# Enabler: Utilising distributed leadership

*A distributed leadership model could enable reform by increasing organisation-wide accountability for reforms and building workforce trust in workplace equality progress.*

## Why is this an enabler for reform?

During the Progress Evaluation Audit, senior leaders at Ambulance Victoria expressed interest in further work towards using distributed leadership as a model within the organisation. Distributed leadership has been defined as collaborative, autonomous practices managed by a network of formal and informal leaders across an organisation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although Ambulance Victoria says this is a preferred approach, it is not yet happening in a systematic and supported way.

The distributive leadership … it hasn't actually filtered through to allowing us to actually do it … I think every one of us around the state would have strategies or initiatives in their region that we want to do that we can't get over the line because of that fixed nature of the organisation, that doesn't allow us to be flexible in the way we deliver our workforce.

Participant

Research into distributed leadership shows outcomes that align with Ambulance Victoria’s vision. Increasing job control for managers (for example, autonomy over some decision-making) positively correlates with work engagement and is one protective factor for burnout.[[2]](#footnote-2) Distributed leadership can also provide career development and progression opportunities for aspiring leaders, and could reduce the workload of more senior leaders and managers through delegated authority.

## What are the impacts of this reform enabler for implementing the Review recommendations?

Adopting distributed leadership would better enable implementation of the following recommendations:

* Recommendation 6: Improving safety in isolated environments: A distributed leadership model would help Ambulance Victoria to address two drivers of unlawful and harmful conduct – power imbalances, and leadership and management knowledge gaps.
* Recommendation 7: Resetting and embedding organisational values: Distributed leadership will enable organisational values and standards of behaviour to be better embedded, including through KPIs and practices of all leaders.
* Recommendation 14: Enhancing perceptions of independence and supporting capability for the new organisational response to reports and complaints of unlawful conduct: Distributed leadership can reduce pressure on Professional Standards and Behaviours Department (PSBD) resources by effectively resolving incivility and interpersonal conflict at a local level.

Maybe a lot of these complaints that have gone to the PSBD in the first place, if we had more strength as managers to manage them at a local level and more advocacy and support from AV, then they would be managed before they became a repeat problem.

Participant

* Recommendation 37: Embedding sustained learning and development: A distributed leadership model can support embedding of learnings from capability programs.

Select the links above for further information on how this barrier is impacting recommendation implementation.

## What are the impacts of this reform enabler for Ambulance Victoria’s workforce?

### Distributed leadership at Ambulance Victoria will build workforce trust in leadership accountability for the reforms

Throughout the Progress Evaluation Audit, the Commission heard that the workforce does not trust that senior leaders are being held accountable for delivering reforms. Distributed leadership would build trust in the implementation of the reforms as the workforce will be able to see how the reforms are being implemented.

### Distributed leadership at Ambulance Victoria will help equip aspiring leaders with the workplace safety and equality capability which is necessary for effective implementation of reforms

During the Progress Evaluation Audit, the Commission heard that people are being appointed to management and leadership roles without first having undertaken capability training. This creates the risk that they underperform, which may have negative consequences for their team’s performance, but also for their own sense of job satisfaction and reward. Giving people opportunities to develop leadership and management capabilities before being appointed to a leadership role will enhance their ability to be effective leaders.

We are actually a registered training organisation and it might be that we invest in our people with a Certificate Four or a diploma in leadership or management, that they actually work towards that as part of their development and they actually get a vocational qualification out of it that they can use. So that gives them the general leadership and management principles that you can use anywhere. So, it's actually investing in your people.

Participant

## What are the impacts of this reform enabler for Ambulance Victoria’s leadership?

### Distributed leadership will support a more psychologically safe work environment at Ambulance Victoria

Very low psychological safety was an issue identified across both the Commission’s qualitative and quantitative data sources (refer to Recommendation 6) during the Progress Evaluation Audit. Implementing a model of distributed leadership that uses reflective practice (Recommendation 1) to unpack with leaders the factors that are contributing to low reported psychological safety at a team level would mean effective improvement steps can then be taken.

I think at the moment, we don't have that psychological safe space within the teams and for the team managers and for STMs. They don't feel safe in their workplace to undertake those roles and we need to give them the capability, but also the safety so that they feel safe to do that role and then they can be vulnerable and say, here’s somewhere where I could have done that better. You know, because at the moment, everything’s so adversarial, it's a very difficult place to go. I think there's a high level of anxiety about things.

Participant

### Distributed leadership will promote a focus on diverse and inclusive leadership at Ambulance Victoria

One of the positives to come from Ambulance Victoria’s reform work is an increased focus on inclusion and diversity within the workplace. The organisation’s continuing work in this area could be enabled through distributed leadership that ensures the culture and structures are in place to promote and support leaders who fully reflect the workforce, for example, part-time workers, parents, people of colour, First Peoples and people with disabilities.

That message around you can be what you can see, I think it's so important. I think that's where we need to start because when you can see your progression opportunities and you can see yourself reflected in that leadership structure, I think that's really important and something valuable that AV should pursue.

Participant

### Distributed leadership will improve the ability of Ambulance Victoria’s leaders and managers to perform their roles

During the Progress Evaluation Audit, the Commission heard from some Ambulance Victoria managers and leaders that they were reluctant to engage in what they considered to be constructive feedback and/or reasonable management action with an employee, for fear of then being the subject of a complaint. Through distributed leadership, leaders from every level would be supported by more senior managers to engage in effectively giving and receiving feedback through reasonable management actions.

I don't know if fear is the right word, but … there's a little bit of talk about, I can't give that sort of feedback because someone will take me down the path of bullying, even though I'm just trying to give some constructive feedback … There's obviously a fine balance there because people have been bullied in the past and it's gone, you know, unreported and people have been able to continue on their way of doing that … people need to be able to feel confident to raise concerns about someone's clinical or behavioural performance at work without fear of it going down a path that they sort of have no control over … and they're left feeling very vulnerable.

Participant

1. Defined by MIT Sloan School of Management Professor Deborah Ancona in ‘Why distributed leadership Is the future of management | MIT Sloan’ (14 October 2024) <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/why-distributed-leadership-future-management>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lucas Alves et al., ‘Psychosocial risk and protective factors associated with burnout in police officers: A systematic review’ (2023) *Journal of Affective Disorders* 332, 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)