

# Respectful Workplace Best Practices

## For Blue-Collar Small Business Leaders

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# Overview

Healthy and respectful working environments are places where all workers within them feel safe, respected, and valued. As a result, respectful workplaces—if managed effectively—[enjoy](#) improved worker engagement, better decision-making, and higher performance. In addition to workforce benefits, creating a respectful workplace empowers workers to raise critical concerns regarding work conditions that can prevent discrimination, safety hazards, injuries, and deaths. The value of these proactive “[safety voice](#)” communications makes creating and maintaining respectful workplaces a high priority.

Many small businesses that employ primarily blue-collar (or manual) workers have a low Human Resources footprint, using only part-time HR professionals, external HR providers, or having supervisors or managers take on HR-related responsibilities. Because HR is typically seen as the primary steward of respectful working environments in white-collar workplaces, achieving the same outcome with limited or no formal HR requires unique best practices.

This document includes a summary of key insights for small business leaders, a detailed list of best practices, and a set of Do’s and Don’ts when it comes to creating respectful workplaces.

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# Key Insights

1. Even in companies with well-resourced HR functions, achieving a respectful workplace is dependent more on [interpersonal relationships](#) than formal policies. When managers, supervisors, and business owners engage in mentorship, fair treatment, and advocacy on behalf of their teams, and when teammates engage in mutual support, respect, and community, workers feel a strong sense of inclusion regardless of whether there are formal HR policies. However, if interpersonal interactions are hostile, harassing, abusive, or otherwise toxic, workers will [disengage](#) and keep information to themselves.
2. Because a single leader may not be able to build relationships with everyone, work to create an inclusive culture that incentivizes respectful behavior and does not tolerate disrespectful behavior. Supervisors and business owners can create this culture by [modelling the behavior they want to see](#), rewarding those who also exhibit it, and setting straightforward boundaries for what they will not tolerate.
3. In the absence of complex formal policies and full-time HR professionals to oversee them, people will do what is easiest and most convenient. As a leader, make behaviors associated with maintaining a respectful workplace easy, convenient, and common to normalize [behaving inclusively](#), and work to integrate these behaviors into the normal cadence of work for all workers.
4. The more workers feel informed and involved in business decisions that impact them, the more [engaged](#) they will be with their work and [invested](#) in maintaining a respectful workplace. Extending decision making down through the organization increases worker [satisfaction](#) and helps build a sense of shared responsibility. Transparent and frequent communication helps workers feel informed and valued.

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# Best Practices

1. Communicate your [expectations](#) to all workers for what on-the-job behaviors your business will not tolerate, and make sure all supervisors are trained to do the same. For example, *“We will not tolerate harassment, bullying, violence, hateful language, or retaliation. All supervisors are trained to respond if they hear of or witness it.”*
2. Establish, communicate, and follow through on clear [consequences](#) for what happens when these expectations are violated, with higher expectations for supervisors and other leaders. For example, *“We recognize that people have bad days, and expect that supervisors will work with workers affected by and engaging in this behavior to make things right. However, repeated breaches from team members and any breaches from supervisors may be grounds for disciplinary action including firing.”*
3. Communicate your expectations to all workers for what on-the-job behaviors your business actively wants to see, and make sure all supervisors are trained to do the same. For example, *“We expect that all members of the team work together to solve problems, share feedback with each other to work more safely, efficiently, and healthily, and extend help and understanding to each other when needed.”*
4. Create an informal resource for reporting and conflict resolution like a reporting hotline or a third-party platform that all workers can use with minimal training. Especially if this is the primary means for your workplace to receive complaints and feedback, [best practice](#) is to staff the hotline with dedicated staff or utilize a third-party service with its own dedicated staff, set strong consequences for retaliating against those who use the resource, and create a standard process for supervisors and leaders to follow up in a timely manner to address the root cause of the concern.
5. Where possible, invest time and money into training and coaching supervisors to not only manage the work, but also steward a respectful workplace. Skills to focus on include [emotional intelligence](#), maintaining [psychological safety](#), [mentorship](#), [inclusive communication](#), and [conflict resolution](#).

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**6.** Make sure that [rewards and punishments](#) line up with your respectful workplace expectations. Do not hire, promote, give pay raises to, give choice assignments to, or otherwise reward people who do not embody respectful behavior. (Also known as the “[no asshole](#)” rule.) At the same time, use your discretion and make sure you reward—instead of punishing—workers who act collaboratively, respectfully, and thoughtfully. For example, if you discipline a worker for showing up to a shift late the morning after staying late to help a teammate the day before, that worker will learn to not extend help. Instead, praise the collaborative behavior and ask the worker how you can support them showing up in a timelier manner in the future.

**7.** Make space for worker community and relationship building. Create [social opportunities](#) for workers to get to know each other and connect as a workplace community. Allow regular breaks and organize social events to [improve](#) worker well-being, encourage collaboration, and create shared community.

**8.** Hold regular meetings to [proactively](#) communicate clear expectations and avert challenges before they occur, rather than waiting for them to become issues. For example, *“We know that around this time of the year the work often increases. Work with your team members and supervisors to establish agreed-upon working hours, manage work-related stress, utilize wellness resources, and take care of each other. Know that our employee hotline is also intended to report job stress and mental health hazards, and utilize it as needed.”*

**9.** Solicit feedback from workers for decisions that will impact them. Being able to weigh in on a decision [increases worker buy-in and appreciation](#) for the end result, even if they don’t agree with it. Stay open minded: reach out for feedback early in the decision process and allow that feedback to potentially influence the final decision.

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## DO'S

- Define what a “respectful workplace” means in terms of which behaviors you want to see, and which you won’t tolerate.
- Encourage respectful behaviors by giving informal and formal rewards to workers who embody them, having leaders model these behaviors, and refusing to tolerate misbehavior, even from high performers.
- Make it easy and convenient for anyone to share feedback, and regularly follow through and take action to improve working conditions.
- Push decision-making down to the front line and solicit feedback from workplace-wide decisions that will affect them.
- Invest in training supervisors to not only manage the work, but effectively lead their teams and uphold a respectful workplace.
- Make space for socializing, community-building, and breaks to support worker wellbeing and increase collaboration.

## DON'TS

- Prioritize communicating about your workplace as “respectful” or “inclusive” but not taking action to ensure so.
- Punish people for engaging in respectful and collaborative behavior.
- Reward people despite regularly disrespectful or toxic behavior.
- Make it complex, inconvenient, or inaccessible to share important feedback.
- Permit retaliation against those who share feedback, especially from supervisors.
- Make decisions that negatively impact your workers without soliciting their feedback.
- Set expectations for respectful behavior without allocating resources to learn those behaviors.
- Isolate, overwork, or ignore hostility between your workers.

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