Centre for Inclusive Employment

Centre for Inclusive Employment & Disability Employment Australia
Lunch & Learn Session | Wednesday, 1 April 2026

Creating inclusive and psychosocially safe workplaces

Speaker: Bob Bowen, National Psychosocial Safety Network Australia
Host: Simon Rowberry, DEA

SIMON: My name is Simon, Deputy CEO of Disability Employment Australia. Before we get started with the formalities of the session, I would like to take this opportunity to do an acknowledgment of country. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land I'm calling in from today, the land of the Kaurna people from the Adelaide Plains, and I pay respect to Elders past and present.

These Lunch & Learn sessions are brought to you by the Centre for Inclusive Employment in partnership with Disability Employment Australia. The centre exists to support providers by providing practical resources, tools and training and help deliver high-quality employment services to people with disability and employers alike.

Disability Employment Australia is a peak body that represents disability employment providers; they provide supports across the disability employment ecosystem in Australia. The centre is delivered by a national consortium led by the National Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology, working alongside Inclusion Australia, Disability Employment Australia, National Disability Services, Family Advocacy and the University of Melbourne. Together the consortium brings a strong mix of research, lived experience and sector expertise to the work.

A bit of housekeeping before I introduce you to Bob. There will be live captions provided by Expression Australia, and Liv has popped some details in the chat around how you can access them.

The session itself will be recorded and available through the online hub along with slides and a transcript.

Now I will introduce you to Bob, who is coming in live from the U.S. for us today. In this session, Bob Bowen from the National Psychosocial Safety Network will explore why it's important to create safe and inclusive workplaces for people with disability, along with providing practical tips and resources you can implement in your work. Bob is an internationally recognised consultant, author and speaker with over 40 years' experience in administration of human services programs and is currently a behaviour support practitioner with Prag Consulting in Melbourne, and is also a member of the Expert Advisory Group for National Psychosocial Safety Network in Australia, and has published over 25 peer and scientifically reviewed articles on topics of workplace safety, and minimising behaviours of concern in NDIS funded programs.

Bob has provided keynote and conference presentations at conferences throughout the world on topics of workplace violence and psychosocial safety. Before Bob gets going, if you have got any questions, please pop them into the Q&A function and I will stay on top of those throughout the session. Now without further ado, Bob, it's over to you and welcome.

BOB: All right. Thank you very much, Simon. Let me share my PowerPoint presentation with everyone here and we can go ahead and get started on this.

All right. So, creating a psychosocially safe workplace, support structure - what we're doing here is creating an environment where people can say that their minds, their heads, feel safe; they have a sense of psychological health. You also have a sense of emotional health, that your heart is safe, that the feelings you have about yourself are honoured and respected and you experience positive social interactions. The research tells us that on average in traditional workplaces social interactions tend to be more negative than positive. The ratio varies between 3 to 1 and 5 to 1 depending on the setting.

You probably have seen situations or experienced them where you go to work and it's not been a good day. Those negative social interactions usually aren't big negatives; it's not a slap in the face, it's not bullying. It's little micro-aggressions, it's little things that put you down, that disappoint you, that make you just a little uneasy.

What we want to do is to recognise that psychosocially safe places have much different ratios of positive to negative interactions. The goal is 5 to 1. So every time I interact with people I want to say to myself, 'I'm positive with this interaction.' I'm not able to do that 100 per cent of the time. I have been teaching about this topic for probably 35 years. Better now than I was 35 years ago. But I'm not perfect. And I don't think anybody is. Wellbeing is a word that means that that at a holistic level we feel pretty good about

ourselves and it's created by the interactions between a person, you or me, the social dynamics in the organisation, relationships, and support systems in their environment. All of those things work together to create that sense of wellbeing and psychosocial safety. It doesn't just happen. There is a tendency to believe that because I'm a supervisor or because I was recently promoted to an administrator that I must be pretty good at what I do. The research tells us that most people are not trained for their new job, because people think that oh you did really good in your old job, you must be good so we will promote you and make you a supervisor, God bless you and then you start your job. For me, it was terrible. I was a horrible administrator the first couple of months that I was in that position. Because I was using my old skills in a new job. And it just didn't work. So you have to build this thing that's called psychosocial safety. Part of the building includes the physical lay-out. The physical lay-out is going to welcome or exclude people. I have been in enough places, enough buildings around the world to know that a building can be wheelchair accessible without being wheelchair accessible. That there are little things that get in the way of making that building truly accessible for people. It's the same thing would go for other disabilities as well. It takes a lot of work to make a physical lay-out welcoming. Not just saying, "We have met the minimum standards"; you want the physical lay out to be one that welcomes people. Policies and procedures provide the blueprints for relationships. It's a different way of thinking about this. But when I write policies and procedures, I think to myself, "I'm going to be structuring here the relationships that are ongoing within this organisation and I want to make sure that these are relationships that build and don't take away from wellbeing".

If I do a good job, and I have created a -- an organisational structure where the relationships are safe or as safe as we can make them, nothing is 100 per cent safe -- we all make mistakes. There are days when something will pop out of my mouth and oops, I didn't mean for that to happen. And if I have a good track record, if people know that I'm doing my best all the time and sometimes I mess up, they are more more likely to forgive me. That forgiveness is part of this fabric that we're building here in psychosocial safety. As we look at putting this together there is a pedagogy, a way of doing education, called invitational education. It is for my money the best pedagogy in the world. What I have done is to adapt invitational education to invitational safety. Asking myself: How can we create environments that invite people to build relationships where safety is at the forefront?

So you have these characteristics, personal characteristics, that you first have to committed yourself to not just doing but incorporating it into who you are.

You have to come to work and say, "Today I will be honest. Today I will be optimistic. Today I will be respectful. Today I will be authentic" and if I do those four things then I will build an environment in which I am trust worthily; people can trust me because of my honesty, my optimism, my respect for other people and my authenticity. What you see is what you get. I am just Bob. That's all there is to it. So that's the first step, is I have to be intentional about doing my work in this way. To make it happen I have also got to be intentional about living like this. Because if I'm the kind of person that has one tool belt that I put on for going to work, and another tool belt that I put on for my home based relationships then there are days when I will forget which tool belt I have got on. I have one tool bit, in that tool belt is honesty, optimism, respect and authenticity and hopefully I will be able to build trust with people. Then I take those characteristics, the building blocks, and I infuse them into the people, the places, the processes, the policies and the programs of the organisation. People, just what it says. It's us. It's who we are. Then the places, there is the physical environments in which we happen to be. Process refers to how I measure success. And there is lots of different ways to do that. And if I choose a way that measures success that is not honest and optimistic and respectful and authentic it's not going to reflect the true character of what I want to accomplish. Policies -- are just what they say. These are policies that are designed to be honest and optimistic and respectful and authentic. I do a lot of policy writing. I also teach about policy and -- writing policy is hard work. It takes a lot of effort to make these policies reflect the values that we want to incorporate into our work. Programs refers to the what we do. And those programs likewise, have to be infused with honesty and optimism and respect and authenticity. If I do that, then I have got a good chance of building an environment, building a culture, an organisational culture, where I'm choosing to always use these building blocks and I will be intentionally safe. If I don't do that, if I come to work and I say, "I have been at this for 47 years. I don't need to do this anymore", then I'm going to rely on my natural skill sets and I'm going to be unintentionally harmful to people. I will say things and do things that I don't mean to be harmful but that are because I'm not intentional about what I do. I have found that being an administrator is a whole lot harder than I thought it was. Because I have to be on all the time. I cannot choose those times that I'm going to interact with people and that person is going to walk away and say to themselves, oh, yeah. That was good. There is no such thing as the teaching moment, because every moment is a teaching moment. Every moment I either build someone up or I tear them down. There is no middle ground in these workplace relationships. You either build folks up or you tear them down. And that's all there is to it. So I need to be intentional

about how I do my work. And those core values of honesty, optimism and respect and authenticity -- if they're not part of who I am, then it's not going to come out in my work. I want to make sure I do a good job of building people up all the time. When we're honest and optimistic and respectful and authentic, we will be trust worthy. And as we engage with other people we will create psychosocial safety together. It's not something one person does by themselves. We create the sense of safety, all of us, when we work together in ways that are honest and optimistic and respectful and authentic. It's especially true that we do this or maybe it's especially important that we do this for people affected by disability. Because these are people whose histories of woundedness run far deeper than most people. The research data tells us that people with disability are two to four times more likely to be bullied in their work experience and their school experience than people who don't experience disability. So, we want to make sure we create an environment that doesn't reject people, that doesn't disappoint them and doesn't have that sense of trauma that is present in environments unintentionally. I'm doing a lot of research now on autism because I'm writing an article on autism. It turns out that people who are autistic are naturally bent neurologically to experience their interactions in ways that create PTSD-like memories. People who are autistic are much more at risk for trauma than people who are not autistic. I think that is true for everyone that we're going to put in a category of a person with a disability. It requires that we create settings that are intentionally safe. We come to work every single day and every single hour we say to ourselves today, right now, I will be respectful. Today, right now, I will be optimistic. You probably have some co-workers who may have been at work as long as I have. I have been doing this for a good, long time. I still have got my optimism. I still, I still believe that good things are possible. I'm not giving up. You probably know people that have lost some of that. And we want to help them regain it and then maintain it for all of us.

Bill Shorten was the Minister for the NDIS a number of years and in 2009 he talked about an ordinary life in a speech at the national press club in Canberra. What he said is that people with disability want nothing more than to be just one of the gang. A girl in the office, a bloke at the pub. Not invisible, but unremarkable. Just one of the guys. Just one of the people. And that is such a true statement among all the folks I have known over the years who have been affected by disability. They want to be just part of the crew. Part of the group. Shorten went on to say they want to be part of a normal order of things, a friend like any other, a neighbour, an average Australian, a citizen -- another human being.

Wow! That is a beautiful statement and I use this a lot in the work that I do. And I ask the people I support whether or not this is true for them. I have yet to find someone who says "no, that's not true". This is a very true statement.

So, taking a look at how we apply this to our settings -- I work at home now. When I do consulting, when I do my work as a behaviour support practitioner -- I don't have an office. But when I did, I made sure that my office was open and inviting. I put my desk in the back of the office against the wall and -- on the side -- so I could see with my left eye who was coming in. So I didn't have my back to them. But I also wanted to have an open space. Then I had a couple of chairs and a table that were down from my desk. So I had an open space. I could take my chair from where my desk was, slide it over and now I have got an open and inviting area where I can interview or I can talk, where I could do my work. I really pay attention to barriers and not just physical barriers but relational barriers as well. One of those barriers is -- administrators. That can be a barrier because when I was an administrator people would say, "Oh there is Mr Bowen". They stopped calling me Mr Bowen a few months into my position because the employee of the month, I worked their shift for them. And that was eye opening for me. And eye opening for them. Because I could do the work. The only time I couldn't do that is if a nurse was the employee of the month or sometimes a psychologist. But other than that, the employee of the month got a day off and I worked their shifts. It did a couple of things. First, it made me accessible. It gave people a face to a name, to a position. It also gave accessibility. Because after a few months people realised this is not an act, I'm not going to quit doing this after the first year; I really like doing direct support work. Yeah, I started in this building as direct support and I like it. It's good stuff. So, I think it's really important that administrators and supervisors are fully accessible. And you find your own way to do this. This is the way I did it. You have to find your way to be fully accessible to the people that you supervise. There are no titles in the organisation. When I first started I had a supervising psychiatrist named Coleman Burns and I would say hi, Dr Burns and he would say, "Hi, Bob, call me Coleman". I couldn't do that because he is a psychiatrist and I hadn't even finished college yet. I was his support. After a few months he came in early and said Bob when I come to meetings I only have 20 minutes per person to review things and make decisions about medication, program matter particular direction we're going to go, so I need your input, because I am a psychiatrist and you're not. You're a direct support practitioner and I'm not. You know more about these people than I do. Call me Coleman. Because in this organisation it's just first names, it's just people. We have different roles but at the end of the day we're just people. We're just folks." That was really

important to me. I have made it my life's goal to just be Bob and nothing else. So, that's my title. And that is the title that I like. . One of the best resources I know of is an article from Harvard Research View published 20 May last year called How to build psychosocial safety in the workplace". It's a great article. Lots of good resources. The national psychosocial safety of safety network, we've got a website. There are a tonne of resources here as well. We can help you with just about anything in terms of asking -- if you ask a question, how do I do this, how do I -- and give a specific-- there will be someone on our expert advisory group who can answer the question if our staff can't answer it; we can get that done. So, building psychosocial safety. It's what we do. We build psychosocial safety or we build psychosocial harm. What you build is up to you. For me, I'm committed to building safety every single day, every single interaction one at a time. With that I will say thank you and hopefully I have hit my time allotments. And I can answer questions.

SIMON: Very, very timely, Bob. Great time management there. I do have a couple of questions that I am happy to put to you while everyone else kind of puts some questions in the chat. So, when interviewing someone who has a stated disability, how do I know how much time to give people to process my question, and should I say it again or rephrase the question?

BOB: Okay. So, my general rule is to take four or five seconds after I ask a question and give people time to process. Processing delay happens in many different types of disability.

So you want to give people time to process that. And then if they are still struggling, then I rephrase the question. And I do my very best to use concrete language instead of abstract language. What I mean by that is I use words that depict things that you can see or touch and if I say, "So tell me how you felt about your last job", that's an abstract question. Some of the folks I'm interviewing might not be able to process abstractly. They process concretely. So then I might say, "Tell me about something you did that was successful". And that they can process. I also try to minimise the number of words that I use. And there is a PowerPoint rule that says you should have no more than 8 words in a PowerPoint line; I'm terrible at that. I usually have more than 8. But I try to keep it simple so it's easier for people to process what I'm asking.

SIMON: Thank you for that. next question, Bob: How can you support a team with many who have a disability or are neurodiverse when you yourself are neurodiverse?

BOB: Okay. So, that's a great question, because I'm neurodiverse. So, what that means for me is that I have feelings but I don't process that way. I'm a

cognitive person. When people ask me questions, I just -- I just go right to town. And I start dealing with facts. What I have learned is that every single person has facts and feelings about everything that's going on within the environment. And I need to take a minute and stop and ask myself, "How do I feel?" And pay attention to the feelings that I have inside of me. I'm not naturally connected to my feelings and so I have to work at them. My friends and colleagues who are neurodivergent say very similar things; that when we're working with neurotypical folks, it's hard to remember that they swim in feelings. And I don't. I have to get used to that. Taking that time out, asking how I feel, paying attention to body language, tone of voice, keeping all of my feelers out, so to speak, is really, really important.

SIMON: Thank as, Bob, next question comes from Jane: I love not using titles. While the December 2025 legislation asked us to integrate the term "psychosocial" throughout our risk management systems, do you tend not to use the term when you are communicating directly with employees this is.

BOB: I have to use the phrase psychosocial safety once. After I use it once, then I tend to go to the building blocks. I tend to talk about respect and optimism, I tend to talk about the things that create safety rather than the over averaging term psychosocial safety. Because lots of folks whether or not they're affected by disability struggle with that word. What does psychosocial safety mean? I will use it once, maybe twice and then I will go to the building blocks, the things that create safety, the things that get in the way of safety. So that we can address those risk factors as well.

SIMON: Thank you. Next question: From an employer's perspective what are your views on the need to adapt on boarding processes for people with a stated disability?

BOB: With a stated disability.

SIMON: Yes.

BOB: I think you need to. On boarding means welcoming people onto the train and saying hey, come on in. I want to show you your seat, show you the car on this train you will be riding and here is what you're doing. I'm going have to adapt my processes of doing on boarding to the way this person learns. There is a system I use called VARRK -- reading, writing, kinaesthetic. I spend time asking how does this person learn? I can do that by listening, and saying I see you do this. That person might be someone who is visual. If they say oh you know what, I think ... then that person might be cognitive. I pay attention to the ways people interact with me and the worths people use and then I pre-

plan -- I have got a set of on boarding materials that are primarily visual, primarily auditory. Primarily railing and writing and then -- some people are kinaesthetic, they have to do things with their hands in order to learn. So I will have lots of fidget toys available and I will use one myself as I'm interacting with people. The onboarding process, I heavily adapt that. On boarding may take me more time and that's just been something said to me in my evaluations over the years, is I take more time in doing on boarding. But what I have found is if I do a really good job of on boarding, you're going to have a really good job at performing. I spend a lot of time in that on boarding process.

SIMON: Thank you, next question: Can you comment on how role ambiguity can represent a risk to psychosocial safety, in other words, not having clarity about your priorities and expectations from leadership et cetera and can you suggest any solutions?

BOB: Okay. I sense a minefield out there.

SIMON: I'm just reading them as they come in.

BOB: I hear you. Role ambiguity, it's there. The not just add manufacturers that can fall into that. It's in any position, if you don't know what you're supposed to do, you won't know how to do it. You won't know what to do. And you will come to work and you will go through the motions, but you don't know what you're doing. Having a really clear vision of what it is we're supposed to do at an overarching level, at an administrative level.

SIMON: We're frozen.

NEW SPEAKER: Might be the Wi-Fi cut out. I will see if there is anything I can do in the background.

BOB: I hear you but you're not moving.

SIMON: It's the same with us, Bob. We can hear you but you're not moving. If you keep talking.

BOB: All right. I can hear you. That's good.

SIMON: You were part way through answering --

BOB: Oh, I froze during all of that.

SIMON: Yes, so you are going to have to go back to the start, Bob.

BOB: I will start at the end. Every single person in an organisation needs to have their own mission, vision and values statement. We need to be clear

about what it is that we're doing, whatever our role in the organisation, so we don't have role ambiguity. If we're not clear on that, then we're not going to fulfil our role in a way that other people in the organisation can use our work. Got to have clear mission, vision and values that are integrated and synchronised with everyone else in the organisation. That's the short answer.

SIMON: Excellent. Thank you. Next question, Bob, is if someone reacts strongly to something you have said or done, how should you respond?

BOB: Okay. That's a really good question. So when someone reacts strongly the first thing I do is I sit back. I sit back because my body language, I want that to demonstrated that I'm not aggressive, that I'm not defensive and so I sit back, just a little bit and then I put my hands in front of me. You can't see my hands but my hands are open and relaxed. So there is light or air with my fingers. Can you turn me back on? See if that works?

Because when someone is upset, and I have done something to harm them potentially at an emotional level I want to make sure they understand I'm not a threat in any way. I want to sit back, I will have my hands up and I will say, "Man, I'm really sorry that that happened" and I will just wait for a second and then I will ask a question, and I will own my end of whatever that miscommunication was. So I have to have my body language match that sense of openness that I want. I want people to trust me, my body needs to say that. If I lean in a little bit I might look aggressive. I don't want that. So I will sit back, I will have my hands open. I usually do something like this and say, "Man, I'm sorry that happened. What did I say that ..." and I will explore what the person just said to me. And move on from there.

SIMON: Okay, thanks, Bob. I don't have anymore questions. I might start to wrap up if that's okay. From my perspective there are a couple of really key things I took away from this, the whole concept of psychosocial safety doesn't just happen, that it must be built. I think that's a fantastic take away and also that when we're honest, optimistic, respectful, authentic and trust worthy we build psychosocial safety together; the whole concept of moving through this process together was fantastic. Thank you for that. On behalf of the Centre for Inclusive Employment, DEA and the other consortium members I would like to thank you, Bob, for your presentation. Yes, Jane, there will be -- the slides will be available a little bit later on. For those who joined us today don't forget to claim your CPD points. Today's session is worth 2. Also coming up in a fortnight's time on 15 April our next session is about sensory workplace design with Nicole from the Exceptional Academy on Wednesday, 15 April. Please join me once again in thanking Bob and I wish you all well in the rest of your day.

Thank you.