



Creating a speak up culture: Empowering employees to raise concerns with confidence

A speak up culture is one where employees feel safe, supported and encouraged to raise concerns, share ideas and challenge behaviours without fear of retaliation. This guide outlines practical steps to help organisations build that culture – one that goes beyond compliance and creates lasting, positive change.

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With over 45,000 employment tribunals open in the UK, it's clear that reactive approaches aren't enough.

Discrimination cases, especially those involving disability, are rising. Yet many organisations still lack the basics: 32% don't use formal investigation procedures, only 51% track whether issues raised were substantiated, and 70% don't even track the type of issue raised.

But this isn't just about reducing risk. It's about building a culture where people feel safe, heard, and empowered. When employees know they can speak up without fear, it not only prevents issues from escalating, it helps stop poor behaviour before it starts.

1.



Define the culture you want to build

Before you can embed a speak up culture, you need to be clear on what kind of culture you're aiming for. This clarity will help shape your goals, guide decision-making, and ensure your approach is aligned with your values.

Ask yourselves:

- What culture do we currently have?
- What culture do we want?
- What would it take to get there?
- What cultural norms exist in our industry that we may need to challenge?

Culture is co-created, you can involve employees in shaping your approach:

- Ask teams what would help them feel safe to speak up.
- Invite feedback after cases to understand what worked and what didn't.
- Encourage people to become ambassadors for the culture.

2.



Go beyond compliance

Legal requirements are a starting point – but a strong speak up culture requires more.

- Conduct risk assessments tailored to your organisation.
- Create solutions that reflect your structure, workforce and values.
- Regularly review and adapt your approach based on feedback and learning.



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3.



Equip your people to speak up

Training is essential – not just to raise awareness, but to give people the tools and confidence to act.

- For **all employees**: Help people understand what to do if they witness or experience something concerning.
- For **managers**: Provide space to say “I don’t know” and offer guidance on how to respond with empathy and clarity.
- For **leaders**: Ensure they model the culture and take visible action when concerns are raised.

4.



Embed the culture across the employee lifecycle

Culture isn’t built in a single training session – it’s embedded through every stage of the employee experience:

- Recruitment: Set expectations in job adverts and interviews.
- Onboarding: Include speak up messaging in welcome packs and induction sessions.
- Contractors and freelancers: Add clear expectations to contracts and onboarding materials.
- Ongoing communication: Reinforce messages through regular updates, campaigns and leadership visibility.

5.



Keep the message alive

A one-off campaign isn’t enough. Create a sustained drumbeat of communication:

- Regular updates and reminders.
- Stories and case studies (anonymised where needed).
- Leadership visibility and reinforcement.
- Ongoing space for learning and reflection.

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6.



Make it easy to raise concerns

People need to know how to speak up – and trust that they'll be taken seriously.

- Offer multiple channels (e.g. hotline, email, in-person, anonymous) to meet different needs and comfort levels.
- Provide a clear “how to” guide so people know what to expect when raising a concern.
- Remember, support should go beyond the reporting moment. Confidential and anonymous reporting options can give people the confidence to come forward, and knowing what specialist support is available can make a critical difference to employees who are struggling.

Don't forget informal routes. Not every concern needs to go through a formal process. Sometimes, people just want to talk something through or get advice. Make it clear that informal conversations are welcome.

A note on external hotlines: do they make a difference?



Yes, research shows that employees are more likely to speak up when they can use an external, anonymous hotline. These channels are seen as more impartial and trustworthy, especially in organisations where internal systems are viewed with scepticism. External hotlines reduce fear of retaliation, offer stronger confidentiality, and often lead to higher-quality reporting.



7.



Support that goes beyond reporting

When we talk about speaking up, we need to go beyond formal reporting channels. There's a difference between raising a complaint and having the courage to say, “I'm struggling.” Both are connected to psychological safety, and both deserve a thoughtful response.

If someone opens up to a manager, do they know how to respond with empathy? Do they feel equipped to offer support, not just log a workplace issue? Creating a culture of care means building the confidence and capability in leaders to handle these moments with humanity

That's why support should be visible and accessible. This might include Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), mental health first aiders, or independent bullying and harassment advisors outside the organisation. HR and managers should also have access to a resource list for common life challenges, like Tommy's for baby loss or Samaritans for crisis support, so they can signpost help when it's needed most.

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8.



Build Psychological Safety

A speak-up culture thrives when people feel psychologically safe, when they believe they won't be punished or humiliated for sharing ideas, concerns, or mistakes.

- Encourage curiosity and challenge in team meetings.
- Reward people for raising concerns.
- Train leaders to respond with openness, not defensiveness.

Because when people feel safe and supported, they don't just speak up, they grow, contribute, and thrive.

9.



Consider who might be less likely to speak up

- Some people face more barriers than others. Think about:
- Power dynamics – for example, freelancers, junior staff, those on temporary contracts.
- Personality traits – for example, introverts and extroverts
- Language barriers – people who don't speak English as a first language.
- Culture and identity groups – gender, race, disability, neurodivergence.
- Generational differences – for example, Gen Z are less likely to speak up internally and more likely to go external. [Read more here.](#)

10.



Let's consider gender: who reports harassment, and when

Women in high-wage, male-dominated workplaces are significantly more likely to report sexual harassment than men. In these environments (which pay 3–6% above the national average), the gender gap in harassment risk can be up to 20 percentage points higher for women (ResearchGate, Vanderbilt University).

By contrast, in lower-paying, female-dominated workplaces, men report

harassment more frequently than women, showing the reverse pattern.

Why? Higher-paid, male-dominated industries often have better reporting structures and less stigma around speaking up, making it safer for women to come forward. As women's pay increases in these environments, their likelihood of reporting harassment rises sharply.

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» Handling a complaint with care

How you respond when someone speaks up can make or break their trust in the process. It's not just about following procedure – it's about showing empathy, clarity and respect at every stage.

Our eight key principles:

1. **Be clear:** From the first conversation, explain the process, what the person can expect, and when they'll hear back. Manage expectations and avoid overpromising.
2. **Take ownership:** Even if you're not the person handling the case, take responsibility for ensuring it's passed on appropriately and followed up in a timely way.
3. **Offer support:** Ask what the person needs – this might include access to an EAP, a trusted colleague, or an external advisor. Tailor support to the individual.
4. **Ensure both sides are heard:** During investigations, make sure everyone involved has the opportunity to share their perspective. This helps ensure fairness and transparency.
5. **Give people a 'win':** Even if the outcome isn't what they hoped for, help them feel that their voice mattered and that something positive came from speaking up.
6. **Always follow-up in person:** Never deliver an outcome by letter or email alone. A face-to-face (or video) meeting shows respect and allows space for questions, clarification and support.
7. **Rebuild trust:** After a case is closed, think about how to restore confidence – not just for the individuals involved, but for the wider team. This might include follow-up conversations, team support, or visible changes to policy or practice.
8. **Learn from every case:** Every time someone speaks up, it's an opportunity to learn and improve. Review what happened and what could be done differently.



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>> Tell Jane's top tips

These are the key lessons we've learned from supporting organisations to build speak up cultures that work in practice – not just on paper.



1. **Don't wait for a crisis:** If you don't invest early, issues can escalate and become harder to resolve.



2. **Align speak up culture with your values:** This helps people see speaking up as part of "how we do things here," not just a compliance requirement.



3. **Create a shared language:** Introducing terms like "bystander" and "active ally" gives people a way to talk about and respond to inappropriate behaviour.



4. **Celebrate positive action:** Focus on the potential of a positive culture, not just the consequences of bad behaviour.



5. **Be open and honest:** Defensive organisations lose trust. Share what you can and explain your decisions.



6. **Localise your approach:** If you are a global organisation, cultural norms vary – adapt your support and messaging.



7. **Use data:** Identify gaps in reporting or representation and create targeted interventions.

>> Want help building your speak up culture?

We've helped organisations of all sizes create cultures where people feel safe, supported and empowered to speak up. Whether you're starting from scratch or looking to improve what you already have, we can help.

Get in touch at hello@telljane.co.uk to find out more.