



# How to create a supportive workplace culture

## 'Deeper Dive' for SME employers

### Contents

- ✓ **What is workplace culture?**
- ✓ **Why does it matter?**
- ✓ **Unique selling point for SMEs**
- ✓ **How do you improve workplace culture?**
  - *Have regular, open conversations*
  - *Work towards establishing trustful relationships and a culture of 'give & take'*
  - *Be inclusive by supporting all staff – parents and non-parents*

### What is workplace culture?

Workplace or organisational culture is a set of values, beliefs and attitudes that guide the practices or simply 'how things are done' in an organisation.

---

*"...there is a general understanding amongst the staff that you will never be turned down for a genuine need to attend to parenting duties... [they] are accepted as part of your working life." (Small business employee)*

---

### Why does it matter?

Cultivating a positive, supportive workplace environment benefits employees and their organisations by enhancing

- Employee wellbeing
- Staff loyalty and retention
- Employee productivity and engagement

---

*"And also, it helps performance doesn't it, [...] knowing that your work-life balance, family-balance is respected, makes you want to work better for the business as well."*  
*(Small business owner)*

---

## Unique selling point for SMEs

- **Developing a supportive workplace culture do not have to be costly: small steps can lead to big changes.**
- SMEs often already have more close-knit teams which are an important foundation for a supportive culture.
- You can foster an environment rooted in trust, respect, open communication and 'give and take'.
- Also, many employers don't actively promote support to fathers. If you do, this could help you retain both male and female staff.

## How do you improve workplace culture?

**Have regular, open conversations:** Unmet support often emerges when not openly discussed. It is thus important to promote a culture of communication where everyone feels heard and valued. Creating an environment where employees feel comfortable to talk about their parenting roles, and raise any support needs without fear of negative consequences helps to set a workplace culture based on trust. Ideally, employers should be proactive in informing staff about their rights before they even become parents. However, in practice, this often does not happen, particularly if time is scarce (see [Resource Scarcity](#)) or if the topic you want to discuss is of a sensitive nature (see [How to start a conversation about a sensitive topic](#)).

### What can employers do?

- Have regular team discussions and one-to-one meetings between managers and team members. Create an environment where all employees feel comfortable raising issues or support needs without the fear of negative consequences.
- Build in time during one-to-one check-ins to discuss changing support needs such as adjustments to working patterns (e.g. before, during and after parental leave).

### What can employees do?

Be proactive and share your support needs with your manager. Could you make suggestions (e.g. a suitable space for pumping breastmilk; adaptations to your working hours to allow school or nursery pick-ups or drop-offs)?

---

*"I was sat next to a lady... she's got a daughter and she started relatively recently and she was lamenting that she doesn't get to pick her daughter up from school. And I said, you know, just ask and see what they say. She asked and now I think she's managed to negotiate for a few days a week." (Small business employee)*

---

## The importance of trustful relationships and 'give & take'

**Trustful relationships:** Trust is an important component of a supportive workplace culture. In order to feel comfortable having open conversations about support with your staff, manager/employer or colleagues, you need to trust each other that you will try to understand each other's perspectives and do what you can to find solutions that work for everyone involved (typically the organisation, the staff member asking for support, and any colleagues directly affected, for example by changes in shifts or work hours).

Note: Such trustful relationships are not built overnight – they tend to develop over time. However, smaller organisations often have an important advantage here in comparison to larger workplaces, as they tend to be characterised by closer, more family-like relationships.

**Give & take:** Reciprocity or 'give and take' is about the idea that when someone does something for you, you feel a natural desire to do something for them in return. It is thus about creating a balance in relationships by sharing kindness, favours, or support.

---

*I think being able to feel comfortable, and not just linked to maternity but all the other benefits that we offer as well in that flexibility, it takes some of that stress away from people having to worry about, oh, do I need to take annual leave for this, do I need to ask permission, are they going to say 'no'. All of that definitely takes the worry out of it so then the business benefits by having a more engaged and happier workforce. (Small business employee)*

---

## Be inclusive by supporting all staff – parents and non-parents

All employees experience life events that may require different types of workplace support at different times and might not be related to parenthood (e.g. illness, parents/partners with care needs, pets). Catering for these support needs can be very challenging for SMEs, especially if they are unexpected and require an immediate response (e.g. sudden longer-term absence). However, strategies developed to support new parents at work are a good investment as they can also be used to support all other staff, leading to an improved workplace culture, better retention, improved staff morale and productivity across the entire workforce.

**Fairness and inclusivity:** Expectant and new parents - both fathers and mothers - often fear negative implications of asking for support at work. It can create tensions in the team if colleagues without childcare responsibilities feel less supported than parents. It is thus important to recognise that all people have a life outside work, regardless of gender, life stage or nature of support need.

---

*“There is no difference between requests from men or women. [...] and we’ve now got one or two of the elder staff who are needing time off because of parental care, and they’ve asked for reduced hours, the same as for childcare... we recognise people have a life outside work and try to make sure we take that into account as well as business needs.” (Small business owner)*

---

## Case study example – Creating a supportive workplace culture

### **Small Manufacturing Business**

This employer emphasised the importance of recognising the value of parents and of offering a workplace culture that reflects this. He also highlighted that, in his business, he aimed to support everybody equally, regardless of parenthood status, and argued that this would *“bring out the best in your employees”* and *“get staff loyalty”*.

#### **Have regular, open conversations**

*“We ask our employees to suggest a workable solution that meets their needs and neither harms the business nor their colleagues [...] we get them to talk to their colleagues and get their agreement if they want to change their working arrangements.”*

#### **Work towards establishing trustful relationships and a culture of ‘give & take’**

*“I think it’s generally this cultural thing of trying to not see things as a challenge, it’s actually seeing it as an opportunity to get that staff loyalty. And we have a very low turnover rate of staff because people actually do value that flexibility, whether it’s for horses or children or adult and older care.”*

#### **Be inclusive by supporting all staff – parents and non-parents**

*“There is no difference between requests from men or women. [...] and we’ve now got one or two of the elder staff who are needing time off because of parental care, and they’ve asked for reduced hours, the same as for the childcare. I mean, it’s care. And it’s...it’s...again, it’s...I suppose the attitude is, we recognise people have a life outside work and trying to make sure we...we take that into account as well as business needs. And we’ve not really, I think, had many cases, if any, where there’s been a conflict which is not resolvable.”*

This ‘Deeper Dive’ on How to create a supportive workplace culture is part of the [Supporting Parents in SMEs Toolkit](#).