

THE GUIDE TO ADDRESSING

CULTURAL SAFETY FOR MANAGERS



Introduction

The traditional workplace was based on static hierarchies, inflexible policies, and authoritative management. However, this has changed dramatically. The modern workplace is now one that embraces open communication, collaboration, flexibility, and mutual respect. Managers are directly responsible for fostering a healthy culture for the benefit of employees and organizations. This is accomplished in part by establishing policies that promote workplace cultural safety.

In this guide, managers can find concrete recommendations for leading cultural safety initiatives that put your most valuable asset—your people—front and center.



What is cultural safety?

The concept of cultural safety emerged as a grassroots response to unequal access to health services by indigenous Maori people in New Zealand during the 1980s. At the time, [indigenous rights leaders](#) campaigned for recognition and respect of their unique identity and amendments to the health care system that would meet their needs, rights, and expectations.

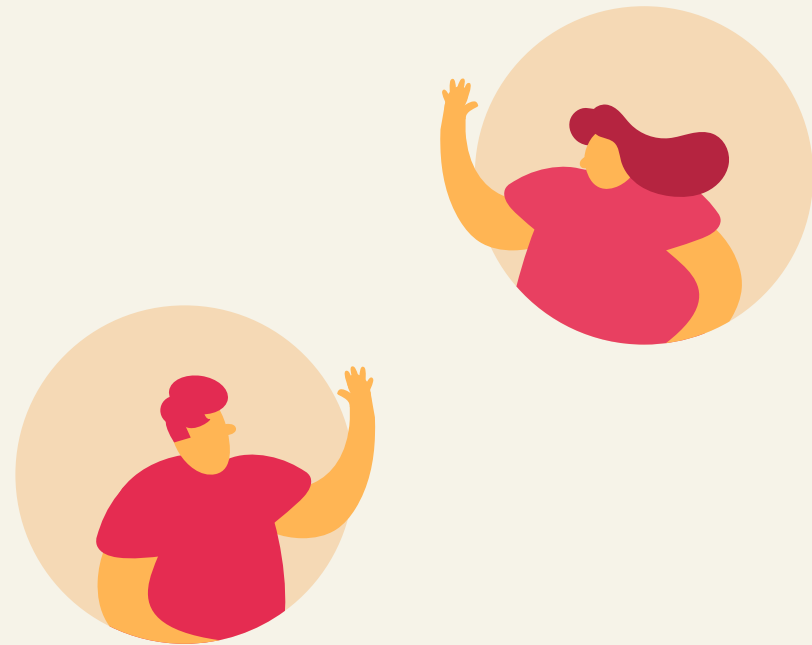
As organizations worldwide increasingly recognize the importance of engendering a healthy culture in the workplace, [cultural safety](#) has become a vital part of the conversation.

Organizations are learning that they must feel [recognized for their unique and diverse identities](#) for employees to feel valued. Furthermore, organizations must develop safeguards and processes to protect the expression of these identities. In this sense, cultural safety enables employees to flourish, regardless of race, religion, gender, physical or intellectual differences, or sexuality.

Zero tolerance

An organization's leaders have the opportunity to model cultural safety by implementing a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence and discrimination, and managers can support HR in developing workplace violence prevention programs. Taking active steps to prevent and remedy incidents signals a culture that values its employees and takes their wellbeing seriously.

In one poll, researchers found that **one out of seven** respondents does not feel safe at work. Even worse, 25% of those surveyed reported experiencing at least one incident of workplace violence. Failing to protect physical and psychological safety can negatively impact organizational morale and productivity. It will also contribute to higher employee turnover and associated costs for finding and onboarding new employees.



The unsafe workplace

Diversity and inclusion are vital to creating a culturally safe work environment where employees can thrive and actively contribute to furthering your company's goals. Organizations that fail to promote inclusion and diversity may struggle to protect employees from blatant or subtle [forms of discrimination](#).

There are many forms of discrimination and, despite legal protections outlined by the [US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) (EEOC), many American employees do not feel safe at work. Managers have a responsibility to recognize and address any incidents of discrimination, including based on the following categories:

Gender

There are two ways of understanding gender discrimination. The first, traditional understanding of gender discrimination is about inequality and sexism. Primarily affecting women, gender discrimination manifests in subtle ways such as not promoting women over male counterparts when they are more qualified, or turning a blind eye to derogatory comments about a particular gender.

The second way of understanding gender discrimination involves gender diversity. Increasingly gender is [being redefined](#) and understood as having a wide range of variations. Failure to foster nonbinary [inclusion](#) is discriminatory and can negatively impact your organization's long term success.

Race, religion, ethnicity, or country of origin

Underhanded comments about a person's accent, national origin, or skin color constitute discrimination, and when these aren't stopped immediately, they can become harassment.

Teasing and offensive remarks create a hostile work environment. Managers must take steps to communicate that this type of behavior is unacceptable.

Age

The number of [age-related discrimination charges](#) is rising, with the number of charges filed by workers over 65 doubling from 1990 to 2017. Ageism in the workplace risks discrimination lawsuits and demotivated employees; furthermore, devaluing older employees sidelines people with valuable experience and skills, negatively impacting long-term organizational success.

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Disability

Companies should prioritize making accommodations for employees with disabilities and implementing equal opportunity hiring policies regardless of physical or psychological conditions. Making the physical workplace accessible and offering employees mental health benefits promotes cultural safety and signals inclusion, attracting more qualified applicants.

Parenthood and caregiving

While most forms of workplace discrimination are illegal under federal law, discrimination against parents is not included in the mandate. [Caregiver discrimination lawsuits](#) have nonetheless increased dramatically, tripling over the past decade. Mothers, fathers, and other caregivers may struggle to balance work and home responsibilities in a culture that requires full time presence and does not offer flexible options. These employees may experience anxiety, isolation, and demotivation, leading to reduced productivity.

Implementing parent-friendly hiring criteria, flexible working arrangements, and compassionate leave policies at the organizational level is vital, but managers must be onboard with these measures and remain supportive of employees who utilize them.

Sexual harassment

In 2019, sexual harassment charges filed through the EEOC cost employers a record [\\$68.2 million](#). Despite the ubiquitousness of sensitivity training and sexual harassment policies, [40% of women and 16% of men](#) report being sexual harassed at work. Nearly every company in America has a grievance procedure in place, yet rates of sexual harassment haven't changed in forty years.

Researchers have found that sexual harassment [programs are more effective](#) in organizations with gender-diverse management. Fighting discrimination and harassment comes from the top, so hire supervisors that support your organization's commitment to cultural safety and prioritize inclusive hiring criteria.

Retaliation

In 2019, over half of the charges alleging workplace discrimination listed [retaliation](#) as the cause and [three-quarters](#) of sexual harassment charges filed with EEOC include a charge of retaliation. Retaliation describes targeting an employee for dismissal, demotion, or harassment after filing a discrimination complaint or otherwise opposing discrimination. The high number of complaints including retaliation indicates widespread failure for many companies to effectively handle incidents while protecting the employee.

Retaliation against employees undermines cultural safety and will prevent other employees from calling out offenders, thereby increasing the risk of additional incidents and litigation. Fear of retaliation demotivates employees, which hurts productivity and increases turnover.



Your organization's value statement

The unsafe workplace is one that doesn't protect employees from discrimination and fails to promote the physical and psychological wellbeing of its people. This culture can hurt an organization in a number of ways:

- Lower productivity
- Loss of experienced employees
- Failure to attract top talent
- Negative brand recognition
- Potential for litigation
- Higher costs resulting from turnover

Aside from business impacts, cultural safety is an ethical imperative that starts with defining your organization's purpose and values.

A value statement defines an organization's beliefs and expectations, providing moral guidance for decision making at every level. It's a message to your people about what is most important—it's the soul of the company. For these values to trickle down and inform employee attitudes and actions, managers must be committed to them.

The safe workplace

A value statement is great, but unless operations are aligned with it, it will remain hollow and ineffectual. Managers have the skillset and are in a position to make a genuine contribution to the cultural safety of an organization. It is up to supervisors and managers to make sure that employees don't fear humiliation, blame, or criticism, and instead feel valued, respected, and appreciated.



Prioritize diversity and inclusion

Research from [McKinsey](#) shows that diversity and inclusion in the workplace is related to increased sales, share prices, and profit. Developing hiring practices that promote diversity will combat discrimination and communicate your company's values to potential hires, shareholders, and customers—and that can be a big boost to productivity. According to researchers, up to [70% of consumers under the age of 35](#) would prefer to buy from an ethical brand.

While race, gender, physical or psychological condition, or age should never (ever) be a factor in the hiring process, finding candidates that are enthusiastic about your company's commitment to cultural safety should be a priority. Look for people who:

- Understand your organization's approach to cultural safety
- Support diversity and inclusion efforts
- Are aware of privilege and representation in the workplace

Hiring processes are an important part of building a safe workplace, but it doesn't stop there. Continuing in-office initiatives to promote diversity, inclusion, and other key values, is the only way to maintain cultural safety. Some examples of initiatives include:



Diversity and sensitivity training

Managers can take a leading role in promoting cultural safety by initiating [goal-oriented diversity training](#). Encouraging employees to develop individual and team goals towards inclusion will foster deeper engagement, loyalty, and mutual respect. Frequent team building exercises and opportunities for dialogue can create a more positive environment of acceptance, which will in turn propel organizational success.

Bystander training is another way to foster diversity and inclusion. Offering actionable strategies [empowers team members](#) who witness harassment or inappropriate behavior to speak up and support colleagues.



Self assessment

Taking a long, hard look in the mirror every once in a while can reveal gaps or failures that might otherwise go unnoticed. Organizations should periodically audit their processes, from recruitment to business planning, to ensure that cultural safety is prioritized at every stage of the employee journey.

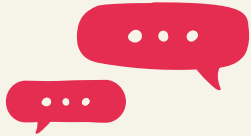
One way to gauge how your organization is performing is to find out how your employees feel about their workplace. [Surveys](#) conducted at regular intervals offer valuable input to ensure that every member of your team is able to meaningfully contribute in a safe environment.



Open communication

In a culturally safe workplace, people are encouraged to communicate what they are experiencing and voice their opinions and concerns without fear. At the heart of inclusion is dialogue, so creating opportunities for employees to be heard is vital. Managers should have an open door policy and be available to employees seeking guidance or support.

Digital solutions can also create enhanced opportunities for communication. Anonymous reporting platforms empower people to anonymously report workplace misconduct and enables companies to take swift action. Like a virtual suggestion box, [reporting platforms](#) encourage secure reporting and provide a single source of truth for organizational policies.



Non-retaliation

Even if your organization has clearly defined policies for conduct and reporting mechanisms in place, if employees fear retaliation, then it is an unsafe workplace. Digital reporting platforms don't just facilitate communication, they also promote easy reporting. More companies are leveraging tech to propel [internal reporting processes](#) that are accessible and comfortable for employees and enabling companies to swiftly and appropriately deal with harassment or misconduct. For organizations to truly foster cultural safety, employees must be able to report discrimination or other offenses with minimal fear of retaliation.





Code of conduct

Honesty and transparency are the hallmarks of a culturally safe workplace. Managers should collaborate with HR in developing a code of conduct that offers a single source of truth communicating your organization's culture, goals, and values.

Your company's code of conduct acts as a central reference for employees and further serves as a benchmark for measuring individual and organizational performance. It also offers guidelines for identifying risk areas and addressing issues should they arise.

It is a manager's responsibility to both serve as a role model for the code of conduct and to communicate it frequently. Opportunities to communicate a code of conduct include during recruitment and hiring, onboarding, ongoing employee training, and performance reviews.



Handling complaints

The true test of an organization's cultural safety is how complaints are handled internally. The process for filing a grievance should be clearly outlined in the code of conduct and regularly communicated to employees so that if an issue arises, they don't have to face uncertainty, fear, and anxiety wondering what to do. Whether the employee is a bystander or a victim, this ten-point grievance policy delivers effective and transparent mechanisms for handling complaints:

1. Offer a 24/7 digital platform to file grievances
2. Guarantee confidentiality
3. Collect and record details
4. Select an impartial investigator or panel as needed
5. Consult with legal counsel as needed
6. HR and management determine consequences according to company policy
7. Follow up and monitor complaint resolution
8. Be transparent with your people but protect the identity of the complainant if this is their preference
9. Help survivors, including offering compassionate leave or mental health services as needed
10. Reassess policies based on emerging complaints and resolved issues

Managing cultural safety

The cultural safety of an organization starts with its leaders. The manager-employee relationship is vital to organizational success. Engaging your people, retaining and attracting top talent, and propelling productivity depend on mutual trust and respect, so focus on managing with empathy and intrinsic motivation rather than fear and competition.

Toxic management

When managers don't trust their employees or aren't confident in their own role, this can manifest in toxic behaviors that sabotage organizational success.

Cultural safety depends on manager buy in, so when this is absent, employees and the bottom line suffer.

[Research from SHRM](#) has found that toxic leadership is costing the American workplace \$223 billion every

year and that more than a quarter of employees dread going to work. This is an unhealthy—and unsustainable—situation.

Nipping toxic management in the bud will prevent it from poisoning your entire organization, but what does it look like? Here are some signs:

- Aggressive focus on productivity
- Competition between team members
- Fear of being fired
- Unkind speech and lack of positive feedback
- Siloed lack of communication between managers and team members or among team members
- Favoritism and cliques
- Taking credit for others' accomplishments
- Blaming others for failures

Being a genuine leader is an ongoing process. Good managers never stop learning—for their employees, their organization, and in pursuit of their own ambitions. Professional growth doesn't come from cutting others down and companies that tolerate a toxic culture will lose employees, customers, and revenue down the road.

Managing with care

Managers are the gatekeepers of cultural safety, and, by extension, of an organization's ability to achieve its goals. A confident and effective manager will lead by example, motivate employees with positive encouragement and inducements, and foster collaboration and cooperation between team members. Where toxic management incites exclusion and harassment, managing with care supports inclusion.

1. So what can you do to be a better manager and contribute to your organization's cultural safety? Be clear and reasonable about expectations. When employees know what is expected and aren't overwhelmed by unrealistic workloads or deadlines, they will be able to accomplish their tasks efficiently and without anxiety. Defining specific tasks and timelines will ensure that employees stay on track and feel accomplished rather than confused and overwhelmed. Leverage technology to keep everything organized and clear.

2. Foster teamwork, not competition. Collaboration will propel productivity and get things done faster, so create structured times for your team to brainstorm and openly discuss strategy and business planning. Part of encouraging teamwork is shutting down in-fighting, gossip, cliquiness, and other behaviors that get in the way of cooperation. Build your team up, and they will build up the business.

3. Give positive feedback and credit to employees when it is due. Intrinsic motivation is proven to [improve performance and productivity](#), and contribute to employee satisfaction and retention. It's hard to keep working without receiving any recognition, so make sure you let your people know you appreciate their contributions—and call them out to higher management and other team members.

4. Respect your team members' boundaries. Calling an employee after hours, expecting them to work outside of regular hours, and making employees feel they can't take time off is toxic and will lead to increased turnover. Particularly now, with more organizations adopting a [hybrid model](#) and offering more flexible structures, failing to give your people personal time may scare off top talent and demotivate valued employees.

5. Be a leader in promoting diversity and inclusion. If you show your team that you take D&I seriously, this will signal a culture where every person is valued for who they are and not how they define themselves. Letting employees bring their truest selves to work everyday will engender loyalty, improve productivity, and position your brand.

6. If an employee needs to improve, there should be a process to inform them of what they must do better, a fair timeframe for them to accomplish these goals, and clearly defined processes if they don't improve. Managing and reviewing performance is integral to operational continuity, but if it's done without sensitivity or clarity, employees will either fear for their jobs or won't even know that they aren't performing.

7. Promote your employees and help them [improve their skills to get ahead](#). The more your people learn and grow, the better it is for productivity, innovation, and growth. People can get stuck in a rut if they aren't given opportunities to develop and evolve, and this stagnation will be mirrored in an organization's stalled growth. Keep your business and your employees on a forward trajectory.

8. Keep it professional. As a manager, it's important that every employee receives equal treatment. Even if you know members of your team from outside of work, it should never direct how you manage them in the office. Nepotism and favoritism will drive resentment and harm productivity.

9. Keep your door open and communicate regularly with your employees, either in team or individual meetings. There is [plenty of research](#) showing that organizational silos and lack of cross-team communication can negatively impact goal attainment so preventing silos from popping up is imperative. Make sure your team is looped into organizational changes, even if it's not directly related to their role.

10. Keep improving your [management skills](#) with ongoing training and courses. The best way to inspire your team members to do better is to do better yourself, so seek out opportunities to develop skills that you lack, learn new approaches to business, and improve on your strengths.

Managing with care will contribute to cultural safety within your team—and this will in turn propel organizational growth, success, and employee retention.

The future of cultural safety

Tech is creating new opportunities to promote cultural safety and foster a work environment where every employee is valued and respected. Managers can utilize these platforms to more efficiently lead their teams, promote collaboration, streamline operations, and manage performance.



In 2020, it's time to make smarter decisions
when it comes to your people and organization.

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