

# Bystander Awareness

## Skills for effective managers

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A team calls for a break after a productive morning of work. Someone tells an offensive joke. Everyone is silent. A few people laugh quietly but nervously. One or two people may feel the sting of the joke especially sharply. Others worry about what to do and how to get back on track. The team's momentum is broken.

In this scenario, the “bystanders,” those who witness offensive talk or inappropriate actions, could play a crucial role in signaling that the group values diversity and that offensive jokes are not appreciated. At best, they can help those who are offended understand that they are not alone and those who have given offense, intentionally or unintentionally, to back up, reconsider, and apologize and perhaps still save face. At least, bystanders can call for a halt and break the downward spiral of tension and misunderstanding that can destroy team cohesion.

Bystanders can uphold norms about the importance of valuing diversity. From the cultural perspective, we recognize the importance of norms in the workplace and the ways in which behavior over time can reinforce or erode a norm. If a norm is deeply held, its violation should provoke reactions. What sense can we make, then, of the silence of the bystanders?

Bystanders may very well appreciate that valuing diversity creates the kind of inclusive and culturally rich work world that they want to inhabit and that it encourages the contribution of talent from all people. They just may not know what to do.

## From Valuing Diversity to Taking Action

Valuing diversity is an easy goal to espouse. But how do we practice and realize that goal? Diversity training is quite common in companies in the United States and has helped many organizations to find the “positive spiral” of diversity referenced in the Overview. However, the backlash against diversity training has also been significant. White men complain that they are demonized and mis-

understood. Women and people of color complain that they are set up to speak for their entire group or to reveal their difficulties, only to have their candor come back to haunt them when the trainer goes away.

Diversity training too often delivers lectures to would-be “perpetrators,” offers assertiveness hints for would-be “victims,” or gives legal advice to worried managers. A new, alternative training approach has been designed at the MIT Sloan School of Management. A number of companies and other departments at MIT approached Sloan to learn more about this new approach. Instead of focusing on perpetrators, victims, or managers, it focuses on another crucial and often overlooked party: the bystander. A bystander is anyone who witnesses offensive or unprofessional behavior. With training, bystanders can have the understanding of how norms get shaped as well as the presence of mind and the needed skills to intervene.

It is easy to fall silent in an awkward situation. People rarely have a chance to rehearse how they might intervene effectively in a tense and awkward situation. But the actions of bystanders are often the most crucial for signaling that the norms of respect and inclusivity are to be taken seriously. A norm is empty if no one challenges its violation. Bystanders are concerned parties who take ownership for setting the tone.

The lack of support from bystanders often worsens the strains in work groups. Team members who are upset about mistreatment in a team setting do not just complain about the person who was offensive; they may expect to find “one in every crowd.” Instead, the real hurt often comes from the silence of others, which appears as consent or indifference. People who are upset by stinging, prejudicial remarks will say things like “I can’t believe no one jumped in to say anything—everyone just sat there,” or “I was left out there alone without any support,” or “Sure Joe is insensitive, but does everyone else agree?”

Practicing in advance helps bystanders know what to do; the word, gesture, or approach that

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turns around the situation and reinforces a shared commitment to inclusivity and respect.

## Historical and Conceptual Background

Research on bystanders comes from a number of areas of social science: the effects on children of watching someone getting hurt in abusive family settings, the motives of Good Samaritans in stopping to help someone in trouble, the reasons why some people join a social movement to improve conditions while others “free ride” on the collective benefits that may result, as a few examples.

Social psychologists in the United States addressed apparent bystander apathy following a disturbing and much-reported event. In 1965, a woman named Kitty Genovese was murdered on a street in New York City at night, while many people from adjacent apartment buildings watched. No one called the police or intervened. Why?

The first reaction of the press and the American public was that New York City was a heartless place and New Yorkers were cold and uncaring. But some researchers thought it was not quite so simple. The witnesses were horrified and upset. What is it that causes bystanders not to react?

They focused on two factors: uncertainty about what to do (people freeze when they do not have a well-rehearsed script in an unfamiliar situation) and diffusion of responsibility (everyone thinks that the situation is so serious that surely someone else, perhaps someone better qualified, will do something).

Other factors may affect bystanders’ reluctance. Mary Rowe characterized reasons why complainants do not come forward or request that no further action be taken, reasons that apply as well to bystanders: fear of loss, including the loss of respect, ease, and comradeship with fellow employees; fear of silent disapproval; fear of vulnerability or invaded privacy in speaking from one’s personal perspective; the risks of getting in the middle of things; the belief that they lack sufficient information about the situation; and concern they may be overreacting, as a few examples.

These insights about bystanders can be incorporated into diversity training. Bystander inaction can be reduced if people take the following steps:

- Practice some interventions in a safe space so they feel more ready.
- Think through various scenarios in advance.
- Expand their menu of possible responses.
- Understand cultural differences in appropriate interventions.
- Learn from others’ experiments and discover new ways to act.

- Take personal ownership for the situation, instead of just sitting back.
- Become self-aware and understand the norms they want to uphold.
- Discuss options with one another and make bystander action more open, expected, and legitimate.

Consider emergency medical technicians who have to respond quickly in crises. They play out many scenarios in their training to gain the “situational awareness” they need to size up what is happening and intervene effectively.

## The Bystander in the Workplace

A bystander reacts immediately in the moment. The first step is to be good enough at reading the political and cultural dynamics to know that trouble is brewing. Often the most important thing a bystander can do is just stop the situation from escalating. A simple call for a pause or clarification can help.

A bystander is not charged with dealing justice on the spot. It might be more appropriate to give feedback to individuals at a later time. Calling on institutional resources—such as a mediator or ombudsperson—can help.

To clarify the nature of the bystander, some images of what the bystander is and is not were generated. These descriptors are summarized in Figure 11.5.

## The Courage of One’s Convictions

Speaking up rather than remaining quiet requires some moral courage. You can speak from your own vantage point, about how uncomfortable the situation is making you or about your concern that the tone does not reflect the kind of organization in which you want to work. Or you can speak on behalf of another, which is more complex. In general, it is best to intervene just enough to let others have the chance to speak for themselves.

Speaking on behalf of another requires:

- *Tactfulness.* Quite simply, a bystander should not drown out or embarrass the person they’re supporting or make them feel helpless or pathetic by jumping in too strongly.
- *Willingness to take risks.* Group backlash against the bystander is possible. Bystanders can become the target of the escalating anger in the group. They might be called “Pollyanna” or “bleeding heart liberal” or “knight in shining armor.” They might be asked, “Who are you to say?” A bystander has to be prepared to take some heat.

## Figure 11.5 What a Bystander Is and Is Not

### A Bystander Is . . .

Witness	Observer	Onlooker	Eavesdropper
Concerned Party	Stakeholder	Advocate	
Listener	Colleague	Peer	Audience
Mediator	Helper	Friend	
Facilitator	Peacemaker	Humble Questioner	Learner

### A Bystander Is Not . . .

Judge	Avenger	Enforcer	Fixer	Know-It-All
Rescuer	Hero/Heroine	Final Authority		

- *Awareness of one's own power or privilege.* Diversity training tends to focus on the experience of disadvantage by people who occupy solo roles in a group (e.g., the only older person in a young start-up) or who belong to historically oppressed social groups (e.g., African Americans in the United States). A true understanding of diversity adds the dynamics of privilege (what does it mean to be one of the “young fast-trackers”? What does it mean to be white in the United States?). It is emotionally exhausting for people in disadvantaged positions to keep presenting their perspective and advocating for their rights. Members of a privileged group can develop a sense of empathy and spend some of their “political capital” to speak out when they see injustice. It is powerful when white people speak out against racism, when men speak out against sexism, and when straight people speak out against homophobia.

Given the delicacy and risks, why should bystanders do anything? Aren't they giving away more than they're getting? Are the costs too great?

One benefit of playing an active bystander role is that you get to help create the kind of climate that you want in your organization and of which you may someday be a beneficiary. You can crystallize norms by exemplifying and defending them. Some bystanders who have taken heat from others say it is worth it to be true to themselves and what they believe. Another benefit is that you can demonstrate your group dynamics skills, which are increasingly listed as a factor in performance appraisals.

## Collusion

Despite the advantages of playing an active bystander role, sometimes it is reasonable not to

jump in. What are the costs and benefits of silence? One cost is a feeling of collusion with the offense. For example, sometimes women laugh at sexist jokes to signal that they're good sports, but afterwards they may wonder if they're just perpetuating a negative climate of sexism.

At the same time, some benefits may come from holding back. Sometimes it is necessary to “pick one's battles.” Timing is important; waiting for “teachable moments” can make an important point. Speaking out too much can dilute one's message.

Another benefit of not speaking out in the moment is that sometimes it is best to pull people aside afterwards, to reduce embarrassment and wait until tempers cool to the point at which feedback can be heard and absorbed.

## Cultural Variation in Intervention Styles

Whether bystanders act in the moment or wait, both the style and content of the intervention must be considered in cultural context. Cultures vary, for example, on one of the most delicate questions of intervention: whether to reprimand someone else's children when you see them misbehaving. It might be considered out of line to say something in one culture, or negligent *not* to say anything in another culture.

Survey your team members to see what kinds of interventions might work or fail in the countries or companies they come from. For example, is it better to stand up and leave than to say something? Is that considered dignified? Or would it be considered rude and awkward?

Bystanders just throw fuel on the fire if they fight one stereotype by invoking another. For example, a bystander intervenes on behalf of a

woman on a team by saying, “You men from <wherever> are all so chauvinistic!” and potentially makes the situation worse.

## Ideas for Bystanders

Some general types of interventions suggested by a range of participants in bystander training sessions are summarized in Figure 11.6.

## Structural Solutions

The bystander’s role during or just after an incident is important and can help shape cultural norms. However, it is an *ad hoc* response to issues that often require structural solutions. A successful bystander will interrupt unprofessional behavior, but systems must be in place that backup the norms and provide any subsequent support or

**Figure 11.6** Some Tactics for Bystanders: Ideas from Workshop Participants

### Inclusion:

- Invite someone into the conversation
- Solicit the opinions of people who have been quiet
- Be an ally for someone taking a risk
- Be gracious, help others save face

### Discovery:

- Ask questions
- Give people a chance to clarify
- Check assumptions
- Consider the big picture, the broader context

### Cooling things down:

- Ask for a break
- Use humor (but with care)
- Suggest next steps, another meeting, off-line conversations

### Heating things up:

- Surface emotions
- Say how the situation makes you feel
- Point to the “unspeakable” issues that may be lurking

### Body language/signaling:

- Stand up
- Turn away
- Raise your hand
- Bang the table
- Say “ouch”
- Laugh
- Leave the room

action needed to prevent future incidents. Some examples of structural solutions, at both the local and corporate level, include the following:

- An organizational policy on harassment, distributed to everyone, periodically reviewed, systematically enforced
- A third party (mediator, ombudsperson, employee advocate) who can counsel individuals or groups, whose services are supported and publicized, and who keeps track of aggregate data on incidents
- Clear policies governing promotions, a mentoring program, and a review board that keeps track of who is promoted (or not) and why
- Regular sessions to discuss and consider the alternative ways in which people from different cultural backgrounds might approach the process and product of work (especially helpful for breaking free of taken-for-granted assumptions and “thinking outside the box”)
- Training sessions on a variety of issues, such as giving culturally sensitive feedback, curbing sexual harassment, and recognizing different leadership styles.
- Celebrations of diversity, to recognize accomplishments and best practices from different teams or departments, to celebrate different heritages (e.g., a speaker or film during Black History Month in February)

Structural solutions should align with the organizational vision of how to embrace diversity. Organizations that plan to fundamentally reshape how work is done, based on more diverse inputs, will need more innovative structures to support that approach. Figure 11.7 shows an evolution of three approaches.

## A Closing Thought

Jewish tradition gives us a Talmudic story that is relevant:

*In the book of Proverbs, King Solomon said:*

*“A tongue can bring either life or death.”*

*(Proverbs 18:21)*

*Why is a tongue mightier than a sword?*

*A sword can only kill one person at a time.*

*Hurtful words kill three people at once:*

*They hurt the one about whom they are spoken.*

*They hurt the one who said them.*

*They hurt the one who listened to them.*

*(Bereshit Rabbah 98)*