

The Blueprint to Reduce Grievances and Disciplinary: A Practical Guide to Prevention and Culture Change

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SECTION 1

Who should use this guide

HR professionals, Heads of People, senior leaders and people managers who are committed to building a fair, accountable workplace and culture and want to reduce the number of grievances and disciplinaries, and overall case volume, in their organisation.



SECTION 2

How to use this guide

This practical guide has been designed to provide organisations with tangible strategies to address the root causes of grievances before they escalate into bigger issues that could cause legal, financial and reputational damage.

It will help shift the focus to practical, cultural and structural improvements that will drive real, long-lasting change.

Please customise and apply this guide in accordance with the following factors:

- the size and nature of your business
- the sector you operate in
- your working environment
- the demographic of your workforce
- the diverse range of people you employ
- any specific areas where your business might be at risk of someone raising a complaint or informal grievance
- the types of clients, customers and third parties you and your employees may come into contact with the resources available to you.

This guide offers foundational guidance, but is not an exhaustive list of steps. We strongly recommend regularly reviewing and implementing any additional measures when it comes to handling informal and formal grievances, such as leveraging technology for monitoring and reporting.

There's no one-size-fits-all rule for how much you should do as an employer. Your actions should be based on what is reasonable and practical for your specific circumstances.

A hand holding a pen over a document, with a blue overlay.

SECTION 3

Reviewing other policies

At Tell Jane, we recommend treating this practical guide as a standalone document, separate from your other employment policies.

If you choose to combine it with any other overarching policies, be sure to continuously review and monitor how it interacts with other company policies.

Existing policies, especially those covering workplace relationships, may need updating. Clear, fair policies and a culture of respect will help address any complexities without overstepping into your employees' personal lives.

SECTION 4

Grievances - the hidden cost of getting it wrong

Grievances at work are on the rise, and employers simply can't afford to look the other way.

When poor behaviour is unchecked, opportunities for early intervention during a minor disagreement are missed or a formal grievance is unresolved, businesses risk more than lost time and productivity. Poorly handled complaints can erode trust, damage morale and increase turnover and lead to reputational harm and legal risk.

Discrimination, harassment and retaliation claims hit a record high in 2024, with the volume reaching **14.7 issues per 1,000 employees***. This eye-opening figure is predicted to surge in 2025 with ongoing regulatory changes including the staged rollout of the Employment Rights Bill through to 2027 and employees being more sharply aware of their rights.

As of the end of March 2025, there were 45,000 ongoing employment tribunal claims. This is a 32 per cent increase compared to the same period the previous year.

[\(Tribunal Statistics Quarterly: January to March 2025\)](#)

In addition, Acas has seen a significant increase in disputes, dealing with over 117,000 individual disputes in Great Britain in 2024-2025. It only takes one unresolved conflict to create significant costs and lead to damaging consequences.

High numbers of grievances in your business aren't an inevitability, they are an alarm bell that shouldn't be ignored. It can impact every part of your business performance; from time and resources to trust and morale, to retention and turnover. It can also damage employee wellbeing and take a heavy emotional toll on every person involved.

Most grievance cases are avoidable. They often stem from leadership gaps, weak systems and tolerated behaviours, which we'll explore further in this guide.

The UK annual cost of workplace conflict is estimated to stand at £28.5 billion.

[Acas \(Acas in demand ahead of major changes to employment rights\)](#)

* Ninth Annual Employee Relations Benchmark Study by HR management and ER software company, HR Acuity.

SECTION 5

Why grievance issues escalate at work - and how to avoid them

More often than not, the root cause of grievances at work are both preventable and actionable. With the right systems, leadership behaviours and a culture of accountability you can strengthen your HR strategy around management training, risk assessment and policy review.



Some factors that can lead to grievance issues include:

1. Poor Recruitment Decisions

Hiring decisions are often based solely on technical ability and role experience alone. However, failing to consider how an individual's values align with your company's values, and not paying attention to other areas such as interpersonal skills and behaviours, social perception, empathy and emotional intelligence, can be an oversight. It could lead to friction between colleagues later down the line, clashes with those in more senior positions and issues with accepting feedback or boundaries.

How can this be avoided?

Educate your leaders and managers on a range of inclusive interview techniques, including behavioural, values and strength-based, so they can get a sense from the candidate of what engages and motivates them. Offer training on spotting 'red flags' like poor emotional intelligence or a confrontational attitude and how to assess their alignment with your culture as well as their capability.

SECTION 5

2. Weak Management Styles

If your line managers and leaders lack the confidence, training and skills to tackle issues around conduct and performance head on, and instead let them fester, this could exacerbate or even cause workplace conflict. Passive rather than proactive management allows seemingly minor issues to become major disputes, which could escalate into a formal grievance.

How can this be avoided?

Provide your line managers with early invention training and equip them with the skills and techniques to spot and resolve minor issues before they reach the complaint and investigation stage. This includes giving difficult feedback, managing conflict and how to have difficult conversations (because silence rarely solves anything). This will empower them to model the right behaviours, and simply having a good quality conversation could make all the difference.



Inadequate training and guidance for managers will have a direct impact on their confidence to challenge inappropriate behaviour, employees' level of trust in them and whether or not the culture is focused on dignity and respect.

CIPD. (2020) Managing Conflict in the Modern Workplace. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

3. Conflict Avoidance

Given that we spend the majority of our lives at work, conflict in some shape or form, such a personality clash, healthy competition for an internal promotion, any form of bullying behaviour or harassment, can occur at any time. However, avoiding conflict is dangerous and leaves organisations at risk of dealing with a surge in formal grievances. HR Director Magazine reports that a fear to tackle interpersonal issues or provoke emotional conversations is a cultural issue and a shift must be driven from the top.

How can this be avoided?

When managers steer clear of conflict because performance and behavioural issues feel too tricky, the outcome is a culture that lacks accountability. Organisations should create the right culture from the top, one that transforms conflict avoidance into conflict management, and encourages even low-level issues to be managed early on. Empower and upskill your managers to normalise preventative and informal dialogue, create the right conditions for honest conversations and don't rely solely on your policies.

SECTION 6

Read the signs – your data is talking

A culture of accountability is essential to maintaining a safe and respectful workplace that prioritises wellbeing, and this is where smarter data collection becomes a powerful enabler.

It can help you understand the bigger picture and lead to more confident, informed action.

- **Undertaking regular engagement and pulse surveys** will help you to glean insights and feedback on your people's experiences at work, including trust and psychological safety. A simple temperature check could identify potential sources of dissatisfaction or conflict and help you evaluate the likelihood of these issues leading to formal grievances.
- **Robust tracking and data insight** within your grievance procedures can support you in identifying any worrying trends and repeated concerns, not only helping you learn from previous incidents, but to prevent them from happening again. The more repeat issues you see, the more the system, not the people, is failing.

Just 38% of employers say they collect some kind of equal opportunities monitoring data.

Miller, J. (2022) *Inclusion at work 2022*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

SECTION 6

Here are some suggestions on what to track beyond the volume of grievances you have in your organisation:

- **Number of grievances from individuals or departments.**
- **Number of informal issues raised and resolved.**
- **Average number of issues per grievance case:** The average number of individual issues or concerns raised with each grievance case.
- **Substantiation rate:** The percentage of grievance complaints or allegations that are substantiated (i.e., found to be true after investigation).
- **Substantiated issues breakdown:** Substantiated issues by type including grievance issue, department and seniority.
- **Recurring issues rate:** The percentage of grievances that are similar in type and occur multiple times in the same team, department or location.
- **Average time between incident and reporting:** The average number of days between when an incident occurs and when it is first reported.
- **Average time between report and action:** The average number of days between when an incident is first reported and when action is first taken.
- **Average time to resolve a grievance:** The average number of days it takes to fully resolve a grievance, from the date it was raised to the date it was closed.

- **Number of grievances involving a manager or leader:** The percentage of grievances where the alleged person involved is a manager or leader.

Use our ‘**Tell Jane: The Blueprint to Reduce Grievances and Disciplinarys** **Grievance Tracking Template**’ to make it easy to log, monitor and analyse your grievance data.

Crucially, you should be overlaying the above with your diversity data rather than just looking at overall numbers. This will help you look out for bias, whether conscious or unconscious, and if certain groups are being treated differently.



Beyond the data - root cause analysis and evaluation

Instead of focusing on closing each grievance or case (i.e. ticking it off as “resolved” which can feel satisfying when your caseload is high), you should also look to **understand the underlying causes** behind the issue. Taking a deeper dive will help you uncover why the issue happened in the first place, as well as the facts of what happened.

Evaluate and review lessons learned

during the handling of the grievance, from investigation to outcome, and what improvements could be made for next time. This write-up will support your prevention efforts, and take effective action on anything that can be avoided in the future.

SECTION 7

From reaction to prevention – what actually works

Too often, organisations find themselves stuck in a reactive grievance handling space, dealing with a complaint or an issue when it reaches near boiling over point or after a conflict escalates. This can happen when line managers are under pressure and in crisis mode, or lack the skills or confidence to intervene early and handle conflict in a proactive and positive way.

This is where a shift from fire-fighting to future-proofing needs to occur. Instead of reacting to issues as they happen, organisations need to invest in preventative structures that will help improve morale, retain valuable skills and talent, and reduce sickness absence.

So what needs to change?

- **Build a culture of trust** with visible and proactive approaches and a fair process culture. Performance issues can often be a source of conflict themselves, but it should be a positive, supportive and transparent process with regular meetings and constructive feedback. This includes a trusted HR team that line managers feel comfortable and empowered to seek advice and guidance from on handling difficult conversations.

- **Accountability is about behaviour, not just performance.** Your policies on dignity and respect at work should be clear so everyone knows the

behaviours you expect. Leaders and managers should also model respectful behaviours and lead by example, as well as challenging inappropriate behaviour. Consistency is essential.

- **Equip your line managers with behavioural skills.** This will empower your leaders and managers to understand, influence and embed behaviour within their teams and create a positive and inclusive workplace culture. Core topics could include communications skills, conflict management, self-awareness and empathy.

- **Share clear messages from your senior leaders about your culture.** Your leaders should model and communicate what good looks like when it comes to your workplace culture. Communications should be consistent, empowering and action-orientated, rather than simple platitudes about your values that can lack authenticity and quickly disengage your people.

- **Encourage people to speak up.** Introduce effective early warning systems and robust, multiple reporting channels that make people feel psychologically safe. Fear of reprisal, being ignored or a sense that a formal

process will be triggered can stop concerns from surfacing. People don't always need a formal process, they need to feel heard and supported and have a powerful employee voice. Learn more about encouraging a speak-up culture in [Tell Jane's Creating a Speak Up Culture](#).

A proactive approach that includes some of the above isn't just about reducing ER case volumes and minimising grievances cases. It builds trust, wellbeing, and a collective accountable culture with a sense of collective responsibility.

SECTION 8

Grievance handling: what good looks like



Most of us spend a significant amount of time with our colleagues, and bring a rich mix of experiences, backgrounds and perspectives with us to work. While this diversity can be hugely beneficial for innovation, engagement and creativity, it can also spark off a wide range of behaviours. Often this can result in minor disagreements, misunderstanding and even conflict, which has the potential to escalate to a complaint or a formal grievance and disrupt harmony at work. This can be costly, damage working relationships and have legal and reputational consequences.

So, what does 'good' look like when it comes to handling grievances at work, and how can organisations foster a supportive, safe and positive work environment to prevent grievances happening? Here are a few key principles that can help leaders, people managers and people professionals implement best practices.

Give people a voice and listen to it.



Work in partnership with your Employee Resource Groups and Employee Forum, and frequently reach out to your people via engagement and pulse surveys. These mechanisms allow people to talk about their experiences at work in a safe and confidential way, and could help unearth any issues or concerns before they amplify. Visibly act on the data so people feel seen, heard and valued and consider if any wider organisational change is needed.

Create a safe to speak up culture.



A culture built on dignity and respect gives people the confidence to call out inappropriate behaviour and encourages them to report it without fear of retaliation. An effective framework must be in place to handle complaints, including clearly signposted and multiple reporting channels, with both anonymous and non-anonymous routes.

SECTION 8

Grievance handling: what good looks like

Be clear on your approach to AI.



The rapid evolution and use of artificial intelligence in the workplace has led to a growing trend where employees use AI to draft formal grievances and support legal claims. This can lead to lengthy, overly-detailed and often sometimes vexatious or inaccurate complaints, which can be challenging, and potentially overwhelming, for employers to manage. Introducing a clear, robust AI policy (or updating existing policies), to guide the legitimate and appropriate use of AI by your employees can help mitigate this risk. The policy should set out clear expectations on formal on formal personal experiences, and reference your grievance and disciplinary policies, including the potential consequences of raising a vexatious grievance.

Take a shared responsibility approach.



Grievance handling isn't solely HR's responsibility, it requires shared accountability between HR, people managers and senior leaders. Managers are often on the front line and need the confidence, and the right training, to step in and deal with any issues effectively. Foster a culture where every manager takes responsibility for addressing complaints, not just the direct line manager, rather than walking past or turning away.

Offer a well-rounded approach to wellbeing.



Employee Assistance Programmes are important, but shouldn't stand alone. Strengthen your support systems with a team of Mental Health First Aiders, peer support networks and trained bullying and harassment advisors. This demonstrates that you take mental health and wellbeing seriously.

Leaders that walk the talk.



While profit and performance is business-critical, good leaders also focus on their people's success and can balance the two effectively. People-orientated leaders care deeply about the wellbeing, needs and development of their teams and inspire motivation, creativity and loyalty. They understand the importance of healthy and respectful relationships and build trust in their people.

SECTION 9

The three pillars of a grievance strategy

Dealing with concerns, problems, complaints and conflicts at work can be complex and stressful. A robust framework can help to break down some of the complexities.

Use the following three pillars to guide your grievance-handling procedures and serve as a reference point for everyone, from line managers to the HR team, to stay aligned in how you prevent, respond and resolve issues.

1.

Prevention: create the right conditions to prevent grievances happening in the first place.

- Focus on behaviours and values during your recruitment process, as well as technical ability to ensure your potential new hire is aligned with your businesses behaviours.
- Provide regular training and awareness around expected behaviours with a clear focus on dignity, respect and open and honest feedback
- Educate your line managers on how to listen well. It may sound simple, but kind, empathetic leaders who listen well build trustworthy relationships and inspire loyalty. Employees feel valued, comfortable and safe to voice ideas and that they belong - essential in creating an inclusive workplace.



Did you know
the average
person listens
with only about
25% efficiency?*

Medium

SECTION 9

The three pillars of a grievance strategy

2.

Intervention: act confidently, consistently and promptly.

- Review your own grievance policy to ensure they are accessible and inclusive and that your employees trust and understand them. It should be aligned with the ACAS Code of Practice for disciplinary and grievance procedures and any process should be consistent.
- Avoid delaying the investigation, and be transparent and communicate reasonable timeframes.
- Ensure the person who is handling both informal and formal complaints has the appropriate skills and confidence to do so. You may want to consider using a trained investigator for impartiality and extra support.

3.

Recovery – provide a clear follow-up, support everyone involved and consider what has been learnt.

- Provide clear follow-up and outcomes, ensuring everyone is fully up to date, with individual conversations if necessary.
- The emotional impact of a grievance can linger and take its toll if the right support is not in place. It is crucial to support everyone involved in a grievance and create a safe and positive culture that focuses on mental health and wellbeing.
- Consider what you've learnt throughout the entire grievance process, via root cause analysis or by gaining feedback from those involved to identify any gaps in process or communication. Use these insights to review and update your policies and strengthen your manager's skills and capabilities.



Early intervention matters. Ignoring an issue at work, no matter how small or insignificant it might be, won't make it disappear. It's more likely to grow and morph into a much bigger problem down the line.

SECTION 10

Making it stick – the essentials you might be missing

Psychological safety

When it comes to avoiding grievances, **psychological safety** could be your most powerful prevention tool. If you have created a safe and supportive culture in your business, your people will take a preventative approach to problems, and focus on accomplishing team goals rather than simply looking out for, and protecting, their own interests.

Project Aristotle was a research project undertaken by Google starting in 2012, and led by Julia Rozovsky. It aimed to understand what increases performance and what makes teams successful and drew

upon the work of Amy C. Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School, and her 1999 paper on Psychological Safety.

Findings showed that those who were highest performing were also those where teams felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and ideas openly, leading to more productive discussions and innovative solutions. **In other words, the high performing teams were the ones with the greatest psychological safety.**

But what does this look like in practice? Some examples include:

- People are comfortable sharing different perspectives and viewpoints and to disagree openly
- They're not afraid to speak up, ask questions or admit if they've made a mistake, and can do so without fear or reprisal, ridicule from their colleagues or disciplinary action.
- Your employees feel safe to share constructive feedback with others, including feedback to senior leaders and managers if they believe change or improvements need to be made



Psychological safety refers to how confident we feel to take appropriate risks at work because of our relationships with colleagues and managers.

Trust and psychological safety: An evidence review (2024) London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

SECTION 10

Role clarity

When it comes to role clarity, although managers and people professionals have interlinking responsibilities, these are quite distinct.

Line Manager	People Professional
Defining the specifics of the role, including duties, deliverables and expectations	Designing role frameworks, descriptions and appropriate systems to support role clarity
Setting clear and measurable goals and objectives that are aligned with team and business strategy	Acting as a strategic partner in aligning individual and team goals with overall business objectives and strategy
Managing performance with ongoing coaching, feedback and communication	Creating performance management systems and guides to support managers and employees
Tackling performance issues using early intervention, coaching and collaborative solutions	Providing the appropriate training and development opportunities to address performance issues
Modelling the behaviours and values that are expected within the team and the overall business, as well as empowering individuals to take ownership	Helping managers to create a safe and inclusive culture



SECTION 10

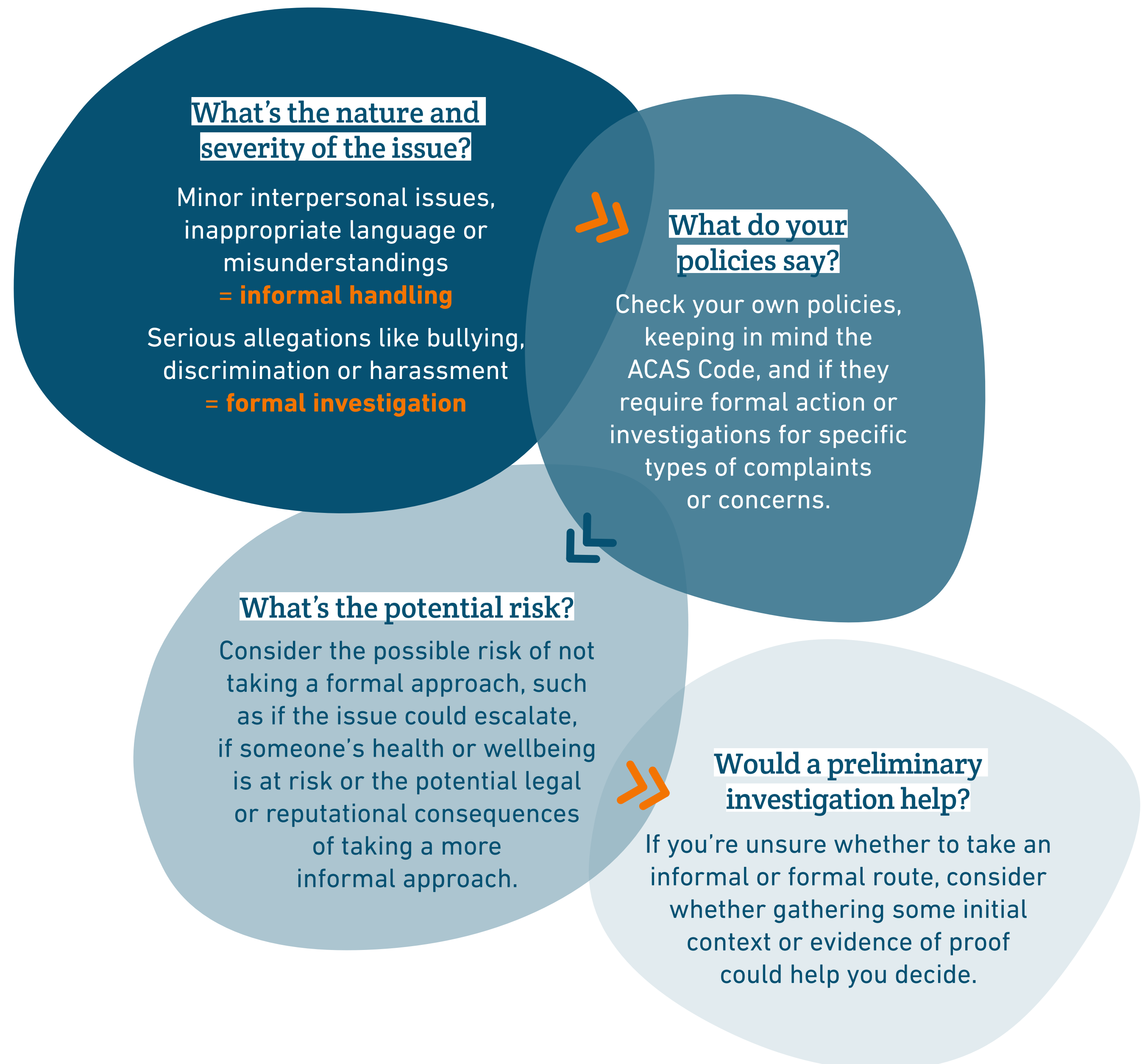
Informal resolution

When it comes to grievance handling, and before launching into an investigation or formal grievance process, informal resolution should always be considered.

Not every concern needs to be escalated into a full complaint and, in many cases, a carefully thought-out and well-handled conversation could lead to quicker, less stressful outcomes for everyone involved.

Formal grievance procedures can be emotionally draining, time consuming and potentially damaging to working relationships and teams. If appropriate, mediation, an informal conversation or even simply a quiet word could avoid the issue flaring up and resolve it without escalation.

However, not every situation can, or should, be handled informally. Allegations involving bullying, discrimination or harassment might always require a formal investigation to protect the people involved, and your business. So how can you decide which is the best course of action? Ask yourself the following key questions



SECTION 10



Enable your managers (don't just train them)

While training managers on effective grievance handling and procedures is essential, it cannot stand alone. Genuine enablement goes beyond skills training and organisations should equip their line managers with everything they need to identify, address and resolve issues early, and effectively, before they escalate. Here's some ways to do this.

- **Time** - If your managers are under pressure or over-stretched, they avoid difficult conversations or issues that could otherwise be swiftly dealt with informally. Allow the time and space for them to check in with their teams, spot red flags or appropriately prepare for sensitive discussions - otherwise early intervention is hindered.
- **Feedback** - Support your managers with ongoing feedback and coaching on how they handle concerns, complaints and grievances, alongside any formal training.
- **Expectations** - Set clear expectations for how you expect your managers and leaders to behave. This could include how they log informal concerns and the role they should play in building a safe speak-out culture for example.
- **Recognition** - Praise your standout managers who intervene early to defuse tension, listen well and help to build a safe and inclusive culture. This reinforces the expected behaviours and helps to build confidence and motivation to keep doing better.

SECTION 10

Tracking any changes in your culture

Rather than waiting for any cracks to appear, or issues to escalate, organisations should take a more proactive approach to measuring their culture and tracking any changes, before any legal or reputational damage is done. It can help you track the impact of any interventions (such as revised policies or newly introduced training), monitor any cultural shifts and identify areas that need urgent attention.

Core categories could include:

- Psychological safety
- Employee experience
- Trust and how safe people feel to speak up
- Manager capability
- Inclusion and accountability

Metrics could include:

- Percentage of employees who feel safe to raise concerns
- Percentage of managers trained in handling conflict
- Percentage of issues resolved informally
- Average response time taken to respond to a complaint
- Grievances categorised by protected characteristic or diversity data
- Percentage of employees who feel confident that their complaint will be handled fairly
- Percentage of substantiated cases by complaint or issue type



SECTION 10

Inclusion and trauma-informed approaches: who's not speaking up, and why?

Even in inclusive organisations, or those that appear so on the surface, some individuals don't feel safe or empowered to speak up or raise a concern or issue, informally or formally. This could include people from marginalised groups, newer or more junior employees, neurodivergent people (including those people who do not identify as disabled but

need support to live in a neurotypical society) or people who have experienced previous trauma or harm (whether at work or outside of it).

An inclusive, psychologically safe organisation will consider who doesn't feel safe to speak up, and why. It adopts principles and approaches that take into account that some people may have experienced a traumatic past experience at work (such as bullying, discrimination or harassment) that has shaped how

they view and address conflict.

Train your leaders and managers in this area, and use specialist support if necessary. Providing multiple reporting channels, including anonymous routes and view grievance trends through a diversity and inclusion lens.



SECTION 11

Trust - ask yourself the big question

When it comes to building a safe, inclusive workplace culture with minimal grievances, trust is a powerful component. It encourages open and honest communication and good psychological safety, where people feel comfortable speaking up, and out, and being their true selves at work. It helps to build happy, productive teams who can discuss creative ideas and different perspectives without fear of isolation.

Consistency and fairness in how behaviours are addressed, or tolerated, within your organisation is also critical towards building a fair and inclusive culture. Expectations around standards of behaviour need to be clear and reinforced and your line managers must apply consistent approaches when it comes to poor conduct, rather than leaving it unchecked.

Trust is built when people believe they will be treated fairly, no matter what role they have, department they are in or line manager they report to.

A powerful question to ask is, “If I asked five employees across different teams what behaviour is tolerated here, would they give me the same answer?”



SECTION 12

Checklist for employers



At the time of writing this guide, there are no specific regulatory changes that will alter current grievance procedure rules. However, broader employment reforms around sexual harassment prevention, dismissal rights and whistleblowing is reshaping the context in which grievance processes operate. This means that organisations must review how they manage complaints, handle investigations and support employee wellbeing.

At Tell Jane, we strongly recommend that employers:

- ☐ Proactively review and strengthen their grievance handling and investigation procedures to stay ahead of the game and build employee trust.
- ☐ Use formal and structured investigation procedures to establish the facts and ensure a transparent, objective, and unbiased outcome.
- ☐ Implement robust tracking and data insight within grievance procedures to help identify trends and repeated concerns and inform your training needs and policy review. Expand preventative and reporting measures, particularly around harassment and whistleblowing
- ☐ Ensure your grievance investigations are structured, transparent and fair.

SECTION 13

Further support from Tell Jane

While this guide covers the essentials, it's just the beginning!

At Tell Jane, we can partner with you to craft a detailed, customised grievance policy that addresses your unique challenges and requirements. This approach not only ensures that you stay compliant, but also helps you build a safe, respectful and inclusive workplace culture.

Ready to take the next step, review your policies and build a more resilient grievance handling process? Get in touch today, we'd love to support you!



Resources

When creating this guide, we gained insight and inspiration from a selection of trusted sources. If you are keen for a deeper dive or to further expand your thinking in this area, we recommend exploring the following resources:

- Tell Jane Blog: <https://www.telljane.co.uk/blog/>
- People Management Magazine (articles from 2024 and 2025): <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/>
- HR Acuity's Ninth Annual Employee Relations Benchmark Study: <https://www.hracuity.com/resources/research/employee-relations-benchmark-study/>
- CIPD Reports on Line Management, Wellbeing, and Managing Workplace Conflict: <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/>
- CIPD Inclusion at Work Index 2022: <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/inclusion-work/>
- Acas Early Conciliation Statistics: <https://www.acas.org.uk/about-us/service-statistics/early-conciliation>
- Amy C. Edmondson's work on psychological safety: <https://amycedmondson.com/psychological-safety/> and her 1999 paper on Psychological Safety.
- ACAS Code of Practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures: <https://www.acas.org.uk/acas-code-of-practice-on-disciplinary-and-grievance-procedures/html>



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