

Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination Industry Consultation: key themes and best practice guidance

In 2017/18, in response to the Me Too movement, SOLT/UK Theatre began a major programme of work to help everyone in theatre and the performing arts prevent and tackle discrimination, harassment and abuses of power, and work towards making our industry a safer, more supportive and inclusive working environment for all.

As part of this work we undertook extensive consultation with members, unions, and industry bodies. This document outlines the key challenges that were identified at facilitated open forums we held around the UK in 2018, and suggestions of best practice that arose from these forums. Around 200 people from all areas of the theatre industry and from across the country participated in the events, which were open to all.

Key Themes

- Bullying and abuses of power were seen to be prevalent. The behaviours can be found at all levels, all areas of the industry, and with all genders. Sexual harassment was a part, but not always a major part, of the discussions.
- There can be a passive culture of endorsing bullying. Leaders may encourage new entrants not to challenge, perpetuating the culture with statements such as ‘that’s just how they are’ or we have ‘extreme characters in our industry’ or ‘it’s the price you pay for the talent’.
- Links were made to the ‘myth of the artistic temperament’ (Anne Marie Quigg, *Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power*, 2011). It was suggested that the value placed on artistic output and process, places some individuals beyond criticism, which perpetuates the culture.
- Incidents of harassment and bullying were thought to exist across all areas and in all departments of theatre for example off-stage, the rehearsal room, front of house and administrative roles. Incidents that had taken place between staff and audience, or funders, were also discussed.
- Incidents are likely to be underreported, overwhelmingly because individuals would be concerned that speaking out would have repercussions on their employment.
- This was seen to be a major issue with self-employed workers. Individuals talked about feeling powerless or isolated, of being employed project-by-project and of the importance of ensuring a ‘good reputation’. The risks of challenging (and being thought of as outspoken) are high.
- Individuals (particularly if freelance) might not be aware of, or have access to the policies and procedures in place at each organisation. While policies exist on paper, it’s also important to ‘live’ them through modelled and discussed expectations of behaviour.
- There is a wider culture of long hours in theatre. This can result in:
 - a merging of work and social lives, which can make individuals more vulnerable
 - stressful working situations, which can excuse or lead to unacceptable behaviours
 - a 24/7 culture where expectations of employees (such as not taking leave, or being available via email or phone day and night) are themselves bullying, or lead to bullying behaviours

Best Practice Guidance

- Promote a sense of collective responsibility in each workplace.
- Establish the language for a dialogue. Keep it simple and make it part of the conversation.
- Treat this issue as seriously as we now treat health and safety and safeguarding.
- The behaviour of the theatre leadership is critical. If peer-to-peer challenge is there, others will feel empowered and have confidence that issues will be dealt with.
- Establish routes for peer to peer support. Provide training and advice for the identified supporters. See The Old Vic's [Guardians Programme](#) for a model.
- Working with freelance or self-employed: venues should consider providing a company handbook with relevant policies for freelancers to visiting companies and freelancers. This will help set out culture and expectations at a welcome meeting or induction. A debriefing and feedback are essential.
- Freelance or self-employed workers, or visiting companies: ask to see the company handbook with relevant policies for freelancers; ask for a de-brief.
- Ask individuals to sign something to acknowledge they have read the handbook or policies, or principles. This makes them more aware, and more accountable.
- A staff welfare committee, or a staff company forum, can give everyone the chance to discuss company policies and culture.
- Boards can be encouraged to engage with and be alert to the issues. Boards should ensure there is a policy, and consider appointing a nominated trustee.
- Consider how to embed this culture change in schemes for younger people.
- Organisations can help each other. Those who have policies and practices in place could help others – see our [bullying, harassment and discrimination resource library](#).

This information was originally included as part of SOLT and UK Theatre's [Encouraging Safer and More Supportive Working Practices Handbook](#), published in 2018.