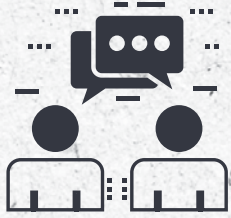


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA)



ANTECEDENTS* OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

a summary of scientific literature

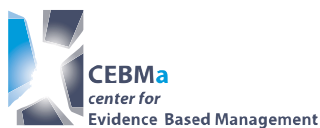
January 2020



Culture Review **Implementation**
our journey of positive change



***For the purposes of this REA 'antecedents' refers to the 'drivers' that may cause workplace incivility.**



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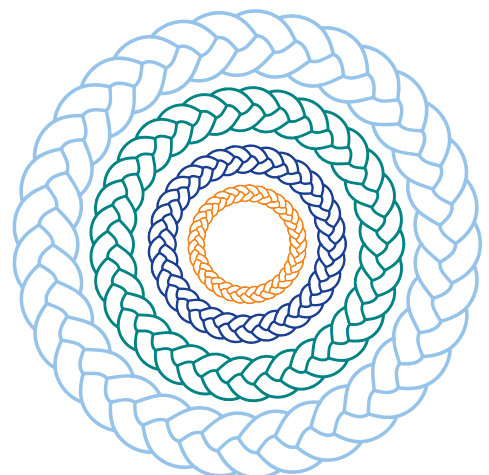
What is a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA)?

Rapid Evidence Assessments (REAs) use a specific research methodology to comprehensively identify the most relevant studies on a given topic, and select appropriate studies based on explicit criteria. In addition, two independent reviewers assess the methodological quality of the studies. In contrast to a conventional literature review, REAs are transparent, verifiable, and reproducible, and as a result, the likelihood of bias is considerably smaller.



Background

Over the past 20 years it has become clear that workplace incivility negatively affects a large percentage of workers (Hodgins, 2014). It is estimated that three to four percent of workers experience serious bullying, between nine and 15 percent of workers experience occasional bullying, and at least 10 to 20 percent experience negative social behaviour at work (Zapf, 2011). The British Workplace Behaviour Survey found that one-third of a nationally representative sample, experiences some form of workplace incivility (Fevre, 2012). Similarly, in Australia over one-third of workers report being sworn or yelled at while at work, and almost one quarter reporting having been humiliated in front of others (Dollard, 2012). All of these numbers show that workplace incivility is common. In late 2019 the ACT Government through the ACT public health system, in partnership with the ANU Research School of Management, approached the Center for Evidence-Based Management, recognised as a world authority, to conduct a REA of the most trustworthy scientific research on workplace incivility to determine the impact and antecedents of workplace incivility in teams and organisations.





What this REA assesses

This REA answers the following questions:

1. **What is workplace incivility?**
2. **What is the impact of workplace incivility on organisational outcomes?**
3. **What are the antecedents of workplace incivility?**
4. **What interventions effectively address workplace incivility?**

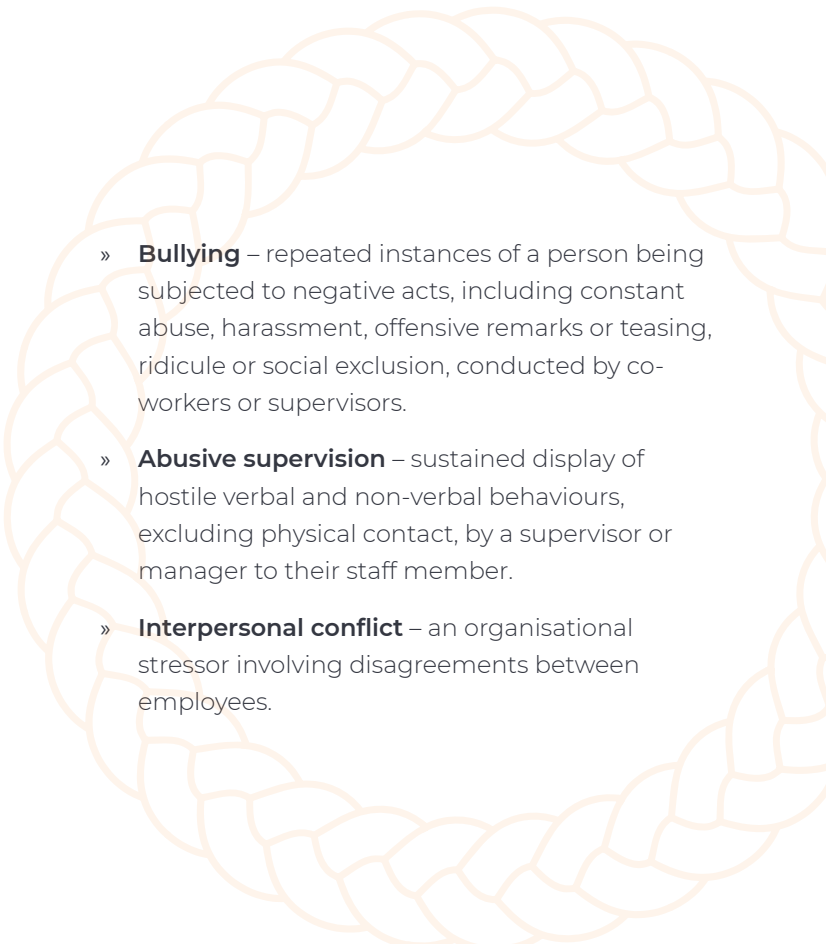
Main findings

1. What is workplace incivility?

The research literature revealed many terms used to define workplace incivility, with some authors arguing that it 'appears under many different labels, with each label referring to the same overall construct (Bowling, 2006).

The term 'workplace incivility' encompasses a range of inappropriate and unprofessional work behaviours that vary in intent, frequency and severity. It includes:

- » **Low intensity deviant acts**, such as rude verbal and non-verbal behaviours taken towards another employee with ambiguous intent to harm.
- » **Social undermining** – behaviour that is enacted over time to hinder a person's ability to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, achieve work successes and negatively impacts their professional reputation.

- 
- » **Bullying** – repeated instances of a person being subjected to negative acts, including constant abuse, harassment, offensive remarks or teasing, ridicule or social exclusion, conducted by co-workers or supervisors.
 - » **Abusive supervision** – sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviours, excluding physical contact, by a supervisor or manager to their staff member.
 - » **Interpersonal conflict** – an organisational stressor involving disagreements between employees.

2. What is the impact of workplace incivility on organisational outcomes?

This REA reveals that workplace incivility is related to many attitudinal, behavioural, and health-related outcomes, such as reduced self-esteem, life and job dissatisfaction, reduced work performance and organisational commitment, anxiety, depression, burn-out, negative emotions, increased employee turnover, and a range of physical symptoms.

Results from a systematic review of 66 samples shows that workplace incivility that involves supervisors has the strongest impact on attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, whereas there was no relevant difference

between supervisor and co-worker incivility for health-related outcomes (Hershcovis, 2010)

Workplace incivility does not only directly affect victims, but its consequences also extends to the team level, affecting employees who observe or become aware of others being mistreated (Escartin, 2016). Several studies indicate the presence of a contagion effect where uncivil behaviour of peers and supervisors is related to negative behaviours from employees through trickle-down (superiors) and trickle sideways (peers) effects (Aube, 2014; Mawritz, 2012). In addition, it was

found that being the target of aggression increases the likelihood of engaging in aggression (Glomb, 2010). A recent meta-analysis of 70 studies indicated that abusive supervision, in turn, may lead to 'employee deviance', defined as a 'broad range of behaviours that violate significant organisational norms and in so

doing threaten the well-being of an organisation, its members or both' (Park, 2019). This deviant behaviour may be focused on the supervisor, co-workers, or the organisation as a whole, depending on who the employee considers to be the responsible party.

3. What are the antecedents of workplace incivility?

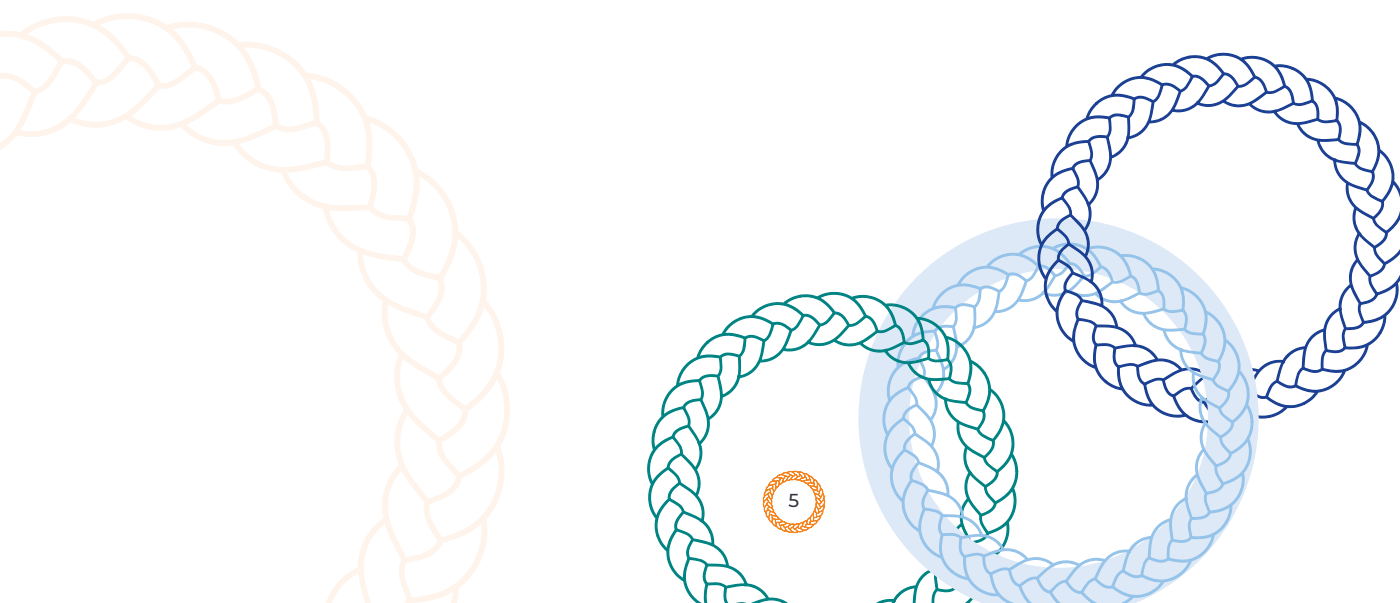
Following are the most important antecedents to focus upon as they are based on effect sizes and can contribute to workplace incivility in teams and organisations:

Leadership related antecedents

- » **Leadership style** – leaders perceived by their employees as authoritarian, autocratic, unethical, or having a laissez-fair type of leadership style are more likely to display abusive behaviour and also induce workplace incivility in others (Chadwick, 2017; Hoel, 2010; Zhang, 2016). Conversely, leaders perceived as constructive, ethical, fair, supportive or having a participatory style of leadership, are less likely to display abusive supervision and tend to have an inhibitory influence on workplace incivility (Hauge, 2011; Salin, 2015; Zhang, 2016).
- » **Lack of people management skills** – A recent systematic review of 62 studies in the context of Australian healthcare organisations indicate that a lack of effective management skills is a significant factor contributing to workplace bullying, authoritarian management, and failure to address workplace incivility when it occurs (Chadwick, 2017). A possible explanation for this

finding is that in some organisation's managers are promoted due mainly to their clinical and technical skills and competencies, even when they lack the relational and interpersonal skills required at more senior levels.

- » **Stressors and negative affective states** – supervisors' interactions with higher organisational levels influence their affective state and their behaviour towards their teams (Zhang, 2016), suggesting a 'trickle down' effect. It was found that stressors such as negative experiences with higher management, conflicts with colleague's, or lack of organisational justice, produce a negative affective state, which in turn leads to mistreatment of team members. On the contrary, supervisors with more positive affective state will less likely display abusive behaviours towards their teams. For example, a study by Eissa and Lester (2017) indicated that negative emotional reactions such as frustration are more likely to increase abusive behaviour from leaders, managers, and supervisors. The same study found that role overload is an important source of supervisor's negative emotions. Conversely, supervisors that felt 'in control' will less likely display abusive behaviours (Courtrigh, 2016).



Employee related antecedents

- » **Stressors and negative affective states** – high job demands, such as job stress, role or work overload and a poor physical work environment may lead to bullying, aggressive behaviour, harassment and other forms of workplace incivility (Bowling, 2006; Hershcovis, 2007). A study by Salin in 2015 revealed that employees with higher levels of job demands reported an almost four times higher risk of bullying than those with low job demands. Such stressors tend to produce negative affective states, which in turn have shown to increase the likelihood of interpersonal incivility and workplace aggression (Bowling, 2006; Reio, 2009, Van den Brande, 2016; Zhang, 2016).
- » **Co-worker conflict and conflict management style** – several studies have revealed that co-worker conflicts is a strong predictor of interpersonal aggression (Agotnes, 2018; Baillien, 2016; Huage, 2007; Hershcovis, 2007). These findings suggest that workplace interpersonal aggression, such as bullying, should be viewed as the end state of a highly escalated and poorly managed conflict. The research literature on conflict behaviour notes the following conflict management styles: integrating (collaborating); dominating (competing or forcing); accommodating (obliging); avoiding; compromising. A cross-sectional study found that an integrating style of conflict management, involving problem solving and a willingness to explore and work with the other person to find options that will be mutually acceptable, is the most constructive of the five conflict management styles (Trudel, 2011). A dominating style was found to be the less constructive of the five styles. It was also found that employees who lack social skills in order to resolve organisational conflicts are more likely to be victims of workplace bullying (Moayed, 2006).
- » **Job/role characteristics** – these are the most widely researched antecedents of workplace incivility. A large numbers of studies have found that role ambiguity and role conflict are strong antecedents of workplace harassment and bullying (Bowling, 2006; Hauge, 2011-2; Reknes, 2014). Role ambiguity refers to uncertainly about which actions to take in order to fulfil



the expectations of one's work role, while role conflict arises when the different expectations and demands of one's work role are incompatible (Beehr, 1995). In fact, it was found that role ambiguity and role conflict together predicted more than 20 percent of the variance in workplace harassment (Bowling, 2006). Another antecedent of workplace incivility is work constraints: situational constraints, such as lack of resources, that interfere with employees' task performance and prevent them from doing their job effectively, leading to frustration and ultimately aggression. Meta-analyses suggest that work constraints may be even stronger antecedents of workplace incivility than role ambiguity and role conflict (Bowling, 2006; Hershcovis, 2007). Not surprisingly, job autonomy was found to have a moderating effect on workplace incivility (Baillien, 2011; Bowling, 2006).

- » **Demographic characteristics and personality traits** – there was limited evidence that personality traits are antecedents of workplace incivility (Nielsen, 2015). However, some evidence was found that 'trait anger' (the predisposition to respond to situations with hostility) may be linked with workplace aggression. A possible

explanation may be that people high in trait anger are more likely to be easily provoked because of their tendency to perceive situations as frustrating (Hershcovis, 2011). This also applies to age, level of education, time in an organisation and ethnicity, except for gender. A systematic review in the realm of healthcare found that female junior doctors experience more bullying behaviours compared to male junior doctors (Samsudin, 2018). The authors suggest that a possible explanation is that 'men and women perceive workplace bullying differently, with men being more likely to perceive it as a particular management style, with women perceiving certain behaviours as threatening. Others argue that women who deviate from traditional roles may submit them to negative evaluations and increase the risk of experiencing bullying'.

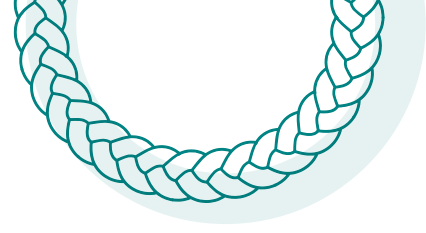
Organisational antecedents

- » **Organisational (in)justice** Research suggests that perceptions of fairness and justice in organisations can impact work incivility, particularly workplace aggression. When procedures and processes for decisions made are perceived as unfair (procedural injustice) employees can 'retaliate' by engaging in aggression against the organisation or the supervisor (Hoel, 2010). Similarly, employees who feel that the outcome (distribution) of a decision is unfair are likely to blame the source

of the decision and therefore may 'retaliate' by engaging in supervisor- and organisation-targeted aggression (Glomb, 2010; Hershcovis, 2007). Research suggests that perceptions of fairness and justice in organisations can impact work incivility, particularly workplace aggression. When procedures and processes for decisions made are perceived as unfair (procedural injustice) employees can 'retaliate' by engaging in aggression against the organisation or the supervisor (Hoel, 2010). Similarly, employees who feel that the outcome (distribution) of a decision is unfair are likely to blame the source of the decision and therefore may 'retaliate' by engaging in supervisor- and organisation-targeted aggression (Glomb, 2010; Hershcovis, 2007).

- » **Hierarchical structures** -workplace incivility tends to occur in organisations with hierarchical management structures, high work pressure, and few policies. A recent systematic review of 62 studies in the context of Australian healthcare organisations found that interpersonal hierarchical bullying was more prevalent with professions with high power disparity (Chadwick, 2017).





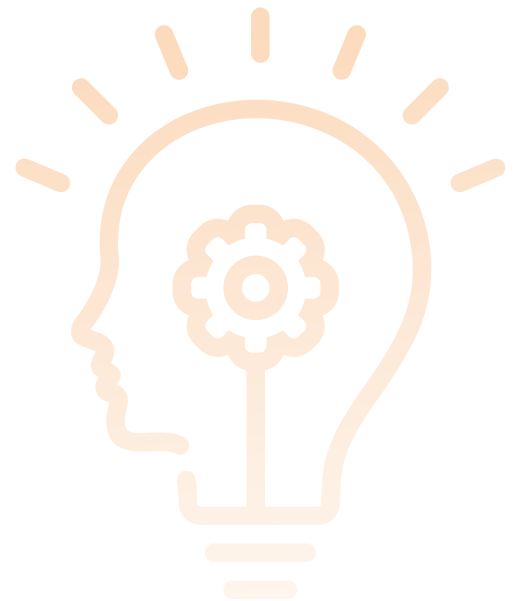
4. What interventions effectively address workplace incivility?

Only a limited number of studies on the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce workplace incivility have been published. Below is an overview of the main findings from systematic reviews of high quality (controlled before and after) studies:

- » The development, implementation, and evaluation of a program addressing workplace incivility should be consistent. This consistency could be achieved through implementation of a single method program across the organisation (Stagg, 2010).
- » Involving employees in the design and implementation of the intervention, drawing on their experiences, gives them a sense of agency and ownership, which is more likely to be successful than when employees are passive recipients of an intervention (Hodgins, 2014).
- » Multi-component, organisational level interventions – focusing on individual behaviours, in a group context, and including actions to ensure visible management commitment – appear to be more effective than single level interventions (Hodgins, 2014).
- » A combination of the three following elements is recommended by Armstrong (2018), Escartin (2016), and Stagg (2010): education about workplace incivility; training related to effective responses to workplace incivility; and finally, an opportunity to practice those responses in a safe environment appears to be an effective approach to assisting employees in managing workplace incivility.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed in this REA clearly demonstrate that workplace incivility constructs such as bullying, aggression, and abusive supervision have a profound, negative impact on a wide range of organisational outcomes. In addition, the findings from this REA indicate that workplace incivility is symptomatic of broader issues within organisations. In fact, workplace incivility may be more about leadership and organisational issues as well as interpersonal relationships within organisations.



More information

You can access more information in the *Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) Antecedents of Workplace Incivility, a summary of scientific literature, January 2020*.



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A partnership between the ACT Government through the ACT public health system and the ANU Research School of Management.

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