

BEING AN ACTIVE BYSTANDER

STRATEGIES FOR CHALLENGING THE EMERGENCE OF BIAS

THE KIRWAN INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RACE & ETHNICITY | AUTHOR: LENA TENNEY

Thank you for your commitment to challenging explicit and implicit biases in your professional role and day-to-day life. It can be difficult to know what to say when a family member, friend, colleague, or acquaintance makes problematic comments. However, we will only be able to dismantle racism in its overt forms if we are brave enough to challenge racism in even its most common forms. The Kirwan Institute invites you to utilize these strategies in order to empower yourself to speak out in response to biased comments. In the words of Audre Lorde, *“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”*

Below is a description of how individuals can be active bystanders when faced with the emergence of bias in interpersonal interactions. These suggestions encompass a variety of approaches to opening a conversation about bias. Each person should consider which strategy or strategies might be most appropriate to employ based upon the context of the situation, as well as their own personal strengths and comfortability with using the strategy. This document is intended to provide some tools for being an active bystander while recognizing that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to challenging every manifestation of bias.

Steps to Being an Active Bystander

- Identify the emergence of bias.
- Decide to address the situation.
- Take action.
 - The goals of these strategies are to educate people and invite them to do better, rather than to criticize or ostracize them. They are intended to help address the situation while avoiding making the person defensive, a common reaction to challenging bias.
 - There is a difference between calling someone in (inviting discussion and learning) and calling someone out (shutting down the conversation). Both approaches can be valid in various circumstances, so choose which one is most appropriate for the situation.
- Continue the conversation.

Strategies for Speaking Out

- **Use humor.**
 - “What are you?” “Human! How about you?”
 - “Your English is so good!” “I should hope so since it’s the language I’ve been speaking my entire life!”



- **Be literal/refuse to rely on the assumption being made.**
 - “That’s so gay!” “I didn’t know that ____ could have a sexual orientation. How does that even work?”
 - “That stereotype gets me every time! I don’t understand why so many people think that stereotyping an entire group of people makes any sense.”
 - “I don’t get the joke. Can you explain it to me?” If they say that “it was just a joke” or that “you can’t take a joke” you can say, “I know that you think it’s just a joke. But I don’t think that joke is funny.”
- **Ask questions that invite discussion.**
 - “What do you mean when you say that?”
 - “Do you know what that phrase actually means and where it came from? Most people have no idea that it actually has an offensive meaning.”
 - “Can you explain your thought process to me? I want to be sure I understand how we reached such different conclusions.”
- **State that you are uncomfortable.**
 - “That phrase makes me uncomfortable. Could you please not use it around me?”
 - “Assumptions about an entire group of people make me uncomfortable. I don’t think that we can take that assumption for granted or make our decisions based off of it.”
 - “I’m not sure how I feel about that.”
- **Use direct communication.**
 - Speak honestly and from the heart, using “I statements” to communicate how you are feeling, why that is the case, and what could be done.
 - “When we say that people who are nearing retirement shouldn’t be promoted to this position because they might not be as dedicated at this point in their career, I worry that we aren’t being fair to our older employees. That assumption doesn’t take into account every individual’s circumstances and work ethic, so can we please make sure we aren’t relying on it when deciding who to consider for the position?”
 - “I know that you aren’t intending to stereotype anyone, but as your friend I wanted to let you know that what you said could easily be interpreted that way. Since I know you’re a good person who cares about others, I would hate for you to accidentally say it again without realizing how it can come across.”

Continuing the Conversation

- Offer support to people who may have been directly affected by the biased comment(s).
- Consider what could be done in order to prevent the situation next time—such as being aware and intentional about the words and phrases you use.
- Be a consistent champion of challenging bias. One discussion is not as likely to change institutional culture and society as a series of ongoing conversations.

For additional information or questions, please contact:

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