

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.

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