

# A Guide to: Bystander Awareness & Responses

## What is an Active Bystander?

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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. It is natural for bystanders to freeze or to "diffuse responsibility" and hope others will speak.

## Active Bystanders Matter

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According to the Safety Net Zone1, an active bystander is, "Someone who not only witnesses a situation, but takes steps to speak up or step in to keep a situation from escalating or [take steps to] disrupt a problematic situation."

## Why We Care?

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Active bystanders have a critical role in advancing inclusive excellence in any organization. Sharing experiences and practicing active bystander responses can help us become more effective allies and create inclusive communities.

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### Thanks to our Collaborators

AdvanceRIT - [rit.edu/nsfadvance](https://rit.edu/nsfadvance)

Diversity Theater - [rit.edu/diversity/diversitytheater](https://rit.edu/diversity/diversitytheater)

**RIT** | Division of  
Diversity  
and Inclusion

**RIT** | Office of the Provost  
**AdvanceRIT**

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# How to be an Effective Bystander:

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## 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 offer solidarity with those who were targeted.
- Seek institutional resources. Talk to an advisor, someone from HR, etc. Consider whether new policies are needed.

## 2. 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.
- Ask for clarification. In explaining themselves, people may realize they’re off-base.
- Be personal. Share ways that you used to have blinders.
- Be affirming. Acknowledge that they may not have meant to be offensive or hurtful.
- 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 them.
- Reveal. Share your own experience or perspective.
- Claim authority. Name policies or laws that prohibit such conduct.

## 3. Possible Actions & Responses

### • Ouch

Just “Ouch!”

### • Pause/Pivot

Shift the focus, prevent escalation.

### • Question

What are you saying? What do you mean by that?

### • Recruit

Hmm, what do others think?

### • Speak Up

Name what is going on, share your values in the “I” pronoun. “I feel uncomfortable here.”

### • Use an “I” pronoun

“When I hear/see/observe \_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_, and this impacts/affects \_\_\_\_.”

### • Teach

It’s hard to get a “teachable moment,” when a simple Ouch or Pause/Pivot might do, but sometimes an incident presents the right opportunity to “dig deeper” into the underlying dynamics of equity and inclusion.