experience which can help develop a challenge based perspective - which has been linked with a reduction in adverse emotion.
- **Self-care:** You may need to take a break immediately after the incident e.g. getting a coffee or going for a walk, you should also try to ensure you make additional time for relaxation following the event, whether that's engaging in hobbies, spending time with friends or reading a book.

Internal and external support options

University support

Remember that any adverse behaviour encountered at work is **not** your fault. The University of Aberdeen provides a suite of internal support mechanisms, with some of these highlighted below (this is not an exhaustive list):

- The workplace dignity network is in place for staff who want to discuss concerns about well-being, stress, and workplace mistreatment. Contact Janine Chalmers for further information: janine.chalmers@abdn.ac.uk
- The University also provides an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which you can contact via freephone: 0808 168 2143 to discuss personal and work related issues.
- There is a network of mental health first aiders whom staff can contact to discuss mental health concerns and signpost you to further local mental health services.
- The University HR partners can be contacted to discuss workplace mistreatment and formal avenues for managing such behaviours, you can also contact them regarding dignity at work issues.

External support

Whilst the University internal support mechanisms provide a good range of support, you may wish to also explore external sources of support. As above the below list is not exhaustive but provides an indication of the types of support structures and organisations you might wish to contact:

- If you have concerns about your mental and / or physical health a good port of call can be your GP. Alternatively you might want to access NHS services outside core hours by calling 111 for advice.
- The Samaritans offer a 24/7 helpline to discuss mental health concerns, adverse behaviours or any other general concerns you may have. Ring them on: 116 123
- Mind is a core UK mental health charity and provide a range of online resources to support mental health, including various activities. You can also call them at: 0300 123 3393 or chat with them online via their website.
- The Mental Health Foundation also provide a range of online materials, as well as links to a broad range of mental health services that are accessible within the UK.
- The national bullying helpline has advice specifically for staff experiencing bullying at work. You can also call their helpline: 0300 323 0169