


## Identifying racism

# *The whistle blower*

 Suggested time: 40 minutes

### Preparation

*The whistle blower* focuses on institutional racism. That is, the climate within a school or college that promotes, supports or, more frequently, does little about the presence of racist behaviours or racism among staff and students.

The discussion activities of *The whistle blower* get people talking about the impact and consequences of racist behaviours on individuals and institutions.

If necessary, view or review the *The whistle blower* video and read the notes.

Copy the handout for each participant.

### Whole group activity

#### Introduction (2 minutes)

- Use the Purpose and Overview from *The whistle blower* reproduced on page 2 to explain the purpose of this session.

#### Before the video (12 minutes)

Divide participants into small groups. Ask participants to identify:

- an occasion when they complained about a product, a service, a behaviour or a person
- whether the complaint was resolved to their satisfaction.

Ask groups to list actions they expect from an individual or organisation when they complain and to rank the actions in order of importance.

Ask a representative from each group to read out the three actions ranked highest by their group.

#### Preparation for watching the video (6 minutes)

- Distribute a copy of the discussion question handout for *The whistle blower* to each participant.
- Tell participants that Michelle, the first character they meet in the video has lodged a formal complaint about racism in her school.
- Ask participants to view *The whistle blower* (5 minutes) and to collect evidence that they consider supports or does not support Michelle's complaint.

#### After viewing the video (20 minutes)

- Divide participants into small groups and ask them to discuss their answers for the two questions.
- Invite a representative of each group to provide a response to the second discussion question.

## Conclusion (2 minutes)

- The whistle blower highlights the importance of taking seriously any concerns raised by staff about prejudice, discrimination and racism.
- Timely and sensitive action can avoid unwanted impacts on the lives of individuals as well as maintain a positive climate and good reputation for the institution.environments.

## From The whistle blower

### Purpose

The purpose of *The whistle blower* is to promote discussion about:

- potential impacts of sustained prejudice, discrimination and racism in schools and collegeswhether using a racist insult, or other inappropriate racist behaviour, indicates that a person is racist
- the influence of 'organisational climate' on the behaviours and attitudes of staff and students
- the inappropriateness of pre-judging others (prejudice) on the basis of their cultural or linguistic background
- consequences of not taking complaints seriously and not doing anything to overcome the foundations of a complaint.

### Overview

In *The whistle blower*, Michelle, a teacher lodges a formal complaint about the prejudice and racism that she, her colleague Peter and other teachers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds have experienced in the workplace.

The video shows some of the incidents that prompted lodgement of the complaint and allows its characters to explain their behaviours.

*The whistle blower* stimulates discussion of the potential influences of not taking complaints seriously, poor resolutions to complaints or doing nothing to resolve them.

## Before the video

Asking participants to identify what they expect from individuals and organisations when they make a complaint highlights the responses that students, staff and community members are likely to expect from schools and colleges.

Expectations that are commonly identified include:

- listening to complaint
- taking the complaint seriously
- courtesy in treatment by staff
- timely action
- doing something to resolve the matter/fix the problem
- restitution (return of money, exchange goods, apology, etc.).

# Handout discussion

Question 1: Michelle’s formal complaint was lodged about institutional racism in the school. What evidence in the video supports/does not support her claim of racism in the administration of the school and among staff and students?

Evidence supporting claim	Evidence not supporting claim
<b>Principal and Head Teacher</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• didn’t do anything about racism</li> <li>• told HT not to be ‘soft’ on Aboriginal teacher</li> <li>• labelling concerned teachers ‘trouble makers’.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• offered Peter senior Maths class</li> <li>• recognised the need for change</li> <li>• acknowledged need to do more to counter racism</li> <li>• ready to accept leadership.</li> </ul>
<b>Staff</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• didn’t acknowledge Peter’s or Michelle’s contributions</li> <li>• biased in her approach to Peter and Michelle</li> <li>• didn’t take concerns seriously</li> <li>• blamed ‘victims’</li> <li>• arrived late for playground duty</li> <li>• was patronising, rude and insensitive.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wanted Peter to stay because he coached the netball team and school band</li> <li>• acknowledged Peter’s commitment and skills as teacher and in sport and music at the school.</li> </ul>
<b>Students</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• agreeing with HT’s comments about the teachers and their behaviours</li> <li>• didn’t pass on messages</li> <li>• didn’t include Michelle, Peter or other teachers from minority cultures in the social life of the school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• silent majority not heard from, not known how much the behaviours in the video are common in school community.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• retort that they were on ‘Koori time’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wanted Peter to coach the netball team</li> </ul>

## Question 2: What suggestions would you recommend to resolve Michelle's complaint in a way that will satisfy her, Peter and the rest of the school community?

Follow the Department's guidelines on 'Responding to Suggestions, Complaints and Allegations'.

Develop and implement a school anti-racism education policy.

Clarify the role of the school's Anti-Racism Contact Officer.

School Executive could employ conflict resolution and mediation techniques to bring issues, concerns and frustrations to the surface from all perspectives.

Encourage an environment of collegial respect among staff.

Consider ways that supervisors could give positive feedback and identify specific issues of concern, if any, about the work performance of all staff members. Acknowledge the participation and contribution of Peter in the school.

Include an anti-discrimination/anti-racism education session at a staff meeting or School Development Day.

### Possible responses to other issues and concerns

Concern that the video segment is about events in a particular school. Some participants may become concerned that the video depicts events they know to have occurred in their school or one known to them. The school in the video is fictitious. The events in the video segment are dramatisations of incidents that could occur, not ones that have occurred.

#### Role of the Anti-Racism Contact Officer (ARCO)

Early in the video Michelle says that one reason she made the complaint was because the Anti-Racism Contact Officer (ARCO) is unable to do anything without a formal complaint.

This comment reveals a common misunderstanding. ARCOs are responsible for receiving complaints, not for investigating or resolving them. Investigation and reaching resolutions that satisfy all parties is the responsibility of the Principal and School Executive.

#### Balancing competing rights among staff

An individual's rights and freedoms such as wearing strong perfumes, not wearing body deodorant or eating strong smelling foods need to be balanced against the rights, freedoms and comforts of others.

Racism and discrimination arise as concerns in such situations when individuals are treated differentially. For example, if the smell of Michelle's lunch draws criticism from the Head Teacher, but the strong or offending smell of other staff members' lunches does not, then there is an equity concern about the differential treatment.

Experience suggests that establishing an effective and fair balance between competing rights in a school community is best developed through negotiation.

Conflicts arising from competing expectations and needs among staff in schools or colleges are usually resolved informally through personnel management strategies.

Formal grievance procedures are outlined in the Department's resolution framework, Responding to Suggestions, Complaints and Allegations.

### **‘Only kidding’, ‘you can’t get upset by that’, ‘you’ve got no sense of humour’**

The Head Teacher’s responses to her behaviours being challenged are similar to those often encountered when anti-racism education is discussed or complaints about racism are investigated.

Beneath many of these reactions lies the cultural assumption that everyone must be able to ‘take a joke’ about themselves, even if the ‘joke’ is offensive or malicious.

‘Jokes’ that are truly light-hearted, without malice and not intended to deliver any negative ‘message’ are usually recognised as such by the individuals who are the brunt of the joke. Such ‘jokes’ and ‘just kidding comments’ can be misinterpreted, but they can also be used with deliberate or unconscious malice to exclude, intimidate or insult others.

Most individuals are able to deal with an occasional innuendo, unpleasant comment or joke, but the joke ‘wears thin’ and becomes harassment when it is repeated by many individual ‘jokers’ each day, every day, week after week, month after month. Unrelenting repetition of unwanted innuendos, comments and jokes amounts to workplace harassment and can have serious consequences on individuals, schools and colleges.

Despite her claims, the Head Teacher in the video was not making light-hearted jokes. She was delivering strong, negative messages and ‘covering her tracks’ by saying they were ‘harmless’.

### **Impacts of racism involving staff members**

Schools and colleges can usually effectively deal with complaints about racism when they are restricted to the behaviours of students. Schools and colleges can be less comfortable handling complaints about racism involving staff. In the video, Michelle and Peter are fed up with the way Aboriginal teachers and teachers from non-English speaking backgrounds are treated and their concerns ignored by their school.

For Michelle, the way Peter is treated is the last straw. Her response is to lodge a formal complaint about the racism that she believes she and other teachers have endured long enough.

Peter responds by submitting his resignation. He believes the only reason his professional expertise was questioned, his effectiveness with students was undermined, his being patronised and socially excluded by the School Executive and other staff was because he is Aboriginal.

No matter what the intentions of the Principal, Head Teacher and other staff members may have been, the cumulative impacts of their actions and neglect are unacceptable.

The Department of Education (DoE) rejects all forms of harassment, vilification, unlawful discrimination and racism. The Department’s *Anti-Discrimination Policy and related Anti-Racism Policy* make it clear that *race-based harassment and discrimination must be stopped. The Department’s Responding to Suggestions, Complaints and Allegations* provides an effective framework for investigating and resolving complaints such as the one submitted by Michelle.

## The whistle blower discussion questions

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Staff	
Students	

Question 2: What suggestions would you recommend to resolve Michelle's complaint in a way that will satisfy her, Peter and the rest of the school community?