

The guide to addressing

CULTURAL SAFETY FOR EMPLOYEES



Introduction

Cultural safety in the modern workplace involves both psychological and physical security, as well as diversity and inclusion initiatives signaling that every employee is respected and valued.

Promoting cultural safety also means preventing and effectively responding to bullying, violence, and toxic behavior. Workplace violence isn't only physical; it can involve circulating rumors, verbal abuse, inappropriate speech, vandalism, and other forms of abuse.

A healthy organization recognizes that, for employees to feel valued, they must feel **recognized for their unique and diverse identities** and valued for their contributions. In this sense, cultural safety enables employees to flourish, regardless of race, religion, gender, physical, or intellectual differences, or sexuality.



What are your rights?

At the most basic level, cultural safety protects employees' rights according to state and federal regulations. Several government agencies and acts of Congress have codified standards for treatment in the workplace, and violations of these statutes may be punishable criminal acts. While it may seem like these fundamental rights and protections are self-evident, unfortunately, they are not—so government agencies and task forces have been charged with codifying them.

As an employee, you have many rights and protections in the workplace created to keep you safe. These include:

Right to be free from discrimination and harassment

Harassment is unwanted conduct that affects individuals' dignity in the workplace and creates a hostile or degrading environment. When harassment is related to personal characteristics such as gender, race, age, national origin, or other traits, this also constitutes discrimination. **Bullying**, like harassment, creates an intimidating environment and can take the form of verbal abuse, physical violence, public undermining, cruel gossip, and other more subtle forms of abuse.

According to studies, at least [20% of American workers](#) report being bullied. Furthermore, although nearly every established company in the country offers sensitivity training and implements sexual harassment policies, [40% of women and 16% of men](#) report being sexually harassed at work.

Right to a workplace free of safety hazards

Physical safety means providing safe and hazard-free working conditions and creating a comfortable and appropriate environment for employees. This includes keeping the workspace well ventilated, adequately lit, noise-controlled, and ergonomically-designed to protect employees' health.

The US Department of Labor has more than [180 laws in place to protect workers](#) and governs health, workplace compensation, and union regulations. OSHA, as part of the US Department of Labor, is tasked with developing and enforcing [regulations and standards](#) concerning physical safety in the workplace.

Whistleblower rights

Retaliation is targeting an employee for dismissal, demotion, or harassment after they have filed a complaint. Fear of reprisals is valid—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 an allegation of retaliation. This is why OSHA enforces [whistleblower protections](#).

Ensuring that employees can safely report misconduct can be accomplished by implementing anonymous reporting software. For example, using [Your Voice](#), you can simply click on an anonymous reporting button on the platform that directs them to a designated representative within your company. The two parties can then chat via an anonymous, encrypted email service.

Right to fair wages

The pay gap in the US is narrowing, but according to the [Pew Research Center](#), women still earn about 15% less than men. Besides gender, gender identity and expression, race, sexual orientation, marital status, parenthood, and age are categories protected by law to ensure that companies pay employees below their value.

In the [Equal Pay Act](#) of 1963, [Title VII](#) of The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the [Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009](#), legislators stipulate that employees must be paid according to their seniority, achievements, education, experience, or other equitable factors.

Wrongful termination

In the US, unlike in most countries around the world, employees can be fired at any time based on what is called the “[employment-at-will doctrine](#).” This doctrine presumes that the employment relationship is voluntary and either party can terminate that relationship at any time, with or without cause. Because of this, wrongful termination suits generally involve a charge of discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Culture is more than the law

Cultural safety goes beyond the law's basic protections to create a positive and mutually supportive work environment where people can show their true colors and bring their best selves to work every day. A healthy workplace will have lots of different kinds of people working together to achieve goals with mutual respect.

“Over the line,” not “against the law”

Harassment, discrimination, and bullying can be subtle—which is why organizations need clear guidelines about what is acceptable and what is over the line. This should include:

- Spreading rumors and gossip
- Insults, ridicule, and demeaning comments
- Sharing privileged information
- Exclusion or unfair treatment
- Overly critical supervision
- Micromanagement
- Sexual advances of any kind, including displaying offensive material or purposefully making a colleague uncomfortable
- Threatening comments about job security or otherwise
- Undermining or criticizing in front of others
- Preventing career growth by deliberately blocking promotion or other opportunities

Hiring practices promoting diversity and inclusion

A 2019 [CompTIA survey](#) showed that 64% of respondents agree that “an organization with a heterogeneous employee base is more likely to produce world-class innovation than one with that is largely homogeneous in makeup.”

Diversity and inclusion are vital to creating a culturally safe work environment where employees can thrive and actively contribute to company strategy and growth, which starts at hiring.

Accessibility and inclusivity

Companies should prioritize making accommodations for employees with disabilities and implementing equal opportunity hiring policies regardless of physical or psychological conditions. Additionally, making the physical workplace accessible to employees with disabilities promotes cultural safety and should be a priority for any organization.

Aside from making the physical workspace accessible, it is essential to make the digital workspace available to individuals with hearing or vision impairments, such as implementing software compatible with assistive technologies such as screen readers for the visually impaired or transcription technology the hearing impaired. With many employees working from home, creating an accessible online work environment is vital to promoting cultural safety.

Health benefits

Offering robust health insurance and an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) shows that an organization prioritizes employee wellbeing. Beyond 100% health coverage, EAPs offer free, anonymous mental health counseling to employees in distress in addition to comprehensive health insurance coverage.

In addition to health coverage, employees should be encouraged to communicate what additional assistance is needed and clearly understand what services they are entitled to.

Some additional benefits that organizations may offer, especially for employees facing challenges, include:

- Sick leave
- Compassionate leave
- Work from home
- Reduced copays
- Mental health support
- Subsidized loans

Studies have found that EAP services, including counseling, improve occupational functioning and engenders employee engagement and retention. Offering these services means that a company that prioritizes cultural safety and employee wellness isn't just doing what is right; they do what is smart.

Flexible workplace

Best practices for healthy work culture increasingly focus on the [hybrid model](#), allowing employees to choose whether to work from home or the office. Globally, [over 50% of employees](#) work outside of the office at least 2.5 days a week—a figure that is expected to grow in the coming years, especially after COVID.

It is the hallmark of a culturally safe organization to be inclusive of all employees, no matter where they are located, and to respect the boundaries between home and work. Calling employees after hours, expecting them to work outside of regular hours, and making employees feel they can't take time off is unfair and inappropriate.

Clearly defined roles and expectations

In a healthy organization, employees receive clear and reasonable tasks that leverage their unique skills and experience towards accomplishing company goals. When employees know what is expected and aren't overwhelmed by unrealistic workloads or deadlines, they will perform efficiently and without anxiety.

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.

Team building and training

One sign of cultural safety is an environment of teamwork and not competition. Collaboration is facilitated with structured team brainstorming sessions, and employees should be involved in strategy and business planning. Healthy teams won't have in-fighting, gossip, cliquiness, and other behaviors that get in the way of cooperation.

Good managers take a leading role in promoting cultural safety by initiating [goal-oriented D&I training](#) sessions at regular intervals. These training sessions should encourage employees to become active partners in [combating harassment](#) and promoting inclusion. Furthermore, these should offer opportunities for dialogue.

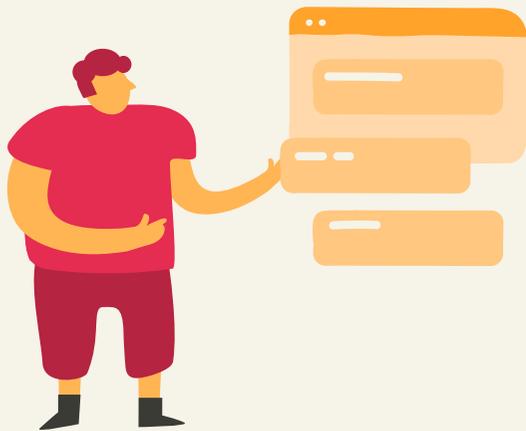
Clear code of conduct

A code of conduct communicates an organization's culture, values, risk areas, and reporting process. As the single source of truth for employees, managers, and other stakeholders, a code of conduct should address the following:

- Physical and mental health and safety services
- Equal employment opportunity guidelines
- Workplace violence policy
- Harassment policy, sexual or otherwise
- Freedom of speech, opinion, and association
- Disciplinary policies
- Statement of ethics
- Guarantee of confidentiality

Safe reporting practices

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. 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.



Reputation

One of the best ways to know if a company is built on a foundation of cultural safety is to dig into their reputation. Warning signs such as publicly filed complaints or lawsuits with the [Better Business Bureau](#) or EEOC, and other public records of litigation or official complaints against a company, are definite red flags.

More subtle ways to know if an organization has a healthy culture is to talk to someone who worked there, look at rates of voluntary [turnover](#), and take a look online to see what other people are saying. Job sites like Glassdoor and Indeed publish company reviews that can often reveal the inner workings of a workplace, whether for good or for bad.

How you can contribute to cultural safety



Get familiar with the code of conduct

Your company's [code of conduct](#) acts as a central reference for employees and serves as a benchmark for measuring individual and organizational performance. It also offers guidelines for identifying risk areas and addressing issues should they arise. Taking the time to fully understand your company's values and policies will empower you as an employee to actively participate in creating a happier and more productive workplace.



Communicate

If you have questions, issues, or concerns, approach your manager openly and with an idea of what you're going to say. This will help keep interactions concise, confident, and solution-oriented. Open communication with managers and team members will also ensure that your efforts remain aligned with expectations and organizational goals. It is especially important to communicate if mistakes have been made or a situation requires immediate resolution. Problem-solving requires dialogue, so don't be afraid to speak up.



Do the work

When you sign a contract with an employer, you agree to perform the tasks that are required and attest that you possess the necessary qualifications to perform them. At the most basic level, as an employee you must do the work you were hired to, carefully and seriously. Showing up late and failing to meet deadlines will damage your own position, but can have reaching effects for your coworkers and managers who will have to pick up the slack. This is damaging to an organization's culture and contributes to feelings of resentment.

Use good judgment and be honest with your employer if you have concerns or questions about workload or specific tasks. Putting assignments on the back burner because you aren't sure about them will mean vital tasks aren't being completed—to the detriment of company interests.



Respect your team members

Keeping things professional and polite will foster cultural safety and promote effective collaboration between you and your team members. Let go of minor annoyances and if you have grievances, make sure to follow reporting protocol and communicate calmly. Rude and abrasive behavior, insults, outbursts, and gossip will tear down an organization from the inside, so it's important to both expect and model respectful, professional speech.



See something, say something

Don't hesitate if you see something wrong. It can be intimidating to report harassment or bullying, but often managers or HR may not be aware of the issue and the victim may be afraid to speak up. Intervene if you feel the situation warrants so that the burden of stopping the inappropriate behavior doesn't fall on the victim. What should you do?

- Do not intervene physically or with threats
- Document the incident or situation in detail
- Set a meeting with your manager
- Clearly state the facts of the matter
- If your manager is not responsive, go to HR
- Be aware of harmful behaviors and take an active role in preventing exclusion, discrimination, or bullying in the workplace



How tech solutions can help teams

As HR and management undergo a digital revolution, employees are benefitting from enhanced cultural safety facilitated by online platforms. Tech is improving communication between managers and teams, and among team members, making collaboration easier than ever.

Digital productivity tracking ensures that employees have clear expectations about workflow, deadlines, and responsibilities. This makes sure you know what you need to do, when to get it done, and who to talk to.

Finally, digital solutions for online grievance reporting is enabling employees that have been mistreated or witnessed mistreatment to take action without fear of reprisal. These capabilities provide organizations with enhanced modes to support cultural safety.

Your Voice

[bob's Your Voice](#) is a unique service that empowers people to anonymously report workplace misconduct without fear of retribution and enables companies to take swift action. Providing employees with a safe and secure place to report misconduct helps to increase cultural safety, encourages secure reporting, and provides a single source of truth for organizational policies.

Your Voice also complies with the EU Whistleblower Directive which requires companies to provide employees with a safe and secure way to report workplace misconduct.

Now is the time to make smarter decisions when it comes to your people and organization.

To learn more about Hibob and our data-driven tools, get in touch with us at

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