



Systems Theory of Change for Lawyer Wellbeing

Prepared for the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner

Suggested citation

Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner (2025). *Systems Theory of Change for Lawyer Wellbeing*. Prepared by First Person Consulting, Melbourne, Victoria.

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and waterways upon which our lives depend.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to ancestors of this country, Elders, knowledge holders and leaders – past and present. We extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Introduction

People working within the law disproportionately experience poor wellbeing. Around 30% of lawyers (and almost 43% of early career lawyers) experience elevated levels of distress. In 2024, 29% of lawyers reported an intention to leave their current employer within the next 12 months, and 8.4% the profession, with wellbeing a contributing factor.¹

Lawyers staying safe and well while delivering high-quality legal services is a shared goal across the Victorian legal system and a key priority for the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner (VLSB+C).

To effect genuine and lasting change, the focus needs to continue to shift beyond individual resilience to include the system-wide drivers that are having negative impacts.

This is why the VLSB+C facilitated the Lawyer Wellbeing Theory of Change project – which saw First Person Consulting (FPC) co-develop a shared model for system-wide change in lawyer wellbeing.

A Theory of Change is a model that represents the outcomes needed in the short, intermediate, and longer-term to achieve a collective vision. This provides a robust set of aims for actions and activities to progress towards and builds clarity across the sector on the goals for change.

The Victorian legal system is made up of a wide range of stakeholders with different roles and responsibilities. This means there's no one organisation that is responsible for lawyer wellbeing - contributions by all organisations and people in the system will be needed.

The uniqueness of this Theory of Change lies in its focus on the systemic factors influencing lawyer wellbeing and the corresponding systemic responses required. **This is why we refer to this as a Systems Theory of Change.**

A Systems Theory of Change allows us to shift from looking at the downstream issue – poor lawyer wellbeing and the associated impacts – to the many upstream factors that come together to drive the issue.

The Systems Theory of Change acts as a roadmap for change in lawyer wellbeing across the Victorian legal system. It is not about focusing on only one area for change, but many, the connections between them, and how that will lead to the vision for lawyer wellbeing in Victoria.

The Systems Theory of Change was co-developed with the legal sector via a 3-stage process:

1. Undertaking research with more than 1,100 people working across the legal system to develop a systems-based definition of the drivers of poor lawyer wellbeing using the System Effects methodology
2. Online peer design workshops with 40 participants to draft the Theory of Change content
3. An iterative review process with representatives from across the sector to develop a final draft, following by a sector-wide survey to gather last comments before finalisation.

The Systems Theory of Change focuses on charting a path forward, but we recognise that there are many existing efforts, practices and approaches that can be learned from and built upon.

When interpreting the Systems Theory of Change remember that there are connections across all described components. Change at the individual level will only work when complemented by change at other levels.

The model is not necessarily applied to all parts of the system equally – there are many things that do work well – but this is an approach to build common understanding of what outcomes are required across the system to equitably improve lawyer wellbeing in Victoria.

¹ Australian National University and University of Melbourne, *Lawyer Wellbeing, Workplace Experiences and Ethics. A Research Report* (2025) at <https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/resources/lawyer-wellbeing-workplace-experiences-and-ethics-research-report-0>



System Effects Results

System Effects asks people to answer questions based on their own experiences of an issue – in this case poor lawyer wellbeing. The unique aspect of this process is that people go beyond the surface-level factors to find the deeper causes of the issue in question. Their answers produce maps of the factors that reflect their experience. These can be analysed and synthesised into a single systems map.

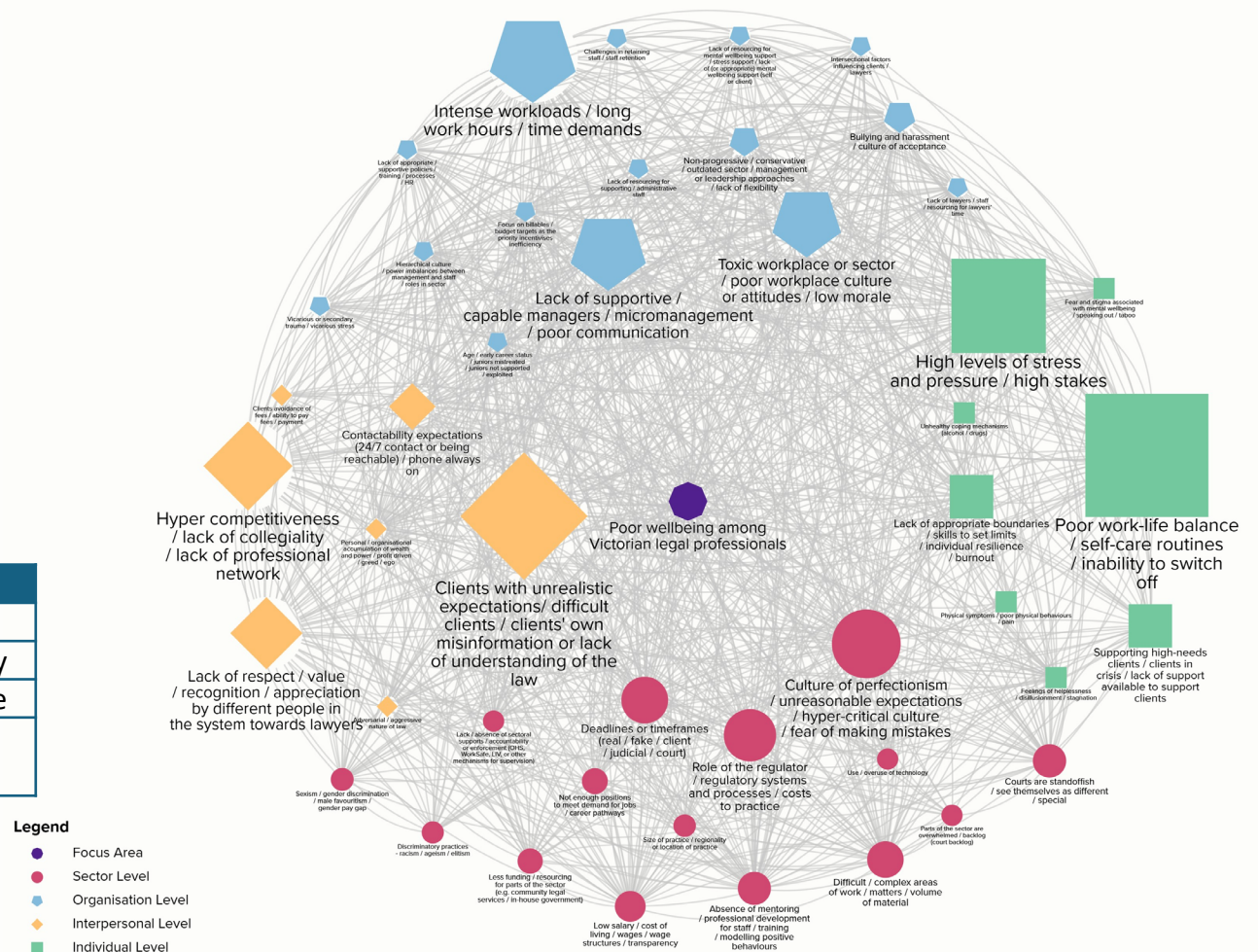
We heard from more than a 1,100 people within the legal sector who identified more than 5,000 different factors that drive poor lawyer wellbeing. Following a rigorous thematic analysis process, we found 45 unique factors with over a 1,000 connections between them, surrounding the central issue – poor lawyer wellbeing.²

These factors and their connections are represented in the map to the right. As part of this process we identified that there are four ‘levels’ to the systemic nature of poor lawyer wellbeing. These, along with the factors that our analysis found to be most influential at each level, are:

Level	Most Influential Factors
Individual	Poor work-life balance; high levels of stress
Interpersonal	Clients with unrealistic expectations; lack of collegiality
Organisation	High workloads; manager capability; workplace culture
Sector	Culture of perfectionism; deadlines / timeframes; and the role of the regulator.

While the analysis identifies the most influential factors within each level, it is crucial that we recognise that factors are also influencing across levels as well. As such, a holistic effort across the whole range of factors will be crucial.

More detail can be found in the full [System Effects report](#).



² First Person Consulting (2024). *Systems-Level Theory of Change for Lawyer Wellbeing Project: Results from the System Effects Survey*. Prepared for the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner, Melbourne, Victoria.



Survey Respondent Stories

These are real stories from survey respondents of different backgrounds. These stories are provided to ground the results of the System Effects results and demonstrate why addressing resultant impacts of the systemic drivers of poor wellbeing is such a priority.

I honestly don't think that anyone cares about lawyers' wellbeing. There is a lot of tokenisms but at the end of the day you are still demanded to do too much work in too little time. The legal sector has left me on antidepressants for seven years and therapy for eight. I am now retraining to leave the sector for my long-term health and wellbeing. This sector destroyed me.

- Male, 6-10 years, community legal sector

I've experienced very poor wellbeing at various points during my time in the profession and there are a range of reasons for this. Partly I am an anxious person, and I need to deal with that. Also being surrounded by type A people (at times) who value a certain type of expertise (technical) and haven't valued other (management, leadership, strategy), has been hard.

- Male, 16-20 years, large private practice

Not only is my physical and mental wellbeing suffering from long hours, but so are all of my relationships. I keep family at a distance because I don't see them that much - even on a work-free weekend. I need to have some intensive downtime to recover from the week or in case next week is really hectic.

I have a limited social circle for the same reason. My partner and I frequently experience tensions because I have to unexpectedly work late, and I consistently feel like a disappointment to them. I feel like I can't prioritise cleaning, cooking even a quick meal, socialising or exercising.

When I have downtime, I usually need it to rest. I really enjoy what I do, and I am frustrated with the notion that if you don't like the hours, you should leave the profession or private practice. It is absurd that that is put forward as the solution.

- Female, 0-5 years, large private firm

My boss has literally seen me bawling my eyes out due to stress from the job. They had the audacity to enter my office and ask for an update on a time sensitive file rather than ask if I am okay and what can be done to help the situation.

- Female, 6-10 years, medium private practice

The only reason why I am still in this profession is because I'm able to work 'part time'. However, I work the same hours as people in other professions. I can maintain my hours being within 9-5 type hours only because I get a part time wage and my budget/billables are part time and therefore reduced.

It's a shame, as I love the law, and I love the actual work. It's the pressure of the hours and billables that reduces job satisfaction.

- Female, 6-10 years, small private firm

Structure of the Systems Theory of Change

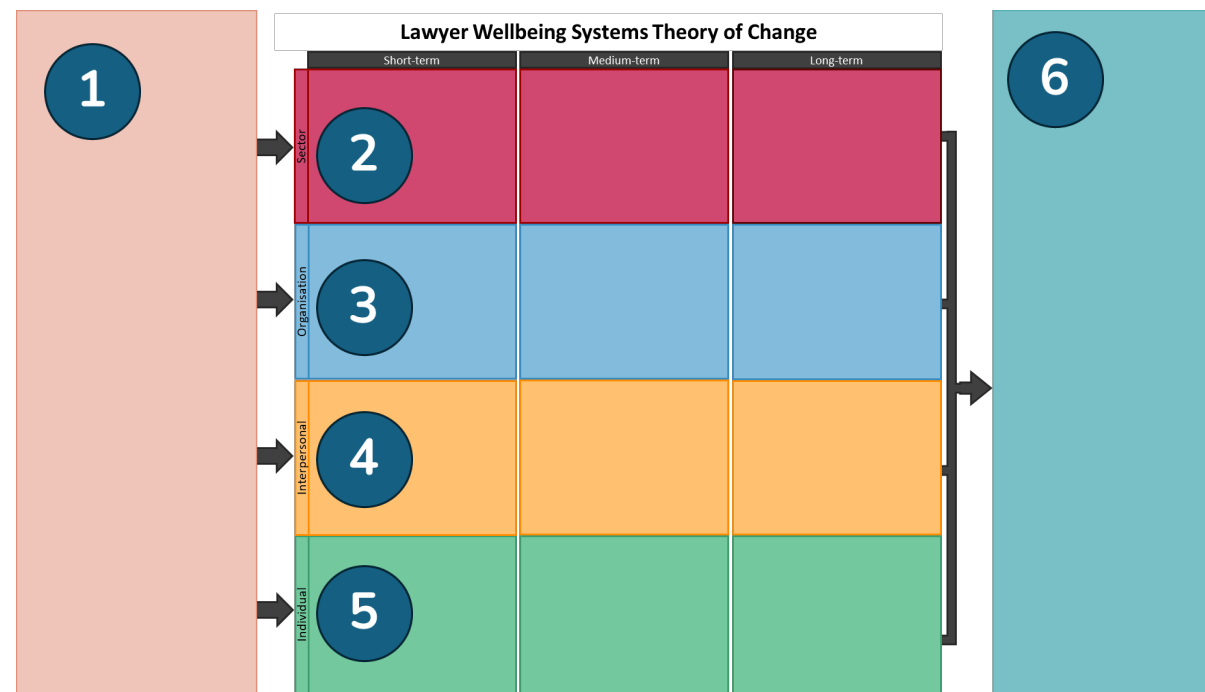
Theory of Change models are tailored to their context which makes them meaningful – but this also means that they can look very different. The model to the right presents the structure for the Lawyer Wellbeing Systems Theory of Change.

A typical Theory of Change is like a roadmap that explains how and why a desired change is expected to happen. Think of it like plotting out a journey from where you are now to where you want to be, while presenting the steps in between.

The main difference with this Systems Theory of Change is that the starting ‘problem’ is defined from an explicit systems perspective which is provided by the System Effects results. We have identified the range of factors that influence lawyer wellbeing, and which of them are most influential. Now it’s about identifying the outcomes that are needed.

This model is read from left to right. This structure reflects the need to address four concurrent pathways across the individual, interpersonal, organisation, and sector levels in order to achieve the vision for lawyer wellbeing.

The following pages presents each of these components followed by the full Lawyer Wellbeing Systems Theory of Change.



1

Current Challenge

Summary problem statements reflecting the four levels and the factors identified as most influential in driving poor lawyer wellbeing.

2

Sector Level Outcomes

The outcomes that need to occur or manifest at the cross-organisation or sector level in the short, medium, and long-term to help improve lawyer wellbeing.

3

Organisation Level Outcomes

The outcomes that need to occur or manifest at the organisation level in the short, medium, and long-term to help improve lawyer wellbeing.

4

Interpersonal Level Outcomes

The outcomes that need to occur at the interpersonal level in the short, medium, and long-term to help improve lawyer wellbeing.

5

Individual Level Outcomes

The outcomes that need to occur at the individual level in the short, medium, and long-term to help improve lawyer wellbeing.

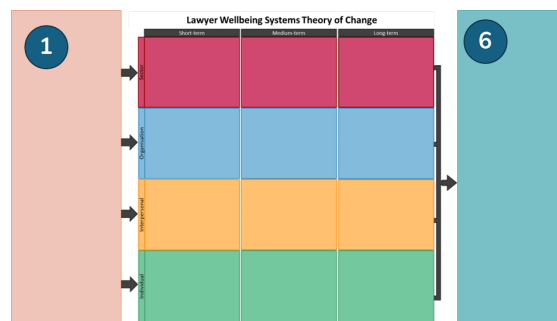
6

Vision for the Future

The desirable future state for lawyer wellbeing that will manifest as a result of all outcomes across the four levels occurring.



Structure of the Systems Theory of Change



Current Challenge and Vision for the Future bookend the Systems Theory of Change model. They reflect what the current situation is, and where we hope to end up.

1

Current Challenge

Summary problem statements reflecting the four levels and the factors identified as most influential in driving poor lawyer wellbeing.

Current Challenge

We know that poor lawyer wellbeing is driven by a complex and simultaneous interplay of factors across four levels:

- **Sectorally**, lawyers experience expectations of perfection, regulatory pressures and an unsupportive legal system. Deadlines, increasing volumes of work and information, entrenched discriminatory practices, and underfunded systems exacerbate pressures including insufficient opportunities for mentorship, learning and growth.
- **Organisationally**, excessive workloads, poor leadership support and capability, and rigid hierarchies perpetuate toxic working cultures. This is exacerbated by resource constraints and, for some environments, a focus on high caseloads and unrealistic billable hour targets over staff wellbeing. These foster unsustainable work environments and erode staff morale.
- **Interpersonally**, lawyers experience unrealistic client expectations, adversarial dynamics driven by the nature of the legal system, and hyper-competitiveness which diminishes collegiality and collaborative practice.
- **Individually**, lawyers grapple with work-life balance, high stress, and the emotional toll of supporting high-needs clients. This is compounded by insufficient boundaries and unhealthy coping mechanisms, which erode resilience and exacerbate burnout.

6

Vision for the Future

The desirable future state for lawyer wellbeing that will manifest as a result of all outcomes across the four levels occurring.

Vision for the Future

The Victorian legal system fosters a connected and empathetic legal professional that values wellbeing while delivering services to a high standard for clients.

The profession supports and sustains its members and respects the humanity of all involved.

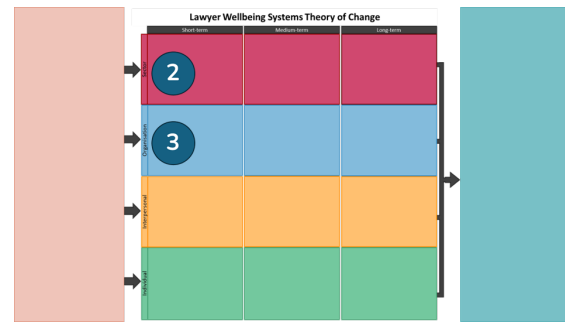
Lawyers are valued as people and professionals, promoting excellence, diversity, inclusivity, and connection.

Personal and professional growth through meaningful mentorship, development, and balance is encouraged and supported.

Successful performance and outcomes for individuals, organisations and the sector are redefined through models grounded in values and equity.

Leaders promote and model boundaries, good mental health in practice, and respectful engagement.

Structure of the Systems Theory of Change



To achieve the **Vision for the Future** progress must be made in the short, intermediate, and long-term across four levels.

These outcomes are interrelated, meaning that progress in one area or level will support or reinforce progress in other areas or levels.

2

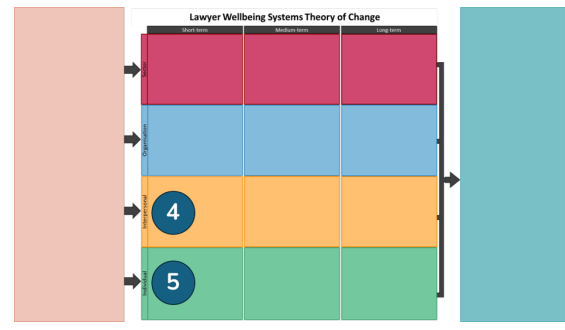
Sector Level Outcomes
 These outcomes manifest across or between organisations and the legal sector as a whole.

3

Organisation Level Outcomes
 These outcomes occur or manifest within organisation settings in the legal system.

	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Sector	The legal system fosters opportunities for growth for lawyers from a range of backgrounds and contexts. “Soft skills” are treated as critical skills and embedded into professional development processes. Cross-sectoral organisations, including the VLSB+C, implement responses and supports to improve lawyer wellbeing.	The legal system embodies the ‘right to disconnect’, whilst supporting the use of technology to improve efficiencies. The legal system embraces learning opportunities from all professional experiences, good and bad. The legal system prioritises meaningful timing and scheduling over unrealistic or arbitrary deadlines.	The legal system advocates for high standards of practice, not perfection. Lawyer wellbeing is championed as a cornerstone of effective practice. The legal system operates with respect and appropriate transparency, including career opportunities, appointments, and dispute resolution.
Organisation	Leaders take responsibility for ensuring reasonable staff workloads, capacity, and supporting their wellbeing. Leaders value positive workplace culture as an investment in staff retention, growth, and performance. Workplaces offer effective wellbeing supports for staff, and suitably manage the risk of psychosocial hazards.	Organisations recognise staff that support the development of others, not just themselves. Improved leader capability to effectively support staff, manage workloads, and associated risks. Organisations respect their staff, their lives and interests outside of work, and value staff wellbeing.	Positive workplace culture is reflected in levels of staff retention and performance. Alternatives to billable hours as performance measures are adopted and promoted as best practice. Processes to manage workloads and psychosocial hazards at all levels are in place and consistently working well.

Structure of the Systems Theory of Change



To achieve the **Vision for the Future** progress must be made in the short, intermediate, and long-term across four levels.

These outcomes are interrelated, meaning that progress in one area or level will support or reinforce progress in other areas or levels.

- 4

Interpersonal Level Outcomes
 These outcomes manifest between individuals – usually as part of interactions.
- 5

Individual Level Outcomes
 These outcomes manifest within or are focused on an individual.

	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Interpersonal	Lawyers are supported in developing skills to engage with diverse clients and stakeholders. Lawyers are supported with opportunities to collaborate with peers across the legal system. Lawyers, peers and colleagues see meaningful debriefs as an integral part of effective practice.	Stakeholders, including clients, understand the basics of legal process, and appreciate their lawyer’s role in it. Lawyer leaders and legal educators are demonstrating the value of respectful and collaborative practice. Lawyers form and maintain networks with like-minded peers to support connection and shared growth in skills.	Lawyers feel respected and their contributions, including as mediators, are appreciated by those they engage with in the legal system. Lawyers actively value collaboration, and healthy competition, with peers and colleagues.
Individual	Lawyers understand how wellbeing affects their practice and are empowered to develop appropriate self-management strategies. Lawyers build resilience through learning opportunities, and are supported to seek help when needed.	Leaders' modeling of boundaries and prioritising of personal health sets an example for staff, peers and clients. Lawyers are actively undertaking reflective practice and engaging with peers and colleagues around them. Lawyers have time to develop and practice interests and passions outside of work.	Lawyers practice reflection and engage in personal health and leisure interests outside of work. Leaders make the time to actively listen and support the staff for whom they are responsible. Lawyers recognise their duty to themselves as part of their broader duties in the legal system.

Current Challenge

We know that poor lawyer wellbeing is driven by a complex and simultaneous interplay of factors across four levels:

- Sectorally**, lawyers can experience expectations of perfection, regulatory pressures and an unsupportive legal system. Deadlines, increasing volumes of work and information, entrenched discriminatory practices, and underfunded systems typically exacerbate pressures including insufficient opportunities for mentorship, learning and growth.
- Organisationally**, excessive workloads, poor leadership support and capability, and rigid hierarchies can perpetuate toxic working cultures. This is usually exacerbated by resource constraints and, for some environments, a focus on high caseloads and unrealistic billable hour targets over staff wellbeing. These foster unsustainable work environments and erode staff morale.
- Interpersonally**, lawyers can experience unrealistic client expectations, adversarial dynamics driven by the nature of the legal system, and hyper-competitiveness which diminishes collegiality and collaborative practice.
- Individually**, lawyers can grapple with work-life balance, high stress, and the emotional toll of supporting high-needs clients. This is compounded by insufficient boundaries and unhealthy coping mechanisms, which erode resilience and exacerbate burnout.

Lawyer Wellbeing Systems Theory of Change

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Organisation	<p>Leaders take responsibility for ensuring reasonable staff workloads, capacity, and supporting their wellbeing.</p> <p>Leaders value positive workplace culture as an investment in staff retention, growth, and performance.</p> <p>Workplaces offer effective wellbeing supports for staff, and suitably manage the risk of psychosocial hazards.</p>	<p>Organisations recognise staff that support the development of others, not just themselves.</p> <p>Improved leader capability to effectively support staff, manage workloads, and associated risks.</p> <p>Organisations respect their staff, their lives and interests outside of work, and value staff wellbeing.</p>	<p>Positive workplace culture is reflected in levels of staff retention and performance.</p> <p>Alternatives to billable hours as performance measures are adopted and promoted as best practice.</p> <p>Processes to manage workloads and psychosocial hazards at all levels are in place and consistently working well.</p>
Interpersonal	<p>Lawyers are supported in developing skills to engage with diverse clients and stakeholders.</p> <p>Lawyers are supported with opportunities to collaborate with peers across the legal system.</p> <p>Lawyers, peers and colleagues see meaningful debriefs as an integral part of effective practice.</p>	<p>Stakeholders, including clients, understand the basics of legal process, and appreciate their lawyer’s role in it.</p> <p>Lawyer leaders and legal educators are demonstrating the value of respectful and collaborative practice.</p> <p>Lawyers form and maintain networks with like-minded peers to support connection and shared growth in skills.</p>	<p>Lawyers feel respected and their contributions, including as mediators, are appreciated by those they engage with in the legal system.</p> <p>Lawyers actively value collaboration, and healthy competition, with peers and colleagues.</p>
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The Systems Theory of Change in Practice

Workplace culture is huge. Relationships with colleagues and bosses have a massive impact on lawyer wellbeing. I am very lucky to have a great network of young lawyers where I practice, and it is not uncommon for us to call one another after a tough week, especially in the Family Law and Family Violence sector.

It is easy to focus on the negative impacts on wellbeing that being a lawyer has, however there are certainly many positive factors. Having people who understand your situation on a personal level is invaluable.

- Female, 0-5 years, small law firm

The best thing that ever happened was to receive personal support in my first two years from the Principal to whom I was articled coupled with professional responsibility, no budgetary pressure and an emphasis on quality of delivery of service. Even if I probably wasn't a good big-firm fit, I value and thank them for the training and their values even as one could see their values were being forced to change.

- Male lawyer, more than 20 years, small private practice

The best leaders make all the difference. Having people at the top who lead by example, rather than by words, makes more difference than having "policies" that (appear to) support staff.

- Female lawyer, 16-20 years, government department

Not everyone's experience is the same. As the examples to the left highlight, good practice is already happening in many areas. The Systems Theory of Change doesn't dictate specific action but identifies necessary outcomes that activities should achieve to improve lawyer wellbeing in Victoria.

To achieve the vision, concurrent action across all four levels is needed, with all organisations and individuals in the Victorian legal system playing a role. As a high-level document, further detail will ensure specific acknowledgement of how actions will be undertaken in different parts of the system, and for lawyers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

To drive system change, all future lawyer wellbeing actions should explicitly link back to outcomes in this Systems Theory of Change by identifying reasonable contributions. For example, organisations with Work Health and Safety frameworks can ensure they explicitly address psychosocial hazards and wellbeing supports—a short-term outcome at the *Organisation level*.

Documenting how activities align with specific outcomes will support broader integration of efforts and avoid siloed activities that impede progress. This allows complementary efforts and maximises long-term impact. Next steps will include identifying measures against outcomes to track progress from collective efforts across the Victorian legal system.

There is no one-size-fits-all response to address systemic drivers of poor lawyer wellbeing. A test-and-learn approach with meaningful engagement will support sustainable change. Existing effective practices can be shared and adopted. New ideas require piloting, learning, scaling and embedding.

The Systems Theory of Change may apply differently in specific contexts, as each person will experience systemic factors differently. **Its purpose is to provide a common direction that all parts of the Victorian legal system can see as beneficial, with cumulative efforts creating tangible and sustained improvements in lawyer wellbeing.**