

Deciding to be a Bystander or an Ally

You make the environment better for everyone when you interrupt problematic behaviors!

Pretty much everyone has made a language mistake or overgeneralization, so an effective strategy for responding to questionable comments is to use compassion. Yulia Laricheva, workplace positivity thought leader and creator of the [Dream Nation](#) podcast, takes this practice of compassion one step further: ...Eye contact, a smile, and an honest response form a strong combination.

If things seem fraught when you are the target of a problematic conversation, dynamics get even more complicated when you're the witness. Being an ally to [women](#), [people of color](#), [trans people](#), and those who identify as [non-binary](#) takes even more self-awareness and ability to read a room. Additionally, the ally strategy is different regarding timing than when you're the subject of a microaggression.

There's a fine line between allyship and appropriation, so it's important to leverage your privilege while still leaving space for the actual issue. This isn't about you having a sister or a friend with a disability that makes sexism or ableism unacceptable—speaking inclusively is important for work culture, period.

If you aren't sure what to do in the moment due to concern of speaking for someone or appropriating the slight, the aftermath is the time to build alliances. Try asking the person how they're doing, acknowledging what was said and that it didn't feel great, Kevin Nadal, a psychologist and editor of [Microaggression Theory](#), recommends. Then, take the opportunity to ask them how you can be there for them in the future.

While each situation is unique, in the case when someone makes a transphobic or homophobic comment, a trans or queer person might not call attention to the comment and out themselves. Instead, Nadal recommends, you can help create a safe space by making it clear to the person who made the comment (or their boss) that you don't want that kind of language to be the norm in your workplace environment.

Changing the conversation

“I would have to agree with responding clearly and with compassion, but I also tend to be very direct—point the ‘thing’ out and let’s talk about it. This is new for me within the last few years; for me, ignoring it or bringing laughter/humor into the equation can minimize the emotional damage caused by microaggressions,” says Char Lee, a writer for theater and film. She often finds herself responding to problematic language: “I would be curious to know if what you really mean is [...] because that is what I hear?” When it comes to responses, giving the benefit of the doubt is key, because if someone is treated as if they meant well, they are more likely to respond without defensiveness. They experience less shame and gain the freedom to improve their behavior while saving face.

“I” statements are key in both cases—it can prevent much of that potential defensiveness. Nadal recommends saying things like “I don’t feel that is a constructive way to talk about that issue,” or “I don’t identify with that group but I don’t want to normalize that type of language.” This gives the microaggressor a chance to reassess what they just said and start a dialogue that could be an eye opener for everyone involved.

From [How to Respond to Microaggressions](#) by Ivory King, 10/30/18

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There's a thin line

Conversely, judgment and intent to corral unintended microaggression can lead to an overwhelming sense for employees that they can't even think without being biased. The best approach is to address microaggressions from a broad perspective with the focus on a positive company culture, respectful behavior, and conscious and careful articulation of thoughts. From [Six examples of microaggression in the workplace](#) / [ELI, Inc.](#)|April 27, 2017

As the Women in the Workplace report reflects, “Microaggressions can seem small when dealt with one by one. But when repeated over time, they can have a major impact.”

The resulting repercussion is that women who experience these microaggressions are three times more likely to regularly think about leaving, meaning the impact for businesses goes far beyond just the relationships within them.

[Microaggressions Still Prevalent in the Workplace](#) by [Bianca Barratt](#) Forbes 10/28/18

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“The thing that is damaging about microaggressions is that if you don’t know how to respond to them, or feel like you can’t, then you feel disempowered,” says Dr. Derald Wing Sue. “But when you have the right strategies, you feel empowered.”

Whether you experience these microaggressions on a regular basis or a more isolated basis, dealing with them is a pain. And if you’re a minority, Sue says you’ll likely be told that the issue isn’t a big deal.

“Many employees of color tell me that when they raise a microaggression issue, their well-intentioned coworker tells them, ‘You are being sensitive,’” he says. “Or, why are you making a big deal about that? Then they begin to second guess themselves.”

That’s why, Sue says, it’s important for workers to not only seek allies outside of their racial group, but also allies within their racial group who will help to validate their experience.

“When the support group comes from other people of color they can validate the fact that you aren’t crazy and what you are experiencing is legitimate,” he adds.

[“4 Workplace Microaggressions that Can Kill your Confidence—and What to Do about Them”](#) by Courtney Connley, 4/25/18

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Shutting Down Microaggressions in the Workplace

The best way to shut down microaggressions in the workplace is not to respond with rage. Instead, try these four strategies.

1. Pause.

It is important to understand that you do not have to react right away. Take a step back and try to understand why it happened and use empathy.

2. Examine Your Assumptions.

Help the instigator understand how the slight or insult made you feel. This will not work each time because the aggressor may believe that they are right or cannot see why it is an issue. The goal is to have a productive conversation and not to get defensive or engage in an [argument](#). Remember, this will only continue to hurt others in the workplace.

3. Cut Some Slack.

As soon as we hear something offensive, we are quick to judge the character of the other person. It is important to test this assumption. However, since workplaces do require respect, if this person becomes a repeat offender, I do

advise reporting it so it can be handled properly and not become a constant point of contention or anger. Use yourself as an example. None of us was born with the knowledge we now have about equity and diversity. Use your own stories of how you've "unlearned" certain hurtful, inaccurate, and misleading information.

4. Share Another Perspective.

While it's not your job to educate the whole world, we are enabling it by ignoring it.

Above all else, remember to approach it with a growth mindset and not a fixed one and it will be possible to change future interactions to more positive ones.

["How to Spot and Shut Down Microaggressions in the Workplace"](#) by Valerie Martinelli

Positive Ways to Address Microaggressions and Unconscious Bias

Many organizations are beginning to understand the magnitude and importance of dealing with microaggressions in the workplace. Helping employees understand how subconscious stereotypes can rear themselves in unintended ways is key so they can begin guarding their words and actions more carefully.

Corporate cultures that are proactive in addressing microaggressions and unconscious bias help team members learn to:

- Speak-up in a non-confrontational manner when on the receiving end of microaggressions or unconscious bias
- Base business decisions on facts and minimize unconscious bias in the decision making process
- Listen, and avoid being defensive when someone speaks up about a comment construed as a microaggression
- Be more inclusive of others
- Create environments in which people are comfortable raising their issues about unconscious bias and workplace concerns

From ‘We are All Responsible’: How #MeToo Rejects the Bystander Response

Soraya Roberts / *Longreads* / February 2019 |

. . . While the “classic Bystander Effect” focuses on diffusion of responsibility, the version in which the victim or the perpetrator is known to the bystanders is a lot more complicated, according to Victoria Banyard. A social work professor at the Center on Violence Against Women and Children at Rutgers, she has been studying the response and prevention to interpersonal violence for more than 25 years. Colleges like hers have acted as incubators for bystander intervention training programs, boosted by the 2013 United States Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act. And while sexual harassment training has [proven to be largely futile](#) . . . engaging the community in bystander intervention training has been tremendously effective. “We are all responsible,” says Sharyn Potter, executive director at The University of New Hampshire’s Prevention Innovations Research Center. This is a paradigm shift, one she compares to the drunk driving initiatives of the ’80s, which suddenly flipped the onus from the driver onto the people around them: “It’s really getting to those people that changes the culture.”

Bystander intervention training involves teaching a person how to identify situations that require it, the various ways to intervene in said situations, and, finally, practicing the strategies that work for that particular person. Sharyn Potter of Prevention Innovations Research Center, which has provided violence prevention training for colleges and the military, says that intervention strategies change according to context. For instance, the way you would respond as a college student (maybe flicking the lights at a party, but not calling the cops because you’re drinking underage) would not be the way you would respond in the office as an adult (maybe by directly confronting a colleague). In both cases, training involves finding a way to intervene that is the most comfortable. “Not everybody can jump into a situation with a superhero cape,” Potter says, “but most of us can do something subtly.” This conjures the [image of “Snackman,”](#) the 25-year-old New Yorker munching on a bag of chips who went viral for wordlessly placing himself in the middle of a physical fight on a New York subway in 2012.

. . . But even where there is no immediate gain, even if the perpetrator is a relatively small potatoes musician or a little-known con man from Orange County or even one of your coworkers who is not famous at all, it is always more comfortable not to risk being the one who ruins the party, the one who interrupts the passionate date, the one who is labeled the office rat. You’re not the one making the problem, so it’s not your problem, right? This is where a societal shift awaits: Instead of seeing yourself as an isolated individual and intervening as a way of potentially compromising yourself, you must see yourself as what you really are — a member of society, in which intervening is a way of saving not just one person, but all of us. And, anyway, you don’t have to act like a superhero, you just have to act in some small way. “In a way people wouldn’t even really notice,” says Potter, “but the person who is in the situation who’s about to be victimized — or being victimized — will notice.”