

Bullying and Harassment in the Public Sector in Australia: Practical Ways to Lift Respect in Public Service Workplaces

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The problem of bullying and harassment within government has been brought into sharp relief in the past few years by high-profile cases of sexual harassment and gender violence within Australian Parliaments and courts. This debate in turn raises broader questions about harassment and bullying in general across the government sector. This paper looks at evidence about bullying and harassment in the Commonwealth, State and Territory public services and suggests some practical ways to address it. The Commonwealth features extensively in this paper, largely because significant new data is now publicly available for that jurisdiction. Many of the reflections apply to both Commonwealth and State and Territory jurisdictions.

Workplace bullying is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker that creates a risk to health and safety. It does not include reasonable management action, like performance management carried out in a reasonable manner.²

Staff surveys show that bullying and harassment are significantly more widespread than codes of conduct or workers' compensation claims suggest. In the Australian Public Service, for example, at most only one public servant in every 1,500 has a code of conduct finding against them for bullying or harassment, but almost one public servant in five says that they have been (or are unsure whether they have been) bullied or harassed in the past year. This pattern is repeated across many States and Territories. There is variation in this average, depending on the jurisdiction and department/agency, and for staff who are disabled, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+ or work in regional locations.

The vast majority of public servants behave civilly and respectfully to their colleagues. But reported rates of bullying and harassment are still too high and are not acceptable. Bullying and harassment not only damage the mental and physical health of the people involved but they weaken institutions, undermine productivity and innovation, and poison workplace culture. It affects all workplaces, not just those in the public sector: Porath and Pearson (2010), for example, reflect on US corporate experience and conclude that incivility in the workplace is a serious drag on corporate performance.³

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² As defined by s789FD of the *Fair Work Act 2009*. See <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/bullying>, <https://www.apsc.gov.au/publication/aps-values-and-code-conduct-practice/section-3-relationships-workplace>, and <https://www.lawcouncil.asn.au/policy-agenda/advancing-the-profession/equal-opportunities-in-the-law/bullying-and-harassment-in-the-workplace> for specific examples.

³ Porath, C. L., & Pearson, C. M. (2010). The cost of bad behavior. *Organizational Dynamics*, 39(1), 64–71 – see <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0090261609000722?via%3Dihub>. To quote the first paragraph: “While managers are looking everywhere to cut costs and maximize productivity, chances are they are missing a potentially devastating expense: the cost of incivility. As employees exchange seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds, productivity plummets and norms are shredded. If employees are behaving badly toward one another, it means that individuals and teams are losing time, effort, energy, focus, creativity, loyalty and commitment. Far from a minor inconvenience, workplace incivility is one of today’s most substantial economic drains on American business. What’s the bottom line? Companies we’ve worked with calculate the tab for incivility in the millions. In fact, just one habitually offensive employee

Failure to address bullying impedes Australian public services from delivering on the expectations of the government and the public more generally. Addressing bullying and harassment is important not only in normal times but is particularly so with the heightened stress that public servants and the community are experiencing with COVID-19. Being able to provide a respectful workplace also really matters to being able to recruit and retain quality candidates in the public service.

The paper makes some organisational suggestions to reduce bullying, including

- clear and practical guidance on what constitutes constructive and positive engagement with staff and colleagues, supported by practical training of managers about leadership, what respectful behaviour entails, and the legal responsibilities of managers and workers under Workplace Health and Safety legislation – this could be a theme in the work of public service-oriented bodies like the Institute of Public Administration Australia,
- full 360-degree performance assessment of all managers, reported to the jurisdiction’s Public Service Commission and the general outcomes made public,
- explicit separate rating in every public servant’s performance assessment of the outcomes they achieved and *how* those outcomes were achieved,
- prohibiting the promotion of people who perform poorly in how they achieve outcomes,
- encouraging staff who have experienced poor behaviour to use confidential and independent support and counselling, regardless of whether they make a complaint,
- inquiries by Public Service Commissions into departments/agencies with consistently or materially above average rates of harassment and bullying,
- using an independent person or body to take informal and formal complaints about harassment and bullying, outside the normal institutional hierarchy, and encourage staff to use that facility, as a complement to the formal processes of Safe Work Australia, Comcare and the Australian Human Rights Commission, and
- openly sharing insight between jurisdictions about what works or otherwise in reducing harassment and bullying in public administration, and introducing greater consistency in reporting across jurisdictions to improve comparability in performance.

These steps should enable jurisdictions to commit to at least halve their measure of harassment and bullying within five years.

While this paper concentrates on respect and civility within public services, it observes that respectful interaction between members of Parliament (and their staff) and public servants may be enhanced by extending the counselling, reporting and resolution processes adopted by the Commonwealth Parliament in relation to serious incidents of harassment in the parliamentary workplace to public servants.

Data on bullying and harassment

Each of the nine jurisdictions in the Australian federation collects and publishes statistics on harassment and bullying.

Consider, first, the statistics published by the Australian Public Service Commission for the Australian Public Service, in the [APSC State of the Service Report 2019-20](#).⁴

positioned in the top of your organization can suck out millions in lost employees, lost customers and lost productivity. The effects are real and the drag on your company’s profits and productivity are nasty.”

⁴ See <https://www.apsc.gov.au/state-service/state-service-report-2019-20>.

In 2019-20, 656 code-of-conduct investigations into APS employees were finalised, 139 of which related to alleged breach of the requirement of public servants to respect and not harass others (s13(3) of the Public Service Act). This includes the treatment of clients and the general public, and it can include discourteous or discriminatory behaviour. In 2019-20, 104 officers were found to have breached that requirement, which represents 0.07 per cent of the total 150,474 APS employees. Comcare⁵ and Safe Work Australia⁶ also publish data on workplace harassment and bullying.

Referencing the number of total code-of-conduct allegations, the APSC (p67) notes that “[w]hile the number is higher than in recent years, it remains proportionately low to the size of the workforce and demonstrates that existing reporting and investigation processes are working.” This conclusion is hard to reconcile with data from the APS employee census.

Since 2019, the APSC has started reporting the individual census results for 70 Commonwealth departments and agencies, accessible on the APSC’s [APS Employee Census 2020 web page](#).⁷ These surveys have been conducted by the APSC since 2012. Their public release by agency was agreed by Secretaries Board from 2019.⁸ It is a credit to public service leaders that this information is now publicly available and that many, but not all, departments and agencies are willing to be open to greater scrutiny. This itself creates a powerful incentive for change.

APS employees are asked by the APSC whether they have, are unsure they have, or they have not experienced bullying or harassment over the past year. There are three types of behaviour that are listed in the survey as examples of bullying or harassment:

- verbal abuse, including offensive language, derogatory remarks, shouting or screaming,
- interference with work tasks, including withholding needed information, undermining or sabotage,
- inappropriate and unfair application of work policies or rules, like performance management, access to leave, access to learning and development.

Appendix 1 collates the results for the 70 reporting Commonwealth departments and agencies, with 75 per cent of their staff participating. Figure 1 summarises these census results on harassment and bullying for 13 portfolio departments and the two largest APS agencies (Australian Tax Office and Services Australia). The vast majority of public servants experience a respectful workplace.

The reports show, however, a very different picture compared to that indicated by data on breaches of the code of conduct. 11.8 per cent of respondents from the 70 participating agencies – which

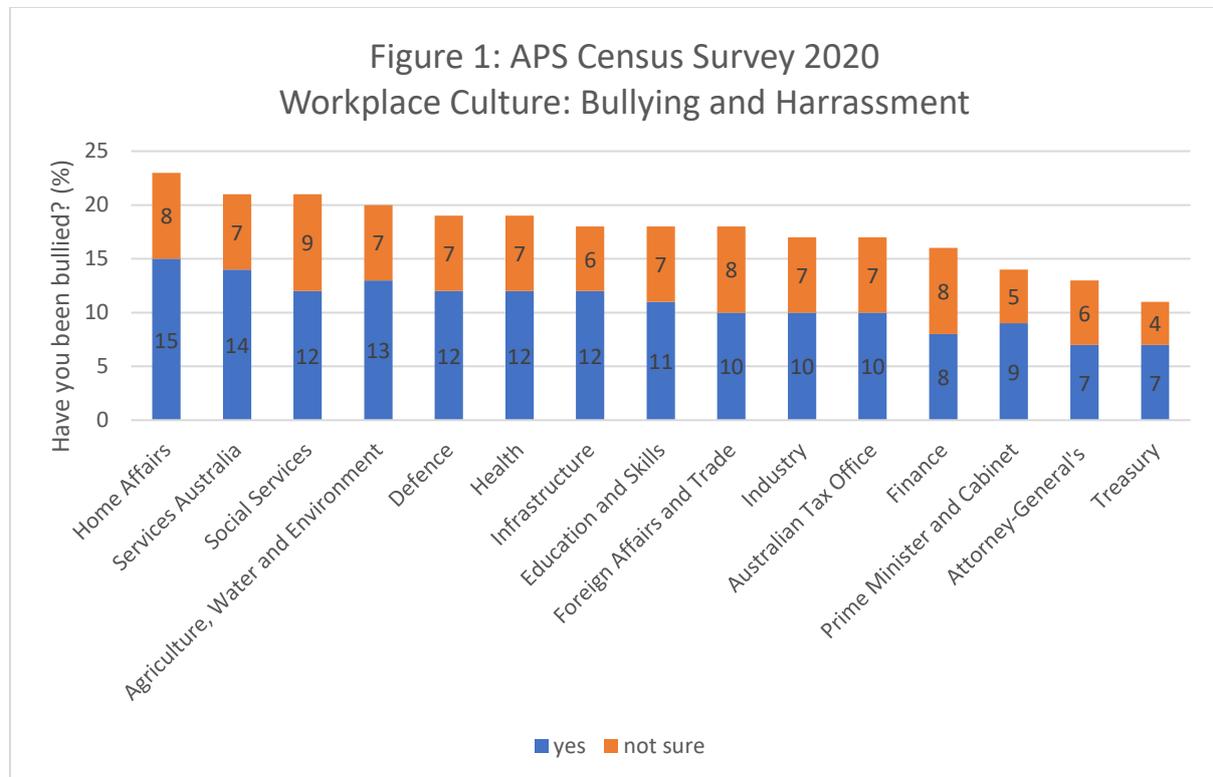
⁵ Comcare reports that in 2019-20, there were 121 workers’ compensation claims made in relation to work-related harassment or workplace bullying, out of a total 397,500 workers covered by the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* or the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*: see <https://www.comcare.gov.au/about/forms-publications/documents/publications/corporate-publications/comcare-scheme-workers-compensation-statistics-19-20.pdf>.

⁶ Safe Work Australia reports indicators from accepted workers’ compensation claims for Australian workplaces. It identifies a work-related harassment or workplace bullying sub-category of psychosocial health and safety indicators, defined as “repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health or safety” (*Fair Work Act 2009*, s789FD(1)). It reports a frequency rate of 14.9 claims per 100 million hours worked in Australia in 2017-18, up from 6.6 in 2002-03 and below a peak of 16.4 in 2011-12.

⁷ See <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/workforce-information/aps-employee-census-2020>. Not all APS departments or agencies publicly report the employee census results. For example, the results for the Department of Veterans’ Affairs are not published on the APSC website.

⁸ There was an aggregated report on harassment and bullying in APS workplaces in 2016: see <https://www.apsc.gov.au/state-service/state-service-2015-16-blogposts/bullying-and-harassment-aps>.

would be equivalent to about 16,300 employees in their workforce – report that they have experienced harassment or bullying in the past year, and a further 7 per cent – which would amount to about 9,700 APS employees in the participating agencies – say that they are unsure whether they have experienced harassment or bullying.



Source: Australian Public Service Commission <https://www.apsc.gov.au/state-service/state-service-report-2019-20> accessed 6 September 2021

While broadly 1 in 1,500 Commonwealth public servants a year are found to breach code-of-conduct respect and bullying, it is reasonable to say that over 1 in 10 members of the APS say that they have been harassed or bullied in the past year. Almost 1 in 5 Commonwealth public servants say that they have been, or are unsure whether they have been, bullied or harassed in the past year. Overall, there is a disconnect in the numbers between ‘proven perpetrators’, on the one hand, and ‘perceived targets’ of abuse, on the other. In general, staff engagement with an agency is highly correlated with low rates of harassment and bullying.

Looking at Appendix 1, in a couple of agencies (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority), the number who say they have (or maybe have) been bullied or harassed rises to 1 in 3 members of staff. In two agencies (Organ and Tissue Agency and Workplace Gender Equality Agency), no harassment or bullying is reported by staff in the Staff Census. In some of the biggest Commonwealth agencies (Home Affairs, Services Australia, and Social Services), *more* than 1 in 5 public servants say that they have, or maybe have, experienced bullying. Central agencies and the Attorney General’s Department stand at the lower end, with slightly more than 1 in 10 experiencing harassment or bullying.

According to the census results, the main type of harassment and bullying is overwhelmingly verbal – offensive language, derogatory remarks, shouting and screaming – followed by undue interference in how work is done. All of the official material on harassment and bullying is clear that performance management itself does not constitute harassment or bullying, so long as it is conducted reasonably.

It is worth noting that cases of inappropriate and unfair application of work policies or rules, which includes performance assessment, is consistently and significantly less frequent than verbal abuse (the most common complaint) and interference with work tasks (the second most common complaint). This suggests that high rates of harassment or bullying do not simply reflect staff dissatisfaction with their performance assessment.

As discussed further below, it is not straightforward to explain variation between agencies because incidences of harassment and bullying vary with the composition of workforces – features like the ethnic, sexuality, gender and other diversity of staff and city or regional location – as well as the strength of a respect culture, the nature of leadership and historical experience in an organisation.

Data from the States and Territories support the view that the problem is common – and indeed widespread – across public services. Every State and Territory reports on bullying within their public services and has taken steps to address it. Consider some examples from selected jurisdictions:

- The NSW Public Sector reports in its People Matter Employee Survey reports that 13.9 per cent of employees say they directly experienced bullying in 2020 (down from 20 per cent in 2016) and 21.7 per cent say they witnessed bullying (down from 35 per cent in 2016), and this bullying is higher for people with a disability, those who are LGBTIQ+ or are in frontline areas, and even more so in regional areas. The main categories of people doing the bullying are senior managers (27.7 per cent), immediate managers (30.9 per cent) and fellow workers (34.2 per cent). Only 20.4 per cent of people report the bullying and, of those, only 20.3 per cent are satisfied with the outcome.
- In Victoria, 14 per cent of staff who completed the People Matter survey say that they experienced bullying in 2019, down from 20.1 per cent in 2016. Yet in the same survey, 30 per cent of Victorian Public Service staff with a disability reported harassment or bullying, as did 24 per cent of Aboriginal staff.
- The NT reports that 4 of the 84 formal grievances in 2019-20 related to bullying. In the NT People Matter survey 2021, 17 per cent of respondents disagree or disagree strongly with the statement that their organisation does not tolerate bullying, 28 per cent say that they have experienced bullying in the past year (and 9 per cent prefer not to say), and 30 per cent say they have witnessed bullying.
- In Tasmania's 2020 State Service Employee Survey, 20 per cent of respondents disagree or strongly disagree that bullying is not tolerated in their organisation. Of the 25 per cent who say that they have experienced bullying in the past 12 months, only 39 per cent reported it. Of the remaining 61 per cent who do not report the bullying they experience, the three main reasons are that they think no action will be taken, it will upset their workplace, or it will hurt their career. The bullying includes intimidation (54 per cent), exclusion or isolation (46 per cent), verbal abuse (39 per cent) and psychological harm (39 per cent). In terms of who does the bullying, 25 per cent are senior managers, 30 per cent are immediate managers and 45 per cent are fellow workers.

The most recent APSC census data suggest that there are more behavioural problems and a lack of civility within the APS than the code of conduct data suggests, and that the experience of the APS suggested by census results is consistent with the experience more broadly across States and Territories.

To summarise, the State and Territory data show that

- targeted interventions to reduce bullying do seem to work, as the experience of NSW and Victoria noted above in reducing reports of harassment may attest, even if it remains a widespread problem. It is worth exploring in detail why reported rates of bullying have declined and what has worked in these cases, including how greater gender and other diversity can be a tool to talk about and build respect. In NSW, for example, the focus has been on bystander training interventions, targeting responses to the most affected cohorts, highlighting the role of senior leadership, integrating WHS and HR functions to ensure a person-centred integrated process to handle complaints, and using Safe Work Australia's psychosocial work tools.⁹ The Northern Territory has emphasised the need for leaders to call out and explicitly deal with poor behaviour and reward good behaviour. The ACT has emphasised the need for senior leaders to model good behaviour,
- harassment and bullying occur across the hierarchy, including senior managers, immediate managers and peers. In thinking about solutions, this suggests that interventions need to apply to all levels in the hierarchy, including the most senior leaders, and
- there is very significant under-reporting of what people regard as harassment and bullying. As suggested by some State surveys, this seems to be because of concerns that things won't change, that the system protects people further up in the hierarchy, or that career prospects will be damaged. In thinking about solutions, this suggests that reporting of bullying and interventions need to apply across the hierarchy and need to be – and be seen to be – independent of an agency's management.

The staff survey results certainly align with stories across jurisdictions about the yelling or bullying boss or colleague in the workplace. Anecdotally, many public services in the federation have their own well-known, notorious and serial bullies in the service. Why do they persist? Perhaps because they are seen as do-ers, they have power and connections, or their supervisors do not really know about their behaviour because it is hidden from their view. It merits saying that these people are typically destructive and, far from supporting ministers and the government, they undermine the ability to sustain delivery and amplify risks for ministers. Addressing bullying and harassment is needed to be able to deliver the priorities of government.

It is worth observing that the reporting methodology and content varies significantly between jurisdictions, making it harder to directly compare standards and outcomes between jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction reports through its own institutions – typically a public service commission – and does so according to its own legal and reporting requirements. There may be scope to develop a common definition of harassment and bullying, standardise language to better understand what is happening and where, and to broaden the scope of inquiry where that is possible.

It is also worth repeating what a great innovation it has been for the APSC to publish staff census results by Commonwealth departments and agencies. There is scope for the data to be compiled and more deeply analysed, including the impact of size or activity (such as differences between policy, program or service delivery bodies), why some APS entities do not report, whether non-APS Commonwealth (PGPA Act) agencies should also report staff surveys of harassment and bullying to the APSC (even on a voluntary basis), and why results differ so widely across entities.

If we accept that there is a problem, what can and should be done about this?

There are five practical things to do.

⁹ See <https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/culture-and-inclusion/workplace-culture/positive-and-productive-workplaces> and <https://www.peopleatwork.gov.au/webcopy/peopleatwork>.

First, **acknowledge that there is a problem with not enough respectful interaction** in public sector workplaces.

The fact is that most, if not all, jurisdictions have a problem with harassment and bullying somewhere within their ranks. It cannot be acceptable that between 10 and 30 per cent of public servants say that they have experienced bullying or harassment over the past year. The data uniformly suggest it is widespread, and experienced from senior managers, immediate supervisors and colleagues. It ranges most commonly from offensive language and yelling, to interference in how work is done (like not giving access to material or undermining work), and to the inappropriate application of work rules (like professional development or performance reviews). Some of this is subjective and depends on perceptions but that does not mean that it is not true. It is crucial to observe that the data suggest that reporting is relatively low because of concerns that systems favour senior people and insiders, and that reporting will hurt the complainant.

The extent of harassment and bullying suggests that respectful behaviour should be the focus of a targeted workplace campaign in jurisdictions.

As a step in understanding the sources of harassment and bullying and acknowledging that the problem is still too big, it would be constructive if public service commissions did in-depth analyses on departments and agencies that have consistently above-average levels of harassment and bullying, and provided that general analysis and possible remedial action in a public report.

Public service commissions could be explicit that they are committed to at least halve the extent of bullying and harassment in their public sector workplaces over the next five years – the steps outlined below would give people confidence that such a commitment is serious and achievable.

Working closely with departments and agencies, public service commissions could ensure that easy-to-use confidential support, advice and counselling services are available to public servants who experience workplace bullying, regardless of whether a formal complaint is made.

Second, **identify and celebrate good management and civility.**

If we want respect to be one of the key elements of how public servants interact with each other, with Ministers and ministerial advisors, and with the public in general, it is essential to be explicit that that is indeed the case, to be clear about what constitutes respectful behaviour and civility, and to celebrate and reward good behaviour.

It is a truism to say that people learn their behaviours from observing and interacting with others.

Poor workplace behaviour can occur for various reasons. Managers might think they need to know every detail themselves, and get angry if they don't. Managers and staff may operate with unnecessarily tight time frames or unrealistic timeframes, creating a pressure cooker workplace exacerbated by the 24/7 cycle and insufficient downtime. Managers and staff may be out of their depth, with insufficient management induction and training. Managers may expect things to be done as an order, without question. Many people make mistakes in interpersonal interaction but if these behaviours are validated, approved or ignored, they can spread and become systemic. They are not effective ways of social or workplace interaction, and they weaken capability and undermine long-term institutional performance and productivity. Respecting people does not mean avoiding direct feedback and criticism, open and genuine performance assessment, having difficult conversations and making hard decisions. But it does mean doing those things in a constructive, open and respectful manner. How to ensure good workplace behaviour does not feature strongly in the professional development and training of managers in some public services.

In the Commonwealth, the APSC work level standards, the APS values and the SES characteristics are clear about the importance of developing other people's capability, guidance and mentoring, learning by doing, and support. But it is not practical. People need to know what does and does not constitute respectful behaviour and a targeted campaign could address this explicitly. It could celebrate good behaviour. In the APS, for example, newly promoted managers do not generally go through practical training on management and leadership.

There are new opportunities in each jurisdiction to be explicit about what constitutes good behaviour and management. The codes being developed by Safe Work Australia and the State and Territory Safe Work bodies to support the work health and safety laws and regulations are a real opportunity to address harassment and bullying in a practical and tangible way. The APSC Review of Hierarchy and Classifications is a great opportunity to reinforce how a good manager and leader ensures respect in the workplace – supported by explicit professional development for staff promoted at each level and training updates for existing managers across the service by the newly established APS Academy. Both of these mechanisms can also reinforce the idea that performance management is *not* a ground for an accusation of bullying or harassment.

Bodies like IPAA, both nationally and at State and Territory Divisions, can help in many ways. It is open to IPAA, for example, to introduce a new criterion in its selection of Fellows that explores how the candidate fostered respect and civility in the workplace. IPAA could focus on respect and behaviour change as one theme in its various events and conferences from 2022. IPAA could institute a new respectful workplaces award – in States and Territories or nationally – based on nominations of workplaces that demonstrate and show case respect in high-achieving workplaces. IPAA Divisions could use public forums where a Minister and Secretary discuss the outcomes and respectful behaviour they expect from staff, as IPAA NSW has started with its 'Daily Briefing'.¹⁰ And, finally, those IPAA divisions that provide professional development programs could develop workplace training modules on 'civility and respect in practice.'

Third, **strengthen the incentives for public servants to act respectfully** through some specific institutional and organisational changes. People respond to incentives so strengthening incentives for good behaviour may shift behaviour and improve outcomes. Four possible changes are:

- 360 performance assessment at all levels, to ensure that information from direct reports and peers (including from other agencies and key stakeholders) about the performance of an officer is collected as part of the performance assessment of that officer. As officers become more senior, this information should be collected and collated by an independent or outside person, to ensure that there is not selective screening information by more senior officers. This should increase trust that information is used, not hidden.
- Performance reviews are formally separated into two components – the outcomes achieved by the officer ("the what") and the way in which those outcomes were achieved ("the how") – with the overall score the average of the two components. In this way, there is a clear incentive to achieve and to do so in a proper way. The public service commission should issue clear guidelines about criteria for performance at each level, including expectations about people leadership.
- Public service values apply to public servants but there are some public-sector employees whose employment is not subject to the public service act in their jurisdiction. In the case of the Commonwealth, this is the case for statutory heads of agencies and some security and other agencies. It is worth exploring ways to ensure that respect is an important value and

¹⁰ See https://www.nsw.ipaa.org.au/Shared_Content/Events/Event_Display.aspx?EventKey=20210421E1.

that performance assessment should look where it can at outcomes and how these outcomes are achieved matter, and that data for these agencies also be publicly available.

There is, for example, no reason why the performance of agency heads should not also use 270 degree information, formally separate the achievement of outcomes from *how* they are achieved, involve independent assessment, be managed by the APS Commissioner, be provided directly to the Prime Minister, and the general results be reported by the APS Commissioner to the Parliament. This would be a powerful signal that respectful behaviour matters throughout the whole public service and that leaders are not exempt.

- Information should be collected and aggregate information published by the public service commission in each jurisdiction. Transparency is a big driver of behaviour change.

Fourth, **follow through on performance with rewards and sanctions**. People who systematically fail to show respect – evident by bullying and harassment – should not be promoted and should face formal procedures including sanctions for poor behaviour, reduction of salary, demotion, and termination. More specifically, employment consequences of poor behaviour should be reported by public service commissions, and independent complaints processes and follow up should be instituted and reported on publicly.¹¹ When the public service sees that people who behave badly do not get promoted, are demoted, or lose their job, behaviour will change.

Fifth, **lift transparency and consistency in reporting** in all jurisdictions.

The APSC has the opportunity with the data that is now publicly available, to make access to that data and analysis easier in future years, and offer insight into what the data tell us about the public service and particular institutions. It could be a special feature of reporting over coming years.

The definition of harassment and bullying and the content and framing of staff surveys can vary across jurisdictions. This is not unexpected since the reporting body (typically the jurisdiction's public service commission) varies by jurisdiction, each jurisdiction is sovereign, and the reporting body operates under its own legislation and reports to its own parliament. But this means that it is harder for jurisdictions to learn from each other and benchmark themselves. The various public service commissions do regularly examine issues of bullying and harassment but this has low public visibility, and they may wish to explore how they could work together to lift information and standardise reporting and make data available where possible in order to influence behaviour. This does not compromise independence and sovereignty.

Civility between the Public Service, the Public and the Parliament

This paper has concentrated on harassment and bullying within public services in Australia. This is because respect and civility within a public service is within the direct control of public servants and the heads of public administration. The suggestions in this paper do not require change to any law in any jurisdiction. Public services do have two other groups with whom they interact a lot. One is the public. The other is the Parliament, especially Ministers and advisors in ministerial offices.

It would be helpful if surveys explored public servants' experience with civility and respect with the public and the parliament. Some States and Territories do include such questions, as did the 2016 APSC survey. COVID-19 has made the public more aware of the importance of showing respect to

¹¹ The Commonwealth Merit Protection Commissioner does report some anonymised cases of harassment – see <https://www.mpc.gov.au/case-summaries/sanction-reduction-classification-harassment-supervisee> – and this could be extended and given public prominence.

public servants, and that agencies can take practical steps to minimise customer aggression towards public servants.

The relationship between public servants, on the one hand, and parliamentarians, Ministers and ministerial and parliamentary advisors, on the other, is extensive but typically occurs behind closed doors. In most instances, that interaction is professional and respectful. But that is not always the case, and harassment and bullying of public servants can be a difficult and sensitive issue to address and resolve because there is a big difference in power. It would be helpful to public servants if there were clear processes by which they could seek independent advice and confidential guidance (focused on *their* health and welfare), raise and then seek resolution of claims of harassment and bullying that provide fairness to all parties and respect the special authority of the Parliament and of Ministers.

‘The Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents’¹² in the Commonwealth Parliament, led by Stephanie Foster PSM, provides a great template. The review defines a serious incident “as an incident or pattern of behaviour that causes serious harm to someone and includes assault, sexual assault, sexual harassment and serious and systemic bullying or harassment.” The review focuses on parliamentarians and staff employed in the offices of members of parliament (MoPS Act staffers). Its counselling, reporting and resolution mechanisms are fit-for-purpose for the Parliament, and could straightforwardly be extended to public servants who interact with members of parliament (including Ministers) and their staff. Such a decision is a matter for the Government and the Parliament. A natural place to start is departmental liaison officers (DLOs) who are public servants who work in ministerial offices, but it should be available to all public servants who interact with the Parliament as part of their job.

Conclusion

All public services in the Australian federation say that respect for people in the workplace is one of their core values. To their credit, jurisdictions have become more open and accountable for that aspiration and are actively working to improve respect. Yet as staff surveys consistently show, respectful workplace culture is absent in too many public service workplaces.

Something needs to change.

Being clear about what respect means, acknowledging the deficit in respect, increasing transparency, explicitly changing incentives for performance, pay and promotion, ensuring that people who consistently fail to show respect in the workplace leave the public service, and providing support for staff who experience bullying, are all steps that could be tried to remedy the problem. These are all things that public services can do to address a problem for which they are responsible for and for which they have the wherewithal to correct. With these tools in hand, public service commissions across the nation could state their commitment to at least halve bullying and harassment rates in their workplaces within the next five years.

Addressing harassment and bullying would, in turn, improve the quality of life of those affected, lift public-sector productivity, and ensure the public service is better able to deliver for the government and community.

¹² See <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/review-parliamentary-workplace-responding-serious-incidents-final.pdf>.

Appendix 1: Commonwealth Agencies Staff Census on Harassment and Bullying 2020

<i>"During the last 12 months, have you been subjected to harassment or bullying in your current workplace?"</i>	2020 responses		
Agency (A-Z)	YES % of total responses	NO % of total responses	NOT SURE % of total responses
Administrative Appeals Tribunal	12	83	5
Attorney-General's Department	7	87	6
Australian Building and Construction Commission	8	84	8
Australian Bureau of Statistics	6	89	5
Australian Charities and Not for profit Commission	9	87	5
Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity	15	71	15
Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care	10	82	8
Australian Communications and Media Authority	8	88	4
Australian Competition and Consumer Commission	5	90	5
Australian Financial Security Authority	7	85	7
Australian Fisheries Management Authority	12	78	10
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare	8	86	6
Australian National Audit Office	5	88	6
Australian Office of Financial Management	4	89	7
Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority	9	83	8
Australian Public Service Commission	11	80	10
Australian Skills Quality Authority	14	81	5
Australian Taxation Office	10	83	7
Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre	6	88	6
Australian Transport Safety Bureau	6	87	7
Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency	9	86	5
Bureau of Meteorology	7	84	9
Clean Energy Regulator	13	77	9
Comcare	9	84	7
Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions	8	89	4
Commonwealth Ombudsman	12	80	8
Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment	13	80	7
Department of Defence	12	81	7
Department of Education, Skills and Employment	11	82	7
Department of Finance	8	84	8
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	10	82	8
Department of Health	12	81	7
Department of Home Affairs	15	78	8
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications	12	81	6
Department of Social Services	12	79	9
Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources	10	83	7
Digital Transformation Agency	13	81	6
Fair Work Commission	5	91	4
Fair Work Ombudsman	6	91	3
Food Standards Australia New Zealand	14	83	3
Geoscience Australia	9	84	6
Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority	22	71	7
Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority	11	81	9
IP Australia	9	85	7
Murray–Darling Basin Authority	5	90	5
Museum of Australian Democracy	4	90	6
National Archives of Australia	11	81	8
National Blood Authority	16	80	4
National Capital Authority	15	82	3
National Disability Insurance Agency	13	80	7

National Film and Sound Archive of Australia	15	79	6
National Health Funding Body	9	73	18
National Indigenous Australians Agency	15	76	9
National Library of Australia	13	78	9
National Museum of Australia	17	73	10
National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority	17	77	6
National Portrait Gallery of Australia	8	74	18
NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission	18	74	9
Office of Parliamentary Counsel	8	84	8
Office of the Australian Information Commissioner	6	89	6
Office of the Inspector-General of Taxation and Taxation Ombudsman	13	81	6
Organ and Tissue Authority	0	93	7
Productivity Commission	8	85	7
Safe Work Australia	6	91	3
Services Australia	14	79	7
Sport Integrity Australia	8	85	7
Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency	24	64	11
The Australian Institute of Family Studies	14	81	4
The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	9	86	5
The Treasury	7	88	4
Workplace Gender Equality Agency	0	87	13
Simple Average of Departments/Agencies	10.2	82.6	7.1
Weighted Average by respondents	11.8	81.2	7.0

Source: <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/workforce-information/aps-employee-census-2020>. 103,975 out of 137,894 eligible staff participated in the 2020 census.