How to say when it's not okay

Tackling prejudicial '-isms' in workplace conversation

When someone behaves in a discriminatory way – whether subtly or overtly, and whether in a group or one-to-one – it can be difficult to decide what, if anything, to do. This decision can be especially complicated at work when so many other dynamics are in play, such as social and personal identities, power, status, and (lack of) entitlement to speak from experience. But it's likely that, at some point while at work, you have thought to yourself, "Am I hearing what I think I'm hearing? Am I going to have to listen to this? Am I going to say something?"

Research shows that it is relatively easy to describe what should be done in such situations, but that it is much harder to do it during live social interaction. There are barriers to speaking out, which include deciding, within milliseconds, that what was said is *unambiguously* a prejudicial '-ism' (e.g., racism, ageism, and other forms, and their intersections) since some are easier to spot than others, also the fact that saying something will often disrupt the ongoing conversation.

Speaking out carries the risk that *you* will be cast as the combative person even though it's the other party who put the '-ism' out there. Further, that other party may be your manager, your supervisor, or in an in-group / majority group member. Not saying anything carries the risk of legitimizing silence, and of siding with those who discourage others from speaking out. And so, speaking out and exposing what is going on carries risks for the person who does so.

When asked 'in theory' how they would respond to an '-ism', most people say that directly challenging it is the obvious option, but in fact other strategies can be surprisingly effective. The strategies described here are based on what researchers have found people actually do. They range from subtle words and behaviours that create opportunities for people to fix their own behaviour to direct challenges. This research also shows how these strategies work – both in the short term, and in terms of our ongoing social (and work) relationships.

Changing other people's behaviour is hard and learning to interact in-the-moment is difficult, especially when the situation is uncomfortable or even abusive. While '-isms' are readily attributed to individuals, we also know that institutions often create and tacitly support the environments in which they occur. Deciding whether and how to intervene requires judgment, so use the following advice as the basis for discussions about how to say when it's not okay.

Act later

Not only is it difficult to think about the right response to someone's behaviour in the spur of the moment, we do not have equal access to the 'conversational floor' to intervene. So, if you can't intervene 'live', then as soon as you can after the event, talk to someone else about it (ideally someone who was in the conversation) to get their perspective and help you decide what to do.

Read the room

Try to **catch the eye of trusted colleagues** to see if you can silently check that they are seeing what you are seeing, and that "this is not okay."

Knowing that there are others who share your assessment can help you decide whether to say something now... and those others might support you verbally.

Pause, with an expectant look

One of the easiest and most effective strategies is to stop and **wait with an expectant look on your face.** This both cues people to inspect what they just said or did and creates a slot for them to fix it.

If you're on the phone, staying silent achieves a similar function. It won't take much time (a second or thereabouts) for the person you're talking to to hear that you are not responding and therefore not going along with what they have just said.

"Huh?"

Research shows that what conversation analysts call 'repair initiators' (such as a simple "huh?") are often enough to get people to redo what they just said, and this often includes correcting their problematic talk. Other examples include "What?" or "Sorry?"

A related strategy is to look confused and ask, **"What was that you were saying about XYZ?".**

Creating opportunities for people to self-correct has the advantage of minimizing friction whilst nevertheless tackling the '-ism'.

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Indirect challenge

Another way to respond is to highlight what the person has just said and **ironize** it.

For instance, research examining when people make generalizations or use stereotypes about a particular group shows these generalizations can be challenged indirectly through sarcastic formulations that expose their over-generalising nature.

So, for example, if person A says "Women don't drink pints, they drink halves", person B can counter with "Oh yeah, ALL women ONLY drink halves". At this point, people tend to get the message and go on to correct what they are saying.

Softened challenge

A particular problem for workplace conversations (rather than, say, social media interactions) is that they happen in the context of ongoing relationships, important relationships that need to continue and to be maintained.

If the person doing an '-ism' is a friend or long-term colleague, it can be especially difficult to respond. **However, the force of a challenge can be softened.** Research shows that one way to soften a challenge is to preface it with a **pre-emptive apology or account** (e.g., "I hope I'm not misinterpreting you", or "I'm sure you didn't mean Y but...") and then tackle their problematic action directly.

Direct challenge

On some occasions you will judge it necessary to **directly challenge**. Challenges include asking for some sort of explanation ("What do you mean by saying X?"); negatively evaluating the behaviour ("That's really sexist"); focusing on the person ("You can't generalise like that'), or somewhere in between ("I don't think you should talk like that").

All these are likely to generate friction. The challenged person is likely to react defensively or combatively, and/or treat you as accusatory or aggressive. In other words, direct challenges are likely to create ripples, and these may escalate – so it's worth being prepared.

Intervening as a third party

Sometimes it's important to intervene on another's behalf, especially if the person who has said the (possibly) discriminatory thing is a member of an in-group or majority group, or in a position of authority.

However, doing intervening on someone's behalf risks patronizing the person being spoken for, and assumes they share your interpretation of what just happened. So, assess whether your intervention is likely to be supported by most others present – will they be grateful that you did the difficult thing? And make yourself available to join with others (**Read the Room**) – can you see that colleagues are uncomfortable and trying to catch your eye to say something?

Loughborough Online Reporting Tool

Loughborough University has an online reporting tool that allows you to report incidents such as domestic violence (including honour-based), bullying and harassment, stalking, hate incidents (including racism, homophobia, etc.), safeguarding, sexual violence, mental health and wellbeing (including self-harm and suicide attempts), substance misuse and any other welfare concerns:

www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/online-reporting

The advice outlined in this document was first shared and discussed at a workshop delivered for Maia, Loughborough University's Women's Network, and was produced by the Discourse and Rhetoric Group (DARG).

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