



Good practice guide: Positive working relationships

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Introduction

To provide the best outcomes for your learners and young people, it is important to:

- give time, care, and attention fostering positive relationships with them
- establish positive and professional relationships with parents and carers

This does not happen automatically and is not always easy, it takes time and effort.

This guide aims to help raise your awareness and understanding of building and maintaining positive working relationships, and what to do if things go wrong.

This is not regulatory or mandatory guidance. Scenarios have been included to help you think about and explore some of the issues which might arise, and how our advice might apply. We have also included examples of unacceptable practices where professional boundaries have clearly been crossed.

The Code

All Education Workforce Council (EWC) registrants are subject to the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice (the Code), which sets out the key principles of good conduct and practice for registrants. This guide should be read in conjunction with the Code.

The principles and expectations in the Code which refer to positive working relationships are:

1. Personal and Professional Responsibility

Registrants:

- 1.5 are mindful of their professional responsibility for the health, safety, and wellbeing of colleagues and themselves
- 1.6 demonstrate a commitment to equality and diversity

2. Professional Integrity

Registrants:

- 2.1 are accountable for their conduct and professional competence

3. Collaborative Working

Registrants:

- 3.1 respect, support, and collaborate with colleagues, learners, young people, and others to achieve the best learning outcomes
- 3.2 share experience and knowledge to help themselves and other practitioners develop and maintain best practice
- 3.4 communicate appropriately and effectively with all involved in the education of learners and young people

4. Professional Knowledge and Understanding

Registrants:

- 4.4 where necessary, seek support, advice, and guidance, and are open to feedback, responding to it positively and constructively

The Code is an important point of reference. Think about the five key principles and the expectations they place upon you. The Code will help you make the right decisions when faced with the challenges covered in this guide.

[The Code is available on our website.](#)

Positive and professional relationships with colleagues

As with any workplace, your colleagues will have a range of roles, different personalities, and working styles, and it is important to value and respect their varying approaches to their work. Remember, there is as much diversity amongst registrants as there is amongst learners and young people.

In developing positive relationships with your colleagues, it is helpful to think about their expectations of you. Just as learners and young people need to know what is expected of them, you also need to know what is expected of you as a registrant and a colleague, as you build and maintain those working relationships.

There are many important characteristics of a positive and professional working relationship. These include the following, which are not mutually exclusive.

Mutual respect

Few people thrive in a bullying, aggressive work atmosphere, where they are rarely praised and regularly criticised.

Having respect for colleagues is an essential part of a good relationship. The realities of the workplace mean that you will often come into contact with people from a far more diverse range of backgrounds than you perhaps would in your private life. The simplest, most effective way of showing respect is to encourage open communication and feedback, which send the message that all views are equally valid.

It is then important to listen to the views of your colleagues and be prepared to explore viewpoints that may differ from your own. Learn to accept and celebrate differences and try to maintain a professional and courteous manner at all times by:

- treating your colleagues in a respectful and empathetic way
- treating your colleagues equally no matter their race, religion, gender, age, or sexual orientation
- never insulting your colleagues, even if you think it is just a joke or 'banter'
- avoiding personalising issues
- being aware of your body language, tone, and demeanour
- not constantly criticising your colleagues over the little things, or belittling, demeaning, or patronising them
- being mindful that a series of seemingly trivial actions, added up over time, may be considered as bullying

Open communication

Open communication in the workplace is very important. It allows people to express ideas freely without fear of criticism.

Do not be afraid of feedback. Listen and learn from it to become a better practitioner and colleague. It is important to remember effective communication is everybody's responsibility and is about more than just exchanging information. It is also about understanding the emotion and intentions behind the information.

Good communication skills will help you to connect with your colleagues effectively, build trust and respect, and feel heard and understood.

Empathy

Empathy means understanding others by taking a genuine interest in them and their concerns.

Showing your colleagues compassion, selflessness, and being non-judgmental are key factors to developing empathy.

Trust

All good relationships are built on trust. Trust is established by maintaining good conduct and practice.

Take responsibility for your mistakes, rather than casting blame on someone or something else. Integrity is central to trust. Be fair and honest in all your dealings with others.

Share resources, information, and learning with colleagues and resist the temptation to gossip.

Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills in the workplace are generally related to an employee's ability to get along with others whilst getting the job done. They include everything from communication and listening skills to attitude and demeanour.

Communication is more than just an exchange of information. It is important to be clear, calm, and focused as well as polite. Remember, it is not just what you say that is important, but how you say it. Think about your eye contact, body posture, and body movement. Assess each situation and be prepared to adjust your verbal and non-verbal communication to fit.

Appreciate others

Genuinely show your appreciation when colleagues help you. Everyone likes to feel appreciated and that they are making a worthwhile contribution. Identifying, acknowledging, and celebrating the achievements of colleagues, no matter how small, can have a significant impact upon their self-esteem. A little genuine praise can go a long way to developing good working relationships.

Listening skills

A good listener will not only listen to what is being said, but also note what is left unsaid, or only partially said. Poor listening skills mean that messages can be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

No job comes without problems. Ignoring problems in the hope they might go away is not a solution. Where possible, listen to colleagues and reflect on the impact any decision will have on them and/or the learners and young people.

Effective negotiation helps to resolve situations where what one person wants may conflict with what another wants. Ideally, it is best to find a solution that is acceptable to all parties. Identifying common goals and being willing to compromise will normally result in an effective solution.

Be assertive

This means expressing yourself effectively and standing up for your, or another's, point of view without being aggressive or inconsiderate to others. Recognise that not everybody is naturally assertive, and often people are not confident enough to express themselves in the workplace.

As with any relationship, it takes time to build positive relationships with your colleagues. Remember to always act professionally, and value, respect, and work with your colleagues. You will then be well on your way to developing positive and supportive relationships with your colleagues to the benefit of your working environment.

What to do if things go wrong

Naturally, there are times when professional relationships do not develop as intended or hoped, or perhaps a specific relationship suffers some setbacks. It is important to recognise and remedy these situations as soon as possible before the problems become entrenched and impossible to resolve.

For example, sometimes, relatively trivial things can become a source of conflict and lead to resentment. It is important that you try and identify tension at an early stage and respond quickly. This may include addressing and managing your own behaviour. Prompt, proactive intervention can frequently prevent longer term breakdown in relationships, even if it means having to ask for support from others, for example, by means of mediation.

Bullying and harassment

Bullying is behaviour which is intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate, or injure the recipient.

Bullying can have a devastating effect on the victim and seriously impact their health and mental wellbeing. It is best dealt with at the earliest stage possible and, if you consider yourself to be a victim, you may need to seek support, perhaps from another colleague, your manager, or a union representative

It may help you to keep a diary record of the behaviour and to refer to your employer's bullying policy for further guidance.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can be defined as behaviour which makes a person feel distressed, intimidated, or offended, and the behaviour is of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment is not about fun or friendship, but about abuse of power. Sexual harassment can include:

- sexual comments, innuendo, or jokes
- physical behaviour, including unwelcome sexual advances, touching, and 'accidentally' brushing up against you
- questions or comments about your personal life
- promises or threats concerning employment conditions in return for sexual favours

Again, if you consider yourself to be a victim of such treatment, you should alert your employer (line manager or HR representative) and/or your union representative if you are a member of a trade union.

Breach of the Code

The examples below are illustrative of cases where registrants (from all the registrant categories), have been subject to EWC disciplinary proceedings as a result of them failing to maintain appropriate, professional relationships with colleagues.

In all cases, there has been a clear breach of the Code and the registrants received a range of disciplinary sanctions including, in some cases, being prohibited from practicing in the education workforce in the future.

A registrant:

- behaved inappropriately both verbally and physically with a number of colleagues which included bullying and sexual harassment. The behaviour resulted in a serious breach of trust and confidence
- bullied and harassed a colleague by making sexualised comments in front of other colleagues and learners which the registrant justified as 'only banter'
- violated policies and procedures by discriminating against a disabled colleague
- demonstrated homophobic discriminatory behaviour against a colleague who was a member of the LGBTQ+ community
- inappropriately touched a colleague on a work night out
- behaved in an unprofessional way towards colleagues which included losing their temper, shouting, and swearing at staff, making derogatory and sexist remarks
- bullied and intimidated staff in relation to the school's performance against the national literacy and numeracy tests
- committed fraudulent acts with learners' work and sought to blame and implicate other colleagues, even though they were a senior leader
- used foul and abusive language towards a colleague over a work dispute, and threatened physical violence
- failed to follow management instructions, sought to mislead colleagues, and provided inaccurate information about learners. They also failed to participate in planning, record keeping, learner progress and acted dishonestly with regards to learners' work

Further support

We offer presentations which focus on fitness to practise and the Code. If you or your employer would like to arrange one in the workplace, please contact us.

The [Code, and information about the EWC's fitness to practise work](#) are on our website.

If you require any of our publications in an alternative format, please contact us.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh and English.

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