icare™

Respect & resilience
In retail & fast-food

Approaches to reduce the incidence and employee impacts of dysfunctional customer behaviour

icare™   Griffith UNIVERSITY Queensland, Australia   MENZIES HEALTH INSTITUTE QUEENSLAND   sda at work with you

Document Control

Version	Revision Description	Date	Author	Checked
1.0	Draft Issue	10 Dec 2018	Andrew Ellery	
1.1	Formatted	12 Dec 2018	Louise Hearson	

Table of Contents

About this report and how to use it

This report collates and presents information that has resulted from the research and the initial design phase of the Respect and Resilience initiative.

It is to be used as a guide to inform thinking about strategies to address dysfunctional customer behaviour with a view to testing as pilot projects in a range of sites and organisations. It makes recommendations for potential solutions, measurement and evaluation based on applied design research methodologies including ethnographic interviews, values-based exploration and academic research. The intended audience for this report is the participants of the design workshop and the wider retail and fast food industry.

This report has been developed to reflect the work of the Community Impact team at icare, the Menzies Health Institute of Queensland at Griffith University and the NSW branch of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA).

Key terms and definitions

Term	Definition
Dysfunctional customer behaviour	Customer behaviour during a service interaction that goes against what is socially accepted. Includes: dismissive; critical; rude; swearing; yelling; intimidating; threatening; throwing things; violence
Systematic review	The highest level of scientific literature review – attempts to identify ALL studies on a specific topic of interest
Emotional labour	Emotional labour is the energy required by a person to manage feelings and expressions to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job Display rule: Service with a smile *Surface acting* – modifies or falsely represents outward display towards customers *Deep acting* – Modifies feelings to match display rules. Main intent is to appear authentic
Customer incivility	*Low intensity* Rude or uncivil behaviour Dismissive or critical comments Speaking over an employee Questioning competence Finger pointing Standing over an employee
Verbal abuse	*High intensity* Shouting or swearing Name-calling Threatening Repeatedly Interrupting Inappropriate remarks
Physical aggression	*High intensity* Hostile or aggressive acts Throwing objects Destruction of employees' property Violence or assault

Executive summary

This report has been developed to reflect the work of the Community Impact team at icare, the Menzies Health Institute of Queensland at Griffith University and the NSW branch of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA).

An evidence based systematic review of available literature on dysfunctional customer behaviour was conducted by the Rehabilitation Innovation Service Evaluation (RISE) team, part of the Menzies Health Institute of Queensland at Griffith University, to explore the issue and identify measures and tools for evaluation and potential interventions.

Dysfunctional customer behaviour refers to the spectrum of negative acts directed at service employees, ranging from incivility, to verbal abuse, to physical aggression and violence. These behaviours are common in the retail sector and exposure to them can have adverse consequences in the short- and long-term for psychological wellbeing, physical health, and work attitudes and performance. Motives for dysfunctional customer behaviour usually include gaining esteem, revenge, and/or financial benefits.

The key findings from the systematic literature review are described on the following page. Four strategic directions were identified to reduce dysfunctional customer behaviour and its impact on employees: **modifications to the customer-service environment, increased workplace support, specialised customer-service training and emotional regulation training for customer-facing employees**.

Findings from the systematic literature review, the SDA survey results and feedback from the focus groups were presented to a cross section of employers, employees, unions, government agencies and academics at a roundtable event. Participants were asked to build on this data to create ideas and potential solutions.

Participants focused on increased workplace support and training to enable and empower employees to respond to problematic customers in an empathetic but psychologically healthy way. Modifications to the physical service environment that promote greater customer accountability and awareness, and employee safety and wellbeing were also recommended. Organisational policies and procedures were emphasised as targets for change, with participants suggesting a move toward policy inclusive of employees in decisions that influence their roles. Finally, for wider impact, participants suggested the implementation of educational campaigns and legislation changes that reinforce the effects of dysfunctional customer behaviour and a zero tolerance approach.

This report summarises the findings from this process along with results from the literature review and focus groups.

In the coming months the team will work closely with stakeholders and community to develop an intervention and materials based on the findings of this report and the solutions suggested at the design workshop. We will pilot, measure and evaluate the intervention and report on the findings to all stakeholders.

Consider and discuss the solutions directions outlined in this report and how these might be applied in your organisation and commit to initiating positive change to address the frequency and impact of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

Key findings

Key findings from the systematic literature review are presented below. Each of these findings were further supported throughout focus group and workshop settings.

	Finding
1.	Dysfunctional customer behaviour is defined as a spectrum of negative acts that range from incivility, through verbal abuse, to physical aggression.
2.	Dysfunctional customer behaviour towards retail employees is the norm, not the exception. It is therefore pervasive, systemic and detrimental.
3.	Exposure to dysfunctional customer behaviour can have adverse consequences, both short- and long-term, for employee psychological wellbeing, physical health, and work attitudes and performance. **The research has shown that customer incivility and verbal abuse can be just as impactful as physical violence and aggression.**
4.	Causal factors contributing towards dysfunctional customer behaviour include organisational policies, service environment and customer motives. More needs to be known about these factors to address the prevalence and impact of dysfunctional customer behaviour.
5.	Progress in this field can be achieved by identifying motives (esteem, revenge, and/or financial gain) behind misbehaviour, addressing environmental factors that trigger or exacerbate misbehaviour, and challenging organisational policies that condone or encourage misbehaviour.
6.	A systematic review was conducted to identify literature that provides evidence as to the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing the incidence and/or impact of dysfunctional customer behaviour. After screening, only 2 studies met criteria for inclusion in the review, and 24 studies offered targets for intervention. This highlights a need for further intervention in this area.
7.	Two interventions that focused on reducing dysfunctional customer behaviour were identified: 1. **Safer Bars** employee and manager training program 2. **Social Mindfulness for Stress Reduction** employee program Both programs were demonstrated to have a positive effect on customer behaviour and employee outcomes.
8.	Four strategic directions were identified to reduce dysfunctional customer behaviour and its impact on employees: 1. **Modifications to the customer-service environment;** 2. **Increased workplace support;** 3. **Specialised customer-service training; and** 4. **Emotional regulation training for customer-facing employees.**

Introduction

Dysfunctional customer behaviour in the retail industry is pervasive.

The effects can be devastating for an individual's physical, psychological and social health and present significant issues for an organisation. The frequency and impact of these behaviours are often underestimated but are seen in absenteeism rates, workers' compensation costs, workplace morale and turnover.

An annual survey instigated by the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA) in 2015 noted an alarming rise in customer abuse and violent behaviour towards workers in retail and fast food. In response, the Respect & Resilience Project was established as a collaboration between the Community Impact team at icare, the SDA, Menzies Health Institute of Queensland at Griffith University, employers, employees and government agencies. The project aims to investigate and co-design a number of customer, employer and employee led, sustainable solutions to reduce the number and severity of incidents experienced by staff.

The team undertook an evidence based systematic review of available literature to better understand the issue, measures and tools for evaluation and potential interventions. To explore the issue from different perspectives, employee and employer focus groups were held with staff members from relevant retail organisations.

Initial findings from the systematic literature review, the SDA survey results and feedback from the focus groups were presented to a cross section of employers, employees, unions, government agencies and academics at a roundtable event on 24 October 2018. Participants were asked to record their thoughts and ideas and complete empathy maps while listening to research insights and build on this data to create ideas and potential solutions. This report summarises the findings from this process along with results from the literature review and focus groups.

Systematic review solutions summary table

	Focus area	Potential Solutions
1.	Workplace modifications	**Changes to physical elements of the customer-service environment, for example:** • Wider aisles • Fewer bottlenecks • Intuitive layouts to avoid confusion • Well-marked queues • Highly visible security cameras • Sound and lighting
2.	Workplace support	Research suggested **four** different approaches to bolstering workplace support: 1. **Employee empowerment and supporting employee autonomy** • Include employees in any decision-making that influences or shapes their role, work environment, training, or policies. • Allow employees to respond to customers in a way that reinforces their own personal boundaries (e.g. stating that the customer's behaviour is not acceptable). • Allow employees the flexibility to take a short break after a negative customer interaction. 2. **Formalised support and social sharing of incidents** Formal support systems can take the form of mentoring programs, post-incident debriefing sessions, and team building activities. • Introduce mentoring systems that help novice employees develop the skills in dealing with customer aggression. • Provide debriefing sessions that are management-endorsed. • Encourage team building activities that focus on the social and emotional support of co-workers. 3. **Rejection of a "customer is always right" ideology** • Develop explicit procedures for employees and supervisors to use when the customer isn't right. • Introduce formal and informal policies, procedures, and practices that support employees. • Promote an organisational culture of low tolerance of dysfunctional customer behaviour. 4. **Strategies to communicate a 'zero' tolerance culture** • Display In-store signage. (e.g. aggression will not be tolerated)

		• Introduce effective advertising campaigns. • Impose limits on bad behaviour. • Provide guidance to staff on how to moderate behaviour. • Remove misbehaving customers temporarily or permanently (blacklisting) from retail environment. • Introduce legal deterrents.
5.	Specialised customer-service training	Research suggests employees be provided with **focused customer-service training** that: • Reduces preventable service failures. • Improves employees' confidence in responding to problematic customers. To support these objectives, training in the following areas is recommended: **Communication** • Active listening • Interpersonal skills • Help-seeking skills **Problem solving skills** • Managing customer anger • De-escalation • Negotiation
6.	Emotional regulation training for customer-facing employees	In addition to customer service training, employees should be provided with **training in emotional regulation and coping strategies to support the development and maintenance of psychologically healthy and empathic customer responses**. Training should embrace a prosocial approach to customers and focus on equipping employees with the skills to master and change their emotional reaction to dysfunctional customer behaviour, including: • Identifying when customers are struggling to communicate their needs; • Recognising when customer displays are not personally directed; • Recognising and responding to emotional displays in themselves and others effectively; • Identifying cognitive rumination in self and how to disrupt this behaviour.

Next steps

All stakeholders agree that there is an issue and we must work together to act on this. At the design workshop, there was a clear consensus to eliminate and reduce dysfunctional customer behaviour towards workers in the industry, this requires a multifaceted approach. Ongoing communication and collaboration will be key.

What we're doing:

In the upcoming weeks:

We will begin the process of collaborating with key stakeholders to develop an intervention addressing dysfunctional customer behaviour based on the findings and the four identified solution directions.

We will be calling on interested stakeholders to help develop a clear direction in the form of an industry statement.

We will consult with industry about ways to stay connected to ensure ongoing communication and idea sharing.

In the upcoming months:

It is clear there is a lack of research in this area. We will work closely with stakeholders and community to develop the intervention and materials and prepare for the roll-out of the intervention pilot. As interventions are developed and trialled with organisations, we will monitor and report on the findings to all stakeholders to maintain a working group on this issue.

What you can do:

In the upcoming weeks:

Read, discuss, and share this report around your organisation and with your employees.

Open a dialogue about the types of dysfunctional customer behaviour your employees are facing, what it means to them, and what you could do to make a difference.

Consider and discuss the solutions directions outlined in this report and how these might be applied in your organisation.

Commit your organisation to initiating positive change to address the frequency and impact of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

Findings from the SDA survey data

The SDA launched their campaign '*No One Deserves a Serve*" to stop customer abuse and violence towards retail and fast food workers. The campaign is aimed at increasing employee awareness and aimed at changing public attitudes and behaviour.

The campaign was started because:

- This issue consistently ranks in the top three safety issues across retail and fast food in surveys conducted from 2015-2018 with over 20,000 workers over that time.
- A detailed survey specifically on customer abuse in 2017 of about 6,000 retail and fast food workers found:
  - 88% of respondents have been subjected to verbal abuse from a customer in the last 12 months.
  - 24% of respondents subjected to verbal abuse say it happens every week.
  - 15% of respondents have experienced physical violence from a customer.
  - 63% of workers said abusive customers had generally been known to them.
  - 11% of respondents said the incidents of customer abuse or violence involved behaviour by a customer that was sexual in nature.
  - 63% of workers had reported incidents to their line manager/store manager.
  - Perpetrators are all genders. However, there are clear trends that show female workers experience customer abuse more than male workers.
  - Higher incidences of abuse (90-93%) occurred in service departments such as door-greeters, drive-thru, cashier, front end, customer service departments.

Radio advertisements from the *'No One Deserves a Serve'* campaign can be heard here https://au.awp.autotask.net/5/filelink/cf2zy-y2rrfw-5vc4guof

- In both the 2017 and 2018 surveys, the SDA also asked if workers reported such incidents to their employer. In both years about 54% of workers reported incident/s of customer abuse and violence to their employer.
- Notably in 2017, only 43% of workers said they were satisfied with the response or actions taken by the company when they reported customer abuse or violence. This compares to 2018, where 64.3% were satisfied with the response from the company.

The SDA believe the effects of customer abuse and violence are far ranging and underestimated; especially the effects of verbal abuse. They can be temporary to permanent and can also be life threatening. There are clear physical, psychological and social effects on individuals' overall health and wellbeing and effects on workplace morale.

Systematic literature review

Background

In the retail and fast food sector, dysfunctional customer behaviour towards service employees is a prevalent problem that can have serious physical and psychological health impacts.

As detailed on the previous page, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA) report that more than 85% of surveyed members have experienced verbal abuse from a customer in the last year, 15% have experienced physical customer violence, and 11% sexual harassment or abuse [1]. Similar prevalence rates have been obtained from frontline hospitality employees, with 82% reporting witnessing or being the target of customer violence or aggression in the previous 12 months [2]. These experiences can be a daily occurrence [1, 3, 4], with employees in some service industries (e.g., call centres) experiencing an average of seven episodes of customer aggression per working day [5].

The pervasiveness of misbehaviour towards customer-facing service employees has led researchers to conclude that it is "systemically present within the service economy" [6, p. 769]. As such, it has been described as the norm in service encounters, as opposed to the exception [7, 8].

Definitions of negative customer behaviour

Dysfunctional customer behaviour can be considered on a spectrum from low to high intensity acts (see Figure 1). Low intensity behaviour includes being rude, disrespectful, or unpleasant to the customer service employee, while high intensity includes a range of aggressive acts. The latter can be divided into verbal aggression, such as making illegitimate complaints, belittling, yelling, sexual harassment or threatening the service employee, and physical aggression, which can include throwing or breaking things, pushing, shoving, or striking the employee in an act of violence, or criminal acts, such as in an armed hold up, sexual assault.

INCIVILITY	VERBAL ABUSE	PHYSICAL AGGRESSION
Low intensity	**High intensity**	**High intensity**
Rude or uncivil behaviour	Shouting or swearing	Hostile or aggressive acts
Dismissive or critical comments	Name-calling	Throwing objects
Speaking over an employee	Threatening	Destruction of employees' property
Questioning competence	Repeatedly Interrupting	Violence or assault
	Inappropriate remarks	

Figure 1. The spectrum of dysfunctional customer behaviour encompasses low to high intensity acts.
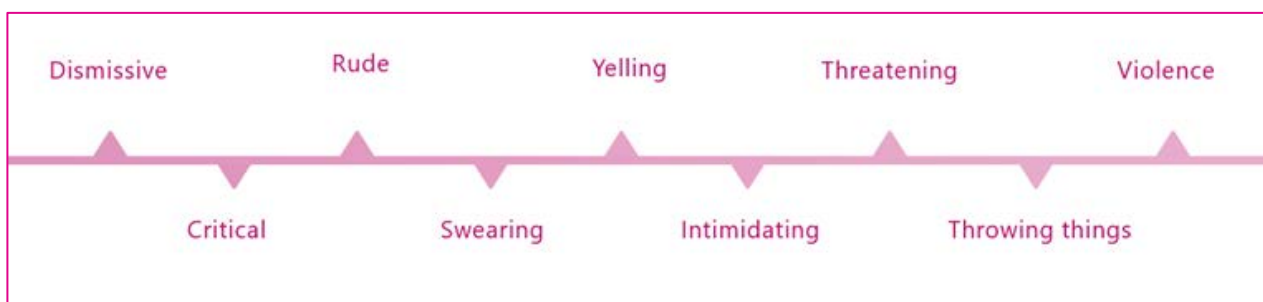
Impacts

Exposure to uncivil, verbally abusive, or aggressive customers is a common occurrence for retail and fast-food service employees. Sustained exposure to even low-level dysfunctional customer behaviour is associated with negative employee outcomes. Numerous studies document the short- and long-term physical, psychological, and occupational consequences for frontline service employees [5, 6, 9-12].

Serving uncivil, abusive or aggressive customers can cause immediate emotional reaction for employees, negatively altering their mood, and generating feelings of depression, anxiety, or anger that can last well beyond the work day [5, 13]. In cases where dysfunctional customer behaviour has been extreme or violent, these feelings can manifest into long lasting symptoms of stress disorder (i.e., flashbacks, anxiety or sleeplessness) [2].

Dysfunctional customer behaviour has also been linked to increased emotional job demands. Employees facing difficult customers must increase their emotional self-regulation efforts to produce appropriate, but feigned, emotional displays [2]. These emotional demands deplete the coping resources available to employees often leading to emotional exhaustion and burnout [14].

Research into dysfunctional customer behaviour shows that it negatively impacts employees' attitudes towards work. For example, research suggests that absenteeism, turnover intentions, job dissatisfaction, and job performance may all be adversely affected. Employees who face dysfunctional customer behaviour experience lower job satisfaction, lower organisational commitment, higher absenteeism [5], and reduced morale and motivation [2].

Antecedents of dysfunctional customer behaviour

Organisational policies

Researchers draw attention to the customer is always right ideology as a leading organisational contributor to dysfunctional customer behaviour [2, 12]. An open acceptance of customer behaviour during service promotes an unequal balance of power between the customer and service employee, increasing the risk of exposure to misbehaviour [5, 7]. Such an imbalance suggests customers may behave freely, while service workers must accommodate this, unable to protect themselves from such behaviour.

Customer perceptions & motives

Customer perceptions and motives provide some explanation of 'why' customers misbehave [15]. Research suggests that customers can be motivated to act out when they are dissatisfied

with the service encounter. Particularly, when customers feel they have experienced injustice or have been disrespected, or the interaction has failed to meet other goals (e.g. financial gain or retaliation) [15]. Daunt & Harris [15] identify three inter-connected motives of dysfunctional customer behaviour:

Ego Motives

- Internal (feeling of self-worth about oneself)
- External (feeling respected by others)

Financial Motives

- Obtaining refund or reduced cost of product/service

Revenge Motives

- Retaliation for a perceived wrongdoing (from staff or the organisation)
- E.g., Punishing an employee for not giving them what they want

Environmental/contextual factors

The physical environment of the workplace can 'trigger' or exacerbate dysfunctional customer behaviour. When store layouts are confusing, cramped, or otherwise frustrating, customers can react with an emotional response that becomes misdirected towards service employees. Examples include:

Physical layout

- Width of the store isles
- Size of customer waiting/queue areas

Customer service context

- Waiting/queue times
- Availability of staff
- Exposure to other dysfunctional customer behaviour

General atmosphere and ambiance

- Music volume
- Colour selection
- Temperature

Methods used in researching dysfunctional customer behaviour

Three sources of information were used to answer the question:

> *"What interventions or approaches can reduce the incidence, severity, or impact of dysfunctional customer behaviour?"*

A systematic review of the research literature, a manual search of the grey (unpublished) literature, and a series of focus groups with customer-facing retail and fast-food employees and managers.

Systematic review

A systematic review was conducted to identify studies that address the research question. Studies conducted in transferable work settings were included so that a range of customer service contexts were examined. However, health care settings (patient aggression) were

excluded, as were interventions that targeted the consumption of alcohol (hospitality sectors were otherwise included).

The process for screening the literature is shown in Figure 2. After screening, only 2 studies met criteria for inclusion in the review and 24 additional studies offered or recommended targets for intervention (although these papers did not provide evidence as to the effectiveness of the recommended interventions).

Figure 2. Systematic review process.

STUDIES IDENTIFIED	STUDIES INCLUDED	STUDIES INCLUDED	STUDIES INCLUDED	INTERVENTION STUDIES
20,014	298	80	26	2
▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
SEARCHING	TITLE SCREENING	ABSTRACT SCREENING	FULL-TEXT SCREENING	RESULTS ▼
				ADDITIONAL STUDIES TARGETS FOR INTERVERTION
				24

Grey literature

A grey literature search was conducted to explore programs published in private, government, or other publicly accessible reports. However, this search revealed only fact sheets or frameworks for assessing and responding to risk generated by customer aggression. No interventions were identified.

Focus groups

Prior to the roundtable event, four focus groups were conducted over two days in October 2018, with frontline employees and managers from:

- Fast food
- Petrol and Liquor
- Small retailers
- Large retailers

The focus groups used a semi-structured protocol and ran for approximately one-hour, with groups containing between three and seven participants.

Participants were asked about their experiences of customer aggression, individual or social coping skills, the role of co-workers or supervisors in supporting the employee or reducing customer aggression, current strategies in practice, and any ideas or recommendations for the design of an intervention.

In all groups, the facilitator began by explaining the purpose and necessary definitions, then used the questions and prompts to generate discussion, and guided the conversation towards actions, strategies, or solutions that were found to be effective or ineffective in participants' workplaces.

Systematic literature review findings

Participants, contexts, and design

Research participants represented all genders and working ages, across the US, UK, Europe, and Asia. The studies reviewed included participants across a range of customer-service industries.

| Call centre | Hospitality | Bars | Hotels | Sales | IT Support |

Intervention studies

While additional strategic directions were identified based on the review, there were only two interventions that focused on reducing dysfunctional customer behaviour that were evaluated in the literature. These were:

- **Safer Bars** employee and manager training program [16]
- **Social Mindfulness for Stress Reduction** employee program [13]

Both programs were found to have a positive effect on customer behaviour and employee outcomes.

Safer bars training program

The Safer Bars training program [16] offered a single 3-hour group-training session for customer-facing bar, door and security, and management employees working in large-sized (300+ patrons) licensed venues.

The training focused on early-identification, prevention, and management of customer aggression. Six topics were addressed:

1. Noticing and responding to the early signs of aggression
2. Using the team effectively to respond to situations as they unfold
3. Minimising personal triggers to stay calm and in control of situations
4. Using effective body language
5. Problem-solving training
6. Legal issues relevant to the bar context.

Evaluation of the Safer Bars program found it effective in reducing the incidence and severity of customer aggression in the venues where it was trialled. Further, all participants of the training (including managers and experienced staff) showed a significant improvement in their understanding of the prevention and management of customer aggression.

Social mindfulness for stress reduction

The *Social Mindfulness for Stress Reduction* approach developed by Song et al. [13] focused on stimulating employees' empathetic responses to difficult customers to reduce the emotional impact of customer mistreatment.

Two thought exercises were conducted daily for 7-days with staff surveyed four times a day:

Recall of Prosocial Action

- Employees were instructed to describe a recent time when they had helped someone or did something for a good cause, and how they felt afterwards.

Perspective Taking

- Employees were instructed to describe a rude customer call they'd had the previous day and to think about the problem from the customers' perspective.

Evaluation of the approach found it effective in reducing incidences of customer mistreatment and maintaining employee wellbeing. Employees who participated in the intervention showed less negative mood, and less rumination after their shift had finished.

Strategic directions for intervention

From the studies reviewed, four strategic directions were identified to reduce dysfunctional customer behaviour and its impact on employees:

1. Modifications to the customer-service environment;
2. Increased workplace support;
3. Specialised customer-service training; and
4. Emotional regulation training for customer-facing employees.

The systematic review provides evidence that changes to these areas have an impact on the severity, incidence, or impact of dysfunctional customer behaviour. However, these have not been formally evaluated in a structured intervention or compared to one another to determine which has the greatest impact on dysfunctional customer behaviour.

1. Workplace modifications

Studies identified physical elements of the customer-service environment that could be changed to positively impact customer behaviour [17-19]. Wider aisles, fewer bottlenecks, and avoiding confusion by using intuitive layouts and well-marked queues were all identified to reduce the frustration that customers feel, and in turn, reduce the likelihood and severity of dysfunctional customer behaviour [17, 19].

Highly visible security cameras were also promoted to reduce dysfunctional customer behaviour, especially concerning overt displays of aggression, as these make it clear to customers that their behaviour is being monitored [18]. Research has found that drawing attention to customers' behaviour increases their self-conscious, decreasing the likelihood that they will engage in extremely aggressive or socially unacceptable behaviour [18, 19]. In one study where cameras were installed, staff indicated that the frequency of dysfunctional customer behaviour remained unchanged, but the severity of customer aggression was reduced [18].

This is not to discount the important of workplace modifications and design. These measures are high level controls in the WHS hierarchy of control and have been shown in practice to be better in the long run to eliminate or reduce risk to employees.

2. Workplace support

Organisational and workplace support of customer-facing employees was identified as an important buffer of the negative effects of dysfunctional customer behaviour, and an important strategic direction for intervention [14, 18-33]. Employees who feel highly supported by their organisation have been shown to experience less rumination and emotional stress following customer mistreatment [33], and better emotional regulation strategies [32].

Research suggested four different approaches to bolstering workplace support:

- Employee empowerment and supporting employee autonomy;
- Formalised support and social sharing of incidents; and
- Rejection of a "customer is always right" ideology
- Management training to provide support

2.1 Employee empowerment

Simple things can be built into the job to support and empower employees facing difficult or problematic customers.

Beginning with organisational policy and procedure, research suggests that employees be included in any decision-making that influences or shapes their role, work environment, training, or policies. Employees who contribute to these decisions are shown to be less vulnerable to the negative wellbeing impacts of dysfunctional customer behaviour, in part, because they feel that they have some control over their work environment. Participation in such decisions also communicates to employees that the organisation trusts and supports them to make decisions, which also offers a sense of control, and increased self-belief.

During an incident of dysfunctional customer behaviour, allowing employees to respond to the customer in a way that reinforces their own personal boundaries (e.g. stating that the customer's behaviour is not acceptable) can reduce the severity of behaviour, and its impact on the employee well-being. Similarly, allowing staff the flexibility to take a short break after a negative customer interaction can be enough for them re-orient themselves; thereby reducing the impact of the event on their mood, and restoring a positive attitude for their next customer.

2.2 Formalised social support

Social sharing or 'venting' to others can have positive effects on well-being as it allows employees to share the burden of dysfunctional customer behaviour with supportive others [20, 21, 28]. However, social sharing can also increase the emotional exhaustion that employees feel and contribute to earlier burnout [26, 33].

Formalised social support systems can offer the benefits of social sharing, while reducing any potential detriment. Formal support systems can take the form of mentoring programs, post-incident debriefing sessions, and team building activities [18, 19, 21-24, 27, 31-33].

EMPLOYEES SOCIALLY SHARE TO:

Talk about difficult customers
Normalise their experiences through others' stories
Reach out for emotional support

- Mentoring systems help novice employees develop the skills in dealing with customer aggression with a support person to learn from and rely on during difficult interactions [23, 24, 27, 31-33].
- Debriefing sessions that are management-endorsed can increase productive forms of social sharing and reduce the impact of difficult customers [18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 26].
- Team building activities that focus on the social and emotional support of co-workers may be an effective strategy, as evidence suggests that co-worker support has a larger impact than supervisor support in reducing stress immediately after incidents [20].

2.3   The customer is always right

It can be difficult to demonstrate support for customer-facing employees in organisations that promote a 'customer is always right' philosophy. For customers, this philosophy encourages a sense of entitlement and allows abuse of the system, while in staff, this creates conflict when the customer is being dishonest, irrational, or extreme in behaviour [18, 19, 20, 33].

How can this be resolved?

Develop explicit procedures for when the customer isn't right

Formal and informal policies, procedures, and practices that support employees, and differentiate service failure from customer mistreatment, can communicate that the organisation cares about their employees [18, 23, 30, 32, 33].

Promote an organisational culture of low tolerance of dysfunctional customer behaviour

Workplaces with a 'zero' or 'very low' tolerance of dysfunctional customer behaviour were reported to be less likely to suffer from a customer abuse problem [18]. The following strategies were recommended to communicate a low tolerance culture [20, 25, 29]:

- In-store signage
- Advertising campaigns
- Imposing limits on bad behaviour
    - Instruction from staff to moderate dysfunctional customer behaviour
    - Removing misbehaving customers temporarily or permanently (blacklisting)
    - Legal deterrents

Situations where conflict emerged were reported to be most damaging when coupled with a lack of management support [18, 19].

2.4   Management training

Management training can be a key mechanism for enhancing the level of support available to employees in their workplace.

Employees tend to refer a customer to their manager when their own strategies for coping fail [21]; that is, when they are no longer able to sustain the emotional effort required to continue the interaction. Management actions at this point can substantially change how employees feel about the interaction after the incident has come to a close. Research demonstrates that direct supervisor support can reduce the adverse emotional and wellbeing effects of customer verbal aggression, disliked customers, ambiguous customer expectations and emotional exhaustion [29], and reduce the negative effects of emotional exhaustion on employee life satisfaction, job turnover [35], and burnout [27].

The following skills-based training areas were recommended for management [18, 20, 23, 25-27, 31, 32]:

- Customer management skills that:
    - Demonstrate support for frontline employees
    - De-escalate problem customers
- Informal counselling skills
    - Provide one-on-one support directly after incidents
    - Provide debriefing and reflection to improve learning from incidents
- Team building
    - Promote co-worker support after incidents
    - Encourage co-workers to back each other up during incidents

3. Customer service training

Additional customer-service training for employees was also identified as a strategic approach for reducing the incidence and severity of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

The effect of training operates through two mechanisms that: 1) Limits preventable service failures (that may trigger or motivate aggression), and 2) Improves employees' confidence in responding to customers [14, 28]. Employees who were confident in their skills showed better coping when facing the demands of problem customers and were less likely to experience negative emotions after the interaction [14, 23, 26]. Research suggests that specialised service training addressing how to respond to and de-escalate customer aggression should also be provided to frontline employees [23, 28, 35, 36].

The following topics emerged for providing specialised service training to employees:
- Communication
    - Active listening
    - Interpersonal skills
    - Help-seeking skills
- Problem solving skills
    - Managing customer anger
    - De-escalation
    - Negotiation

3.1 Implementation of training

The manner in which occupational training programs are implement has been shown to influence their acceptance and efficacy [18, 19, 23, 24, 27]. As demonstrated in the Safer Bars evaluation, implementation of the training program was important to its perceived value by employees and managers. Field notes, videotaped sessions, and role plays were recommended specifically for management training to improve their capacity to intervene effectively [25]. For both frontline employees and managers, training was preferred when it used:

1. Realistic case studies or video clips of what to do (or what not to do) in a scenario
2. Interactive activities (such as role plays)
3. Guest speakers (experienced staff or experts)
4. Workbooks to support retention (rather than handouts that simply repeated content)

Training should be provided regularly in high turnover industries to support inexperienced staff and allow experienced staff to refresh their skills and support and interact with newer staff, as social sharing at training events was viewed as an opportunity to learn from others' experience [21, 24, 28]. If training or support is not provided, employees tend to develop their own informal, and often negative, tactics for coping with dysfunctional customer behaviour [19].

4. Emotional regulation training

The importance of providing employees with emotional regulation and coping strategies that help minimise the negative consequences of performing emotional labour in the face of dysfunctional customer behaviour is consistently emphasised by researchers in this area [13, 17, 19-24, 31, 32, 34, 37-39].

Many organisations expect employees to abide by explicit or implicit display rules (e.g., 'service with a smile' is a common display rule). Emotional labour occurs when an employee is required to expend emotional energy to modify their outward emotional display (also known as emotional acting) to abide by the display rules expected in their role. To perform their role, employees can engage in two types of emotional labour, namely, surface acting and deep acting.

Employee	EMOTIONAL LABOUR	EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES

Employee → **DISPLAY RULES** (E.g. service with a smile) → **EMOTIONAL LABOUR**

SURFACE ACTING: MODIFY EXPRESSIONS

Continuously expend high levels of emotional energy needed to display inauthentic, conflicting emotions.

DEEP ACTING: MODIFY FEELINGS

Initial energy needed to alter felt emotions.

→ **EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES** Health Well-Being Occupational

During surface acting, employees attempt to change their emotional expressions to follow display rules, generally to avoid negative consequences (e.g. to avoid getting in trouble or losing their job). In so doing, these employees have little regard for the emotional authenticity of the display – for example, a frustrated employee may attempt to look concerned, but will continue to feel frustrated. In contrast, when deep acting, employees try to alter how they feel to meet the required emotion. When faced with a difficult customer, an employee who is trained in deep acting instead of just trying to look concerned, might instead try to see the customers' perspective.

Surface acting is a more common strategy but has been associated with a host of negative outcomes for employees [19, 34, 38, 39], including:

- Greater incidence of customer mistreatment,
- Feeling more emotionally exhausted,
- Using more negative coping strategies, and
- Feeling less satisfied with work

Research shows that inauthentic emotional displays (used in surface acting) can escalate aggressive customers, as customers can feel their concerns are not being taken seriously.

In contrast, deep acting has been shown to reduce the incidence and severity of dysfunctional customer behaviour and its effects on employee outcomes. Deep acting is more effective than surface acting in [23, 32, 33]:

- Reducing mistreatment,
- Preventing unnecessary rumination, and
- Protecting staff from the negative effects of customer mistreatment

Deep acting can be encouraged through a supportive work culture that promotes the idea that a misbehaving customer, while not always right, is still only human and should be treated with empathy.

More generally, training in emotional intelligence, specifically perspective taking, can also be used to foster understanding of the customer's point-of-view, and thereby reduce the incidence, severity, and employee-impacts of dysfunctional customer behaviour [12, 20, 22-24, 31, 32, 34]. Emotional intelligence training can help foster deep acting strategies and can support employees in:

- Identifying when customers are struggling to communicate their needs [22] and not taking these interactions personally [13, 17, 20, 26].

- Recognising and responding effectively to emotional displays in themselves and others [17, 20].
- Identifying cognitive rumination in self and how to disrupt this [22-23].
- Presenting positive emotional displays that bolster customer satisfaction and staff wellbeing [21, 22, 34].

Emotional intelligence training can be especially important for workers who have not previously worked in customer service roles before and who may struggle to produce authentic displays of care and concern.

Focus group findings

Customer-facing employee & manager experiences

Four focus groups were conducted across two days, in October 2018, with customer-facing employees and managers to better understand frontline experiences of dysfunctional customer behaviour, its effects on well-being and attitudes towards work, and strategies for reducing such behaviour. The findings are outlined below. The findings from the focus groups confirmed those drawn from the literature review.

Customer aggression

Prompt

Focus group participants were first prompted to discuss their own experiences of dysfunctional customer behaviour and how these experiences affect them, as well as what forms they found most stressful.

Findings

In line with known statistics of customer abuse and aggression, every focus group participant was able to recall multiple examples of customer mistreatment and misbehaviour.

The reported behaviours represented the full spectrum of customer incivility and aggression. Almost all participants cited verbal aggression (particularly employee-directed profanity) as the most frequently faced, stressful, and personally affecting form of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

Employees facing verbally aggressive or abusive customers reported an immediate negative impact on mood that generally lasted the rest of their day. Where aggression took the form of a personal attack, the effects on employee's mood, self-esteem, and self-confidence were more enduring. Where an incident of dysfunctional customer behaviour was severe or extreme (i.e., physical violence), ongoing consequences to mental health and wellbeing were reported (e.g., hypervigilance, fear and anxiety at work).

Changeable behaviour

Prompts

Focus group participants were prompted to examine their own behaviour during a negative customer interaction and identify actions that they see to reduce the severity of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

Findings

Most focus group participants reported feeling helpless during negative customer interactions and acknowledged a need for training in recognising the early signs of customer aggression and how to respond to this swiftly and effectively. Examples of training included: body language communication skills training, social problem-solving skills, and de-escalation training. Participants felt that such training would increase their confidence when dealing with problematic customers and contribute to reducing the frequency and severity of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

Social support

Prompts

Focus group participants were prompted to identify the socially supportive actions of their co-workers and supervisors/management. Prompts for both during and after a negative customer interaction were used.

Findings

Staff facing verbally aggressive customers reported doing so in isolation from their co-workers or managers, often attributing this to inadequate staffing. When asked about the actions of their co-workers or managers during a negative customer interaction, most participants reported limited intervention from those around them.

Managers were often unresponsive to situations involving customer abuse or aggression, with some employees reporting that they had to request management intervention multiple times. In a lot of cases where management did respond, participants reported that the response was inappropriate to the situation. Often, management actions were perceived as undermining or demeaning for the employee originally dealing with the customer, as management often gave-in to customer demands, overruling frontline workers who were required to follow organisational policies and procedures.

Almost all participants recognised a need for management to receive additional training on how to support employees facing problematic customers. Participants felt there needed to be greater recognition that the employee was not automatically at fault and that incidents of customer aggression (and the toll it takes on employee wellbeing and morale) should be taken seriously.

Following a negative customer interaction, participants suggested that they could be better supported by their managers by being allowed to take a short break, or a formal debriefing session. Many employees reported informally debriefing with co-workers after an incident, or when this wasn't possible, with family or friends after their shift. Being able to discuss a negative interaction with supportive co-workers offered employees validation and the opportunity to share strategies for recovery.

Practical approaches & strategies

Prompts

Moving towards the close of each focus group, participants were asked to think about their workplace's current approaches to dysfunctional customer behaviour and the strategies they think would be helpful in reducing such behaviour, including what they would hope to see in an intervention.

Findings

While some employees suggested that customers were unchangeable, with misbehaviour a symptom of society, most participants were optimistic that customer behaviour could be changed, and misbehaviour reduced. When prompted to discuss ideas for reducing customer mistreatment of employees, participants were adamant that a zero-tolerance policy was needed and that repeat offenders should be removed or banned from the store. However, most participants reported that the "customer is always right" ideology prevented policies that would penalise dysfunctional customer behaviour and protect staff. Rejecting the "customer is always right" ideology would allow employees to be more assertive and autonomous in their role. Most participants believed that the impact of customer aggression would be reduced if

they were able to remove themselves from situations where a customer made them feel unsafe at work.

Focusing on elements for a potential intervention, participants reiterated the need for training – for both employees and management. Participants suggested that providing training in listening and communication skills, problem solving skills, negotiation, managing customer anger, and de-escalation would provide both management and staff with greater confidence when facing problematic customers and contribute to reducing the severity of such misbehaviour.

Across all focus groups, participants attributed their recovery from a negative customer interaction to their ability to share their experience with supportive co-workers or friends and suggested that this could be formalised, and management could take a more proactive role in this.

Participant design – Roundtable Workshop

Design approach

This report and the recommendations it outlines are the result of a collaborative process based on human-centred design. Human-centred design is a practice of design that seeks to explore problems and create solutions that are based on the universal human needs of the stakeholders involved.

A core principle of human-centred design is co-design (collaborative design). Co-design means that all relevant parties in a problem situation participate in the design process. Co-design is critical in ensuring that a problem is well understood before attempts to solve it are made, and that those who have the power to progress a problem are invested in its solution by having been involved throughout.

Design process

Initial findings from the Systematic Literature Review were presented to a cross section of employers, employees, unions, government agencies and academics at a roundtable event on 24 October 2018.

Participants were also informed of the results from the SDA survey on the issue and feedback from a series of focus groups and were asked to record their thoughts and ideas and complete empathy maps while listening to research insights.

Participants were then divided into six design teams and asked to reflect on their notes, discuss as a group and produce a short list of key insights. These insights were then converted into six 'How might we …… questions' (HMW). HMW questions are short questions that launch brainstorms. They are designed to create a seed statement that is broad enough to encompass a wide range of solutions but narrow enough that the team has some helpful boundaries.

The six HMW questions were:

1. *How Might We Modify the Workplace to Ensure a Safer Environment for All*
2. *How Might We Influence Community Attitudes to Improve Customer Behaviour*
3. *How Might We Empower Workers So That They Have a Sense of Job Control*
4. *How Might We Improve Process and Policy So That Both Worker and Customer Are Treated Fairly*
5. *How Might We Train Staff Members to Effectively Deal with Customer Aggression*
6. *How Might We Better Support Workers in Dealing with Effects of Aggression*

Each design team was given an HMW question to work on and brainstormed solution ideas. The teams then moved on to add their ideas to another question until all HMW questions were answered. Solution ideas were then themed and prioritised using the idea selection canvas. As each group moved at their own pace, some did not reach the prioritising stage; top suggestions are provided, where a decision was reached.

The participants' ideas and thoughts are represented as an overall summary from all participating in this section, and responses provided in this process are included as an appendix.

Design workshop summary

Recommendations to address the prevalence and consequences of dysfunctional customer behaviour made during participant design discussions with customer-service employees reflected those of the research literature.

Participants focused on increased workplace support and training to enable and empower employees to respond to problematic customers in an empathetic but psychologically healthy way. The organisational provision of comprehensive customer-service training (including communication, conflict resolution, and aggression de-escalation training), emotional intelligence training, and emotional regulation training for employees was highly recommended as a means of empowerment, decreasing employee vulnerability to dysfunctional customer behaviour, and improving well-being following a negative service interaction.
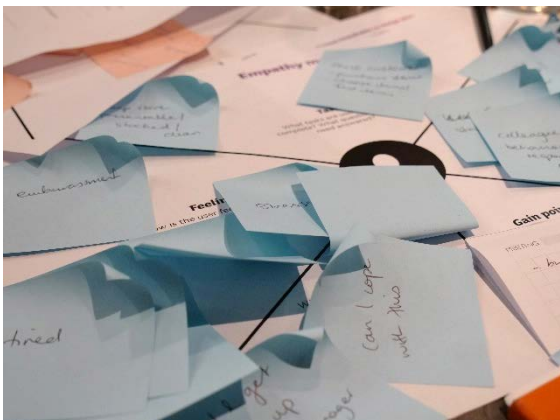
Modifications to the physical service environment that promote greater customer accountability and awareness, and employee safety and wellbeing were also recommended; e.g. customer barriers, visible security cameras, educational signage.

Organisational policies and procedures were emphasised as targets for change, with participants suggesting a move toward policy inclusive of employees in decisions that influence their roles, supportive of employee autonomy and discretion during and after responding to dysfunctional customer behaviour, and definitive in how dysfunctional behaviour is to be resolved.

Finally, for wider impact, participants suggested the implementation of educational campaigns and legislation changes that reinforce the effects of dysfunctional customer behaviour and a zero-tolerance approach.

How might we: Train staff members to effectively deal with customer aggression?

The first *How Might We* scenario addressed employee training to effectively deal with customer aggression. Three main themes emerged, focusing on the implementation of:

Workplace Support	Communication & Interpersonal Skills Training	Education & Training Implementation

Workplace support incorporated recommendations that aimed to reduce employees' vulnerability to customer aggression through social support and empowerment. Providing employees with the confidence to manage problematic customer interactions in ways that reduce the severity of the incident and support their well-being – largely through social demonstration and normalisation.

Communication and interpersonal skill training are an important aspect of employee empowerment and was suggested to be much needed by customer-service employees to de-escalate problematic customer behaviour. Such skills may enable the employee to reduce the severity and frequency of dysfunctional customer behaviour through demonstrated empathy.

Participants also recommended a range of educational and learning techniques and formats they found both effective and engaging. The suggestions focused on providing staff with a selection of resources to apply to the situation.

Top two suggestions - education and training implementation
- Managing *Actual and Potential Aggression* training
- Virtual augmented reality scenarios

How might we: Modify the workplace to ensure a safe environment for all?

The second *How Might We* scenario addressed the environmental issues that could be modified to potentially improve the customer-service experience for both employees and customers. Two main themes, and six sub-themes emerged.

Customer Accountability	Customer Awareness	Customer Comfort

Customer Behaviour

Employee Wellbeing	Employee Safety	Organisational Culture

Employee Wellbeing

Recommendations that directly impacted the behaviour of customers spoke to increasing accountability, customer awareness, and customer comfort. Further responses were focused on maintaining the well-being of employees during service interactions, including employee safety, employee well-being, and organisational culture.

Most of suggestions emphasised a need for increasing customer's perceived accountability during service encounters, ensuring customer comfort, and prioritising employee safety, to reduce prevalence, severity, and impact.

Following this, increasing customer awareness through direct education was suggested to target prevalence, severity, and impact of customer behaviour.

Changing the organisational culture to recognise and support employee safety and wellbeing was also recommended by participants.

How might we: Empower workers so that they have a sense of job control?

The third *How Might We* scenario addressed how organisations could better equip and empower employees in their role. Five themes emerged:

Policy Guidelines	**Workplace Support**	**Education and Training**
Evaluation and Monitoring	**Customer Awareness**	
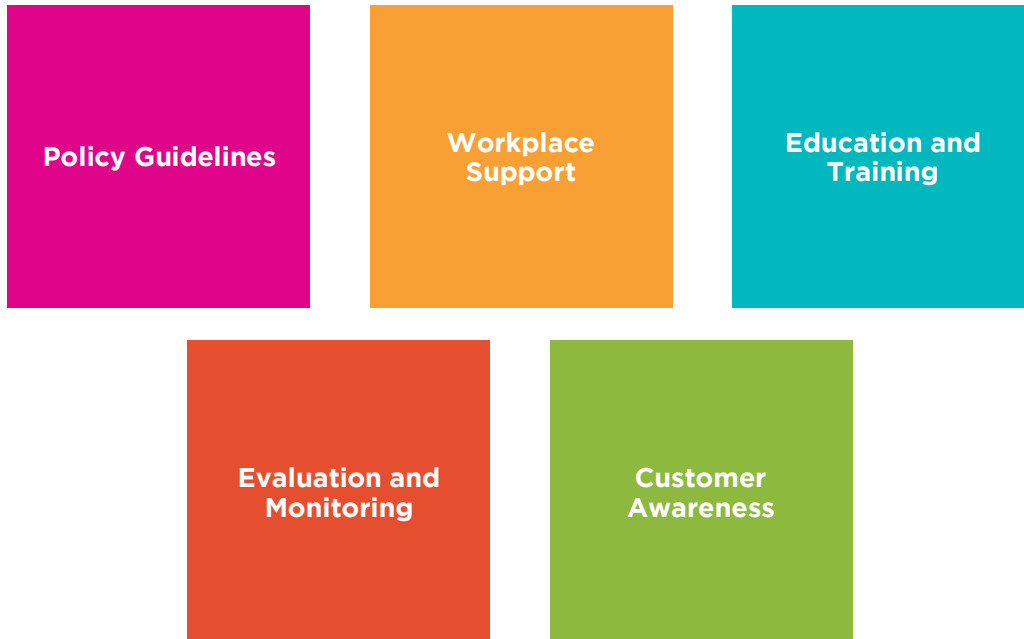
Four themes focused on internal procedures (policy guidelines, workplace support, education and training, and evaluation and monitoring systems) and accounted for many of the suggestions. Another raised element included addressing customer behaviour and accountability. Each of the themes encompassed the support of organisational policies and required employees at all levels to play a major role.

Organisational policy and employee guidelines were a major target of participant recommendations, with suggestions focusing on policy and guidelines that would allow employees to feel confident in their ability to appropriately handle the situation with the support of the organisation. Many participants suggested policy that recognised, rewarded, and reinforced "good" behaviour when facing customers, or policies that allowed flexibility and support for the employee to deescalate problematic customer interactions.

Workplace support also resonated in this context, with participants recognising a need for employees to be involved in organisational decisions about their role, offered and invited to provide organisational and workplace feedback, and supported in adhering to organisational best practice both practically (e.g. reasonable workloads, flexibility) and socially (e.g. peer, supervisor, management demonstration).

Responses also suggested further acknowledgment of the emotional effects of customer aggression and incorporating support systems into organisational policy.

Both education and training, and customer awareness were raised as mechanisms to empower employee job control. Setting parameters in the guidelines that provided the employees with the confidence and skills to effectively manage a negative customer interaction was a key recommendation here. To further support employees it was also recommended that organisations make such guidelines visible to customers.

Final recommendations focused on organisational evaluation and monitoring systems, specifically those that supported communication between frontline employees and upper management to address the impact any organisational policy had on employee wellbeing or customer behaviour. Essentially, a mechanism by which employees could be included in higher-order decisions.

Top two suggestions - policy
- Reward good behaviour (customer & worker)
- Ability to communicate to customer that behaviour is poor

How might we: Improve process and policy so that both the worker and customer are treated fairly?

The fourth *How Might* We scenario addressed organisational policy and procedures perceived by employees to contribute to dysfunctional customer behaviour. Five themes were identified:

Adherence to clear and equitable guidelines	**Workplace Support**	**Education and Training**
Organisational Culture	**Customer Comfort**	

Overwhelmingly, participants favoured the implementation of organisational policy that provided both employees and customers with clear and equitable guidelines surrounding dysfunctional customer behaviour – with an emphasis that once organisational policies were established, it became the responsibility of all employee levels to ensure that were consistently adhered to.

Recommendations regarding monitoring and evaluation systems strongly mirrored the sentiments provided when discussing job control, in communication between frontline employees and upper management to address the impact any organisational policy had on employee wellbeing or customer behaviour.

Policy that promotes a change within the organisational culture to recognise and support employee safety and wellbeing was also recommended in this context.

Organisational policy that requires effective training and support for all customer-facing service staff, and environmental awareness of customer comfort were the final two recommendations made in relation to organisational policy and procedure.

How might we: Better support employees to deal with the negative effects of aggression?

The fifth *How Might* We scenario addressed how employees may be better supported to reduce the negative effects of customer to wellbeing. Four themes emerged from participant recommendations:

Adherence to clear and equitable guidelines	Workplace Support	Education and Training	Organisational Culture

Largely, recommendations focused on providing staff with adequate training and education, delivered across a range of styles. Participants recommended that training addressed the behaviour of the customer (e.g. aggression de-escalation training), but also the emotional reaction of the employee (e.g. emotional resilience, or emotional regulation training). The delivery of training was also important with the suggestion that different styles of learning be accommodated through the provision of different training programs across a range of platforms. The application of multiple technique training may protect the staff from some of the negative consequences of aggression and increase their confidence in applying best practices during an incident of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

Types of training:

- Emotion based training - how to deal with / coping mechanisms
- Emotional intelligence training (empathy & perspective taking)
- Non-verbal communication training
- Resilience training - online solution
- Manager support training / upskill management to enable effective coaching

Methods of training:

- Coaching,
- Workshops
- Experiential
- Buddy system - use team members as subject matter experts to support each other
- One on one training
- Scenario based role play/virtual, AR

Suggestions also focused on workplace support with participants strongly recommending that the organisation provide support and assistance for staff following a negative customer interaction.

Participant recommendations relating to organisational policy and evaluation and monitoring address some of the issues with a top-down approach. Particularly, a disconnect between what frontline customer-service employees are facing and how organisations respond to customer complaints. The emphasis by participants was on a unified approach to customer complaints, through which the organisation demonstrates their stance on misbehaviour and support of employees. Taking such an approach promotes zero tolerance for misbehaviour to customers,

and publicly recognises the experiences and value of employees, increasing their sense of belonging to the organisation and wellbeing.

Top Suggestion – Workplace support
- Implement buddy system

How might we: Influence community attitudes to dysfunctional customer behaviour?

The final *How Might* We scenario addressed how community attitudes toward dysfunctional customer behaviour can be changed. Participant responses can be broken down into three main themes that all directly focused on increasing customers' awareness of their behaviour towards customer-service employees. These were:

Implementing Legislative Changes	Implementing Community Campaigns	Customer Education

Together these themes demonstrate a recognition of a need to go well beyond an organisational level, requiring public awareness campaigns and changes to laws or regulation. The clear majority of responses were focused on changing customer behaviour through implementing community campaigns/customer education which are heavily aligned themes. Many participants felt that this issue needed to be promoted at a societal level to support the stance of the organisations and further supported within legislative frameworks and health and safety regulation.

A community-level (as opposed to a store-level) approach to the issue was also viewed to be necessary. Including community groups in consultations, taking the campaign into schools via education, and promoting the benefits of good customer behaviour were all suggestions of ways the issue could be moved into the community.

Participants also supported the implementation of a strong advertising and social media campaign that established an industry standard. It was suggested that these standards could then be internally supported within each organisation using standardised notices and signage.

Top Two Suggestions – Customer education and information
- Raising community awareness
- Advertising including signage & in stores

Measuring change

In bringing together findings from the literature, and collaborative design sessions, viable strategies and solutions for initiating change have been identified. However, while these approaches are supported by scientific literature, further evaluation of their effects in action is needed.

When implementing an initiative aimed at reducing dysfunctional customer behaviour, a suitable baseline and follow-up measurement should be delivered to evaluate whether change has occurred. The measurement needs to be appropriate to the target for change (e.g. customer behaviour or employee outcomes) and both sensitive and specific enough to capture even subtle differences (most large-scale change occurs incrementally). Even if not participating in a planned intervention, baseline and follow-up measurement should still occur when attempting to alter an aspect of the organisational environment.

Regardless of the solution direction taken, three key metrics of change should be tracked:

- Frontline service employees' experience of customer aggression
- Employee markers of change
- Organisational markers of change

For intervention participants

The first two measurements can be taken using published and validated survey measures in a composite instrument delivered to employees at locations participating in the intervention. The third metric, organisational markers, usually involve objective measures of change, such as reduced turnover, absenteeism, sick leave, or fewer workers' compensation claims.

The dysfunctional customer behaviour survey below has been constructed from scales of customer incivility, abuse, and aggression used in research. These scales are supported by scientific evidence supporting their ability to consistently and accurately measure employees' experience of different types of dysfunctional customer behaviour (see Appendix for example survey).

Survey measures of dysfunctional customer behaviour

Employees are asked about their experience of customer incivility (in the past month), abuse (generally), and aggression/ violence (over the past year).

1. Customers take out anger on employees
2. Customers have taken out their frustrations on employees at my organisation
3. Customers make insulting comments to employees
4. Customers treat employees as if they were inferior or stupid
5. Customers show that they are irritated or impatient
6. Customers do not trust the information that I give them and ask to speak with someone of higher authority
7. Customers are condescending to me
8. Customers make comments that question the competence of employees
9. Customers make comments about my job performance
10. Customers make personal verbal attacks against me
11. Internal or external customers make unreasonable demands
12. Customers often shout at us

13. Customers personally attack us verbally
14. Customers are always complaining about us
15. Customers get angry at us even over minor matters
16. Some customers argue all the time
17. Have you had objects thrown at you while you've been at work?
18. Have you been hit, kicked, grabbed, shoved, or pushed by anyone while at work?
19. Have you been spat on or bitten by anyone while you've been at work?
20. Have you been sworn at while you've been at work?
21. Has your personal property been damaged while you've been at work?
22. Have you been threatened with physical violence while you've been at work?
23. Have you been threatened with a weapon while you've been at work?
24. Have you been threatened with property damage while you've been at work?

Survey measures of employee outcomes

Both incident reporting and the dysfunctional customer behaviour survey provide the incidence and severity of customer abuse and aggression in your organisation. For evaluating change, you need to pair one (or both) of these with a measure of the *impact* on employees. The employee outcomes survey is recommended and includes:

1. Job Stress (Lambert, Hogan, Camp, & Ventura, 2006)
2. Emotional Labour Scale (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003)
3. Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003)
4. Global Service Climate Scale (Schneider, 1998)
5. Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981)
6. Work Wellbeing Questionnaire (Parker & Hyett, 2011)

For organisations attempting change independently

For organisations who choose to implement change independently, human resource measurements can be used as an alternative to published survey instruments. The first measurement could be captured using employee incident reporting of dysfunctional customer behaviour, while both employee and organisational markers of change could be tracked using employee turnover, absence, sick leave, performance, or EAP access data, or organisational performance indicators.

A Note on the Independent Use of Survey Instruments: While there are many survey instruments available freely online, please think cautiously before introducing these to your organisation or employees for the following reasons:

1. Most published survey instruments are subject to copyright laws, or accessible only in academic environments. Using these without permission can leave your organisation liable.
2. Many of the freely available instruments are not actually tested or evaluated, or at a minimum may not be tested or evaluated for the purpose intended. Therefore, they may not provide an accurate or suitable measurement for your context.
3. And lastly, many survey instruments are designed to capture impactful emotional or psychological aspects of a person's experience, which can raise unanticipated consequences or unintended harm for those completing the survey.

Incident reporting for dysfunctional customer behaviour: Enhancing and simplifying the process for all

Streamlined incident reporting that records the day/time and nature (or level) of the customer aggression incident can provide an accurate measure of the incidence and severity of dysfunctional customer behaviour in your organisation.

Any streamlined incident reporting system should also capture near misses, particularly ensuring the accurate recording of near misses (e.g. if a punch was thrown but did not connect -this should be classed as a level 7 to ensure it is understood that this risk was present). Incident reporting systems should be easy to complete by managers and workers.

Existing systems for simplified incident reporting have been designed and implemented by the Australian Banking Association (see Table 1).

Table 1 Incident reporting levels adapted from those used by the Australian Banking Association.

Level	Description	Definitions
Level 1	Rude or uncivil (non-aggressive) acts	Any low-intensity rude customer behaviour (e.g., snide or lewd comments, huffing or sighing, eye rolling, speaking over you, questioning your ability, or complaining about you to others in earshot).
Level 2	Other aggressive acts (not directed at an employee)	Any inappropriate behaviour (e.g., fighting) from one customer to another that impacted on staff by witnessing, intervening, or calling the police on the event.
Level 3	Abuse	Any abusive communication that is verbal (e.g., swearing, shouting, interrupting, inappropriate/sexual remarks) or non-verbal (e.g., displays of frustration, finger pointing, aggressive posture).
Level 4	Intimidation	Any actions, including excessive or prolonged abuse that makes the employee feel at risk of physical harm (e.g., aggressive demeanour, hostility, threatening to complain or get you fired, invasion of personal space).
Level 5	Property damage	Any physical actions leading to property damage (e.g., throwing or damaging objects, furnishings or equipment, breaking glass) that impacts on staff.
Level 6	Threat of Harm or Death	Any direct or indirect (e.g., implied) death threats or threats of grievous harm (e.g., sexual assault, injury) that are aimed to intimidate or frighten staff.
Level 7	Violence (without injury)	Any assault without physical injury (e.g., pulling clothing, pushing or shoving, throwing things at staff).
Level 8	Violence (with injury)	Any violent act that results in a *physical* (e.g., punching, attacking with a weapon) or *psychological* injury (e.g., threatening with a weapon, surrounding a staff member, making an employee believe immediate harm will come to them).

All levels carry a risk of psychological harm to the employee and their co-workers. Thus these levels should only be used as a guide to determine the level of risk. Incidents at any level may vary in severity and some incidents which may fall into the lower levels on the scale may be equivalent in risk to higher levels (e.g. customer on customer incidents)

A new Level 1 has been added to the existing scale to address low intensity behaviours that can impact on staff over multiple occasions

Workplace health & safety legislation

In considering the findings outlined in this report it is important to review this through the lens of the Work Health and Safety Legislation. This emphasises the need to focus on eliminating and minimizing risks where reasonably practicable in preference to reliance on lower level controls which depend on human behaviour.
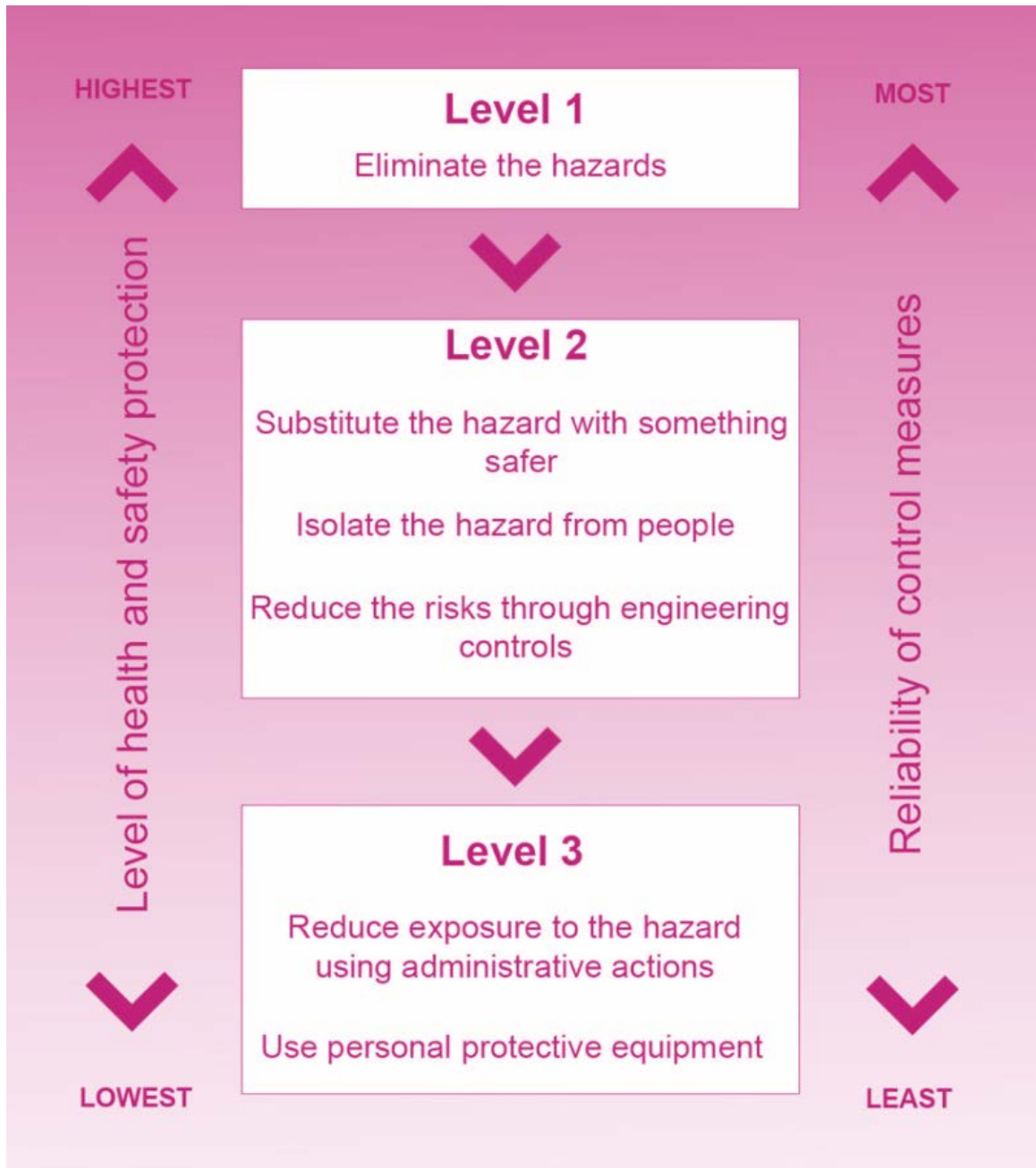
HIGHEST — **MOST**

Level of health and safety protection

Reliability of control measures

Level 1
Eliminate the hazards

Level 2
Substitute the hazard with something safer

Isolate the hazard from people

Reduce the risks through engineering controls

Level 3
Reduce exposure to the hazard using administrative actions

Use personal protective equipment

LOWEST — **LEAST**

Image obtained from Safe Work Australia
https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/risk

REFERENCES

[1] SDA Survey (2017).

[2] Harris, L. C., & Reynolds, K. L. (2003). The consequences of dysfunctional customer behavior. *Journal of Service Research, 6*, 144-161. doi: 10.1177/1094670503257044

[3] Union of Shop, Distributive, and Allied Workers (2010), "Freedom from fear survey report", Union of Shop, Distributive, and Allied Workers, November.

[4] Yagil, D. (2017). There is no dark side of customer aggression – It's all dark. *Journal of Marketing Management, 33*, 1413-1420. doi: 10.1080/0267257x.2017.1357332

[5] Grandey, A. A., Dickter, D. N., & Sin, H. (2004). The customer is not always right: Customer aggression and emotion regulation of service employees. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 25*, 397-418. doi: 10.1002/job.252

[6] Korcynski, M., & Evans, C. (2013). Customer abuse to service workers: An analysis of its social creation within the service economy. *Work, Employment and Society, 27*, 768-784. doi: 10.1177/0950017012468501

[7] Fullerton, R. A., & Punj, G. (2004). Repercussions of promoting an ideology of consumption: Consumer misbehavior. *Journal of Business Research, 57*, 1239-1249. doi: 10.1016/S0148-2963(02)00455-1

[8] Harris, L. C., & Reynolds, K. L. (2004). Jaycustomer behaviours: An exploration of types and motives in the hospitality industry. *Journal of Services Marketing, 18*, 339-357. doi: 10.1108/08876040410548276

[9] Boyd, C. (2002). Customer violence and employee health and safety. *Work, Employment and Society, 16*, 151-169. doi: 10.1177/09500170222119290

[10] Karat epée, O. M., Inorganic, I., & Haktanir, M. (2009). Outcomes of customer verbal aggression among hotel employees. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 21*, 713-733. doi: 10.1108/09596110910975972

[11] Reynolds, K. L., & Harris, L. C. (2009). Dysfunctional customer behaviour severity: An empirical examination. *Journal of Retailing, 85*, 321-335. doi: 10.1016/j.jretai.2009.05.005

[12] Yagil, D. (2008). When the customer is wrong: A review of research on aggression and sexual harassment in service encounters. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 13*, 141-152. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2008.03.002

[13] Song, Y., Liu, Y., Wang, M., Lama, K., Johnson, R. E., & Shi, J. (2018). A social mindfulness approach to understanding experienced customer mistreatment: A within-person field experiment. *Academy of Management Journal, 61*, 994-1020. doi: 10.5465/amj.2016.0448

[14] Ben-Zur, H., & Yagil, D. (2005). The relationship between empowerment, aggressive behaviours of customers coping, and burnout. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 14*, 81-99. doi: 10.1080/13594320444000281

[15] Daunt, K., & Harris, L. C. (2012). Motives of dysfunctional customer behaviour: An empirical study. *Journal of Services Marketing, 26*, 293-308. doi: 10.1108/08876041211237587

[16] Graham, K., Jelley, J., & Purcell, J. (2005). Training bar staff in preventing and managing aggression in licensed premises. *Journal of Substance Use, 10*, 48-61. doi: 10.1080/14659890042000271219

[17] Graham, K., Bernards, S., Wells, S., Osgood, D. W., Abbey, A., Felson, R. B., & Saltz, R. F. (2011). Behavioural indicators of motives for barroom aggression: implications for preventing bar violence. *Drug & Alcohol Review, 30*, 554-563. doi: 10.1111/j.1465-3362.2010.00252.x

[18] Harris, L. C., & Daunt, K. (2013). Managing customer misbehavior: Challenges and strategies. *Journal of Services Marketing, 27*, 281-293. doi: 10.1108/08876041311330762

[19] Reynolds, K. L., & Harris, L. C. (2006). Deviant customer behavior: An exploration of frontline employee tactics. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, 14*, 95-111. doi: 10.2753/mtp1069-6679140201

[20] Akkawanitcha, C., Patterson, P., Buranapin, S., & Kantabutra, S. (2015). Frontline employees' cognitive appraisals and well-being in the face of customer aggression in an

Eastern, collectivist culture. *Journal of Services Marketing, 29*, 268-279. doi: 10.1108/JSM-12-2013-0328

[21] Bailey, J. J., & McCollough, M. A. (2000). Emotional Labor and the Difficult Customer: Coping Strategies of Service Agents. *Journal of Professional Services Marketing, 20*, 51. doi: 10.1300/j090v20n02_05

[22] Baranik, L. E., Wang, M., Gong, Y., & Shi, J. (2016). Customer mistreatment, employee health, and job performance. *Journal of Management, 43*, 1261–1282. doi: 10.1177/0149206314550995

[23] Chi, N. W., Yang, J., & Lin, C. Y. (2018). Service workers' chain reactions to daily customer mistreatment: Behavioral linkages, mechanisms, and boundary conditions. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 23*, 58-70. doi: 10.1037/ocp0000050

[24] Coutts, M. C., Graham, K., Braun, K., & Wells, S. (2000). Results of a pilot program for training bar staff in preventing aggression. *Journal of Drug Education, 30*, 171–191. doi: 10.2190/hfdb-3xdg-59d1-gg8p

[25] Gong, T., Yi, Y., & Choi, J. N. (2014). Helping employees deal with dysfunctional customers: The underlying employee perceived justice mechanism. *Journal of Service Research, 17*, 102-116. doi: 10.1177/1094670513504463

[26] Goussinsky, R. (2012). Coping with customer aggression. *Journal of Service Management, 23*, 170-196. doi: 10.1108/09564231211226105

[27] Han, S. J., Bonn, M. A., & Cho, M. (2016). The relationship between customer incivility, restaurant frontline service employee burnout and turnover intention. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 52*, 97-106. doi: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2015.10.002

[28] Hu, X., Zhan, Y., Garden, R., Wang, M., & Shi, J. (2017). Employees' reactions to customer mistreatment: The moderating role of human resource management practices. *Work & Stress, 32*, 49-67. doi: 10.1080/02678373.2017.1330836

[29] Karatepe, O. M., Yorganci, I., & Haktanir, M. (2010). An Investigation of the Role of Job Resources in Mitigating Customer-Related Social Stressors and Emotional Exhaustion. *Services Marketing Quarterly, 31*, 72-88. doi: 10.1080/15332960903408476

[30] Li, X., & Zhou, E. (2013). Influence of customer verbal aggression on employee turnover intention. *Management Decision, 51*, 890–912. doi: 10.1108/00251741311326635

[31] Mulki, J. P., & Wilkinson, J. W. (2017). Customer-directed extra-role performance and emotional understanding: Effects on customer conflict, felt stress, job performance and turnover intentions. *Australasian Marketing Journal (AMJ), 25*, 206-214. doi: 10.1016/j.ausmj.2017.04.002

[32] Shih, S.-P., Lie, T., Klein, G., & Jiang, J. J. (2014). Information technology customer aggression: The importance of an organizational climate of support. *Information & Management, 51*, 670–678. doi: 10.1016/j.im.2014.06.001

[33] Wang, M., Liu, S., Liao, H., Gong, Y., Kammeyer-Mueller, J., & Shi, J. (2013). Can't get it out of my mind: Employee rumination after customer mistreatment and negative mood in the next morning. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 98*, 989–1004. doi:10.1037/a0033656

[34] Hur, W.-M., Moon, T. W., & Han, S. (2015). The effect of customer incivility on service employees' customer orientation through double-mediation of surface acting and emotional exhaustion. *Journal of Service Theory & Practice, 25*, 394–413. doi: 10.1108/jstp-02-2014-0034

[35] Karatepe, O. M. (2011). Customer Aggression, Emotional Exhaustion, and Hotel Employee Outcomes: A Study in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 28*, 279-295. doi: 10.1080/10548408.2011.562855

[36] Keeffe, D. A., Russell-Bennett, R., & Tombs, A. (2008). Customer retaliation at the employee-customer interface. *Journal of Management & Organization, 14*, 438-450. doi: 10.5172/jmo.837.14.4.438

[37] Goussinsky, R. (2011). Customer aggression, emotional dissonance and employees' well-being. *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences, 3*, 248-266. doi: 10.1108/17566691111182825

[38] Wang, X., & Wang, H. (2017). How to survive mistreatment by customers: Employees work withdrawal and their coping resources. *International Journal of Conflict Management, 28*, 464–482. doi:10.1108/ijcma-11-2016-0089

[39] Zhan, Y., Wang, M., & Shi, J. (2015). Interpersonal process of emotional labor: The role of negative and positive customer treatment. *Personnel Psychology, 69*, 525–557. doi:10.1111/peps.12114

APPENDIX 1 / How might we: Participant responses

How Might We: Train Staff Members to Effectively Deal with Customer Aggression?

- Supporting employees to calmly advise customers that their behaviour is not ok
- Team member who effectively manages to share their techniques
- Buddying with a good mentor – accessible & understanding
- Observe managers deal with customers
- Train them to talk to them the way they want to be talked to
- Stay calm
- Try empathising with customers
- Putting your mindset in the customers place
- Upskill management to enable effective coaching
- Supporting the training with supportive management
- Training on emotional intelligence
- Role playing, case studies
- App which they can use to refer to appropriate strategies
- Face to face training & combined other methods
- Target language & graphics in training for young workers
- Situational training
- Workshops external from work. Paid by company for the day
- Train staff with trying to understand "why" behind policies - and then staff might believe internally & support

How Might We: Modify the Workplace to Ensure a Safer Environment for All

- Implementing security cameras
- Increasing lighting
- Placing distance/barrier between the employer, and the consumer
- Reducing any potential customer discomforts (e.g., loud music, temperature, ergonomics)
- Educating consumers of staff members rights
- Implementing in store signage,
- Advertising internally (e.g., voice overs)
- Advertising externally, (e.g., media, social media)
- Producing educational products for consumers (e.g., fact sheets)
- Providing staff with a safe culture atmosphere, (e.g., staff only zones, tap out/buddy systems)

How might we: Empower Workers So That They Have a Sense of Job Control?

- Reinforce positive behaviour with customers – both internally and publicly
- Target areas of conflict (e.g. Returns) & empower on the decision making
- Flexibility with decision making embedded in policy easier way to review policies with hr
- Give frontline staff discretion in policies to de-escalate the situation
- Giving options to fix issues - ok to decide customer doing wrong thing & being too aggressive
- Clear expectations & policies

- Consulting with workers about changes & policy that effect dealings with customer
- Constructive feedback after they make a decision
- Be opened to employee comments & suggestions
- Support recognition
- Encourage team members to be involved in the policy/procedure writing
- Ensure genuine workplace consultation about workers jobs occurs
- Ensure workload is reasonable and staffing levels are adequate
- Listening strategies. Providing them with opportunities to give feedback
- Support when you make decisions
- Flexibility, consulting. Help on hand. Support. Assistance
- Flexible/adaptable approach to policy
- Reward good worker conduct
- Ensure they don't work alone
- After stressful customer the right to go for a walk outside the shop
- Its ok not to be ok
- Promote positive care for others
- Make it clear what actions they are authorised to do/not do
- Effective training of employee (to handle) manager (to support)
- Whatever training needs to account for different learning styles
- De-escalation training
- Education, new leadership, teamwork, rewards staffs
- Surface acting as opposed to deep acting.
- Employee training to improve confidence dealing with incidences.
- Explicit procedures for dealing with customer misbehaviour
- Make up badges about being abused
- Under name badges advertising about customer abuse is not part of my job
- Message to customers e.g. Through advertising that worker/co may say no
- Clear/visible support e.g. Signage
- System for passing ideas up to hr
- Workshopping with workers about measures they/company can use in particular incident
- Auditor on ipad at register - easy/accessible incident reporting
- Ask for their feedback & actually listen & action it

How Might We: Improve Process and Policy So Both Worker and Customer Are Treated Fairly?

- Ensure processes and policies are achievable for front staff
- Rewriting customer policies to ensure they are also worker focussed
- Informing customers of the organisation's policy
- Consult with all workers when formulating new policies
- Employees to know and customer has to be clear how to enforce
- Define misbehaviour and realistically understand the extent of the problem to be able to set objective goals
- Develop a root cause analysis toolkit to assist with the identification of incident causation (e.g., refund policy, short staffing)
- When dealing with customer complaints evaluate and listen to both sides (employee, customer)
- Evaluation of customer feedback channels in a way that is fair to all
- Review impact of deep acting with young and vulnerable workers

- Introduce policy that implements how to support employees when dealing with aggression
- Introduce peer support guidelines within organisation
- Support OH&S committees

How might we: Better Support Employees to Deal with the Negative Effects of Aggression?

- Emotion based training - how to deal with / coping mechanisms
- Emotional intelligence training (empathy & perspective taking)
- Non-verbal communication training
- Resilience training - online solution
- Manager support training / upskill management to enable effective coaching
- Coaching,
- Workshops
- Experiential
- Buddy system - use team members as subject matter experts to support each other
- One on one training
- Scenario based role play/virtual, AR
- Support one another instead of looking to place blame
- Manager provide one on one support
- Peer support programs
- Manager back up when worker enforces policy
- Debrief every abusive customer interaction
- Provide ongoing support not just post incident
- EAP employee assistance program initiatives
- Counselling
- Have clear incident response processes
- Reorganise health impacts or exposure to abuse, evidence
- Don't reward bad behaviour when worker was reinforcing the policy
- Engage for a bottom up approach
- Code of conduct rule book put in place
- Don't reward aggression with freebies or refunds
- Advertising on council bills about no customer abuse in your local shops

How might we: Influence Community Attitudes to Dysfunctional customer behaviour?

- Prosecution by WorkSafe
- Classify verbal abuse as "bullying" and deal with accordingly
- Change laws to more easily enable no tolerance/banning
- Government support (icare/behavioural insights)
- Legislation and regulation
- United industry culture / position on zero tolerance
- Consistent approaches across companies
- Industry standard and policy presence
- Community ambassadors
- Invite community to participate in forums/discussions
- Education through schools, work experience questionnaires about behaviour
- Rewarding positive customer behaviour
- Public awareness campaign - including in-store

- Consequences for bad behaviour - banning, prosecutions
- Encourage behaviour. E.g. Sydney train's opal card "swipe on" initiative
- Govt public awareness campaign
- Tv campaign "say no to aggression"
- Social media outlets
- Facebook community pages
- Television & social media advertising - "stand in their shoes" "this could be your daughter SDA ad"
- Store PA messaging "Hi, my name is Josh and I work here at Kmart"
- Share impacts customer of polite behaviour on worker

APPENDIX 2 / Major insights by table

Table 1
• **TRAINING** - balance of online/digital and face to face - train the trainer, ongoing formal vs informal • **SUPPORT** - buddy vs mentoring, tone from the top • **CULTURE** - key - what does the company stand or i.e. apple - can't fake it!! • **FLEXIBILITY** - ability to flex to the situation (style of communication and what action you take) • **SCALE** - from misbehaviour to assault

Table 2
• No tolerance (explicit procedures) • The right training for both managers and employees (role playing/emotional intelligence) • Empower employees/job control • Workplace support • Job demands/organisational control

Table 3
• Customer is not always right • Multiple causation factors • Leadership & support is key - acceptable to talk about this issue • Emotional labour - deep acting / surface acting • Shop fit out - clarity / staffing to help make things clear

Table 4
• Employee empowerment - make decisions • Issue resolution & escalation • Employee support/validation • Training - appropriate method & timing • Zero tolerance to misbehaviour • Company policy - direct/indirect impact • Public awareness campaign - e.g. Acceptable customer behaviour/expectations (signage/pa message)

Table 5
• Zero tolerance approach - empowering managers, consistent policy application • Frequent / lower severity incidents can have just as big an impact • Aligning training & policies for team and managers e.g. For stock loss don't pursue offender, not worth team safety, don't hire security (security contradicts stock loss message) • Modify Worksafe Vic prevention of work related violence in health care to provide a retail resource • Better develop understanding of "cumulative trauma" for employers