

## Responding To Biased or Offensive Comments

By Diane J. Goodman

Interrupting biased comments is one important way to foster equity and inclusion. Yet, one of the more challenging moments can be when we hear a prejudiced or stereotypical comment. Often, there is the momentary “freeze” and an anxious feeling of “what do I do now?” To do nothing generally leaves them feeling angry, guilty or disappointed in themselves. If we have a repertoire of different responses, and have practiced them, we are more likely to be able to say something in the moment.

I describe a range of strategies we can use to address offensive comments, whether they were made intentionally or unintentionally. These approaches can be used in conjunction with each other and often are most effective if they are. *There is no one right way to respond.* Deciding how to respond depends on the situation, the context, the people involved, and your mood, among other things. Part of the challenge in responding effectively is determining what is right for you and the other person in that situation. We all have different personal styles and comfort levels. We have various types of relationships with people. The context varies. The choices you make will depend on these variables.

First, there are several things to keep in mind as you consider how to respond. What is your *goal*? Do you simply want the behavior to stop or also to educate the person? Sometimes all you can do or may want to do is to have someone stop the offensive behavior. Given the situation or your investment in the relationship, you may not have the time, energy or opportunity to educate and help individuals understand why their behavior is problematic. Other times, it is important that we try to raise consciousness and sensitivity. We want the other people to become more informed and more thoughtful about how their behavior affects others. So, in deciding how to respond, we need to consider what our goal is.

The *tone* of your response affects how you are heard. How we say it is as important as what we say. When people feel attacked, blamed and judged they are likely to get defensive and angry. They stop listening. Keep your tone non-confrontational and non-judgmental if you want people to listen to you.

Think about your *relationship with the person*. Is this someone with whom you have a close relationship and will continue to interact? Is it your boss or someone with whom there is a power difference that puts you more at risk for speaking up? Is it a stranger you will never see again or a co-worker you need to work with every day? The kind of relationship, your investment in the relationship, the ongoing nature of a relationship and the risks involved need to be considered.

*The context or setting* influences how you might want to handle the situation. Is it a more formal setting which expects more restrained or professional behavior or an informal social setting which allows for more latitude in interaction? The location does not excuse offensive or biased comments, but it can affect how you choose to respond. You also need to decide if the behavior warrants a *public and/ or private response*: If a comment is said in front of others, you need to weigh embarrassing the person versus needing to publicly acknowledge the inappropriateness of the comment. Private conversations often provide more opportunity for education, but public responses can educate others and make a broader statement. Another option is to speak to the individual privately but to talk to the group more generally about appropriate language or stereotypes. Whether in public or private, you have a responsibility to interrupt harmful behavior.

Last, think about *age-appropriateness*. These strategies can be used with people of different ages—children and adults. Again, you need to carefully consider with whom you're dealing and what is most suitable. How we respond needs to be done in age-appropriate ways. Children's comments often reflect ignorance and the need for education.

Bearing all that in mind, these are some approaches that may be helpful:

**Paraphrase or repeat back what they said.**

Restating their comment clarifies it for you and for them. Either it can help them hear how biased or silly they sound or it ensures that you are understanding them correctly and can respond appropriately. “So, you’re saying that all people on welfare are just lazy and looking for a free ride?”

**Ask for more information.**

This can be a follow-up to paraphrasing. Try to understand why people hold those views. As people try to explain their comments, they often realize how what they are saying is unfounded or does not make a lot of sense. It also provides you with more information so you can address the misconceptions. Keep asking clarifying questions to unravel the web of assumptions. Point out contradictions in their statements. In order for people not to feel attacked or ridiculed, you need to do this non-judgmentally with genuine interest.

For example, “I’m wondering, what’s led you to believe this about people on welfare? Further questions might include: How many people do you know that are on welfare? Do you know how much assistance people actually get who are on welfare?”

**Express empathy first.**

Listen for the feelings behind the statement. People may make biased comments when they are feeling frustrated, disappointed, or angry. Often, if you can initially acknowledge the underlying feelings, it provides an opportunity to address the bias later. First allow someone to be heard, then challenge the beliefs.

If someone says, “I’m tired of losing jobs to those unqualified blacks just so they can meet their affirmative action quota.” Instead of immediately launching into a lecture about his assumptions that the black person was unqualified, that they were just hired to fill a quota and clarifying what affirmative action is, first acknowledge the feelings. “You sound pretty frustrated

about not getting that job. You've really been working hard to find a new job. I know job hunting can be really difficult and disappointing.”

### **Play dumb.**

Even if you understand what they are saying, pretend that you don't and ask them to explain. It forces them to think more about their statements.

If someone refers to the race of the person (most likely a person of color since white people don't usually refer to white people by race), you can say, “I'm not sure what their race had to do with the story. Did I miss something?” This can also be used with jokes. When people have to explain the punchline, it often loses much of its humor.

### **Give information or alternative perspectives**

Offer facts to correct or challenge the assumptions, share your own experience that contradicts the stereotype, and suggest other ways of viewing the person or situation.

Comment: “I can't believe they're going to let those gay people adopt kids. That's not providing a good home—kids need a mom and dad.”

Response: Actually, I know many gay couples who are wonderful, loving parents with great kids. In fact, research says that kids raised in gay homes are just as well-adjusted as kids raised in heterosexual homes. Sexual orientation really has nothing to do with it.”

### **Encourage empathy.**

Ask them how they would feel if someone said something like that about their group or their friend/partner/child. Remind them of a time when they complained about similar comments directed at them.

Comment: “Man, is she built. I wouldn't mind having to work late with her”.

Response: How would you feel if someone said something like about your wife/girlfriend/sister/daughter? I'm sure she doesn't like it either. We're here to work.

Or, “I know you hate it when people make Italian jokes. It’s not OK to make jokes about other ethnic groups either.

**Express your feelings.**

Tell the person how you feel and if possible, explain why you’re offended or uncomfortable. Offer an alternative if appropriate.

“I’m uncomfortable when I hear you talk about a person (or a specific group) in that way. I’d like you to stop.”

“I find that language offensive and don’t appreciate hearing it. I know you know other more appropriate words to use.”

“I find it offensive when you call him that. He is a Sikh.”

“I know you may not intend it this way, but I cringe when I hear you refer to grown women in service roles as “girls” because it sounds so demeaning. They can be called “women” just like you call the females in the senior staff.”

**Share your own process.**

Talk about how you used to say, think or feel similar things but have changed. Avoid sounding self-righteous or holier-than-thou. It might be useful to share what caused you to change or to offer alternative language or perspectives.

“I used to laugh or tell jokes like that, but then I realized how hurtful they are to people. I don’t do it anymore and I would like you to stop too.”

“I used to make those assumptions too but then I learned that those are untrue generalizations or stereotypes and try to catch myself when I start to think that.”

“I used to use those terms, but then I heard that those can be offensive (because....). Better language I’ve learned to use is.....”

**Tell them they're too smart or good to say things like that.**

When someone says something that you doubt the person really believes or at least doesn't hold strongly you can say:

“You're too smart to say something like that.”

“You're too good/caring a person to say something that offensive/insulting.”

It's hard to reply, “No I'm not.”

**Separate intent from impact.**

Acknowledge that someone may have said something biased or inappropriate without meaning to. Don't automatically attribute bad motives. Given them the benefit of the doubt, especially if you think the person meant no harm.

“I know you were just trying to be funny, but I found that joke offensive because....”

“I'm sure you didn't intentionally mean to be hurtful, but when you use that term.....”

**Highlight commonalities.**

Point out shared interests, values, experiences, and concerns between the person making the comment and the person they are referring to.

Comment: “I heard our new neighbor down the street is Muslim. I hope we're not going to be living in a neighborhood of terrorists.”

Response: “Come on. Actually I met him last week and he seems like a nice guy. He works in technology like you. He also was asking about local golf courses. I thought you might be able to tell him.”

**Consider W. I. I. F. T. (What's in it for them).**

Explain why diversity or that individual can be helpful or valuable. Often someone can bring new resources, skills, and perspectives that can enhance the group's effectiveness, increase clients/students/members, and improve services. Individuals may also learn new things that can foster their personal or professional growth.

“I know you didn’t support her being hired, but our students have been asking for more diversity in our staff and for more people who share their experiences. I think she will be an important addition and will enhance our department and enrollments.”

“She will really help us work with some our clients. She understands the culture and can help reduce the distrust.”

**Use humor.**

Sometimes exaggerating the comment or using gentle sarcasm makes the point. However, you need to be sure that it is heard as humor or sarcasm, not a reinforcement of prejudice. This is where tone is particularly important.

When people are operating out of stereotypes, you can use humor to highlight the inappropriate assumptions. For example, if woman is being considered for a leadership position but someone is concerned that it might be a better job for a man, consider saying with light sarcasm, “Oh, we can’t hire Ann to lead the team, she might cry when the negotiations get tough. We need a big strong man to do the job. Let’s just keep women making the coffee. They’re so good at that.”

**Appeal to values and principles.**

Individuals and organizations often espouse particular values and principles. Refer to these when challenging their comments.

“I know you want to have a respectful and inclusive workplace; those kinds of statements just aren’t consistent with that.”

Or frame it as a question: “In the past you’ve talked about wanting to raise open-minded kids. How do you think having them hear those comments might impact them?”

**Point out policies or laws that prohibit such conduct.**

In workplaces, remind people of their obligation and liability. Note the policies and laws that prohibit such conduct and the consequences.

“That behavior could be considered sexual harassment and you know we have a policy against that. You could end up in big trouble.”

In workplaces or public settings (e.g., stores, hospitals, businesses) you may witness behavior or overhear comments being made. In these cases, consider reporting the behavior to a supervisor. Employers are responsible for creating workplaces free from harassment and such behavior, especially if it is part of a pattern of conduct, may be violating policies and laws. Also, if you are a customer or client, offensive behavior impacts the service you receive and the desire to engage with this organization. If it was directed at person, you can also acknowledge to the target that you saw the offending behavior and offer your support.

### Jokes

Jokes and humor can be complicated; what is funny can depend on when it is told by whom to whom and with what intent. Sometimes a joke can affectionately poke fun at a stereotype; other times it can use the stereotype to hurt and reinforce prejudice. As a rule, I do not think it is appropriate for people from privileged groups to be making jokes at the expense of the oppressed group. If you're unsure about whether a joke is acceptable, ask yourself if you would tell this joke in front of people from the subordinated group.

Even if a person from the target group says s/he doesn't mind, it does not mean it is harmless. Very often, people feel uncomfortable saying how they feel and will go along with it, even if it is offensive to them. Not only is this hurtful, it can erode trust. It forces people to wonder, “What do you really think of me and others like me?” Nor it is acceptable to tell an offensive joke if you believe no one from that group is around. It still perpetuates stereotypical and harmful messages. You can never be sure who people are, what people may hear in passing or what others may hear you have said. People who are the target of the joke may feel that they cannot trust you-- you'll say one thing to their face but another behind their back.

Consider these responses if you do hear an offensive joke:



“I know you meant it as a joke, but I still find it offensive. It’s not funny when other people tell jokes about that group.”

“You may have heard it from (the subordinated group), but it’s different when we tell it.”

“I’m sure you can find jokes that don’t put down other people.”

Offer your own joke that doesn’t rely on making fun of others.

As the above list indicates, there are many ways people can respond to prejudiced or offensive comments. As we expand their repertoire and practice, we usually will be better at finding something to say. Even if we miss the moment, we often have the chance to address it later. Undoubtedly, there always will be another opportunity.

Adapted from Diane Goodman (2011). *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice: Educating People from Privileged Groups*. New York: Routledge.

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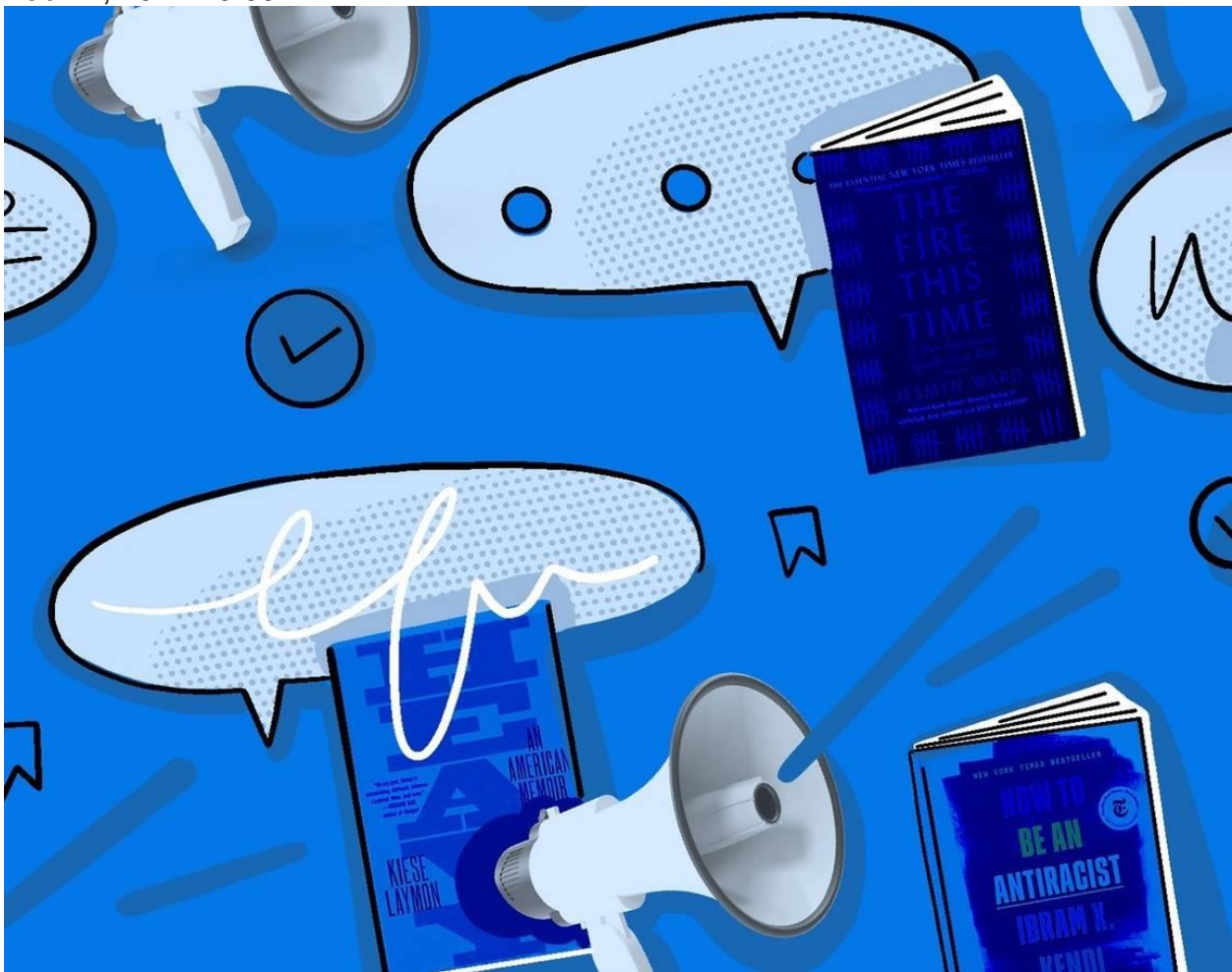
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# Allyship at Work | How to Turn Intentions into Actions



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Illustrated by Marian Blair

We've all heard the term **ally**, used most often to describe an alignment between those who have shared beliefs and who seek the same goal. Up until about 30 years ago, the term was almost exclusively used in two ways: to describe countries that shared similar ideals and vowed to support each other; or in the context of business relationships. Now, though, we often hear the term *ally* used to describe those who position themselves as advocates working toward ending discriminatory action against marginalized groups. It should be noted that allies are often *not* members of these marginalized groups.

But advocacy is more than just talk, and allyship is more than just speaking out against injustice. It's about taking intentional actions to stop injustices in the moment and preventing them from happening in the future. In this post, we do a deep dive into what it means to be an ally and how allyship in action creates productive, equitable, and inclusive workplaces for everyone.

## Allyship in the workplace

Allyship in the workplace means recognizing the privilege that members of majority groups have in a professional context—and using that privilege to aid in the dismantling of systems and processes that prevent colleagues from having equal opportunities. This can look different in different organizations, but here is a set of three **core behaviors** that make good allies:

1. **Knowledge and awareness:** No, it is not possible for you to understand the lived experiences of marginalized and minority groups. But it is possible—and necessary—for you educate yourself on what these experiences may entail. As an ally, you should not only be aware of, but also strive to understand the mechanisms that cause discrimination as well as what “institutionalized racism” is. It is also your responsibility to be aware of the role the majority plays in the perpetuation of discrimination, as well as have an awareness of your own privilege and how you can use it to be an ally.
2. **Communication and confrontation:** Knowledge is not enough. You should be able to share that knowledge and educate others. Step out of the role of simply being an informed bystander by taking action to

demonstrate what you have learned, opposing and exposing discriminatory actions.

3. **Action and advocacy:** Do what you can to support and promote marginalized groups. Actively participate in activities geared toward dismantling institutionalized oppression. Do so publicly, and engage in and with people and platforms working toward these same goals.

## Moving away from optical allyship

As the saying goes, *“Don’t just talk about it, be about it.”* Most of the real work goes unrewarded—and honestly, that is how it should be. If you are really in it for the long run, and want to be a part of the real change, don’t expect a pat on the back. If you’re only looking for recognition, then your allyship is only optical—and therefore not welcome.

Just because other people don't always see the work you're putting in, doesn't mean it isn't happening.

## So what does true allyship look like?

Allyship is more than just wearing a pin, posting about Black Lives Matter, or joining a protest and telling your Black colleagues about it. It’s about taking action when a colleague makes racist comments. It means speaking up about the lack of people of color in senior leadership and on the board. It means requiring transparency of compensation—and if you discover that your Black colleague makes less than you, even though they have equal or better qualifications, it also means advocating for equal treatment and salary.

True allyship is about action: Become an [active bystander](#), do the work that creates a culture that rejects harmful and discriminatory behavior, make a conscious choice to respond to the needs of those who are impacted, and openly challenge those who engage in discriminatory and racist behavior. [Confront the white supremacist](#)

[culture](#) that created this type of environment, even when it means having to acknowledge the role you play.

## Beyond diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion is important, but allyship is more than that. It is about ensuring justice, equality, accessibility, and a sense of belonging. A recent [Ladders](#) article provides some great actionable steps that you and your organization can take to bring about lasting change in the workplace:

- **Shift your mindsets.** Change will not happen overnight. Understand you are in it for the long haul and commit to it.
- **Commit to learning.** Learning about the past is incredibly important. Understanding the history of oppression will inform you of why things are the way they are today, and how you can work to prevent oppression from being repeated in the future.
- **Think about what it means to be a true friend.** Stand up for marginalized groups the way you stand up for your friends. When you see people being mistreated, speak up. In the workplace, make sure there is appropriate representation and diversity in the room when decisions are being made and promotion policies are formed to ensure equitableness.
- **Create a sense of belonging.** Dominant voices dominate the conversation. Be intentional about inviting other voices into the conversation, especially when decisions are being made.
- **Advocate for the hiring and promotion of more Black people and other people of color.** Your leadership and workforce should be reflective of the communities you serve.
- **Channel hope for a better future.** Have the moral conviction and intolerance for racist and oppressive behaviors and instill it in others. [True allyship](#) is about creating spaces that promote equality and increase the success of marginalized groups. When we take away opportunity from others, we not only do injustice to those individuals, but also to the organizations and communities we serve. We need all groups to be able to thrive and be successful in the workplace because we need all of us to make the impact we have committed to making.

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Have you seen any great examples of allyship in your workplace? Or do you feel like you and your colleagues could be doing more? [Share your thoughts with us on Facebook.](#)

## Microaggressions Guide

Racial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Assumptions of Criminality</i> (i.e., when people of color are assumed to be dangerous or deviant). For instance, if a clerk follows an African American around in a store, she or he is presuming that the person of color is going to steal.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• <i>Exoticization</i> (i.e., when people of color are objectified or treated as tokens). A common occurrence is when a man tells an Asian American woman that she is so “exotic,” or that “he has an Asian fetish.”</li> <li>• <i>Assumptions of Intellectual Inferiority</i> (i.e., when people of color are assumed to be less intelligent or capable than whites). An example is someone overemphasizing to a Latina that she is “so articulate” (subtly communicating that they did not expect her to be).</li> <li>• <i>Pathologizing Cultural Values</i> (i.e., when people of color are criticized for their communication styles, behaviors, styles of dress). For instance, when an Asian American or Latina/o is told to “get rid of your accent,” a subtle message is sent that one needs to assimilate.<sup>6</sup></li> </ul>
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sexual Objectification</i> (i.e., when a woman is treated as a sexual object). For instance, when a woman is catcalled on the street or a man attempts to look at a woman’s breasts, he is communicating that women’s bodies are allowed to be sexualized.</li> <li>• <i>Assumptions of Traditional Gender Roles</i> (i.e., when an individual assumes that a woman needs to uphold traditional gender roles). For example, many women are told that they need to have a husband in order to be happy.</li> <li>• <i>Assumptions of Inferiority</i> (i.e., when a woman is assumed to be physically or intellectually incompetent, particularly in comparison to men). One illustration is when a woman is carrying a box and a man takes it away from her (without her permission), assuming she isn’t physically strong.<sup>7</sup></li> </ul>
LGBT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Use of heterosexist or transphobic terminology</i> (i.e., when offensive language is used towards or about LGBT people). For instance, it is commonplace for young people to use the word “faggot” casually when describing someone as weak.</li> <li>• <i>Discomfort/ Disapproval of LGBT experience</i> (i.e., when LGBT individuals are treated with disrespect or condemnation because of their sexual orientation or gender presentation). One example includes a person staring at a same-sex couple holding hands, while another may be someone who makes prejudicial remarks about a transgender person.</li> <li>• <i>Assumption of Sexual Pathology and Abnormality</i> (i.e., when LGBT persons are presumed to be oversexualized or sexual deviants). One instance includes when someone presumes that all LGBT people may have HIV/AIDS, or stereotypes LGBT people as child molesters.</li> </ul>
Religious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Endorsing religious stereotypes</i> (i.e., when people make presumptions about religious minority groups). An example is when someone makes a joke about Muslim people being terrorists or Jewish people being cheap.<sup>8</sup></li> <li>• <i>Pathology of different religious groups</i> (i.e., when someone judges another religion as being inferior or substandard). For instance, when someone treats a non-Christian as a second-class citizen.<sup>9</sup></li> </ul>
Intersectional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occurs as a result of an individual’s multiple groups and may influence the intensity or frequency of microaggressions.</li> <li>• Women of color may experience intersectional microaggressions, as a result of their gender and race (e.g., a Latina who is denied service at a restaurant or store because of both her race and gender).</li> <li>• LGBT persons of color may experience intersectional microaggressions as a result of their sexual identity and race. For example, when a passersby ridicules a Black transgender woman, it can be due to her gender identity, her race, or both.</li> </ul>

Taken from: Nadal, K. L. (2014). A guide to responding to microaggressions. In CUNY Forum (Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 71-76).