

'Spotlight on' series

Calling out bad behaviour

Not addressing poor behaviour in the workplace can lead to a culture of disrespect, fear and low trust. However, calling it out can be challenging. Follow these top tips to develop strategies to challenge bad behaviour.

1 Consider the best strategy based on the specific context



Respond with kindness, particularly when the context is unknown.

Educate and enlighten to ensure that people are aware of the impact of their actions.

Be calm and assertive when you need to make your feelings and needs really clear.

2 Find a calm, clear and concise way of expressing your concern or disapproval



If possible, address the behaviour immediately, directly and calmly.

Use a clear phrase to identify the comment or action that is not acceptable.

If you're angry, take a deep breath, count to ten and consciously choose how you wish to respond.

3 Use 'I' statements



Focus on the impact of the behaviour on you or the team, eg "I am really not comfortable with..."; "when you said..., I felt that was disrespectful"; "I found that comment inappropriate".

This addresses the issue in a non-threatening way, allowing others to feel safe and receptive without conflict.

4 Be compassionate and curious



There may be underlying causes of bad behaviour that you know nothing about.

Approach the situation with empathy and curiosity to determine the intent behind the behaviour, to encourage the other person to understand the impact they have on others.

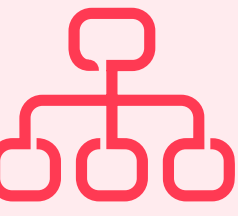
5 Seek help and support



Talk things over with a trusted colleague, mentor or friend.

Identify colleagues in the workplace to support you when calling out behaviour, as this can be isolating.

6 Use structured approach to management



If direct confrontation is ineffective, escalate to a trusted superior or department lead, including contemporaneous factual notes on incidents.

Utilise your HR department for serious, persistent or safety-critical issues.

Consider involving Freedom to Speak Up Guardians and Champions.

7 Do not become the problem



Maintain professionalism and avoid responding to rudeness with more rudeness.

The aim should be to bring understanding and enable changes in behaviour, not to blame or punish.

8 Model civility



Reflect and ask for honest feedback on your behaviour to ensure you are not unintentionally rude or uncivil.

Consider the impact of external stressors, such as tiredness, hunger, time constraints, pressure, and unfamiliar surroundings.

If you behave in a way that could have been better, apologise and assess opportunities for growth.

9 Undertake active bystander training



Learn and practice different techniques for confronting bias or unethical behaviour.

Find some phrases that you are comfortable to use and practice saying them out loud.

References and further reading

NHS England Civility and Respect Toolkit <https://www.england.nhs.uk/supporting-our-nhs-people/health-and-wellbeing-programmes/civility-and-respect/>

CSS Manchester University NHS FT Civility Toolkit https://www.civilitysaveslives.com/_files/ugd/78c2bc_0d93bc5ea573477abbfde0a79972d988.pdf

Responding to Microaggressions, Diane Goodman https://www.rcp.ac.uk/media/t4yib454/responding-to-microaggressions_0_0_0.pdf

Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Civility Toolkit <https://www.rcog.org.uk/careers-and-training/workforce/improving-workplace-behaviours/workplace-behaviour-toolkit/module-4-i-am-responsible-for-a-department-that-has-a-problem-with-bullying-or-undermining/>

Civility Saves Lives resources <https://www.civilitysaveslives.com/resources>

April 2026

Acknowledgements

Series leads: Dr Rebecca Shakir, Dr Priyanka Singhal, Dr Petra Jankowska, Dr Robin Proctor

Previous series leads: Dr Stephen Harden, Dr Tom Roques

Contributors: Dr Archie McNair, author of original guidance in 2019; Professor Malcolm Johnston; Dr Kieran Zucker, Dr David Noble, Ms Kwun-Ye Chu