

An employer's guide to resolving workplace issues



This guide provides employers with step by step practical guidance on how to resolve a workplace issue with their employees. You can find more tips and hints on resolving workplace issues at [fairwork.gov.au/workplace-problems](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/workplace-problems)



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This is a guide for employers dealing with workplace issues.

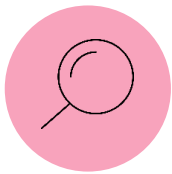
Most workplace issues occur because people don't know what the law is, or because communication has broken down. An effective way for you to resolve a workplace issue is to find out what the law is and then work with your employee to fix the problem.

This guide will take you through a simple five-step process to help you resolve workplace issues with your employees. You can use the steps in the process to respond to workplace issues raised by your employees. These steps can also be used when you want to raise issues with an employee.

Who are we?

The Fair Work Ombudsman's role is to promote harmonious, productive, cooperative and compliant workplace relations in Australia. We want to make sure everyone is following workplace law. We do this by providing education and advice to employers and employees.

We also have responsibilities to monitor compliance, investigate and inquire about alleged breaches of the Fair Work Act 2009 and take enforcement action when appropriate.



Step 1: Identify the issue



Step 2: Check the law



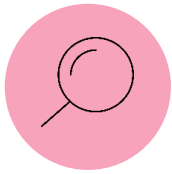
Step 3: Talk to the employee



Step 4: Resolve the matter



Step 5: Seek further assistance



Step 1: Identify the issue

Most people enjoy good relationships at work. However, even in the friendliest workplaces, disagreements can occur. Dealing with workplace issues can be time consuming and frustrating, but it's important to address concerns as soon as they arise to stop them from becoming more serious. Handling workplace issues promptly can also help you to:

- build better relationships with your employees
- maintain employee morale and job satisfaction
- retain your staff
- maximise workplace productivity.

If your employee approaches you with a question or a problem, the first thing you need to do is get a clear understanding of their concerns. Remember to:

- demonstrate you are ready and willing to talk and listen
- be calm and polite – being defensive or aggressive won't help you to resolve the problem
- ask questions if you do not understand the employee's concerns
- find out what action the employee would like you to take to resolve the issue
- take copies of any supporting information provided by the employee
- reassure the employee that you take their concerns seriously and advise them when you will respond.

You may also wish to ask the employee to provide details of the problem in writing. This might help you to better understand the issues involved and provide an appropriate response.

Tips for proactively managing workplace issues

Employees don't always feel comfortable raising workplace issues, but it is important that you know about, and can deal with, problems before they escalate. You can encourage employees to raise issues in your workplace promptly by:

- setting up a simple process for employees to report their concerns or complaints
- having a clear written 'dispute procedure' that employees can follow if they would like to raise an issue
- fostering a workplace culture of trust, transparency and open communication by acting on problems as soon as you become aware of them.

Example

George owns a clothing store. Judith, the assistant manager, arranges for Jim, a part-time employee, to work extra shifts to cover for a sick colleague. Judith and Jim both forget to write the extra hours onto Jim's timesheet.

Jim checks his pay slip and notices that he wasn't paid for the extra shifts. He is upset about this and sends George a text message saying, "I'm not going to put myself out for you anymore if you're not going to pay me properly".

George doesn't know what the message is about, so he arranges a time to sit down with Jim and discuss his concerns.

During their meeting George calmly asks Jim to explain what he meant by the message. Jim explains that he missed attending his nephew's birthday party to cover the extra shifts and feels angry that he wasn't paid for them. George explains that staff are paid based upon the shifts on their timesheet and that no extra shifts had been recorded, but he agrees to look into the issue. George tells Jim he will get back to him by the end of the week.

George talks to Judith and checks the payroll. He sees that Jim wasn't paid for the extra shifts because his extra hours weren't recorded. George contacts Jim to explain what happened. He apologises for the error and organises for Jim to be paid for the extra hours worked. George also reminds Judith and Jim about the importance of accurately recording roster changes and actual work times on employee timesheets.

Because he responded in a timely way, George was able to identify the issue and resolve the matter quickly and efficiently. He also strengthened his relationship with Jim and was able to review his workplace processes to prevent similar issues occurring in the future.

There are common workplace problems which do occur. We have step by step advice on dealing with some of the common problems that employers can experience in the workplace including:

- I'm not sure what to pay my employees
- I'm not sure which award covers my business
- My employee isn't doing their job properly
- I think I've underpaid my employee
- My employee left without giving notice

Find information about these [common workplace problems](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/common-workplace-problems) and simple steps you can take to fix them at [fairwork.gov.au/common-workplace-problems](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/common-workplace-problems)



Step 2: Check the law

Once you know what the issue is, you need to check your rights and responsibilities under the law.

Minimum pay rates and entitlements will depend on any award or enterprise agreement that applies. There are also minimum entitlements such as leave and notice under the National Employment Standards (NES). It is very important that you are familiar with the NES and the terms of any award or agreement that applies to your employees. The award or agreement that applies to your business will set out pay rates based on an employee's duties and other factors like their age and qualifications. If no award or agreement applies to your employees, then the National Minimum Wage Order will set the minimum pay rates. Remember, minimum pay rates may change:

- after the Annual Wage Review each year
- if the employee's duties change
- on the employee's birthday (if they are a junior employee).

The [Pay and Conditions Tool \(PACT\)](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/pact) at [fairwork.gov.au/pact](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/pact) can help you find the correct award and calculate pay, penalty rates, allowances and leave entitlements. For more information about pay, leave, employee entitlements, awards or ending employment you can visit www.fairwork.gov.au

If you need information about enterprise agreements, superannuation, tax, workplace health and safety, workers compensation, bullying or sexual harassment, see the [Links and resources](#) section in the back of this guide for a list of contacts that can help you.

My account

Register for an [online account](#) with us at [fairwork.gov.au/register](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/register) and you'll be able to:

- submit an enquiry about a workplace problem
- bookmark your favourite pages, awards and Pay Calculator results
- explore personalised resources such as online training, templates and more
- get important updates and tailored workplace information.

Example

Maria manages the staff at a local restaurant and has recently hired new employees to work on weekends. Nate, one of the new employees, has spoken to Maria. He's concerned he is not receiving the correct pay rate for working on Sundays, as he received a higher Sunday rate in his last job in the bistro of the local RSL Club.

Maria decides to check the pay rates using the [Pay Calculator](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/pact) at [fairwork.gov.au/pact](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/pact). Here, she finds information about the base rates of pay and weekend penalty rates that her employees are entitled to. Maria compares these pay rates with her time and wages records and confirms that she has been paying the correct Sunday rates.

Maria organises a meeting with Nate. She provides the information she found at www.fairwork.gov.au and explains how the Sunday penalty rates are calculated under the Restaurant Award. She also provides information about Nate's classification under the award and the fact he would probably have been under a different award in his old job. Nate thanks Maria for looking into it.

The next day, Maria gives a letter to Nate confirming their discussion. She encourages him to speak with her if he has any further concerns.

By checking the law and sharing the information she found with Nate, Maria was able to quickly and confidently resolve the issue. Nate also feels better knowing that Maria took his concerns seriously and made proper checks.

Record-keeping

Good record-keeping helps you keep track of employee details, identify any payroll issues and keep your business running efficiently. It also makes it easier to find the information you need to respond to any concerns raised by your employees.

You are legally required to keep written records, in English, for each employee. This includes information such as the business' legal name and ABN, the employee's name, employment status and commencement date. It also includes records about:

- pay
- overtime
- hours of work
- leave
- superannuation contributions
- termination of employment
- agreements relating to employment including individual flexibility arrangements and guarantees of annual earnings.

These time and wages records must be kept for seven years.

You must also give all employees a pay slip within one day of paying their wages.

You can find more information about [record-keeping](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/recordkeeping) at [fairwork.gov.au/recordkeeping](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/recordkeeping)



Step 3: Talk to the employee

Once you have checked your records and the law and have an understanding of the problem, you should organise a time to speak with the employee.

It's important to prepare for this conversation. You can do this by summarising the key points you want to cover, gathering any supporting documents or information and considering your options for resolving the issue.

After the conversation, you should make notes about the discussion you had and any agreement you have made. Include the date and time of the meeting and who was present.

Tips for discussing workplace issues with your employees

Remember to:

- refer to any conversations you have already had about the issue
- clearly outline the employee's entitlements, if that is what the issue is about
- include any supporting information, such as copies of pay slips, leave records and relevant information obtained from
- stick to facts, rather than opinions, and give examples where possible
- invite the employee to share their point of view and listen to what they have to say
- keep an open mind – there may be facts or issues you don't know about.

Need help having a difficult conversation with your employee?

Our [Online learning centre](#) has a free online course to help you prepare for a difficult conversation with your employee. The course includes practical tips to help you handle the conversation well, deal with the problem and get on with running your business. You can access the [Difficult conversations in the workplace - manager course](#) from fairwork.gov.au/learning

Example

Shamim is the manager of a car repair business where he employs 5 staff. One of his employees, Kelly, has sent him a request for annual leave during the upcoming school holidays.

Shamim checks the roster because 2 other employees already have leave approved for the same period. Shamim knows the business can't operate with so few staff, and he doesn't have enough time to find temporary replacement staff. Therefore, he decides to refuse the request because it will have a significant impact on the business.

Shamim expects that Kelly will be upset about being refused annual leave. He's not sure how to talk to her about it, so he visits the [Online Learning Centre](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/learning) at [fairwork.gov.au/learning](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/learning) and does the 'Difficult Conversations in the Workplace – manager course'. The course helps him to prepare for the conversation and makes him feel more confident about discussing the leave request with Kelly.

After completing the course, Shamim organises a time to meet with Kelly. He clearly explains the reasons for refusing the leave and talks to her about other possible times that she could take leave. He also agrees to give her first option on leave for the next school holidays. Kelly says she understands the problem with staffing and will consider taking the leave later.

The next day, Shamim sends Kelly an email confirming their discussion and the reasons the leave was refused.

The following week Kelly sends Shamim a new leave request for one of the alternative dates they discussed. Shamim approves this request. While Kelly is disappointed that her original request was denied, she is happy that she could work with Shamim to find alternative dates.



Step 4: Resolve the matter

Depending on the issue raised, there may be a number of ways to resolve it. These may include:

- giving an explanation to the employee about their entitlements
- back paying any unpaid entitlements
- updating the employee's records to rectify any mistakes
- updating any relevant policies and procedures
- providing training
- setting a date in the future to check in with the employee to ensure the issue has not re-occurred.

It's important that you take action in a timely manner and monitor the situation to ensure the issue has been resolved.

After talking to your employee, it's a good idea to write to them to confirm your discussion and any actions that will be taken to resolve the matter. If you need help writing to your employee, refer to the example letter attached to this guide. Remember, you will need to change the letter to reflect your circumstances.

If other staff members are affected by the same issue, you should fix the matter and discuss this with all affected employees. This may involve checking the entitlements of other employees, updating any relevant policies and procedures or providing information to other employees.



Step 5: Seek further assistance

If you have followed Steps 1 to 4, and still haven't been able to resolve the issue, you may want to ask a third party to help.

A third party might be:

- your industry association
- the Fair Work Ombudsman (us)
- a solicitor
- the Fair Work Commission.

The approach you choose will depend on the issue you're trying to resolve.

Industry association

Your industry or business association can provide you with tailored advice and assistance to help you understand your rights and your obligations to your employees.

A [list of organisations](#) that are formally registered under the national workplace relations system can be found at fwc.gov.au/registered-organisations/find-registered-organisation

There may also be other industry and business bodies in your area that can help.

How the Fair Work Ombudsman can help

You or your employee can choose to request assistance from the Fair Work Ombudsman.

When we receive a report about a workplace dispute or issue, we assess it to decide how we will respond. This can include:

- giving information, advice, and education on workplace rights and obligations
- helping with practical tools and resources such as templates and online courses which can assist with resolving disputes
- inquiring about and investigating potential non-compliance (when the law hasn't been followed)
- using enforcement tools such as compliance notices, infringement notices, enforceable undertakings or commencing legal proceedings in response to non-compliance.

When a workplace issue is reported to us, our response will depend on the circumstances and seriousness of the issue. We assess each matter that is raised with us and use a range of criteria to determine the most appropriate response.

As part of this process, it's important to remember that we are neutral and impartial. We help with employers and employees. We don't act or advocate for either party.

For more information visit our [Fixing a workplace problem page](#) at fairwork.gov.au/fixing-workplace-problems

Legal avenues

You or your employee can seek legal advice from a solicitor or community legal centre at any time. They may be able to assist you with a range of actions, including providing advice about your rights and responsibilities to your employees.

To find a solicitor, visit the law institute or law society within your state or territory. To find a [community legal centre](http://clcs.org.au) go to clcs.org.au

Your employee might choose to take legal action. The small claims process can be used to recover employee entitlements or other debts up to \$100,000. In some cases, the court may allow the successful applicant to recover any court filing fees paid from the respondent. The small claims process is quicker, cheaper and more informal than regular court proceedings. The aim is to settle disputes quickly and fairly, with minimum expense to the parties. For information about [small claims](#) visit fairwork.gov.au/smallclaims



Links and resources

Enterprise agreements

Enterprise agreements are collective agreements made at an enterprise level between employers and employees about terms and conditions of employment. The Fair Work Commission can help you deal with disputes about how the agreement applies.

For more information about enterprise agreements, visit the [Fair Work Commission's website](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/agreements) at [fwc.gov.au/agreements](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/agreements)

Work health & safety

You are responsible for providing your employees with a healthy and safe working environment.

If you're dealing with a workplace issue about work health & safety, contact the relevant work health and safety body in your state or territory. You can find their contact details on our [Related sites page](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/links) at [fairwork.gov.au/links](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/links)

Tax & superannuation

You need to meet your tax and superannuation obligations for all employees. This includes PAYG withholding tax and superannuation.

If you are dealing with a workplace issue about tax or superannuation, the [Australian Taxation Office \(ATO\)](https://www.ato.gov.au/business) can help. Visit [ato.gov.au/business](https://www.ato.gov.au/business)

Bullying and sexual harassment

Everyone has the right not to be bullied or sexually harassed at work.

If you are dealing with a workplace issue about bullying or sexual harassment, the Fair Work Commission can help. For more information, go to the [Fair Work Commission's website](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/issues-we-help) at [fwc.gov.au/issues-we-help](https://www.fairwork.gov.au/issues-we-help)

Personal support

Dealing with workplace issues can cause stress. If you're having trouble coping, support is available from [Beyond Blue](https://www.beyondblue.org.au) at [beyondblue.org.au](https://www.beyondblue.org.au) and [Lifeline](https://www.lifeline.org.au) at [lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)

The Fair Work Ombudsman is committed to providing you with advice that you can rely on. The information contained in this fact sheet is general in nature. If you are unsure about how it applies to your situation you can call our Infoline on 13 13 94 or speak with a union, industry association or a workplace relations professional.

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Attachment 1: Example letter to employee

You can refer to this example to help you write to your employee about workplace issues. If you need more information visit www.fairwork.gov.au or contact the Fair Work Infoline on 13 13 94.

John Smith
123 Sample Street
Suburb STATE 0000

4 February 2022

Dear Mr Smith,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me on 1st February 2022 to talk about your pay.

As discussed, under the General Retail Industry Award (the Award) employees are entitled to receive a 25% loading for each ordinary hour worked after 6.00pm, Monday to Friday.

After reviewing your time and wages records, I've identified that this loading hasn't been applied to your pay. I apologise for this oversight and will ensure that this loading is correctly applied from now on.

I've also calculated that you're owed an amount of \$502.20 back pay as a result of the error. This back pay will be paid to you as part of your next pay, including deducting the relevant tax and making relevant super contributions.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. Please do not hesitate to let me know if you have any further questions or concerns.

Yours sincerely

Jane Smith
Manager
Business Name Pty Ltd