



Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission



# Introducing the positive work environment toolkit

**This toolkit is intended to help you create a positive work environment in your organisation.**

It sets out practical steps and questions for getting started, supporting processes for maintaining the momentum, and links to other helpful resources.

We each contribute to the organisational life we experience through our behaviour, our interactions with colleagues and clients, and the systems we have in place.

Whether that is a positive or negative experience will depend on ten elements:

## Strategic elements

- 1. Vision and Values:** inspiring staff to work towards a compelling shared goal
- 2. Leadership and Accountability:** influencing others' behaviour, decisions and actions and accepting responsibility for outcome
- 3. Organisational Communication:** freely sharing relevant information about work with colleagues.

## Operational Elements

**4. Recruitment and Selection:** selecting those with the right skills and organisational fit

**5. Learning and Development:** keeping skills and knowledge up to date and preparing for career advancement

**6. HR Policies and Strategies:** employing work practices that balance organisational and individual needs

**7. Workflow Management:** having the right mix of skills, support and resources to complete tasks to the right standard

**8. Performance Management:** agreeing on what is to be achieved during the year and how it will be achieved

**9. Risk Management:** identifying, evaluating and minimising risks

**10. Workplace Dispute Systems:** resolving conflict between individuals fairly and promptly.

The toolkit invites us to look at how well the ten elements are operating in our work environment from three perspectives: organisational, managerial and individual (Figure 1). This helps us to determine our priorities for change. The people who view the work environment from these three perspectives are:

**Figure 1: Model of a positive work environment from three perspectives**



## Strategic Elements

1. Vision and Values
2. Leadership and Accountability
3. Organisational Communication

## Beginning

1. Recruitment and Selection
2. Learning and Development
3. HR policies and Strategies
4. Workflow Management
5. Performance Management
6. Risk Management
7. Workplace Dispute Systems

## Organisational

Senior decision-makers of the organisation: those charged with ensuring that the organisation has appropriate structures, processes, policies and systems in place to establish and nurture a creative and productive work environment. Typically, this will be roles such as the Chief Executive Officer, Departmental Secretary, Director, Executive

Manager or General Manager.

## Managerial

Line managers: those responsible for the operational performance of the organisation's mission and services, and of translating organisational policies and strategies into operational actions. Typical roles include Manager or Team Leader. It generally does not include those roles with responsibility for day-to-day running of workflow tasks.

## Individual

This is every employee of the organisation, whether in full-time or part-time, permanent or casual employ, and includes leaders and managers alongside subordinate staff. As individuals we have personal responsibility for our behaviour towards others, and for complying with organisational policies.

Viewing the workplace from three different perspectives may give us a different impression of its culture. For example an organisation that is just beginning to think about its culture may accept negative behaviour as normal. One that has an established positive work environment will view any negative behaviours as an organisational problem (Table 1). Negative behaviour is inherently unprofessional and unacceptable.

## Characteristics of a positive work environment in different stages from different perspectives

Open allClose all

### Organisation

#### Beginning

A negative work environment is accepted as part of the culture and not seen as a problem.

## **Emerging**

A recognition that the environment is negative causes concern, but the overall approach is passive and focused on the individual.

## **Consolidating**

The value of a positive work environment is recognised with coherent and well articulated policies but the focus remains on the individual.

## **Established**

Consistent and coherent, well articulated policies, procedures and practices are in place. Any negative behaviours are seen as an organisational problem.

## **Managers**

### **Beginning**

Managers consistently reinforce negative behaviours through inaction, complacency or neglect.

### **Emerging**

Managers occasionally take positive action but generally ignore or avoid problems.

### **Consolidating**

Managers take some responsibility and action to achieve a positive work environment.

### **Established**

Responsibility for achieving and sustaining a positive work environment starts with the managers.

## **Individuals**

### **Beginning**

Individuals reinforce negative behaviours through inaction, complacency or neglect.

### **Emerging**

Individuals take action but only when there is a problem.

### **Consolidating**

Some individuals take responsibility for achieving a positive work environment.

### **Established**

All individuals take responsibility for achieving and sustaining a positive work environment.

## **Is the toolkit right for my organisation?**

People are more likely to want to join and remain employed in an organisation known to have a positive work environment. The toolkit enables you to choose what is appropriate for your organisation – whether it is to affirm the policies you already have in place, or to help you focus attention on what needs to be changed.

Creating a positive work environment will need commitment from everyone, and support from people skilled in change management. The toolkit is most useful in situations where there is a readiness for change both at the leadership and team level. Teams are able to use resources from the toolkit to help them think about their workplace, and to identify practical steps to develop more positive workplace relations. For example destructive behaviours may be symptomatic of a poor workplace culture.

When used to initiate a conversation within teams, the toolkit can help transform the organisation's workplace culture. The toolkit is particularly useful for:

- leaders and managers who want to improve their workplace culture
- human resource and organisation development practitioners who seek a benchmarking tool to support other processes for monitoring cultural change
- facilitators who deliver workshops on cultural change.

## Best employer in town

The chief executive of a small regional hospital wants to strengthen his organisation's reputation as a great place to work. The hospital is situated in a small community suffering from the drought.

Over the last three years there has been a lot of change, a new vision, new functions and restructuring. Staff are feeling grumpy about the changes at work and the effect of the drought on their community.

The chief executive thought he knew what some of the problems might be but wanted to test his assumptions using the Positive Work Environment Toolkit. He offered a good natured incentive for people on the morning shift to complete the quick check tool – 'have a cappuccino on the boss'. This gave him the perspective of a horizontal slice through the hospital.

Leadership and modelling the vision and values have emerged as the priorities for change. This is similar to other hospitals in the region. Working on these priorities will build on earlier initiatives. One of the primary reasons for re-working the vision and developing behaviourally based values was to address destructive behaviours at work.

The hospital is now thinking about ways of progressing. So their focus is very much on the future. They have plans to use the quick check tool each year to supplement their performance appraisal cycle, and to include it in the quality program for achieving accreditation.

## What is in the toolkit?

The toolkit has three sections that take you through the theory behind the toolkit (above), show you how to assess your organisation's workplace culture, and suggest ideas for planning your strategy for change.

## The big picture

- describes the characteristics of a positive work environment from three perspectives
- how the toolkit can be used to bring about cultural change.

## Taking a quick check of the work environment

- a self-assessment questionnaire to help you quickly identify areas in your organisation that merit deeper investigation and attention
- for use by groups to stimulate discussion about your organisation's stage of development according to three strategic and seven operational elements
- when managers, human resource and organisational development practitioners, or teams want to respond to feedback about the work environment gathered from surveys, such as the People Matter Survey
- can help surface the bigger questions that may need to be explored.

## Delving deeper into the ten elements

- presents the ideal situation or potential goals for each element to help you reflect on your responses to the quick check tool
- a set of litmus test or important questions for each element to assist deeper exploration of your organisation's workplace culture
- a case study to illustrate successful ways for developing organisational capabilities in each element; and
- resources to help you plan your strategy for change.

## How do these resources relate to introducing change?

**change = (dissatisfaction)(vision)(first steps) > resistance<sup>2</sup>**

Change is more likely to happen when people are dissatisfied with the present situation, can imagine a better future, and have decided on the first steps they'll take. If any of these elements is missing or collectively they are less powerful than the resistance to change, then change won't happen.

The toolkit provides the three elements needed for successful change:

- the quick check tool can be used to confirm areas of dissatisfaction with the present situation
- the ideal situation describes the vision for a better future
- the litmus test questions and resources provide the first steps for reaching the vision.

Having a good plan for using the toolkit will reduce the likelihood of resistance to the proposed change. Use of the toolkit is covered in the next section.

## Using the Toolkit to Bring About Cultural Change

### Getting Started

The following questions are to help you plan your use of the toolkit. You may discover that you do not have all the information, capabilities or resources you need for a comprehensive change program. We recommend you 'start small', and work with what you can do now.

### Current organisational climate: identify the case for change

- What do you know about your culture from workforce data, surveys or other HR metrics?
- What additional information do you need to obtain?
- Is there a change (positive or negative) in staff satisfaction surveys?
- Are there any unusual events affecting the organisation that you need to consider?
- What are the systemic influences on the organisation?

### Fit with strategies and business plans

- Do you have a strategic planning framework for your business in place?
- Does this include a people and culture strategy?

### Sponsorship

- Is there a sponsor at the highest level for leading cultural change?
- Which roles have responsibility for the cultural change strategy and processes?

## Capabilities

- Readiness for change ? have you tried this before and what did you learn from it?
- What is the level of your employees? skills for dealing with interpersonal relations and group dynamics ? i.e. their emotional literacy and ability to facilitate group discussion?

## Resources

- What resources do you have internally?
- What do you need to acquire?

## Practical Steps

If you have decided that the timing is right to embark on a major change program and you have the right resources available to you, consider these more detailed steps. They provide a checklist for the approach you might want to take.

### Build a common picture of where you are right now

**Establish and authorise a planning group** to manage the change program. Pay particular attention to communications: who will communicate with whom, the rationale for the initiative, how confidentiality will be treated, what will be done with the results, and what (if anything) to say to parts of the organisation not involved. Try not to use language that reminds people of past events and initiatives.

**Consider the realities of work** such as the availability of staff who work part-time or on shifts, and the differences in roles, skills, education, and personal biographies amongst staff.

**Manage the emotions and anxieties** that may get stirred up by asking questions about people's behaviours, managers' actions and the workplace culture. Some actions to take include:

- managers answer questions and clarify concerns in perso
- a neutral person, such as a human resource or organisational development practitioner or an external facilitator works with teams on their self-assessment.

**Review the quick check tool prior to administration** to identify any language that might appear too generic or could be taken in different ways by your respondents. Agree to in-house clarifications where appropriate.

**Administer the quick check tool** either individually as a survey or at the team level as part of a workshop to scan the health of your workplace culture. Collecting data as part of a workshop enables people to clarify what was on their minds when responding to statements.

**Make sense of the results:** the more specific to a group the better able you are to make sense of the data. When teams analyse their own results the discussion can be more focused and relevant.

**Use the litmus test questions** to extend the group's enquiries on specific elements.

**Put results into context** for your organisation:

- service sector (e.g. the human services, welfare and health services sector may experience higher levels of anxiety because of interactions with vulnerable people)
- organisational history, size (number of employees), financial stability, prior experiences of change;
- employee demographics and length of service
- relationship with the local community (e.g. rural communities are tied much more closely to their local public and community services than in metropolitan Melbourne)
- recent events in the external environment, such as changes in government policy, sectoral reform, drought and bushfire.

## Explore and agree on where you must be in the future

**Identify priorities** for the organisation or team from the ten elements. Don't attempt all ten elements at once. Choose what is relevant for now, and what will be relevant for later on.

**Develop an appropriate organisational or team response**, and plan of action that focuses on organisational development processes and development of people.

**Be realistic** about the capacity of the organisation or the team to undertake systemic cultural change, or people's capabilities to manage the dynamics of a change process.

For example, to mobilise action in a team, it often helps to clarify things team members can do themselves, things the team cannot control but can influence, and supporting things it can refer to management for broader change, such as policies.

## Agree on what you need to do differently, individually and collectively to get there

**Assign tasks and responsibilities** for the planned interventions.

**Set some measures of success** for short-term and long-term actions. These might be selected from the Victorian Public Sector Commission's People Metrics.

**Review achievements, assess trends against benchmark data or goals**, such as the 'ideal situation' described in the toolkit, the People Matter Survey, or other organisational or team data (qualitative and quantitative). Consider linking the toolkit to the annual performance development process.

**Keep people informed**, so that for example the planning group has progressive feedback and reflection on how well their plans are being implemented, managers who answer questions and clarify concerns are briefed and subsequently debriefed, and teams reconvene to reflect on the progress of their initiatives.

## Supporting processes and resources

The extra things that will help you achieve long-term change include:

**Link the toolkit** into a broader suite of organisational development processes and interventions.

**Develop or make available skilled facilitators** of group discussion.

**Hold peer forums** for sharing good practices and case stories about experiences and interventions.

**Develop your managers** to become skilled in transforming experiences of destructive behaviour into understanding and insight about the organisation and individual behaviours.

**Develop the interpersonal skills of all staff** so that robust disagreements do not escalate into experiences of personal attacks.

**Appoint contact officers** to act in the role of 'neutral adviser' and first point of contact for staff who wish to speak confidentially and informally about any personal experiences of destructive behaviour in the workplace.

**Encourage staff to think about what is going on in the organisation** and to become aware of other ways of seeing things (for example, a 'problem individual who exhibits

destructive behaviour' may be an expression of a 'problem in the way we do things around here').

**Focus on the evidence of destructive behaviour** as being symptomatic of the workplace culture, and for what might need to be explored and understood, and ultimately changed within the work environment.

## Taking a long term view

A health care service with long term residential patients wants to improve its culture. They need a resilient, stable workforce to best meet the needs of their patients.

The HR Director initiated the project. So she had to spend time winning the support of senior management and finding work units willing to be involved.

She presented the toolkit to the Council. They were pleased about the longitudinal approach being taken to managing change. They would be able to measure their progress over a number of years.

The focus groups validated the People Matter Survey results. Staff said they felt less valued than the patients they were caring for and left out of important organisational information.

The four unit managers are responding to the ideas staff have raised. They have organised a wellbeing expo and now regularly communicate with staff on matters of importance to them.

The HR Director plans to incorporate the toolkit in the strategic plan. She thinks it could be used for benchmarking with similar organisations

## Footnotes

1. See the publications and websites listed in further reading, and particularly research undertaken by Prof Charlotte Rayner in the UK.
2. R Jacobs, Real Time Strategic Change: How to Involve a Whole Organization in Fast and Far-Reaching Change, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, CA, 1997