

Establishing Office Culture

A guide to ensuring your office is set up for success

There are three main steps which, when followed, create a strong foundation on which you can build a positive workplace culture that will enable your team to perform at their best. Taking these steps when you establish your office, and revisiting them annually, will also help you to meet your responsibility to take reasonable measures to eliminate sex discrimination, including sexual harassment, as far as possible. This duty is contained in the [Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment \(Respect at Work\) Bill 2022](#).

It can be easy to overlook culture and wellbeing when things get busy, so it is important to have another, senior person - such as a Chief of Staff, senior adviser, or office manager (supervisors) - with clearly defined responsibilities for the day to day running of the office and people management.

Step 1: Set Expectations

Involving your team in establishing behavioural and performance expectations will help to embed office culture from the start. While you could send out an email outlining your expectations, consider having a team meeting instead. Encourage your team to contribute their thoughts on the behaviours and standards of performance they would like to see in the office – and listen to what they will need from you to support them to do their work.

Things to consider discussing, and to consider documenting as office policy (see step 2):

- **Expected behaviour** – Set the scene *“I would like to hear everyone’s ideas about what types of behaviours we should all be modelling to ensure a supportive, respectful office environment. To get the conversation started, one of my key behavioural expectations is that we all...”* Some suggested behaviours are:
 - Respect each other, be courteous and sensitive to everyone’s needs and concerns (encourage people to give examples of what respect means for them, such as *giving people the time they need to understand a task; are inclusive and non-discriminatory; listening to other points of view; recognise we work in a high pressure environment, but not taking it out on each other when frustrated; respecting the diversity of others, their customs and beliefs*)
 - Complete all required [training](#) and read the [Workplace Bullying and Harassment](#) and [WHS](#) policies
 - Be accountable for our work
 - Be flexible about job and task assignments
 - Be willing to help each other instead of displaying a “not my job” attitude
 - Ask for help when needed
- **Expected performance** – The specifics of each person’s expected performance will be defined in their individual performance agreements. With the team, discuss your expectations around things like quality of deliverables, stakeholder engagement, standards of presentation, and hours of work. Be clear about when you can be flexible, and when there will be changes depending on sitting weeks or high priority deliverables.
- **Bystander behaviour** – the standard you walk past is the standard you accept. Encourage your team to speak up if they see behaviour which does not align with the office expectations, and to respectfully address concerns with each other as they occur. If anyone needs support to have those conversations, the [Parliamentary Workplace Support Service](#) (PWSS) is available to assist.
- **Reporting incidents** – tell your team how you would like them to raise their concerns with you. Make a commitment to your team that you will address poor behaviour in accordance with the [Workplace Bullying and Harassment](#) policy, and that you will seek assistance from the [PWSS](#) if required.

- **Social media, work functions out of hours, and other work adjacent behaviour** – remind the team that they represent you, and that their actions may carry workplace and reputational risk. Define your expectations around which events, locations and circumstances you consider to be work-related, and how you expect your team to conduct themselves at these times. Discuss your expectations around drinking alcohol at functions and other work-related situations. Establishing a dry office sets a clear expectation around alcohol consumption and can be an effective tool.
- **Leave** – it is important for the health and safety of your team that they take appropriate breaks from work, especially in fast-paced, high-pressure Parliamentary workplaces.
 - Empower your team to take leave by telling them how much notice is required for leave applications, and advising them in advance of considerations that may impact their leave requests, such as sitting days or other expected busy periods.
 - Let your team know how they should notify the relevant supervisor if they are going to be unexpectedly absent. Is a text message okay? When is a medical certificate required?
 - Make sure your team are aware of their obligation to accurately record all leave taken in PEMS. Failing to do so may be fraudulent; it also increases the risk of liability if a person is injured and you cannot demonstrate that they were supported to have an appropriate work/life balance.

Finally, ensure you, or your relevant supervisor, complete an induction checklist for all new staff, available on the [Ministerial and Parliamentary Services \(MaPS\) website](#). This will ensure everyone is aware of their Work Health and Safety (WHS) responsibilities and have completed relevant training, further minimising risks to health and safety in your office.

Step 2: Document Agreements

Good record keeping is an essential part of managing your team. Having clearly documented policies, position descriptions, and performance agreements from the outset means that staff know exactly what their role is and how they are expected to behave. It also ensures that if there are any concerns with a staff member's behaviour or performance down the track there is a clearly defined basis on which your relevant supervisor can raise those concerns, and behaviour and performance targets your supervisor can support the person to meet. Should their behaviour or performance not improve, you will have clear records to support any employment decisions you may make.

Office policies

Consider documenting the expectations you set during the discussion in step 1 as an office Behaviour Policy which can be provided to everyone and made readily available for you and your team to refer to down the track. A Behaviour Policy template is available to assist.

Consider displaying a poster in the workplace outlining the behaviour expectations you have established, to reinforce expectations and serve as a visible reminder of the office culture you wish to encourage. A template is available or you can design your own.

Position descriptions

It is important to clearly define the tasks, responsibilities, duties and capabilities required of each role in your office, and establish a clear office structure and reporting lines. A position description should ideally be created before a role is advertised, but it is never too late to put one in place. A position description allows your staff to know exactly what is expected of them, who they report to, and have certainty around what their role is in the workplace.

A position description also provides the baseline criteria for you and your supervisor to evaluate staff's performance. It should be created based on the requirements of the role, and not based on the skills or preferences of the person currently filling that role.

A template for creating a position description is available on the [MaPS website](#), and through [MOPS Support](#).

Performance agreements

A performance agreement provides a framework for your supervisor to have regular and ongoing discussions with staff about how they are performing their role. Performance conversations should reflect the three key areas of **deliverables, capability, and values and behaviour**.

Performance agreements should build on the broader tasks, responsibilities and duties in their position description by outlining the key measures and targets the person needs to meet in order to perform, and behave, effectively. A good performance agreement also includes goals and deliverables which are linked to broader office objectives; it should identify training and development opportunities which your supervisor will support the team member to access to build the person's capability; and it should reinforce the values and behaviours which will ensure the person reaches their goals and supports the office mission.

Your supervisor should develop performance agreements in consultation with new staff when they commence, and these can be updated at any time to reflect the changing needs of the office.

A checklist and template for performance agreements is available on the [MaPS website](#), and [MOPS Support](#).

Step 3: Have Regular Conversations

Team meetings

Apart from modelling positive behaviour yourself, the best way to reinforce your team's culture is by embedding it in the office routine. Your supervisor should set up a weekly half hour check-in with the whole team. It's a good opportunity for team building, and they may not need the full half hour every week. During the check-in they can reflect on the week just gone and highlight priorities for the week ahead; acknowledge achievements; encourage discussion; and remind the team of your expectations. A Team Check-in agenda template is available to assist with planning these meetings.

It is also an opportunity for the supervisor to address any concerns you or they may have about office behaviour or performance – but they shouldn't raise concerns in the group meeting if the issue is only with one person who will be easily identifiable, as that will make them feel singled out. Save individual feedback for one-on-one meetings.

One-on-one meetings

Regular half hour one-on-one meetings between your supervisor and your staff offers a forum for your supervisor to have ongoing conversations with people about their performance and your expectations, so that if issues do arise they can be discussed immediately and constructively. These meetings are also useful to discuss tasks and progress against deliverables. If regular one-on-ones are established people will be used to receiving feedback and are less likely to react negatively, as people often do when a performance meeting is scheduled 'out of the blue'.

A monthly one-on-one meeting with your supervisor is also an opportunity for staff to raise any concerns they may have, or ask for help if they need it. Committing to these regular meetings is important to establish a relationship of trust between your supervisor and your staff, so they are comfortable talking about their work and how they feel they are performing. Keeping accurate records of these conversations protects all parties, and establishes a history if needed. A guide is available to assist with conducting one-on-one meetings.

Further support

Building a positive workplace culture requires consistent, deliberate action on your part and that of your supervisor, but there is plenty of support available – particularly to help prepare for the conversations outlined in this Guide. The [PWSS](#) can be contacted 24/7 on 1800 747 977 or emailing support@pwss.gov.au, and [MaPS](#) can be reached during business hours by calling 02 6215 3333 or emailing MOPSupport@finance.gov.au.