



DETERRING RACISM IN THE WORKPLACE

Racism Toolbox Talk Series – Part 4

Date: _____ Jobsite: _____ Discussion Leader: _____

WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO DISCOURAGE RACISM?

We all like to think that we would jump into action to help those in need if we witness a situation. But in reality, most often we remain silent and uncomfortable, knowing we probably should say something but are unsure what to say or how to respond. Oftentimes what determines whether we will take action is dependent on how many people are present. The greater the number of people present the less likely we are to intervene in a situation. This is called the bystander effect. It happens because in a large crowd, one person feels less responsible to take action since there is shared responsibility to act amongst all bystanders.

As humans, we also look to others for social cues on how to respond. When others fail to act it serves as confirmation to us that no action is required, even though it may be. Studies have shown that the individual response rate to an emergency drops from about 75 percent if there is only one bystander to as low as 10 percent if there are multiple bystanders present.

“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.”

-Audre Lorde

It can feel even more difficult to intervene as a bystander in a workplace setting where you are dealing with individuals who you must see and work with daily. Most often, bystanders simply choose to stay silent and refrain from joining in on the abuse, justifying their silence as dissent. The problem with choosing to remain silent is that the offender interprets silence as assent or approval. Instead of remaining silent, we must push past the discomfort, take responsibility for our own actions, and speak up in the moment.

BARRIERS TO TAKING ACTION AGAINST RACISM

It is important to acknowledge that barriers exist for individuals who may want to speak up or know they should speak up but are unsure of how to safely do so. Some common reasons that individuals stay silent include:

- Not knowing what to say or do
- Fear of looking bad among your colleagues
- Fear of making things worse
- Fear of becoming a target for future harassment
- Triggering your own trauma from past situations
- Fear of risking personal or professional relationships
- Fear of retaliation – putting your job, reputation, or influence at risk
- Power dynamics – confronting a superior or someone well-liked in your company

STRATEGIES FOR TAKING ACTION AGAINST RACISM

Despite whatever barriers you may have to speaking up, there are different strategies you can use to safely intervene in a situation. Remember, it is important that you say or do something to stand up to and call out racism. It is not enough to simply disengage with or ignore the offender. You need to be an active ally and champion for inclusion.

Change the Subject: If you are uncomfortable addressing the situation directly, change the subject by asking an unrelated question or pretend you need help with something.

Use Humor: Using humor to diffuse the situation is another way to stop the harassment without directly confronting the situation.

Ask Questions: Asking the offender questions to clarify their position can lead to awareness by that individual that their words or actions are causing harm to others. They may not be aware. It also opens the door to further conversation about the impact of their words or actions without them immediately shutting down.

Acknowledge Discomfort: Saying something like, "Well that was awkward" or "That was uncomfortable" lets the offender know that something is wrong. It also invites others to speak up and share their discomfort with the situation.

Confront the Situation: Directly and clearly communicate how you are feeling by using "I" statements. Tell the offender that their words/actions are not okay and will not be tolerated in the workplace.

Act as a Physical Barrier: If possible, step between the offender and their target to act as a physical barrier. This can be effective with distance between the two individuals by using your body to block their line of sight. This strategy works well when combined with changing the subject to get the offender's mind off the harassment and onto something else.

Talk Privately with the Offender: If you are not comfortable with confronting the situation in the moment but have a relationship with the offender, you may feel comfortable having a one-on-one conversation with the individual after the fact. This approach can help the individual understand the impact of the behavior without directly calling the individual out in front of others.

It takes a sustained effort of speaking up and calling out any racism that infects the workplace to truly create an inclusive environment. But one courageous act of speaking up can be the difference between you and your colleagues working in safe or unsafe conditions in that moment.

Acts of racism don't just affect the mental and emotional wellbeing of their intended target but take a toll on everyone who witnesses them. It is up to each and every one of us to be Culture of CARE Impact Champions by standing up to any racism and actively creating safe, welcoming and inclusive workplaces.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION:

1. Check in with your colleagues who were the target. Ask how they are doing and if they are okay.
2. Offer specific ways to help your colleague who was targeted. Examples include offering to assist with reporting the incident, lending an ear, or (if possible) volunteering for tasks that require interaction with the offender so they don't have to.
3. Reaffirm your commitment to continue being an active ally against racism.
4. Identify ways you might be able to prevent a future incident from occurring.
5. If the harassment continues, speak to a supervisor or HR.