

Interrupting Biased or Exclusionary Comments

Aware and active bystanders can support norms of inclusion and interrupt awkwardness from unconscious biases -- ultimately creating space for all people to do their best work. But it is natural for bystanders to freeze or to “diffuse responsibility” and hope others will speak. Practice helps. Our NSF funded AdvanceRIT institutional transformation project promotes an inclusive campus community and uses interactive presentation as one mechanism to empower active bystanders. Here are some ideas for action. (Primary source for this information is Dr. Maureen Scully of University of Massachusetts & True Story, Inc.)

1. General Pointers:

- Know yourself: Do you tend to freeze? Or get too angry too fast? What holds you back from taking action? Take time to reflect on what you need in order to act.
- Doing something is almost always better than doing nothing. “Mistakes” are part of the learning process. Intervening constructively takes practice!
- Decide whether you want simply to stop the escalation or also to educate. Educating might work best later, in a private setting.
- When addressing the person making offending comments, keep your voice non-judgmental and non-confrontational. Also reach out to offer solidarity with those who were targeted.
- Enlist others who are witnessing. When two or three people speak up instead of just one, even just to say, “I agree,” the action is often far more effective.
- Seek institutional resources. Talk to an advisor, someone from HR... Consider whether new policies are needed.

2. Possible Tactics:

- Reflect what you heard
 - Paraphrase what they said. It clarifies it for you and for them.
 - Empathize. Listen for the feelings and needs behind the statement.
- Make your discomfort known
 - Find a short phrase you can readily use in lots of situations.
 - Examples: “Ouch.” “I’m not comfortable with that.” “What do you mean by that?”
- Ask questions
 - Ask for clarification. When people explain themselves they may realize they’re off-base.
 - Ask for additional info. Try to genuinely understand why people hold those views.
- Build a bridge
 - Be personal. Share ways that you used to have blinders.
 - Be affirming. Acknowledge that they may not have meant to be offensive or hurtful. Tell them they are too good a person to say something like that.
- Challenge
 - Express your feelings: Explain why you’re offended or uncomfortable.
 - Humanize: Ask how they’d feel if someone said a similar comment to someone close to
 - Reveal: Share your own experience or perspective
 - Claim authority: Name policies or laws that prohibit such conduct.

