

Using principles to guide workplace sexual harassment prevention

Learning brief



**Our
Watch**

Preventing violence
against women



Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Indigenous organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is not an 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problem.' As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Indigenous women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

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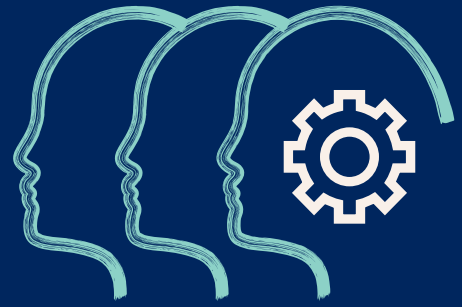
Purpose of the learning brief

This learning brief shares the findings from the evaluation of the Engaging Employers to Prevent Sexual Harassment project, focusing on the enablers and challenges learned during implementation.

This brief is one of two learning briefs that share learning and practice implications for prevention organisations and industry peaks seeking to support workplaces engaging in organisational change initiatives to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

It is also aimed at medium to large workplaces driving their own internal initiatives to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

Background



Project details

The Engaging Employers to Prevent Sexual Harassment project¹ (henceforth Engaging Employers) implemented by Our Watch was a three-year initiative funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services to contribute to Recommendation 8 of the [Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report](#). The Engaging Employers project commenced in December 2021 and was completed in December 2024.

Focusing on retail, telecommunications, and construction industries, the project employed three key social change strategies:

- 1. Intensive support for four medium to large workplaces** to use and adapt Our Watch's Workplace Equality and Respect tools and approaches. This included the following steps:
 - Readiness assessment
 - Meeting with leadership and engaging an organisational change implementation group (normally Human Resources (HR) or Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) staff)
 - Collecting employee insights on workplace sexual harassment through surveys and employee focus groups
 - Policy review
 - Developing organisational snapshots, presenting findings from the employee data and policy review
 - Action planning: supporting organisations to prioritise targeted, evidence-based actions to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

- 2. Broader industry engagement** through hosting practice forums to share best practices and learnings about preventing workplace sexual harassment, collaborating to develop and share resources, and delivering training and presentations.
- 3. A national campaign** to engage and motivate employers with knowledge, skills and tools to address the drivers of workplace sexual harassment.

The campaign used a range of marketing channels, including social media, Google ads, out-of-home advertising, media, and email, and the development of resources, including case studies, animations, factsheets and more.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation aimed to assess the implementation and emerging outcomes² from the Engaging Employers project, and to identify and share key learnings for preventing workplace sexual harassment.

The Engaging Employers project used a **developmental evaluation approach** to capture project teams' learnings throughout implementation. Our Watch commissioned Cultivating Change to conduct an end of the project evaluation. The end-of-project evaluation drew on **qualitative and quantitative data** collected throughout the project by Our Watch. The evaluation team conducted reflections with project teams and 14 stakeholder interviews with organisational change implementers (normally HR and D&I staff), leaders in the four workplaces, key contacts in industry peaks, and collaborative partners.

1 Also known as *Social change strategies to prevent sexual harassment - Recommendation 8 of Respect@Work project*

2 The evaluation focused on short and medium-term outcomes (within two years) including changes in awareness, understanding, leadership commitment, skills, confidence and resources (tools and processes) in relation to workplace gender equality and preventing workplace sexual harassment.

What were the principles?

Our Watch developed three principles as part of the project's Theory of Change, to guide the implementation of the Engaging Employers Project.

In addition to these three principles, an intersectional approach is a key practice principle across all Our Watch's prevention work.

ENGAGING EMPLOYERS' IMPLEMENTATION PRINCIPLES

- 1.** We will be responsive and adjust to the context

- 2.** We will foster mutual engagement and trust

- 3.** We will focus on learning about what makes a difference

How were principles used in Engaging Employers across the project cycle?

Design and planning phase:

Principles were developed during the project's planning stage before specific details of project activities were developed. These principles gave the team a flexible framework to guide strategic choices about project delivery across different industries and the various social strategies employed in the project.

Implementation:

Principles guided ways of working with stakeholders and informed implementation practices. Reflection processes tracked how principles were being applied, monitoring what worked or needed improvement.

Evaluation:

The evaluation assessed how well guiding principles were used throughout the project and whether they enabled changes. A principles-focused evaluation component was chosen because of the diverse implementation contexts and the need for adaptation in uncertain conditions.



How were principles applied in practice?

The section below explains how the Engaging Employers project principles were applied, how they enabled outcomes, and the challenges faced.

PRINCIPLE

We are responsive and adjust to context

STRATEGIES USED TO APPLY THE PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE:

Language:

There was a focus on translating complex concepts, such as intersectionality and gendered drivers of sexual harassment, into language that could be easily understood by workplaces. Our Watch also conducted message testing in the campaign to help choose the right language for target audiences.

Framing:

Prevention concepts needed to be framed in a way that was meaningful and motivating to workplaces. For some workplaces that meant talking about the prevention of sexual harassment as an occupational health and safety risk, connecting it to positive duty legislation or a broader gender equality agenda. In the campaign, message testing shaped communications. For example, "Lead the change and end sexual harassment in your workplace" resonated more with audiences than the other creative concepts ("Don't wait – Act now to prevent workplace sexual harassment", "Prevention is your business").

Tailored advice, processes and tools:

Significant tailoring of Workplace Equality and Respect tools and processes took place to ensure they were fit for purpose and aligned to existing business practices. For example, integrating to existing workplace surveys during data collection or adapting organisational action planning processes.

How did this principle enable outcomes?


- Supporting a shared **understanding** of complex concepts.
- Identifying **entry points and priorities** within an organisation's **language and motivations**.
- **Gaining traction** in busy and complex work environments.
- Enabling advice and actions to be **responsive to the workplace's specific needs** and, therefore, more impactful.

What were the challenges in applying this principle?

- The need to tailor processes and tools to the workplace is intensive and requires resources that accommodate for each individual workplace.

PRINCIPLE

We will foster mutual engagement and trust



"I think one of the best things about working with her [workplace lead] is she had come from working in the private sector."

WORKPLACE 1

"...they offer an independent... well informed perspective about workplace sexual harassment and they do that across sectors across industries."

WORKPLACE 3

"We saw this as a really great opportunity to have expert counsel and support as we went through this journey."

WORKPLACE 2

"Our Watch arranged the right person who could speak from the perspective of Aboriginal people... or in the disability space... Participants got to see all the sides of an issue. They got to see... those contemporary discussions around intersectionality."

COLLABORATIVE PARTNER 2

STRATEGIES USED TO APPLY THE PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE:

Demonstrating credibility:

Initial trust was built through the project team's skills, Our Watch's existing profile, connections in the business community, and the use of evidence.

Partnership approach:

The project recognised mutual expertise - workplaces and industry brought business context and insights, and Our Watch brought prevention and marketing expertise. The project was not based on a contractual or funding arrangement with stakeholders.

Working relationally:

Trust was formed through a highly relational process, working one-on-one with a core group of workplace representatives. Regular and ad hoc meetings facilitated trust as people got to know each other on a personal level and learnt their values and ways of working.

Coaching and mentoring:

Capacity development was provided primarily through advice and support. This included one-on-one meetings with leaders, providing expert advice on resources for industry stakeholders and ongoing mentoring with key personnel in workplaces.

How did this principle enable outcomes?

- Encouraging workplaces to be **strategic** and address systemic issues.
- Facilitating **open communication**, demonstrating genuine support, and **creating a safe space** for difficult conversations to occur.

What were the challenges in applying this principle?

- Where engagement waned in one workplace, project activities stalled; it is difficult to maintain momentum alongside other priorities and staff turnover.
- There were challenges in gaining trust and engagement on public-facing actions - brand and reputational risk are a priority for business.
- Relationship building takes time and requires sufficient funding for deep engagement and trust. This way of working was possible and effective in this project as it involved a small number of workplaces but could limit options for scalability.

PRINCIPLE

We will focus on learning about what makes a difference

STRATEGIES USED TO APPLY THE PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE:

Variety of learning sites:

Engaging Employers chose a range of industries and workplaces as part of the strategy for learning.

Sharing learning:

The project facilitated practice forums with target industries and workplaces to share strategies and challenges for preventing workplace sexual harassment.

Investing in evidence:

Evidence provided the basis for strategies to be implemented. This included investing early in campaign messaging testing and commissioning a survey for the target audience about workplace sexual harassment for media engagement. Workplaces were supported to collect insights from staff using surveys and focus groups, and to develop action plans informed by these insights.

Data, learning and feedback loops:

- Learnings gained from supporting workplaces informed what resources and tools were developed to share with workplaces and other industry stakeholders – for example, the project team identified the need to develop resources to help some employers prevent customer to staff sexual harassment.
- The campaign used data analytics from earlier campaign phases to inform what marketing channels to use in the remaining phases - for example, phase one data indicated LinkedIn was proving an effective engagement channel for the target audience, so the team invested more on paid ads here in the following phases, leading to high levels of reach and engagement.

Evaluation focus:

The evaluation prioritised learning using a developmental approach. The key evaluation questions and processes facilitated learning during implementation and as part of the evaluation. Monitoring data and team reflections captured signs of progress and learning. These learnings informed implementation planning and adaptation.

How did this principle enable outcomes?

- Focusing strategies on what the evidence says and what appears to be working through implementation learnings.
- Enabling “in time” adaptation of tools, processes and strategies for greater effectiveness.

What were the challenges in applying this principle?

- Getting staff to pause and engage in reflection and learning processes during busy implementation schedules was sometimes difficult to coordinate and prioritise.

Embedding intersectionality²



"Our Watch arranged the right person who could speak from the perspective of Aboriginal people... or in the disability space... Participants got to see all the sides of an issue. They got to see... those contemporary discussions around intersectionality."

COLLABORATIVE PARTNER 2

STRATEGIES USED TO APPLY THE PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE:

Building awareness and capacity:

Language was simplified to support understanding. A range of campaign and workplace resources dedicated to intersectionality were developed to suit workplaces' existing understanding. This included fact sheets, animations, and practice toolkits. Advice and support were provided to workplaces on how to translate concepts into actions. Dedicated practice forums on the topic of intersectionality were facilitated, with expert speakers. Intersectionality was further embedded across all practice forums to reinforce learning.

Embedding into Workplace Equality and Respect processes and tools:

Workplaces were supported to build in disaggregated data to surveys, facilitate focus group discussions and analyse intersectional data to gain insights on different staff experiences of sexual harassment. Intersectional insights were then translated to specific actions during action planning. Workplaces needed significant support to safely facilitate trauma informed focus groups.

Communications reflect diversity:

All campaign communications and resources used diverse representations of people in the workplace, including through video, photography, animation and illustration.

How did this principle enable outcomes?

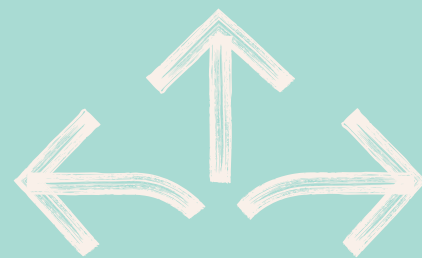
- Building an **understanding** of intersectionality by leaders and staff.
- Providing practice tools and advice on how to **translate concepts into actions**.
- Supporting workplaces in gaining insights during diagnostics and benchmarking helped us better understand staff experiences and strengthen leadership commitment.
- Supporting workplaces to translate insights into **intersectional actions**. For example, three of the four workplaces have invested in anonymous reporting tools. One workplace developed six short, impactful videos of inappropriate workplace behaviour, including sexual harassment, discrimination, racism and homophobia, as part of its workplace campaign to promote equality and respect.

What were the challenges in applying this principle?

- The **maturity of understanding** around intersectionality is **relatively low** in workplaces.
- Significant work is required to simplify the concept and its relevance to workplace prevention efforts.

² Whilst intersectionality was not a specific principle it was a core practice component that guided implementation.

Implications



The following practice implications are based on our learnings from applying principles in the Engaging Employers project.

When to use principles?

Consider applying a principles-focused approach to implementation and evaluation if your initiative is:

Operating in complex contexts.

Principles can improve the chance of making progress on complex issues. For example, if your initiative is settings-based, involves working across multiple locations or industries, and/or includes working with diverse stakeholders and social strategies.

Focused on systems change.

For example, in the prevention of violence against women, outcomes are long-term, unpredictable and evolving. Principles can support adapting to new challenges whilst staying aligned with values and ethical commitments.

Requires social innovation

involving new ideas, practices or models for change. For example, if your initiative involves piloting an approach in a new setting or addressing a new or emerging challenge such as online sexual harassment.

How can you use principles across project phases?

Planning and design

- Identify principles that align with core values and beliefs to drive action; for example, survivor-centred action, do no harm, and human rights-based are commonly used principles in efforts to prevent violence against women.
- Develop principles collaboratively with stakeholders, integrating them into your design process or Theory of Change.

Implementation

- Use principles to guide decision-making and embed them in everyday practices such as planning and risk assessment, engaging stakeholders, and designing activities, tools, processes and resources.

Evaluation

- Apply principles to track progress, promote learning and drive continuous improvement in prevention efforts. Traditional success/failure measures may not fully capture evolving outcomes in complex systems.
- Key evaluation questions can assess whether and how principles are used and how they contribute to outcomes.
- Principles can facilitate reflection and learning processes during implementation, such as integrating short team reflections on how the principles have 'shown up' and are enabling change.

Useful links and resources

Preventing workplace sexual harassment

[Workplace Equality and Respect resources](#) for free tools and resources will support you through the Workplace Equality and Respect process to address gender inequality and prevent violence against women.

Principles-focused implementation and evaluation

[Brief Introduction into Principles-focused evaluation](#) for a short video by Michael Quinn Patton on what the approach is and when to use it.

ourwatch.org.au

OurWatch Preventing violence against women